

Introduction

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It is a good time to study democracy in America. This is so, not because these times are easy, but because they are hard. As I write, cities in the United States are under military occupation by our own government. Masked federal agents abduct people, ignoring the law and the decent opinion of majorities of Americans. Closer to home, Wyoming's state officials continue to pass ever-stricter regulations for voting and intensify their efforts to ban books from public libraries and schools. None of these actions reflect the will of majorities of people in America or Wyoming, but while we did not choose those acts, we can choose to raise our voices.

So I am proud to present the second issue of the Democracy Lab's journal, *Experiments in Democracy*. However the current political situation continues—and it is too early for either predictions of success or doom—people who read this journal will know that even in difficult times, we choose to believe in what democracy could be, and to think critically about the world in which we live.

This second issue of *Experiments in Democracy* features the work of the Democracy Lab's 2023-2024 cohort of participants. The second cohort of participants was larger than the first, and it reflected the hopes of those of us who designed the program—the cohort was an interdisciplinary and intergenerational mix of people who worked together, challenged one another, and grew intellectually and civically because of that mix. This cohort's student participation was significant, bringing undergraduate and graduate students together with faculty and members of the public, beyond the university.

I am grateful to the Democracy Lab's facilitators: Amy Albrecht, Robby Bishop, Janel Seeley, and Tennessee Watson. Robby Bishop also continued excellent work as this journal's managing editor, making the publication a model of high-quality work, meeting the best standards of open-access scholarly publishing.

There are six essays in this issue, three of which are collaborative efforts and three of which are individual pieces. I am happy that they reflect a diversity of engagements with ideas about democracy. The Democracy Lab welcomes a broad approach to studying the quality of democracy, including the problems of electoral and representative democracy and questions of everyday democracy, the issues that impact the histories and daily lives of people in Wyoming, the nation, and the world.

Lucas Fralick's essay, the "Wyoming Elections Project," describes one part of a broader project about the perceptions that Wyomingites have about the state's contests for public office. Fralick challenges the persistent myth that elections in Wyoming are predetermined. By looking through historical data about gubernatorial races, Fralick shows that the stories people tell about the state's political history should be more complicated.

Chelsea Escalante and Conxita Domènech's essay, "Wyoming's First Spanish-language Newspaper: *La Página en Español* (1927) of the *Powell Tribune*," tells the story of the *Be-tabeleros*, Spanish-speaking sugar beet workers, many of whom settled in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin and North Platte Valley in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Powell Tribune* published *La Página en Español*, a Spanish-language page that ran from May 26 through October 27, 1927. It is one of the only Spanish-language newspapers of the region of that period; therefore, it shows readers a glimpse into the lives of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living in Wyoming nearly a century ago.

Hanisah Hassim and Ryan J. Tucker's essay "Difficult Doesn't Mean Impossible: Using Film as a Vehicle for Engaging in Critical Discussion" engages a fundamental aspect of "small-d" democracy, namely having difficult conversations with people who may disagree about important, and often polarizing issues. As they write, the idea of a conversation may seem simple, but the implications of conversations and their resolutions matter a great deal to the quality of democracy. Issues that are deep-rooted and close to the heart benefit from building good conversations about them.

Danielle Cover's "Reflection" is a meditation on the understanding and use of empathy in the legal classroom and in a democratic society. As she writes, empathy acknowledges the complex relationship between the existence of self and the existence of other people. Following that empathetic path in a classroom asks students to recognize experiences or contexts different from their own, in an effort to make meaning of the world around them. Such efforts become complicated when we recognize that people have many connecting identities and can be simultaneously part of in-groups and out-groups. 'Othering' becomes problematic when it is used to denigrate and/or dehumanize people from perceived out groups. Using empathy as a learning tool means connecting what happens in the classroom

with what happens in the outside world, a vital exercise both in legal education and in diverse communities.

Darrah Short and Margaret M. Holland's essay, "Guardianship in Wyoming: The State's Most Pressing Human Rights Concern" shows that while all people have certain rights, those rights are often denied when a person lives under plenary guardianship, a situation when a court gives authority to a person to make decisions for someone else. Their essay examines the implications of guardianship for Wyoming citizens, identifies key issues with the current system, and explores alternatives that offer protection while protecting individual rights, proposing a more dignified and inclusive approach to decision making and exploring less restrictive legal alternatives to guardianship.

Emma Jones's essay, "Restorative Justice and the Way Forward for Natural Resource Communication," shows that equitable decision-making practices are growing more important as communities recognize the full extent of the impacts on long term ecosystem health. Because equitable solutions are vital to pressing environmental problems, it is essential to consider the processes of communication and public participation to achieve those solutions. Restorative justice finds its greatest potential in incorporation into collaborative governance practices, she argues, and therefore it ought to have greater consideration by the agencies and other entities attempting to navigate complex issues in environmental justice and natural resource management.

Many thanks to these authors—in their brilliant and brave essays, there is material for all of us to reflect upon, during these times when democratic communities need thoughtful engagement.