



Democracy Inventory Case Study

Johns Hopkins University

Jason Leggett

Part One: What was the motivation for the inventory?

In 2021, the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) decided to launch a “democracy audit” to determine the institution’s commitment to leading and upholding democracy work internally, and in the greater Baltimore, Maryland, US, and international communities.

The audit came at a time in which JHU had designed, planned, and implemented a number of programs to promote and support democratic engagement at the University. This included the expansion of campus-wide voter education and registration drives through its Center for Social Concern, a host of new programming focused on topics ranging from current news events to the women’s suffrage centennial, and, perhaps most prominently, the launch of the SNF Agora Institute, which assembled dozens of faculty and fellows to quickly become one of the leading centers for bridging the study of democracy with promising practice.

Against the backdrop of the tumultuous 2020 election, an insurrection at the US Capitol, and a nationwide racial reckoning and renewal of civil rights efforts, the University decided it was important to take stock of the efforts underway on campus and identify how else the university might instill a vibrant democratic education and culture on its campus.

Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

This report was written in 2021 by SNF Agora Visiting Fellow Scott Warren, with assistance from a number of students, and from staff in the offices of the Provost, Development and Alumni Relations, and the President. To complete the review, the team relied on registrar and orientation data, surveys, interviews, an audit of innovative peer practices, and publicly available information.

Specifically, the audit and review attempted to:

- Collect and analyze information on democratic engagement at Johns Hopkins through a systematic review of courses, events, and other activities.
- Interview audiences—including students, faculty, staff, and members of the surrounding community—to determine how they experience democracy-oriented opportunities at Johns Hopkins.
- Start to define what democratic engagement might mean for purposes of a university.
- Identify ways Johns Hopkins might consider strengthening its approach to democratic engagement

Recognizing the need to present concrete definitions, while acknowledging there is no correct classification, the audit asserted that a university that promotes democratic engagement should seek to instill in its students the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors to become active participants in the democratic process. The sort of participation this contemplates includes but is not limited to voting, participation in public debate, advocacy on local issues, and engaging democratic institutions to address flaws in the society or the democracy itself, among them, enduring issues of inequality. This definition is meant to be more encompassing than electoral and political activity but more specific than any form of general civic or community engagement, which—however valuable in its own right—does not necessarily teach to democratic aims.

Importantly, JHU explored the importance of focusing on the local community of Baltimore, and broader community of Maryland, through its deep democracy work. The hypothesis in exploring the local engagement is a recognition that the public can be overly focused on national politics, a trend that could be contributing to affective polarization, a sense of frustration with democracy among citizens, and an absence of community buy-in for local democratic outcomes. The role that universities can play in promoting local engagement in their specific communities is a question pursued in the report.

The team separated the top-line findings into five distinct categories:

- **Coursework:** The team engaged in a deep audit of “democracy-related” courses occurring throughout the university at the undergraduate level. Partially because of the advent of the SNF Agora Institute, the number of democracy-focused undergraduate courses grew 44 percent from the 2019–20 to 2020–21 academic years alone.

However, importantly, the audit found that democracy-courses were not reaching STEM-oriented students. For comparison, 785 undergraduate students from the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences took at least one democracy-focused course over a two-year period from Fall 2019 to Spring 2021, out of the 4,524 unique students in Krieger in that period. Only 83 undergraduate students from the Whiting School of Engineering took a democracy-focused course during those two years, out of the 2,444 unique students in Whiting in those two years.

- **Events and Programming:** The team also comprehensively examined recent democracy-related events occurring on campus. The audit found that the number of such events on campus also has grown substantially in recent years, from 15 such events in Fall 2019 to 27 events in Spring 2021, according to our comprehensive analysis. Again, the data indicated that this is primarily due to the maturation of the SNF Agora Institute.

However, students reported that they are often unaware of democracy-focused events on campus. The review revealed that these sorts of events do not appear in any single repository online and often are scattered across multiple websites.

- **Elections and Voting:** The university launched a number of initiatives under the Hopkins Votes umbrella in recent years to improve its students' participation in elections, and the data suggested these efforts are paying off.

According to the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement, a national university voting study, the voting rate of undergraduate students nearly quadrupled from 7.5 percent in 2014 to 29.4 percent in 2018.

However, in interviews, students expressed some concern about the lack of breadth in the university's election promoting initiatives. Some students observed that the university focuses almost exclusively on national elections and tends to ignore local affairs. Others said that the university's election promotion is voting-centric and that it could do more to promote election activities beyond voting—for example, volunteering at polling places.

- **Local Communities:** The university has invested in partnerships with Baltimore through anchor institution initiatives in recent years. But to date, this focus on Baltimore rarely has intersected with the university's democracy-oriented courses and programming. According to the inventory, of the 71 democracy-oriented courses students took over a two-year period, only three involved the city of Baltimore in a meaningful way.

Of the 42 democracy-oriented campus events discussed in the report, only five involved Baltimore. When the university focuses on democracy, it is most often talking about events on the national stage.

- **Democratic Culture:** One critical path to inculcating in students a sense that their voice matters in democracy is to ensure they have a voice in their university, the institution that issues rules most immediately governing their lives and that they interact with most as they come into their identity as civic and political actors.

Part Three: What were some of the challenges along the way and key lessons learned?

In surveys and interviews, a number of students reported a sense of disconnect from the university. These students said that they felt there were limited avenues through which they can communicate with the administration about university-policy issues of importance; and even when their voices are heard, they felt the administration does not act upon concerns raised.

In interviews and surveys, many students and faculty underscored the importance of diversity, inclusion, and equity to a democratic culture on campus. All democratic-engagement efforts should have the values of diversity, inclusion, and equity at the forefront by centering historically underrepresented voices and ensuring that students understand the true history of democracy and racial oppression in this country and in Baltimore specifically.

Above all, the report indicated that there was a potential disconnect between a research university that has prioritized a commitment to exploring democracy, and how faculty and students actually experience that commitment. Ensuring that a focus on democracy is holistic, rather than siloed in specific departments, is challenging- but this report allowed JHU to explore both areas of strength and weakness that can lead to further productive action.

Part Four: What did the effort ultimately produce or lead to?

The report has helped to catalyze a broader conversation on deep democracy within JHU, including a large grant specifically to examine civics education in the STEM space. The SNF Agora has begun to develop an approach to civics education for the 21st century that integrates curricular programming, community-facing work, and training programs. The program will teach civics in a way that focuses on some of the key challenges facing our modern workforce and citizenry, with particular attention to the needs of STEM students, based on the findings of the report that STEM students were especially unlikely to participate in democracy-related activities.

The report has also become a topic of conversation in different settings focused on exploring issues of democratic engagement within JHU, including the extent to which the University is actively building a democratic culture.