

## Civic Studies at Tufts University

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Civic Studies is the name of an undergraduate major and associated activities at Tufts University. It is also an emerging international field of scholarship.

### Background

In 2007, Harry Boyte, Stephen Elkin, Jane Mansbridge, Elinor Ostrom, Karol Soltan, Rogers Smith, and I wrote a short statement entitled “The New Civic Politics.” It described ideals of “public-spiritedness” and “the citizen as a creative agent.”\*

Equipped with this statement, Soltan, Elkin, and I planned an intensive Summer Institute of Civic Studies devoted to similar themes and intended for faculty, graduate students, and practitioners from many countries. Soltan and I then led that institute annually at Tufts’ Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life from 2009-2017.

I sometimes informally called these institutes “theory camp.” We found that some practitioners used intensive conversations about highly theoretical texts and concepts to gain perspective on their everyday work, while some scholars enjoyed using the same texts to pose practical and even existential questions, such as what kinds of lives we should strive to lead.

Another distinctive aspect of the syllabus was its combination of political theory, philosophy, and theology with empirical research on civic behavior, plus detailed examples of practice from fields like community organizing and nonviolent social movements. The assignments gradually stabilized around a canon, in which Elinor Ostrom, Jürgen Habermas, and Mohandas K. Gandhi were some of the prominent authors.

From 2015-19, Soltan and I collaborated with Tetyana Kloubert to offer a similar annual summer institute in either Chernivtsi, Ukraine or near Munich, Germany, open to participants from the former communist world and using some texts from that region. In its final year, that institute attracted 900 applicants for the 20 slots, testifying to an appetite for “theory camps” in that region. In 2014, I led a short version in Mexico City. In 2019, alumni of the institutes who had attended from the Spanish-speaking world met in Madrid to revisit their discussions and consider a seminar series for Latin America. McMaster University in Canada and James Madison University in Virginia are among the institutions that have embraced both the label and content of Civic Studies for some of their own programs.

Meanwhile, Tisch College was providing impressive experiential civic education for Tufts students and supporting partnerships with nonprofits in the area. Tisch College had also become the home of substantial empirical research on the causes, characteristics, and consequences of civic engagement in the United States. More than 20 full-time, professional researchers, funded by external grants, work at

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\* Harry Boyte, Stephen Elkin, Peter Levine, Jane Mansbridge, Elinor Ostrom, Karol Soltan, and Rogers Smith, “The New Civic Politics: Civic Theory and Practice for the Future” (2007), *The Good Society* 23, no. 2 (2014): 206-11.

Tisch and produce some of the leading research on K-12 civic education, youth voting, electoral districting, and related topics.

The missing component at Tisch College was an interdisciplinary academic program for Tufts students that explored similar themes as the summer institutes and that took advantage of Tisch's empirical research and community partnerships. To that end, in 2019, we launched a new undergraduate major in Civic Studies.

### **The major**

Civic Studies is unapologetically academic. Virtually every US college or university offers experiential civic education in the form of student-led groups, service placements and internships, and projects assigned in courses. Meanwhile, colleges and universities offer courses relevant to being effective and responsible citizens, from "Intro. to American Government" in political science to courses on specific social issues, to courses that help one to understand cultural identities and differences. Indeed, the liberal arts curriculum as a whole is civic education, if it is done well. (It can be civic mis-education, if it is done very badly.)

However, there is typically a gap between students' civic experiences and the curriculum. When they are engaged in civic activities, students—like all human beings—usually interact with finite numbers of other individuals within groups and networks, formal organizations, or enterprises. As individuals and collectively in these groups, they make value-judgments: What counts as a problem? What would be a good outcome? They create and enforce (or undermine and revise) norms that influence their collective behavior. They work together in various ways, producing products and outcomes. And they face characteristic challenges. Some people may slack off, some may misinterpret the purpose of the group, some may mistreat others, and so on.

These issues are addressed in the standard college curriculum, but in a scattered way and not as a focus. One can learn about ethical judgments in philosophy, about free-rider problems in economics, and about voting procedures in political science. But a student would be hard pressed to identify these relevant aspects of many different courses from various disciplines and put them together.

It is a mistake to think of politics as composed only of: 1) individuals who have identities, values, and beliefs, and 2) issues that these individuals may address. Individuals come together in groups, and indeed often discover *who* they are, *what* they *want*, and *what issues* arise through the groups they belong to. Civic Studies puts group-dynamics at the heart of civic education. Our introductory and capstone courses and the electives (including the required internship) are specifically designed to address the challenges of acting together in groups at all scales, and specifically:

1. Problems of collective action: how to coordinate separate interests and choices to accomplish shared ends;
2. Problems of discourse: how best to discuss normative questions about means and ends; and
3. Problems of exclusion: how to prevent people from inappropriately distinguishing between "us" and "them."

These problems have practical significance, and one can learn from experience how to manage them. But they are also intellectually complex, and one can learn from theory, history, and empirical research and data. Our aspiration is put those forms of knowledge together.

### **Current status**

As a major at Tufts, Civic Studies is just over five years old. Although it is a co-major (i.e., students must also major in something else), it has grown quickly and has about 50 majors at a time. The “Intro.” course regularly fills to capacity. Most of the rest of the Civic Studies courses originate in other departments at Tufts, including many humanities and social science disciplines.

We also offer two minors: Peace & Justice Studies and Social Entrepreneurship. A grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations enabled us to develop courses at the intersection of religion and civic life. Tufts’ robust program in Massachusetts state prisons (the Tufts University Prison Initiative at Tisch College, or TUPIT) is closely linked to Civic Studies in two ways. Non-incarcerated Civic Studies students have opportunities to study with incarcerated men “inside”; and all the incarcerated people who are pursuing Tufts bachelors’ degrees major in Civic Studies. This focus has proven popular and successful for a cohort of incarcerated people who seek to make social change.

Despite growth and intellectual vitality, we face the following challenges:

- Insufficient philosophical or ideological diversity among both students and faculty (although there certainly is some).
- Too few faculty colleagues who are seriously invested in the program, as opposed to cheerfully agreeing to having their courses cross-listed in the major.
- A continued gap between the empirical—largely quantitative—applied research on civic engagement that is conducted at Tisch College and the undergraduate major.
- Some reluctance among some students and faculty colleagues to engage with social theory,<sup>†</sup> and sometimes a reluctance to investigate *competing* social theories within the same course.

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<sup>†</sup> Here, “social theory” encompasses a wide range of methods and agendas, from historically grounded political philosophy to formal modeling, from theology (in many traditions) to versions of Critical Theory. It can draw on disciplines as diverse as literary criticism or economics. It simply means the explicit consideration of general frameworks that may inform social action.