



## Taking a civic leap of faith

The final episode of the season takes a step back from individual democracy reforms to look at what it will take to create a healthy civic culture where power is shared across the community — rather than concentrated in the hands of a few stakeholders. Eric Liu believes this can happen and is working tirelessly to spread his idea of civic faith across the U.S.

Jenna Spinelle: I spend every Tuesday night in a church worship room. Depending on the night, there are 50 to 60 other people there, ranging in age from teenagers to retirees. We're not there for church services or Bible study. Truth be told, I'm not very religious. Instead, we all sit down, take out

our instruments, and spend the next 90 minutes making music together.

[Recording of Jenna's community band playing patriotic song]

Spinelle: I've played the saxophone since I was in middle school and have played in community bands since I graduated from college. If you're not familiar with a community band, it's like a high school band for grown-ups. It's a big part of who I am and how I think about community. We come together to play music, not discuss politics. I know for a fact that the people who sit on either side of me in the sax section hold very different political views than I do.

But my section mate Jason and I do have a long-running debate over whether America is a republic or a democracy. We talk about it in the parking lot after rehearsal or over beers after a concert. And we can do this because we've built trust with each other over the years. As bandmates, we've had to learn how to communicate with each other. If he and I don't listen to each other while we're playing, one of us will play out of tune or out of time, and the whole song will get derailed. Over time, this practice of communication and community has built the trust that allows us to have respectful and engaging political conversations. The way I see it, this kind of trust that's built outside of specifically political spaces, is what makes our democracy work. Community bands are one way that happens, but it also happens through sports leagues or volunteering at the animal shelter or any of the many ways we connect with our neighbors.

I'm Jenna Spinelle, and this is When the People Decide, a show about how everyday people are shaping democracy. This season, I've looked into real examples of ways people are trying to build community and engage with democracy in their city or town. Such as the lottery in Petaluma, California, that allowed residents to join a panel and give thoughtful direction on a city project. Or the process of participatory budgeting in Durham, North Carolina, that let residents decide how city money would be spent in their neighborhood. For our final episode of the season, I want to zoom out a little bit and talk about why improving democracy is so important. And why this moment in history is the perfect time to think about our personal relationships to democracy. As I reported this podcast, I kept coming across the work of Eric Liu. The perfect person to help me explore these ideas.

- Eric Liu: I'm Eric Liu. I'm the CEO and co-founder of Citizen University.
- Spinelle: Eric is sometimes called a “civic evangelist”, and that’s because he preaches the importance of citizenship. Now, when Eric is talking about citizens, he’s not referring to people with a specific legal status, but rather someone who participates and takes responsibility for all aspects of their community. That’s what his work at Citizen University focuses on: training people to be better civic servants to their own community. Eric’s parents immigrated to the U.S. from Taiwan, which made him aware from a very young age that the democracy we value in our country is unique.
- Liu: I'm the child of immigrants, and I think that has informed the way I see everything. Being a second generation American means you just grow up with a heightened appreciation both of what it is that every American inherits just by being part of this society and community and the good, the bad and the ugly of the inheritance. But also a heightened awareness that there are things that we shouldn't take for granted. How can I, as a kid who had the dumb luck to be born here—how can I, in a sense, earn that luck and be a contributor back to this society?
- Spinelle: Eric worked in DC for a time as a legislative assistant in the U.S. Senate, and later in the White House during the Clinton administration. Since 2013, he’s run an organization called Citizen University. The non-profit’s goal is to get more everyday people involved in their communities. We first mentioned Citizen University in our third episode with Shamichael Hallman, a former library manager for Memphis Public Libraries.
- Shamichael Hallman:
- A colleague said, Hey, there's a group in Seattle and they're getting ready to take their show on the road. The event was called Citizen Fest. It was essentially a day-long celebration of citizenship and thinking about citizenship more broadly in terms of how do we show up in our communities? That's where I first met Eric. That's where we really got to start talking, uh, about his vision and, and, and the work of Citizen University.
- Spinelle: Shamichael hosted one of Citizen University’s programs, called Civic Saturday, in Memphis.
- Hallman: Eric and his team have a lot of ways of talking about Civic Saturday. But one of the things that really struck me was they said that Civic Saturday is the civic analog to a faith gathering. A typical event lasts about two hours. There is music, there is lively conversation. There is what Eric calls a civic sermon, that pulls texts from moments in American history, influential figures, who have called out or encouraged this country to live up to its ideals. And there's kind of opportunities for continual engagement in fellowship.
- Spinelle: Eric and his staff at Citizen University train people like Shamichael on how to host a Civic Saturday event in their city or town. Another program of Citizen University is called the Civic Collaboratory.
- Liu: The format of the Civic Collaboratory is that every time we meet, several members take turns presenting to the full group a project they're working on. An initiative they're trying to move or get off the ground, and the rest of the group has to offer—not critique or commentary—but hard commitments of help. Investments of capital, of every kind. Ideas capital, relationship capital, institutional capital, financial capital, because there are funders

that are part of this. And then what goes around comes around, it'll be your turn to ask for commitments and receive commitments.

Spinelle: Eric says this model of mutual aid among community members helps builds trust within that community.

Liu: And by helping you, I will get to know you and humanize you in ways that will lead me to want to do more stuff with you. Then we make the community stronger. And recognizing that we can make each other stronger by building this habit of taking turns helping each other.

Spinelle: Citizen University has established collaborations all over the country, including Atlanta, Charlotte, Lexington, Wichita, and Phoenix.

Liu: Well, this national Civic Collaboratory has worked so well that in the last few years we've actually adapted the format in place-based local ways. So we started that in Chicago where there is one that's off and running. And what they end up doing is, again, not leading, but unlocking. Activating, catalyzing the wealth and the power and the capital. I don't mean just financial wealth—the ideas, people, norms, problem solving capacity of a community—unlocking that in a mutualistic reciprocal way, that is not about elites asking the regular people for input, but is rather about people helping people. And this kind of mutual aid can happen in small rural communities, in low income urban precincts, in affluent places. And most importantly, it can occur at scales that mix all three of those, right? And get people across lines of power to in fact see each other as being mutually beneficial and useful to each other.

Spinelle: In Chicago, the event proved to be a catalyst for a conversation about having a physical meeting space.

Liu: One of the things that emerged in one of those early meetings at the local collaborator in Chicago was the absence of a space, a regular space, where even gatherings like this could happen. So out of that early meeting was born, this idea of let's literally create a co-working space for nonprofits and civic activists from all parts of town to come and be able to treat this as their space where they can kind of meet and collide and connect in ways that they wouldn't otherwise because they're on other parts of the town where they don't usually connect. And that has since come to pass. It's a thing called Impact House in Chicago.

Spinelle: The goal of Citizen University's programs is to get more people to practice citizenship and improve their communities. Politics are more polarized now than at any point in the last 50 years and a majority of Americans think democracy is in crisis, according to Pew Research and NPR polls. If we want to improve our democracy and get more people to care about government and how it works for us, Eric says first, the culture needs to change.

Liu: If you have a culture that is—as ours is these days, more often than not—atomistic, hyper individualistic, short term in its memory, cynical about the possibility of change, materialistic, dehumanizing, polarizing, then you have a very narrow window to actually affect structural reform or change or action.

- Spinelle: Despite all of this, Eric is hopeful that his work encourages a kind of civic participation that strengthens the country.
- Liu: But if you have a culture that is mutualistic, service oriented, where people think about responsibilities as much as rights, where people think about what preceded them and what they're passing things onto as much as the here and the now, and where people take ownership of, again, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Then that kind of culture actually expands the frame of the possible for any kind of structural policy reform or debate.
- Spinelle: One thing that Citizen University's programs stress to participants is that all members of a community need to understand power, and how to harness it for their goals.
- Liu: We define power at Citizen University in a very simple sense, which is just, it is a capacity to ensure that others do as you would like them to do. And that doesn't mean that things have to therefore get nasty and mean and polarized and everything else, it just means that as grownups we have to recognize that any hesitations we may have about the word power, about the idea of power—we have to get over that. I think a lot of people do have hesitation or just they have very negative associations with the word and the idea. They think that power means: power games, power trips, power hunger, power plays. Power suffuses every part of our lives, and we are constantly practicing it whether we know it or not. And we are constantly giving it away! Whether we know it or not.
- Spinelle: A good example of Eric's understanding of power—is the right to vote.
- Liu: Not voting is voting. It is voting to hand your power over to somebody else who's very happy to take it and use it in your name and against your interest perhaps. There's no such thing as not participating. You thinking you're checking out because everything is corrupt or rigged or you don't have time, is a form of participation. It is actively handing to somebody else your people power, ideas power, voting power, money power, social norms power.
- Spinelle: We also often think of power as being in the hands of politicians. Eric argues that we need to begin to see it in our hands.
- Liu: To live like a citizen in this way requires you both to be fluent in power and understanding what power is, and who has it, and who does not, and why that is, and how you can change that. But then coupling that literacy and power with a grounding and civic character, which is greater than mere personal character and personal traits of diligence or perseverance or what have you. It is the values and norms that hold a community together. Most so-called elected leaders are not leaders of anything. They are exquisitely attuned followers. They have antennae up to see: "Where are the squeaky wheels, where is there signals of demand that I must respond to? And let me then respond to that and act like I can get in front of the parade that already started going." That is true of almost every politician and every social movement that emerges in our society, including ones you don't like. We lead our leaders and when we decide to check out or decide that it's not worth participating in—decide that the game is rigged—we actually make it so.
- Spinelle: And, he says, when we decide that we can make change—elect a different kind of leader, choose a different way of doing things—we can also make that a reality. It's our power that has put elected officials where they are, and can impact their priorities. But he says it's not enough to just elect someone you agree with, we have to be involved as well.

Liu: And that whole arc of hero worship, and waiting for saviors to arrive and just fix stuff for us, is both symptom and cause of this disease that we're talking about here of civic atrophy of our muscles. This is a cross-partisan problem that we've been experiencing as a society for many years.

Spinelle: Another way we can exercise our power, Eric says, is to turn our attention to our local communities.

Liu: These days we pay attention to national politics like spectators watching sport and thinking that, oh, the things that they're doing there or the norms that they're setting or breaking are going to leak down to the rest of us. And that is a very limited view of what citizenship is. Our view at Citizen University is that in a democratic republic where we all have to take responsibility for self-government, the power lies with us not only to decide things, but to set in motion a contagion of norms. We are the ones who determine what is okay. We, by showing up or not showing up, are the ones who create the demand that politicians respond to.

Spinelle: Which is why Citizen University focuses on community-level programs. If the goal of democracy is to have more people work together on local issues, first, they need to talk to each other. Get to know each other. When we spoke, Eric referenced a landmark 2023 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, on the quote "loneliness epidemic." Here he is talking to PBS about it:

[PBS Clip:](#) Here's why this is so concerning. It's because we've realized that loneliness is more than just a bad feeling. It has real consequences for our mental and physical health. It increases our risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide, but social disconnection also raises a risk of heart disease and dementia.

Spinelle: The report found that half of the adults in the U.S. experience loneliness, and that it's a significant health concern. This lack of social connection can cause premature death—comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Liu: This is the psychic and physical measures of the cost of loneliness are the consequence of the ways in which we have stopped joining. We have stopped associating and we've stopped inviting and hosting one another in civic spaces in a way that actually builds that muscle of trust and relationship.

Spinelle: That lack of connection can be apparent everywhere. People work from home and don't interact in person with colleagues. We can pick up groceries curbside, have goods delivered straight to our door, and complete tasks online, so we rarely have to engage with our neighbors. But Eric says if we find more community in person, we might also find more issues we want to get involved with.

Liu: What will motivate people to in fact stop just doomscrolling on social media and just watching their cable news about national politics and saviors or devils in national politics, what will motivate us, in fact, to show up for the people we literally live next door to? And I think one of the prime motivators, one of the prime motivations of this is relationship. The motive has to be, "I've been asked by somebody I know to join in something." That's what will get you off your couch, off your doom scrolling. "Someone who I know who's involved in the library asked me to join this fundraiser for the library. Someone who I know who works on homelessness issues asked me to get involved in this ballot measure to create new service centers for the unhoused."

Spinelle: There is a lot of mobilization and community building at the local level that we can learn from. In Los Angeles, for example, which as of 2022 had the largest population of people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., grassroots organizations run by Angelenos provide direct services to their unhoused neighbors and advocate for better housing policy. Oftentimes, people most impacted by an issue are the ones mobilizing for solutions. Yet Eric still sees a level of disconnection when he travels the country working with different cities and towns. Particularly among the more privileged.

Liu: It's often the affluent, I must say, who when I talk to them can't seem to muster the motivation. "Oh, I'm so busy at my thing. I've got my kids' soccer practice. It's overwhelming to even follow national politics." The problem that many of the more affluent people I talk to face is not a lack of time, but it's a lack of relationship. They don't know their neighbors in the McMansions next to them. They don't know the people who live down the street from them. And I think trust and relationship and connectedness is the base layer of any of this civic renewal that we're going to need to catalyze, from the local outward.

Spinelle: Like my participation in community band, the first step to getting involved is just to join any activity or group in your community. To begin meeting people! For me, community band ended up connecting me to other organizations centered around veterans and senior citizens. I was suddenly in the loop about local festivals and openings of new community spaces because I was playing at the events with the band. For example, if you cared about food justice issues in your city...

Liu: Go join something like the local Chamber of Commerce. Go join something like a gardening club in your community, you know, or an environmental group. And I bet that as you join that and just kind of come to associate with these people and come to know them, that you're gonna discover, 'Oh yeah, there's other people here who also care about food justice.'

Spinelle: Like a lot of the folks we've interviewed in this series, Eric says: when we commit to our local communities, we discover our power.

Liu: I can't promise you that showing up in this way is going to change your town or your community in visible, tangible ways immediately, or even maybe over the next few years. All I can promise you is that the act of committing to that work will itself be transformative and that this is literally and figuratively a leap of faith. I'm not sure that it's going to make a difference, but I'm going to take that leap of faith on the idea that it might. And that by doing that you actually actually change the equation. You actually make it a bit more likely when you join that something is going to change because you set in motion this positive contagion of joining.

Spinelle: Throughout this season we talked to people innovating and engaging with new ways to be more of a participant in this democracy. You might begin to look into participatory budgeting, or something like the Decatur 101 class, in your town. But just showing up somewhere and listening is a start. Hear what your neighbors are passionate about. Share what you're interested in. Let your participation convince leaders in your town that your opinion, your way of life, is worth considering. When the people decide to show up, they make their power known. And that's when we'll see dramatic change happen.

When the People Decide is produced by LWC Studios for the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State. The podcast is reported and hosted by me, Jenna Spinelle. Our producer is Claire McInerney. Paulina Velasco is our editor. Erica Huang mixed the series. Fact checking by Fendall Fulton. Thank you to Eric Liu for participating in this episode. Follow When the People Decide on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts. We're also at [thepeopledecide.show](http://thepeopledecide.show) and on social media @peopledecidepod. I'm Jenna Spinelle. Thanks for joining us.