

# Growing Democracy PODCAST

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- Casey (Co-Host): Welcome to the inaugural episode of The Growing Democracy Podcast. Some of our listeners may be familiar with our In-person Community-based Growing Democracy series, where we brought in experts and activists from a wide variety of nonprofit, governmental, and advocacy organizations to speak with folks interested in citizen engagement and civic action in both Cleveland and Kent, Ohio. Unfortunately, we've had to indefinitely postpone the community series, but that doesn't mean that we can't continue to engage with experts, advocates, and citizens to help for our democracy. And this first series, we thought it'd be interesting to focus on understanding governance in the time of pandemic. But before we do any of that, we've decided that we're going to start with an episode zero. And episode zero really is, we're just going to title this Casey, Ashley and the Growing Democracy Project story. So hello, Ashley, how are you?
- Ashley (CoHost): Hi, Casey. I'm good, I'm glad to be here. It's fun to put this together.
- Casey (Co-Host): It's been a lot of fun to put this together and I think a very welcome distraction from some of the other things that are going on.
- Ashley (CoHost): Absolutely. And I know that we've had this conversation multiple times and with multiple people in the community already, but it was really disappointing when stay at home orders and the closure of the university and all of that led to the fact that we had to kind of basically suspend and possibly even cancel our 2020 series of events. And so being able to continue our work and have these conversations and just share it in a different platform in a different way has really been really valuable. So really glad that we get to do that with our listeners. So thank you for making this an opportunity for us to do this.
- Casey (Co-Host): Thank you, happy to be here. So I thought maybe we should start off by telling our listeners some of the background about the Growing Democracy Project, right? So we're thinking some of them probably have listened to maybe not all of them have. So what is this project and what was the motivation behind it?
- Ashley (CoHost): So everyone knows Casey and I, at the time of the inception of the project or a faculty in the same department and faculty at Kent State University. And we shared kind of a department suite, but we also shared a wall. Our offices were right next to each other so we spent a lot of time talking about our work. And so our work actually comes from very different places. The classes we teach tend to be a little bit different, the research we do tends to look a little bit different.

But at the core, we share a lot of the same interests in kind of fostering a robust democratic system, and whatever that looks like and kind of a socially just system. We had the opportunity to start thinking about what that could look like for us, what a project might look like to collaborate?

And I think reflecting on the conversations we were having with students, reflecting on our own research, reflecting on our partnerships in communities. So we both do engaged research as well, so we work collaboratively with organizations across the country, throughout Ohio, Northeast Ohio particular. We were thinking about what can we do to supplement and support the work that others are doing? And I think ultimately, the Growing Democracy Project kind of emerged from that, right? So having a series of events, having conversations, collaboratively thinking about what civic and political engagement looked like, or could look like, really kind of came out of that. Casey, what brought you to the project?

Casey (Co-Host): As you said, in a lot of our discussions about, especially our graduate training, where we spent a lot of time talking about how decision making in public administration happens and what governance looks like when it happens with the citizenry and not to the citizenry. And that, that can really be shaped a lot by having an informed citizenry that understands what's possible and some of the mechanisms behind how you get change to happen. And so in these discussions, as you said, I've spent time in the community trying to offer information about what is program evaluation, how is that done? You've spent time in the community advising people in different communities of how do you get advocacy work done? What does that look like? What's successful? And so in doing that, we already kind of signaled that we do have a great desire to start at a grassroots space and offer whatever expertise we have to help them kind of further the things that they're interested in furthering.

And we recognize that there's a lot of other people out there like us, maybe academics, maybe not, maybe people that are already in advocacy roles, maybe people that are just experts in specific fields that have this same kind of vision of, "I want to bring what I have to people that would benefit from it and can use it to make change in their own community." And so that was really interesting for me to have an opportunity to do this in Northeast Ohio, where I see a lot of people that are really interested in improving the communities in which they live.

Ashley (CoHost): So I have a question for you. We talk about kind of governance in the time of pandemic, but we also use words like civic and political engagement and the power of governance. What are we talking about? What do we mean when we say governance?

Casey (Co-Host): Right. So it's a great question. And that is that, we live in a society, not because we're forced to, but because we choose to. And as a democratic society, we

have an ability to shape what our society looks like, and a lot of what it looks like is the way in which we're governed. We have opportunities and mechanisms to try to mold the governance structures that are around us. I want people to think of this just as voting, but that's a very kind of basic surface level approach to governance. You don't just vote and that's it. I mean, I guess you can, but there's a lot more to governance than just that, right? Most of the governance that people probably see in their everyday lives, they don't even recognize as being governance, right?

The person that delivers your mail, that's a public servant. The person at town hall that grants you that permit to put in a fence in your backyard, that's a public servant, right? All of these decisions that are made, and most of the time, a very local capacity, those are points at which we can become engaged with our own governance. There are important ways that we can make changes happen or facilitate change. If we have a voice and somebody else doesn't, we can kind of use that as leverage to make change. But governance is more than just voting, it's a lot more, in my experience, and I think in the experience of most people, when they think about it at the local level, and those are things that you can do something about pretty easily, you just need to have some of the right tools.

Ashley (CoHost): Yeah, absolutely. And thinking about how we shape the spaces, where we live, work, play, and pray, I suppose, right? That we have a capacity to inform what the environment looks like, what our communities look like, what the organizations where we're working or engaging with look like, what our city looks like. And that it's really powerful when you recognize your own agency and then can seek out the tools to make sure that you can kind of leverage that power to shape it.

Casey (Co-Host): Absolutely. So in that vein then, how do you connect that to a civic engagement?

Ashley (CoHost): Yeah, so when I'm thinking about civic engagement and governance, I tend to gravitate toward a recognition that this is happening in lots of different ways and in lots of different spaces. And that once we recognize where it's happening, we can move into those spaces and help shape them, or we can move out of them because we recognize that the people that look like me, act like me, are already taking up a lot of space and so I can move other people into those spaces, right? So I think it's constantly thinking about how we're creating opportunities for people to be engaged in their communities. And so for civic engagement, I'm typically thinking about everything from being a volunteer or a member of a local girl scout troop, understanding how that is teaching people about decision making processes, how girls and adults who are leading, are involved in doing even small scale volunteer projects, like making masks, is helping their community, right, kind of building their philanthropic tool kit too.

But everything from also attending public meetings or deciding to serve on a local board or commission, I don't even think people realize that those are available to them, right? That there are positions available to advise local, state, and even federal level officials on the decisions that they're making and so thinking about what that looks like. So for me, civic engagement kind of runs that gamut. And then political engagement tends to be a little bit more focused for me on conversations around power. How do you understand that power? How do you shape who's in power? How do you leverage your own power to inform decision making? And so I probably tend to see them very similarly, but understand politics from a power lens.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah, and I think that that's another area in which we have a lot of agreement and made this collaboration pretty seamless actually. I've realized that we've jumped into a lot of the definitions about some of these things and also what this project is, but we haven't taken a few moments to give folks some background about ourselves, who we are, and who we are inspired us to create this project. So maybe you want to start with that.

Ashley (CoHost): Oh, absolutely. I am a faculty member. I study things like urban governance and policy and activist development, so how people become activists, how they do that work, right? But that's just kind of my research focus, but my history is a little bit... It's funny because I can point to all the path and it seems so seamless, but really it was much more, a little less mapped out and strategic in its actuality. So I have a background in... I'm an undergraduate degree in psychology. I was always interested in working with groups that had been marginalized by different systems and thinking about the ways in which they had been impacted very individually. And so a lot of my work, I think, is still grounded in that early kind of education around how inequality and how systems of inequality impact individuals, their mental health, their wellbeing, and so on.

But I really began to gravitate towards kind of this systems thinking and thinking about how laws or communities shape that space. So I have a master's of public administration and worked for many years doing service learning work, volunteer management, leadership training, and community outreach work with a university based women's center. And so I taught classes, I sat on a lot of boards, local community boards, and was seeing firsthand what was happening. And so a lot of that early kind of thinking about the type of world I wanted to see really informed how I wound up deciding to get a PhD and the type of work that I research and the types of classes that I teach.

Even now that I'm here in Northeast Ohio, I'm originally from West Michigan, lived in New Jersey, lived in DC, kind of lived all over, now that I'm in Northeast Ohio, trying to create spaces where I... And not just a researcher there to impart my wisdom, but also to learn from community, right, and to be in spaces where I can really kind of grow in my understanding of Northeast Ohio and the

communities in Northeast Ohio and understand how all those systems have, have shaped people's individual experiences.

Casey (Co-Host): I think that a lot of my background inspired this. My undergraduate degree was in justice studies where I was very interested in systems of inequality and especially how historically marginalized populations tended to be disproportionately harmed by the governmental systems that were in place. And that this was a pattern that occurred time and time and time again. And that a lot of the faculty that were in the department, where I received my undergraduate degree, did engage in a lot of community work. So they were at prisons and interviewing prisoners and trying to find out the systematic issues there that were affecting them and how these things were not necessarily legal in many aspects, and so they would involve legal interventions in many cases. And so at that time I thought, "Okay, I'll pursue a law degree and that would be really a good way to, right, use some power and benefits that I have to try to tackle inequalities in the system.

And I was very lucky to work at a state agency that was essentially in charge of regulating and giving out a lot of social policy benefits. So things like food stamps and child support and TANF, or what's otherwise known as welfare. And through my work at the state agency, I was able to see that in fact, law isn't always the easiest or best way to intervene to disrupt these systems of inequality, and in fact that there are many other ways in which policy is an important and invisible kind of tool that's been leveraged to both to put this inequality into place and maintain it, but it can also be used to break it apart. And so this kind of developed my love for public policy and I decided instead, that I was going to pursue a master's in public policy, which then turned into a PhD.

And while my research focuses mostly on early education, but also labor policy. I think that that is motivated by groups that I see that are in very vulnerable and fragile positions, and that those are places in which policy interventions can have a big and lasting impact. But that is really just a reflection of that my interest is in how policy can be used try to break apart again, these systems of inequality that disproportionately affect people that are in vulnerable populations. And that it can be a tool for good, not necessarily for evil. And that also, I know that people don't think policy is interesting all the time and that kind of makes me sad. And so I want to go out there and proselytize people about the interesting work that's done in policy and why you should care about it, why it's really, really important and it should be paid attention to, and then it can be used for something that is very important as opposed to a tool for oppression or just controlling people.

Ashley (CoHost): One of the things that that brings up for me is that on the one hand, when we talk about political engagement, a lot of people see policy as kind of this end the thing, right? So I am going to call my State Senator and ask them to support or

oppose a specific policy that's been proposed. But a lot of the work that we do is on implementation and evaluation. And to me, that is such an important place for people to be engaged. And so can you tell me a little bit about what we mean when we were talking about kind of policy implementation evaluation and maybe even why we want the general public to be paying attention to it, why it's so important?

Casey (Co-Host):

Yeah. And this was something that I always found fascinating when I would teach students, either program evaluation or policy evaluation courses, is that their idea of what policy is very, very narrow. So one, policy is something that the state or local government or federal government chooses to do, but it's also what they choose not to do, right? So the absence of action, that's policy as well. Because they've decided, I'm not going to intervene in this I'll let, I don't know whatever it is, market forces or something else "work it out." But policy is really a lot of decisions that are made at every level. Just because a legislative body gets together and crafts some language and passes it and says, "Okay, here you go, agency, you implement it," there's no way in the world that that legislative body wrote down every single step of implementation that they could recognize that implementing a policy in Cleveland looks different from implementing a policy in Columbus, that the context in which these policies are being implemented and looks radically different.

And so because they can't capture all of that information, that means that whatever administrative body is charged with implementing that policy, they have to make a lot of boots on the ground decisions. And those decisions, they're also policy, right? Because it can fundamentally change the ways in which benefits are delivered to certain groups and the creation of winners and losers happens. So when we say that these "small decisions" are policy, what we mean is that, in a local setting, some of those policies that are essentially made right, in the absence of a democratic fashion, because these aren't always made by people that are elected to a position, that those are policies that affect people very locally and in a very personal way, and that they should be carefully examined.

Whether that's through a program evaluation or whether that's just through folks in a city or town or whatever it is saying, "I want to understand what's going on here and I want to understand how this was implemented, what the outcomes are and if it was implemented efficiently and the way in which it was envisioned, and in a way that is having an equal effect on all of the citizens that we would hope it would have an effect on."

Ashley (CoHost):

I think this gives people a sense of why Growing Democracy Project kind of evolved to what it is now, right? So thinking about kind of a series of workshops and community-based discussions, but also podcasts that aren't only talking to people that we traditionally think of as policymakers, right, elected officials at any level of government. So those people are important and we're inviting them

in to have conversations around what they're doing, but we're also talking to local government administrators, we're talking to advocacy organizations and representatives who are holding people accountable and mobilizing people to action to help shape what those local forces look like. And we're also talking to people who are trying to mobilize individuals to take the census or get out and vote so they can see those connections to how voting or census taking impact kind of all those other levels.

And so I think having this conversation really helps to make it clear that when we're talking about civic and political engagement, we're really thinking about it in this very big picture way, right? And there's so many places in which we can help to shape the world that we're living in. And that's what we want to be able to do is have conversations about that and have people think about what that looks like for them in conversation with them, what it looks like for them, as opposed to like, give them a template and say, "Now go change the world."

Casey (Co-Host):

Yeah, and that's exactly right, is that I think that a big goal for us out of this was to say, "Hey, public administrators. Hey, citizens that are interested in engaging in their communities. How you guys see each other as helpful allies, right." And that the public administrators, they have the knowledge, they have the tools, they know where the post-its are kept, right? But citizens know what's important to people, and what are some of the issues that are really, really pressing, but also sometimes invisible, especially to folks that are either in political positions or in public administration positions. And that when they work together, that they can identify problems in the community and solve them in ways that are really meaningful and impactful. And so I think that that's probably one of the biggest goals that you and I shared for this series.

Now we've had a pretty, I think, successful run on the past 15 months. And, as you said, we were really looking forward to the lineup that we had for 2020. It was very exciting and we were days away from our March event when we found out it had to be canceled. So that makes a lot of sense that we've had success there and that we would look forward to getting back to that. But instead we said, "Hey, we're going to produce the podcast, two people, two professors. We've never done this before. We're going to go ahead and produce the podcast. Why in the world would we do that?"

Ashley (CoHost):

I don't know if I can respond, I'm just laughing. So I think that I fundamentally believe that my role in the university and the skills that I've developed along the way have not been so that I can talk at somebody, but so that I can create spaces for conversation for others. And so, yes, I do kind of traditional research. You can find my stuff in academic journals, but a lot of my other work is very much around conversation building. And so I think that really is at the core of what we wanted to do is to say, "We don't want to talk at people, but we want to try and create spaces where people can talk about the amazing work that they're doing, and we can be in conversation about it."

And we can talk about theory and concepts as they're applied and understood within the community. And I think that that is one reason that we kind of pivoted in this direction. That, and there's just really cool people doing really cool work across the country and in Northeast Ohio right now, that not taking an opportunity to share those stories just kind of felt like a waste.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah. So these first 10 episodes have this theme of governance in the time of pandemic. And this really, I think through talking through this, we saw this as a major opportunity that would be missed we didn't share some of these governance stories that are happening. And by governance, it's not just necessarily folks that are in public agencies, but also folks that are out doing the work of advocacy or in nonprofit organizations, because they're part of our governance structure too. And that there are some really cool things going on and this is a moment in time where I think that, for a lot of people, they can start to identify and understand, "Hey, you know what, public administration, nonprofit organizations, advocacy work, all of that is so freaking vital and we're benefiting from that structure and that system right now. And maybe it's a great time to learn more about the work that folks are doing, especially folks that are doing just incredible work in Northeast Ohio. And also, how can I get involved with that? Because that sounds awesome. And I want to know more."

Ashley (CoHost): Yeah. So to that point, Casey, who are some of the people that we have coming on the show. We've had the benefit of recording some of them?

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah, So we've got everyone from folks from a County public health department. We've got folks from a local food bank that came on, which is going to be our episode one. And Katie Carver Reed is really impressive and I think everybody's going to love episode one, perhaps more than episode zero, where you and I...

Ashley (CoHost): Yes.

Casey (Co-Host): We've also got folks coming on that are from amazing organizations like the Trust For Public land, we've got somebody from the Columbus Zoo coming on to talk about how people can engage with other spaces like green space or zoos, which we think of as, "Oh well, I'm just going to go to the zoo. It's a lot of fun," but actually there's a lot of education going on, both for parents and for children, and that they're figuring out new ways to still engage with those communities and people. We've got somebody that's coming on to talk to us about something that's very relevant such as, how does the use of certain types of data potentially aid in contact tracing, but also what are some of the drawbacks to that? So we've got a mayor that's going to be coming on and joining us, we've got somebody else that's engaged in the LGBTQ community in Cleveland.



So just a lot of different people that are doing a lot of cool things that I think folks will really get a sense of what a broad variety of work is happening right now and how important the work is that all of these folks are doing to really help just an enormous community of people during a time that is really stressful and, and can be challenging. And yet they're kind of pushing back against all of that and struggling against it, to find some really fundamentally innovative and cool ways to still continue to do the work that they're doing.

Ashley (CoHost):

Yeah, and I think, when I'm thinking about the pandemic and this public health crisis, and I think it's really important to talk about kind of the challenges that it presents, but it also, one of the things that in conversation with people that we've really realized, and I think we knew, but it became really apparent is that in many of the people's work, it really just amplified the work that they were already doing, right? It really made the services that they were providing or the advocacy that they were doing, or even the electoral work that they were doing so much more important and viewing it as so significant to shaping the lives of people that they want it to be, helping, serving, in whatever capacity.

And so for me, these conversations, I feel like, have been, how do I say, they've been a comfort, they've really have been an opportunity for me to be in community with people and thinking about what my local community looks like and knowing that there are amazing people out there doing this work, even in a really horrible time, that it's there. How have you felt? I mean, how have how these conversations shaped your perspective?

Casey (Co-Host):

So I, and I'm one of those people that the data was comforting and so it was always nice for me, at least to see the data about the spread of the infection and how things are coming down and how people are responding to different policies that are put in place. But it was a really different kind of comfort to talk to people that are doing this hard work in our local communities to hear how one, they recognize the urgency of the work that they're doing. So when we spoke to folks that are working with the incarcerated population, right, they recognize that this is a moment that they need to act.

That yes, there are some additional challenges that come along with these, stay at home orders, and the social distancing measures, but this is a moment where their work is of utmost urgency, and they need to take this on. To how the food bank is responding to trying to get people food still in a time of great challenge in that it just really was a lot of messages from different people, but the same message over and over, which is, we're going to do the work that we're going to do, because it's really important for people and it makes a huge difference in their lives.

And maybe it's a community of people that we don't always think about, and that they're often invisible, but they're not invisible to us. And we're going to do what it takes to help them, even if the challenges are different and the

challenges are harder. And we're going to have to develop some weird ways of doing these things. And that's okay, it's going to be better in the long run if we do that then than if we just sat back and didn't.

Ashley (CoHost): Absolutely, and I think from the podcast, right? So the series of workshops and community dialogues really kind of is built around a sequence of getting someone from thinking about themselves as an individual within a community to thinking about themselves as a collective and how they can shape and create change, right? But these conversations on the podcast allow us to have a different type of conversation with people on the ground and to invite our listeners into that conversation, by thinking about the ways that they can be involved. In some instances it's policy, right, so how can you be involved in shaping policy? How can you be involved in volunteering? Or where to get services, right? Because that's also a really vital thing that we want to make sure that people recognize is what's available and what are people doing. For you, Casey, what do you want our listeners to take away from kind of the first few episodes of the Growing Democracy Podcast?

Casey (Co-Host): Well, I'd like them to take away a couple of things. I think the first is just a great appreciation for some of the work that's kind of silently been done for the community in Northeast Ohio and communities of Northeast Ohio. And that it's really incredible what some of these folks have been doing and continue to do. I think the second takeaway is that, that they can become involved and they can, at various points, depending on the thing that is of most interest to them, or how much time they have, or what they're willing to do, that there are so many points at which they can make a difference in the communities around them and for an oftentimes very vulnerable populations. So this is the time where maybe we are feeling isolated and we feel like we're kind of alone, but we don't have to be and that there are so many mechanisms for us to get engaged and that that can have a positive effect on us, even though we can't necessarily be together. We can feel together because we're making a difference together. What about you, Ashley?

Ashley (CoHost): Yeah. I mean, I don't know that I have much more to add. I mean, so for me, I studied things like community organizing, right? And that's relationship building, and for me, a lot of that is being in community with people. And so I'm hoping that the podcast is one of those little tiny pieces of feeling like you can be in community. Because in some ways, we're focused a lot on Northeast Ohio. We see our work as really informing the communities of Northeast Ohio. But I do think that it also is relevant to people elsewhere, right? So most of the people we've talked to point to, we're seeing this same phenomena or a similar phenomenon happening in Arizona and Texas and Connecticut. So I think that, it's an opportunity for me to feel like I'm in conversation with people that I hope that it creates a space that people feel like they get to be in conversation with us, even if they're just listening to it three months from now. And that it's not only relevant to the people of Northeast Ohio, but kind of beyond.

Casey (Co-Host): Yeah, nobody that we are talking to had their jobs created because of the pandemic, right? They all were doing this work that they do pre-pandemic, but the pandemic really just highlighted how important this work is, and that we probably should have been paying attention all along. And what's happening in Northeast Ohio is just a microcosm of what's happening throughout the United States. And that all of these issues are shared regardless of what, what state or city that you live in. And so I think that there is probably a particular interest for folks in Northeast, Ohio, but no matter where you are, I think you're going to find a lot of interesting information out from listening to these podcasts.

Ashley (CoHost): Excellent. So I have one last question for you, Casey, where can our listeners find more information about our project, about the podcast, about everything that's coming up.

Casey (Co-Host): Right, so if say, go to [growingdemocracyoh.org](http://growingdemocracyoh.org), then they can find out all the information they ever wanted to know about this podcast, about the project in general, about our in-person series and the events, a lot of them were taped and they can actually go back and watch some of those events. But we also have some other information up there, some educational curriculum, access to the links that some of our guests talk about on the podcast and also links to other folks that we think are doing really incredible work, that they should check out and beyond just what we're doing. And more information about us if they desperately wanted to know that.

Ashley (CoHost): Excellent. Thank you for doing this with me.

Casey (Co-Host): Thank you for doing this with me. Thanks for listening to the Growing Democracy Podcast. I am Casey Boyd-Swan and my co-host is Ashley Nickels. Our podcast is edited by Gheramy Demery and supported by the American Political Science Association. If you like our show and want to know more, check out our website, [growingdemocracyoh.org](http://growingdemocracyoh.org). Join us next time for our first episode in this series when we talked to Katie Carver Reed, director of Network Partners and Programs with Akron Canton Regional Food Bank.