

The following is a copy of a speech given by Stuart Langton to the League of Women Voters of Sanibel, Florida, on March 16, 2017. Dr. Langton is an educator, civic leader, and businessman. He is the former Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Tufts University and is currently Chairman of the Coordinating Council of the Florida Civic Advance. He can be reached at stlangton2010@gmail.com.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC LIFE IN FLORIDA
by Stuart Langton, PhD

When most people think about Florida, citizen participation and civic life are hardly the first things that come to mind. Now, if one mentioned political dysfunction, crazy elections, greed, corruption and sheer weirdness, it is a pretty good bet that people have heard about that.

While this image may seem unfair, especially if you live in a well governed place like Sanibel or Sarasota, consider that Florida has been dubbed the "Corruption Capital of America" because 1,762 public officials have been convicted of public corruption since 1976, a national record. Forbes magazine piles on to Florida's bad image by naming three Florida cities among the 10 most "miserable" in the nation. The U.S. Census Bureau then ranks Florida 5th worst state in violent crime, 7th worst in high-school dropouts, and 9th in prison incarceration. Plus, we are number one in health care fraud and identity theft. We should not forget we are 48th among 50 states in health insurance coverage, and dead last in unemployment insurance and affordable housing. And we haven't said anything about traffic, elections, race relations, pollution, sinkholes, or pythons in the Everglades.

From all of this, one might expect Floridians to be enraged and engaged. Unfortunately, the opposite appears to be the case according to research by the Florida Joint Center on Citizenship and others. The research shows, among the 50 states, Florida ranks: last in citizens working with neighbors to fix a community problem, 48th in donating money to charity, 47th in citizens belonging to a community group or in attending a public meeting, and 46th in terms of people volunteering. Looking at civic health in the 51 largest metropolitan areas, Miami ranks last, Orlando 48th, and Jacksonville and Tampa tie at 47th. Floridians aged 18 to 29 are also found to be, "the most disengaged group in one of the most civically disengaged states."

Let me add: segregation and differences among Floridians is high, incivility is so common that many city councils have rules about how to be civil, income inequality is 5th worst in the U.S, political affiliation is roughly split between demcorate, republican, and independents, and 36% of people think the state is moving in the right direction while 39% disagree. The only area of consensus is distrust of politicians. No wonder, author Carl Hiassen concludes: "Floridians are so divided they cannot even agree on the design of their license plate." At last count, I believe, we had 122 options.

Why is Florida's Civic Culture so Weak?

So, why is Florida's civic health so weak? The big reason is population growth for which Florida is the American heavyweight champ. Between 1950 and 2000, Florida's population grew by 470%, while the average growth for states was 87%. California's growth rate, by comparison, was half this size. In response, Florida created many political and social institutions to try to keep up with a swelling population. Between 1987 and 2012, the number of political units in Florida went from 966 to 1,555, including special districts, with the creation of 23 new cities and towns. One outcome of this is that many of these government entities have limited capacity and experience to successfully inform, engage, connect, and attract support from citizens.

Florida has also struggled to establish non-profit groups to address community needs, but it still ranks 48th among 50 states in the number of non-profit groups per capita. This is a serious problem as nonprofits are critical in community problem-solving, nurturing civic values, attracting volunteers, building local leadership, connecting groups, mediating conflicts, and building consensus. The bottom-line here is that because of Florida's hyper-growth, our cities are in a never-ending game of civic catch-up, and most cities lack the civic infrastructure to adequately meet community needs. Unfortunately, this phenomenon may last for some time as Florida's population is forecast to increase by over 20% more in the next 20 years.

In analyzing Florida's phenomenal growth, Craig Pittman, author of the witty and fact-filled new book, [Oh Florida: How Americas Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country](#), observes: "This human Tsunami brought the young, the old, whites, blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and a host of other census classifications, all bumping up against each other, running into each other with cars, and shouting at each other in various languages, objecting to whatever weird things their neighbors were doing."

O.K., I admit this is pretty hyperbolic, but it does point to the multiculturalism that is Florida, and the need to build appreciation and connections between so many that live together and share the commonality of being different. This is a big deal, since now, or very soon, those who have been minorities will be the majority. And, consider that over two-thirds of us come from somewhere else. Thus, the famous Florida greeting: "Where ya from?"

The Case for Civic Optimism

No talk about citizen participation and civic life in America would be replete without a good quote from Abraham Lincoln or Alexis de Toqueville. I don't have time for both, so here is a favorite from our 16th President: "We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or we can rejoice because thorn bushes have

roses.” Well, since I have talked enough about Florida’s civic thorns, let’s move on to the roses as I tell you why I am optimistic about our civic future.

While Florida is back in the pack in its civic health ratings, it is also rich with initiatives to promote civic engagement and strengthen civic life. I could give you a hundred examples, but let me illustrate with these few: Florida has 25 cities and counties designated as All America cities because of their civic performance; Florida created the first and one of the strongest Sunshine laws in the nation to give citizens access to government materials and meeting; Florida has one of the most comprehensive K-12 civic education programs; Florida’s leading business association includes civic development among its major goals for the state; nearly a half million citizens volunteer in Florida schools; the 28 Florida state colleges have created a network to promote civic literacy among students; the state of Florida has a volunteer program that administers \$32 million in programs that provide 1.7 million hours of service to communities annually; all Florida institutions of higher education have service learning programs, and it is estimated that these institutions have created over 3,000 community partnerships throughout the state.

You should also know that there is a great deal of creativity and innovation in Florida civic life, and it is growing. We see this in the Civic Hackathon program in Miami (and several other cities) where computer programmers and geeks work with government and nonprofits and donate their time and skills to social causes. In Jacksonville, a couple of entrepreneurs create the One Spark fair, which brings together potential volunteers and funders with nonprofit community groups. In 2015 it was reported that 320,000 attended, making it the largest crowd-sourcing event in the world. In Sarasota, hundreds of high school students, from diverse background are trained in community leadership, and then proceed to serve on the boards of directors of local organizations. In Central Florida, a young college graduate creates her job and an organization, to provide decent housing for migrant workers who are needed to harvest crops in her rural community. In Tallahassee, the local utility collaborates with residents in one the poorest neighborhoods, and they work together successfully to reduce energy consumption and cost. And in Miami, the Venture Café and the Center for Social Change provide space and programs for young entrepreneurs to come together to build new businesses as well as social and civic innovation initiatives. Not only are these stories inspiring, but they represent just a fraction of the new wave of civic innovation and entrepreneurship emerging in Florida communities.

About the Florida Civic Advance

At this point, you may think that what I have reported is contradictory. If so, you are correct because civic weakness and vitality are two sides of Florida’s civic story. This was the very impression that my colleague, Bob Jones, and I had when we completed a study for the Board of Governors of the State University System of Florida, in 2009, about University Community Service and Engagement. We concluded that there was a deeper narrative to explore in reconciling the paradox

between poor civic health ratings for Florida and the abundant examples of civic vibrancy we saw throughout the state. Consequently, we were encouraged by a bipartisan group of state leaders to study the issue of civic life more broadly. We did this for several years, in between our consulting schedules, through the Consensus Center at Florida State University, where Bob directs and I assist, as my schedule allows, as a Senior Fellow. In 2012, we completed a white paper with many of our findings, and shared it widely with over 100 Florida leaders.

As a result, we found many leaders were deeply concerned about Florida's weak civic health, and they were eager to do something about it. We became impressed that many people referred us to other individuals and institutions committed to civic improvement. This led us to the realization that there was a latent civic development interest network of academics, business leaders, public officials, students, and nonprofit leaders. Almost all of them said they were interested in communicating and possibly collaborating with others. At that point we determined our challenge was to connect the dots among leaders and between institutions. So, we started asking leaders if they would be interested in creating some kind of network to connect and advance their shared interests.

Before we knew it, 20 organizations had signed on, including AARP Florida, the Florida League of Cities, the Florida Chamber Foundation, Leadership Florida, the Florida Philanthropic Network, Campus Compact, Allegheny Franciscan Ministries, the Florida Association of Counties, the Florida Library Association, and many academic institutions. After discussions with these groups, it was agreed to convene a summit meeting in February 2015 of representatives from them. This decision forced us to come up with an appropriate name for this network, and to be clear about what we wanted to accomplish since much of the language used to talk about civic matters was viewed by many to be as clear as mud and as soft as a marshmallow.

It was decided to call the emerging network the Florida Civic Advance because, unlike much of the rest of the nation, our problem was less one of renewing faded civic capacity, as it was a matter of creating it anew. We also adopted this definition to clarify that civic matters are about government, but much more: "Civic refers to the variety of things done by citizens, government, and other institutions that make democracy work. Civics is important because it includes principals and practices essential to our political and social life." We went on to state our shared values and vision in this way: "As for American communities, civic ideals inspire us with expectations that citizens and institutions should be engaged together for the common good; they care for one another and the quality of community life; government is just, proactive, inclusive, and transparent; collaboration among public, private, and community leaders and institutions is regular; and opportunities are created for connections between different elements of the community."

To make things even more tangible, we also identified eight areas of civic practice and programs we would like to see done well in Florida communities:

1. Voter Education, Deliberation, and Participation
2. Citizen Engagement with Government
3. Collaborative and Inclusive Economic Development
4. Volunteering and Charitable Giving
5. Nonprofit Sector Leadership
6. Intergroup and Intergenerational Connecting
7. Civic Education and Student Service Learning
8. Civility, Neighborliness, and Community Caring

The long-view of the Florida Civic Advance is to create awareness of these areas of civic importance among the public, leaders, and officials in Florida's 410 municipalities and 67 counties, and to encourage, support, and track their advancement.

Florida Civic Advance Progress and Direction

In early 2015, the first Florida Civic Advance Summit was held in Orlando. It included over 100 leaders from 24 participating organizations, and it resulted in many pledges to work together. Participants developed scores of ideas to increase civic engagement and strengthen civic life. A Coordinating Council of leaders from 18 organizations, a group I chair as a volunteer, was then established to develop policy and plans, and the Florida Consensus Center at Florida State University agreed to serve as secretariat. The Council then created and adopted a strategic plan that clarified the following three goals for the network: to build public support for civic advance, to encourage action by local officials and leaders, and to support civic innovation and entrepreneurship. In support of all of these goals was a commitment to ongoing research and development.

Next, plans were made to organize work groups in the 8 areas of civic practice mentioned above. The purpose of these groups is to identify research and action priorities in each area, as well as strategies for advancing them. The first four of these groups will meet in May, 2017. We are proud that these workgroups include over 50 highly accomplished and well respected leaders who combine deep experience, successful performance, and strong thinking about the future.

The number of FCA member organizations has now grown to 44, and we expect that the network will expand to 50 by November 2017 when the second Florida Civic Advance Summit will be held. Several Miami area organizations have joined as a result of the first local civic advance summit in December 2016. We are now exploring the development of other local civic advance conferences and projects in other cities. As we continue to grow, we particularly plan to strengthen ties with businesses, faith based organizations, and foundations.

Our grandest, and most difficult, goal is to create a robust and influential civic information system and network. We envision providing high quality presentations and deep analysis on-line and through other sources, about the best and most innovative civic work in Florida. We have in mind a “Good Story” network that will inspire, but will also include meaningful analysis and practical guidance in support of community civic improvement efforts. The initiative we have in mind will reflect a new kind of civic journalism to be developed with college and university students. Additional distribution will be through the many FCA organizations and media partners.

No state has a venture quite like this, and no state could create one without a strong collaborative network to support it. The Florida Civic Advance has evolved as such a network in one of the largest and most prosperous states in the nation, and we are now ready to invite supporters to join us in this entrepreneurial civic enterprise. If any of you have time and/or money, we invite your support

Civic Advance: A Global Perspective

In closing, I would like to frame the civic challenges we face in Florida in a broader perspective since civic decline, disinterest, and disinvestment have been going on for a long time in America. At the same time, there is deep concern about this, and there is a growing national movement to promote civic renewal and advance. Significantly, this movement coincides with growing public dissatisfaction with current partisan politics and a decline in confidence in the established political order. Whether this will result in a migration of interest in and greater commitment to community civic engagement is not clear, but many propose it as a corrective force or an alternative way to strengthen democracy. Such a prospect, I suggest, is neither good nor bad. At worst it could increase political polarization and detract from local problem solving if not managed well; but it could also lead to a renaissance in community engagement. In the end, the results will depend upon the leadership and values that will prevail. This is why we should be as concerned about the quality of citizen engagement as the amount of it.

Finally, we need to understand the importance of citizen participation and civic life in a global context. Author Tom Friedman does a good job at this in his recent book, Thank You for Being Late. He argues that this is a time of accelerated change in which the mega forces of technology, globalization, and climate change are so powerful and fast that we cannot adapt to them, and that governments throughout the world are floundering as a result. While his solutions are few, his approach illustrates what Albert Einstein’s meant in claiming that a good framework may be more helpful than a number of proposed solutions. Friedman’s framework is to create strong and healthy communities, like the one in which he grew up. He feels strongly that it is through the experience of community that we can establish

the values, practices, relationships, and institutional capacity to cope with the unintended negative consequences of accelerated change. He proposes that, “we each need to be rooted in the topsoil that is the foundation of all healthy communities. We must be enriched by the topsoil and enrich it in return. This prescription is easier to write than to fill, but it is the order of our day – the real uber-task of our generation.”

Where did Tom Friedman grow up? It turns out to be St. Louis Park, a suburb of the Minneapolis and St Paul area, which, interestingly enough, has been rated as the highest city in the nation in civic health in a study that compares it with greater Miami, the lowest rated. So, what is the secret civic sauce of the twin cities? It turns out to be pretty simple actually. The study concludes: “Minneapolis – St Paul civil servants, public officials and citizens have traditions and policies of collaboration that enhance satisfaction with public institutions, leaders, and other citizens, and maintain a spirit of creativity and inclusion.”

While not exactly banner headlines, the study comparing civic health in the twin cities and Miami does provide an algorithm for civic growth based on the variables of COLLABORATION, CREATIVITY, and INCLUSION, all values (and practices) that the Florida Civic Advance seeks to encourage and support in Florida communities.

My last thought is that in looking at civic life across America today, we cannot help but be impressed and inspired by the wonderful example of Minneapolis-St Paul and their civic tradition. We should extract every ounce of learning from them. However, if we look to the future, and the many emerging civic challenges we will face nationally and globally in the next decade, I have a tip for you:

Keep your eyes on Miami and the rest of Florida.