



# Trygve Throntveit, Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative

Symposium will highlight collaborations across barriers to solve civic problems

A Civic Caucus Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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## Present

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## Summary

According to Trygve Throntveit, cofounder of the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI), hosted by the University of Minnesota, it's important for people to learn from Minnesotans who have worked across differences or barriers to solve civic problems. During an interview with the Civic Caucus, Throntveit says people will have a chance to hear such stories at the upcoming second annual Minnesota Symposium on Civic Renewal, to be held on Saturday, Oct. 27, 2018. The stories will be told at the symposium through interviews with people involved in such efforts, a different format from that used at MNCSI's first symposium in October 2017.

Throntveit is looking for more examples of collaboration on civic problems among an unlikely alliance of actors who came together to try to do something that wasn't going to get done if they just waited for the next election. He says barriers groups have had to work across include ideological divides, institutional divides or community organizations working for the first time with businesses.

He says MNCSI tries to promote the idea that none of us knows it all and that citizens need to learn that other citizens might think differently and that there are different meanings for different words. Through collaboration, Throntveit says, people can learn about other people's ideas and concerns. They can build relationships of trust, even though they don't agree on everything. He says ideas will never be as good as they could be if we don't put them to scrutiny and look at ideas from elsewhere.

He describes an initiative to try to improve voter turnout in several wards in Saint Paul that traditionally rank among the lowest turnouts in the state. The University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development and Ramsey County are collaborating with Minnesota Civic Youth and social studies teachers in various Saint Paul schools to enhance civics education for middle and high schoolers.

Throntveit says academia should be more involved in helping to solve public issues. Institutions might have to change their incentives to encourage academics to become more engaged in the civic life of their communities.


## Biography

Trygve Throntveit is a development officer for the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). He is also Dean's Fellow for Civic Studies and editor of *The Good Society: A Journal of Civic Studies*. He is one of the organizers of the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative, hosted by CEHD. The Initiative is a group of diverse people convening to build relationships across barriers as a first step toward reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens.

Throntveit has published several articles and book chapters on the history of U.S. politics, foreign policy and social thought. He has authored two books: *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Power Without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Throntveit received his bachelor's degree in history and literature from Harvard College and his master's and Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. He taught for several years at Harvard and held a postdoctoral fellowship at Dartmouth College's John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding before moving back to the Twin Cities. Throntveit grew up in Saint Paul and is a 1997 graduate of Saint Paul Central High School.

## Background

Continuing its focus on Minnesota's competitiveness, since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On November 27, 2016, the Caucus issued a report based on that review,  *Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process*.

The Civic Caucus interviewed the University of Minnesota's Trygve Throntveit to learn more about the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI) and its plans for its upcoming second annual Minnesota Symposium on Civic Renewal to be held on Oct. 27, 2018. The Civic Caucus previously interviewed [Throntveit on March 24, 2017](#).

## Discussion

**The Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI) held its first annual Minnesota Symposium on Civic Renewal in October 2017.** Trygve Throntveit, Dean's Fellow for Civic Studies at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) and one of the organizers of the Civic Studies Initiative, said the symposium attracted a diverse group of 215 Minnesotans from academia, business, community organizations, government, civic groups and health care, as well as students. The idea, he said, was to have the attendees learn from Minnesotans who had worked together across differences or barriers to solve problems.

Throntveit said the symposium used three- or four-person panels, with each member asked to tell their version of the problem the group came together to solve, the difficulties of working together and how they worked through them, and what successes and failures or opportunities for improvement they had.

**There were some problems with the format.** "Almost no one stuck to 10 minutes," Throntveit said. "Some lapsed into position statements or 'this is why this issue is important to my group,' rather than actually telling the story about how they collaborated across an ideological divide or an institutional divide or how a community organization worked for the first time with a business. The barriers weren't all super-polarizing, but they are practical barriers to citizens getting work done together and we wanted to focus on the possibility of overcoming them."

Throntveit said the organizers of the symposium wanted the audience to be able to hear these stories to know that they really do happen and to be able to ask questions of the people on the panels and give their input. "We ran out of time," he said. "Several impressive people gave very good talks, but most weren't really telling the stories we had hoped to hear."

**The second annual Minnesota Symposium on Civic Renewal is set for Saturday, Oct. 27, 2018, from 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.** Throntveit said the format for the upcoming symposium will be different from last year's. This time, he said, the format will be public interviews with two or three people in each of four different groups. He said the interview format will allow for more control of the time and topic.

There will be no keynote address, he said. Instead, the public interviews will start with an interview of Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter and Burnsville Mayor Elizabeth Kautz. Former Saint Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel, now professor of practice at Hamline University, will conduct the interview. Throntveit said he believes Kautz, who has been mayor since 1995, has been trying to govern in the way Carter has been talking about governing.

Throntveit said there will also be an interview of Ron Anderson, senior vice chancellor for academic and student affairs at Minnesota State; Mary Hinton, president of the College of St. Benedict; and Bob McMaster, professor of geography and vice provost and dean of undergraduate education at the University of Minnesota. The interview will focus on what role higher education should and does play in civic renewal.

**Throntveit is looking for people to tell stories at the symposium of how they have collaborated as citizens with citizens in other sectors on solving problems.** He said the symposium's purpose

is to promote a culture of putting citizens at the center of self-government, so they are less consumers of politics, left to make choices among options they had no role in formulating and maybe don't like. He wants citizens to be creators of public life.

**Ignorance shapes how people respond to issues they think are important to them.** An interviewer made that statement and said, "I'm dumbfounded about and troubled by what people don't know."

Throntveit responded that probably a lot of what forms people's response to issues has to do with general ignorance about how the world works and how public policy institutions work, but he said his and his colleagues' aim is not to play civics teacher. "We're trying to promote overall an ethos of epistemic humility-that none of us knows it all," he said. "What comes out is people saying, 'It never crossed my mind about what different people think or that they assign x or y different meanings to certain words.'"

He said the symposium wants to focus on people collaborating on specific problems they've worked through, rather than on people memorizing ideological positions on things. Through collaboration, he said, people can learn about other people's concerns and ideas, with everyone learning several things at a time.

**It's instructive to look at the history of neighborhoods in Minneapolis.** An interviewer made that statement and noted that the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) started in 1992, with millions of dollars of funding from the city's tax-increment financing (TIF) districts. The idea, the interviewer said, was citizen-driven public policy at the micro level.

Now, the interviewer said, that movement has evolved into more top-down policies from the city, rather than what each neighborhood thinks. "It might be interesting to go the way of looking at the neighborhood level to find out what kind of neighborhood and amenities each neighborhood wants," he said.

"There are things at the neighborhood and community level to which larger institutions don't attend," Throntveit responded.

**Our first step is to learn where collaboration works.** Throntveit made that statement and said people working together can help mitigate a situation or advance a goal in small ways. "It's building a relationship of trust," he said. "People don't have to agree on everything."

Throntveit said he'd like to be able to draw out in public at the symposium the way in which a statewide official had worked with a neighborhood council or an association of counties. It's important, he said, to identify what assets there are locally, but also to include partners with more knowledge of what's going on at the national or international level.

"The interviews are going to focus on a particular story of people solving a problem as citizens collaborating across differences," he said. Throntveit is asking people to let him know about actual initiatives in which an unlikely alliance of actors came together to try to do something that wasn't going to get done if they just waited for the next election.

An interviewer offered the example of the Drug Sentencing Reform Act, which included collaboration by law enforcement, public defenders and people on the right and the left. He said all the work was done behind the scenes.

**Are there any key elements of civic renewal that seem to be missing today and that we must concentrate on?** An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit responded by giving Ramsey County as an example. He said the county has the lowest voter registration percentage and lowest voter turnout in the state. He noted that Saint Paul's wards 5, 6 and 7, which ring the Capitol, are particularly low in those percentages.

Throntveit said he has begun working on this issue with Ramsey County Elections Manager Joe Mansky and several other partners. "The reason people are not voting isn't because they're lazy citizens," Throntveit said. "It's that candidates promise things and then do the exact opposite. People don't feel represented or connected or have control over that kind of politics."

For that reason, CEHD and Ramsey County are collaborating with [Minnesota Civic Youth](#) and social studies teachers in various Saint Paul schools to enhance civics education for middle and high schoolers. The idea behind these efforts, funded largely through a grant from the Saint Paul Foundation, is to approach topics in civics and issues in the broader election season that are important to students. The students largely guide their own conversations, under the guidance of a teacher trained in a protocol adapted from the Minnesota Council of Churches' "Respectful Conversations."

"These things take time," Throntveit said. "It will be frustrating if you just concern yourself with voter turnout. We need to make politics not just about voting, but about people's lives and how they can take control over them."

**The interviews at the upcoming October symposium will be a coordinated process between the interviewer and the interviewee.** Throntveit said it will be a multi-step process. The interviewer will interview the interviewees ahead of the event, which will allow the interviewer to come up with questions. Throntveit said, "We want to say, 'This was the problem. What were the conflicts you faced in collaborating with other people? What are the real nuts and bolts of the messy process of citizen politics and of maintaining political friendships with people who have different interests?' We want to show it can be done, but how?"

**There are several directions we can take to try to improve public policy in Minnesota.** An interviewer made that statement and said one direction is making civic engagement better as an end in itself. Another direction is trying to get more and better public-policy proposals into the process. He asked how urgent the need is for better ideas.

Throntveit responded, "If we don't repair our civic fabric and have a culture in which people truly believe they can engage with people of very different backgrounds and ideas and be assured that, even if they lose this discussion, their input has had some effect, it doesn't matter what kinds of ideas someone puts forth. Our ideas will never be as good as they could be if we don't submit them to scrutiny and look at ideas from elsewhere."

"We do need better ideas," he continued. "There is a role for groups like the Civic Caucus and for academia."

**Without saying protest or mobilizing is wrong, Throntveit worries about a culture in which we're either protesting or doing nothing.** Throntveit made that statement in response to an interviewer's questions about whether protestors know what their goals are and what parts of the civic milieu can help them solve a problem. "We don't get to that point so often," Throntveit said. "We live in a day where protesting seems like the only manifestation of engagement."

**Do we have to give up transparency to come to a good public-policy outcome?** An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit responded that we must sometimes make that existential choice. "And we have to know we might be making the wrong choice and accept that," he said. "When a behind-the-scenes process is finished, however, then public officials could be more open with the public on how things were done. They should at least be accountable after the fact."

**Civic work would be better if we as a culture could embrace epistemic humility and failure a bit more.** Throntveit made that statement and an interviewer commented that one word means something to one group and something else to another. "There's an area for potential benefit if we all understood what we're saying," the interviewer said.

Throntveit said the keynote address at last year's Civic Renewal Symposium focused on the importance of asking for clarification before you respond: "When you said X, I heard this. Is that what you meant?" Throntveit said we must train ourselves to do that and speak in "I" statements. "Assume good faith on other people's side," he said.

**More involvement from academia is critical.** An interviewer made that statement and Throntveit responded that higher education too often markets itself as a private good, not a public good. "If you come from academia, people aren't sure you're relevant," Throntveit said. "If you're not pumping out engineers, why should I invest in you? Academia has no case to make if it can't convince people it is a public good."

"There are people in the hard and soft sciences who are feeling this," he said. "That's especially true among the younger generation of academics." He noted a 2012 Harvard University study of associate professors, many of whom feel a lack of civic purpose in their work. "Their students are trying to figure out what this education can do, not just for me, but for the world," he said.

Throntveit said there might be a way for institutions to change the incentives for academics to get involved in public issues as citizens, rather than just to publish papers to climb up the academic ladder. He said he and others-David Sloan Wilson at the State University of New York (SUNY), Scott Peters at Cornell, Anand Marri from Columbia and Harry Boyte from Augsburg-are working on organizing a summit at the University of Minnesota in November 2018 of academics who are committed to a long-term process of identifying the normative and practical foundations of such involvement.

**We need people in politics to say, "I don't have all the solutions."** Throntveit made that point and said politicians should say that frankly, and then tell people their role is to help the community make its own decisions. "No party or side or leader has the one right solution," he said. "The rightness of a solution depends, at least in part, on the process by which it was reached, and whether that process was fair, inclusive and empowering for all."