Disavowing Politics: Civic Engagement in an Era of Political Skepticism

Elizabeth Bennett¹, Gianpaolo Baiocchi², Alissa Cordner², Peter Klein², Stephanie Savell³

1. Department of Political Science, Brown University
2. Department of Sociology, Brown University
3. Department of Anthropology, Brown University

Corresponding Author: Elizabeth Bennett. Direct all correspondence to Project@brown.edu or Elizabeth Bennett, Department of Political Science, Brown University, Box 1844, 36 Prospect Street, Providence, RI 02912.

Word Count: 12,271

Key Words: political disavowal, cultural sociology, civic engagement, ethnography, apathy

Acknowledgements: We are a collective of researchers, and equal co-authors in every way. The name order in our publications varies from essay to essay. We would like to thank the many activists and organizers of Providence who welcomed us into their work and lives, inviting us to work along side them to make Providence a more just and pleasant place to live. We especially thank the seven organizations that shared with us their everyday labors as well as their visions of a better city. We are grateful to our graduate student and faculty colleagues who read drafts, reviewed ideas, and reminded us to be reflexive, especially Tatiana Andia Rey, Javier Auyero, Claudio Benzecry, Marcy Brink-Danan, Diane Graizbord, Jose Itzigson, Sharon Krause, Kathy Lutz, Keith Morton, Michael Rodríguez Muñiz, and Corey Walker. A draft of this article was presented at the Eastern Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia in 2011.

Funding: No funding received.

ABSTRACT

Americans are skeptical, distrustful, cynical about, and disappointed in politics. However, political action and civic engagement persist—and by some measures are on the rise. How and why is it that, in an era of skepticism, Americans continue to engage? Based on a one-year, multi-cited, collaborative ethnography of civil society groups in a medium-sized American city, we explore the tension between skepticism and engagement in civic life. Drawing on elements of cultural sociology—particularly symbolic boundary making, ambiguities, and role distancing—we develop the concept of disavowal of politics. Our analysis demonstrates that disavowal is a cultural idiom of simultaneous involvement with civil society and critique of politics. It is neither a false negation nor a cynical disengagement, but rather emerges to distinguish between the unsavory realm of politics and the desire to work for social and political change. By paying attention to the day-to-day practices and meanings of participants in civil society, we show that disavowal of the political allows people to creatively constitute what they imagine to be appropriate and desirable forms of political engagement. In this way, the disavowal of politics provides an avenue of democratic participation.
INTRODUCTION

Is distrust of government and political institutions dangerous to democracy? Certainly, a long line of thinkers has thought so, from canonical figures like de Tocqueville to more recent observers like Putnam. They argue that political disaffection leads individuals to withdraw from social and political life, and that this sort of apathy corrodes even the most vibrant of democracies (Wuthnow 1991; Goldfarb 1991; Calhoun 1993; Putnam 1995, 2000; Bellah et al. 1996; Skocpol 1999, 2003; Mouffe 2000; Zizek 2003). On this point, de Tocqueville famously wrote that in a democracy, despotism emerges when individuals turn their back on the common good, and begin to think of fulfilling their political duties as “a troublesome annoyance” (2003 [1840]: 627). Unsurprisingly, in the 1990s, when Americans’ trust in politics and approval of politicians fell to (what was then) an all-time low, the status of political engagement—and therefore the state of democracy—became a central concern within and outside of the academy. Political scientists and sociologists meticulously documented American political apathy, cynicism, and distrust of government (Dionne 1991; Craig 1993; Tolchin 1996; Bennett 1997; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997), and analyzed empirical trends in civic and associational life (Teixeira 1992; Paxton 1999, Rotolo 1999; Baer, Curtis, and Grabb 2001), which were generally argued to be on the decline (Putnam 1995, 1996, 2000, Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Today, Americans are even more skeptical of political actors and institutions (Pew 2010; American National Election Studies 2010), but by several measures are participating more than ever in civic life (Corporation for National and Community Service 2006; American National Election Studies 2010:). If distrust, cynicism, and disaffection are typically synonymous with disengagement, withdrawal, and apathy, what explains today’s paradoxical state of skeptical engagement? In this article, we ask what it means when citizens participate passionately in civic life whilst swearing off politics. We explore the meaning of being a citizen, in a time when declaring, “I am not political” seems central to political action. What does skeptical engagement mean for democracy today?

This article speaks to a central debate in the contemporary civic engagement and democracy literature by bringing the sociology of culture to bear on the practices of American civil society and the meanings that animate it. By drawing on evidence from original ethnographic fieldwork, we extend both literatures by developing a concept called disavowal of politics. We examine empirical and theoretical work on the relationships between political skepticism, civic engagement, and democratic health. We review how scholars have addressed similar questions (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Mouffe 2000; Zizek 2003; Offe 2006; Norris 2011), and highlight how cultural sociology on “actually existing civil society,” especially boundary making (e.g., Lamont and Molnar 2002; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Wacquant 2009; Baiocchi and Corrado 2010) and role distancing (e.g., Goffman 1961; Coser 1966; Snow and Anderson 1987; Teske 1997; Eliasoph 1997; Taft 2006; Norgaard 2006), can contribute to analysis. We then describe our field site of Providence, Rhode Island, a mid-size city facing post-industrial transitions, economic decline, and immigration challenges similar to many of its rust belt contemporaries. Our team of five researchers\(^1\) collaboratively studied seven civil society organizations – each researcher observing all sites – for one year, using ethnographic methods and collective, workshop style

\(^1\) This is purposefully an interdisciplinary team, comprised of one anthropologist, three sociologists, and one political scientist.
system of data management, coding, theorizing and writing. Our research confirms among activists in Providence what has been documented more generally: that whatever their race, class, social background, or political ideology, Americans hold politics in low regard, and consider “being political” as unsavory or seedy (Eliasoph 1998; Dionne 2001). But what our research also showed was that, surprisingly, having a negative view of the workings of government did not make for thin or instrumental commitments to narrow interests. Perhaps even more surprising was that rejecting politics often went hand-in-hand with direct involvement with political institutions and actors.

We introduce a new concept: disavowal of politics. The concept of disavowal, a form of cultivated disinterest, though originating in psychoanalysis, has been developed in Bourdieuan accounts as a way to describe fields, like art or the academy, or even some sports that are predicated on a self-understanding of autonomy (1993). The disavowal of politics, like Bourdieu’s concept, is used to distinguish one’s self as autonomous, but in this case, the anonymity is from the state, politicians, and political institutions, as opposed to the economy. In extending the usage of disavowal to civil society, we draw heavily on the literature on symbolic boundaries (e.g., Lamont and Molnar 2002; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Wacquant 2009; Baiocchi and Corrado 2010) especially Mary Douglas’s work on symbolic pollution (2002). We show that disavowal of the political involves identity work that creates boundaries between the activities in which people engage, and the unsavory and contaminating sphere of politics. Disavowal emerges when people seek an appropriate way of ‘doing’ civil society work. This action of distancing allows one to engage in the political system by resolving or addressing the ambiguities involved with participating in politics. That is to say, by asserting that she “is not political,” an individual may distinguish her actions and her self from the unsavory qualities popularly associated with politics. We argue that, in this way, the disavowal of politics is productive for civic engagement—in generating taboos against politics, it actually creates new notions of what it means to be a good citizen, and these notions provide an avenue for engagement. Disavowal makes sense of engagement in an era of skepticism. We conclude that distrust and cynicism about politics is not in itself a threat to democracy or a prelude to disengagement. Rather, attention to the day-to-day practices and meanings of participants in civil society shows that disavowal of the political allows people to creatively constitute what they imagine to be appropriate and desirable citizenship and civic engagement.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES, ACTIONS, AND DEMOCRATIC HEALTH

The relationships between political attitudes, civic action, and democratic health have for many years been at the core of political sociology. In the 1990s, as political attitudes soured in America, and scholars warned the public about declining associational life, these questions again came to the fore. It seemed political disenchantment and withdrawal from civic life simply went hand in hand—and that neither was good for democracy. Today, however, Americans have reached even lower rates of government approval, yet political participation is on the rise. This paper examines how Americans can be more distrustful, disapproving, and disdainful of politics than ever before, yet still actively engaged in civic life. We address the questions: Why do activists claim “I am not political” while participating in politics? Why doesn’t disenchantment with the political system stop citizens from engaging with vigor? And what does this state of skeptical engagement mean for democracy?
In this section, we present the theoretical concepts of skepticism and civic engagement, and how they have presented themselves in recent American history. We then examine a diverse range of ideas about what skepticism means for democratic health: that skepticism is bad for democratic life; that it reduces participation, which is bad for democratic life; and that it signifies an era of post-politics, which is also bad for democratic life. Some of these theories frame skeptical engagement as a paradox unlikely to persist, while others warn it is the beginning of a corrosive process toward non-democratic ends. Our approach makes sense of skeptical engagement by importing insights from the sociology of culture of civic life. Our answer is deeply rooted in—and uniquely extends—work on role distancing, boundary making, and pollution. By bringing together these often disparate bodies of literature—sociological scholarship on civic engagement and the sociology of political culture—we lay the groundwork for a new concept, the disavowal of politics, which relieves the paradoxical tension between civic engagement and deep distain for politics.

**Skepticism and Engagement as Sociological Concepts**

In this article, we use the term “confidence” to refer to positive attitudes and “disenchantment” to refer to negative attitudes about politics, politicians, and government efficacy. Political attitudes, the feelings and beliefs about politics that people hold, have been parsed on several axes, such as approval/disapproval, passion/disaffection, trust/mistrust, hopeful/cynical. “Skeptical” captures the negative aspects of disapproval, disaffection, mistrust in politics and politicians, and cynicism about government. Our approach is catholic, including several concepts that have been developed and distinguished from each other in the literature, such as Eisinger’s ‘cynics’ who are “not politically indifferent” but rather “keenly aware” of the political environment (2000: 55-56), and Offe’s ‘disaffected’ who dissociate from a polity they experience as being “strange, boring, incomprehensible, hostile, or inaccessible” (2006: 25). It includes those who believe government can work (but doesn’t) as well as those who believe the system is broken. The disenchanted report low levels of approval of Congress, nil trust in politicians, and minimal government efficacy.

We use the term “engagement” to describe actions and activities in the political and social spheres. The concept of civic engagement has been defined and operationalized in myriad ways (Berger 2009), but commonly includes political action (e.g., voting, voter registration, campaign participation); social connectedness and community participation (e.g., membership in voluntary associations, time spend with neighbors); and values, morals, knowledge, and skills (e.g., reading the news, prioritizing volunteer work). We include all three of these activities, but pay the most attention to political action and community participation, as our fieldwork provided less evidence

---

2 According to *The Oxford Dictionary*, the nouns ‘distrust’ and ‘mistrust’ are synonymous, both meaning to regard with suspicion. Similarly, *The Cambridge Dictionary* defines distrust as simply ‘lacking trust’ and mistrust as having ‘doubts about the honesty or abilities of someone.’

3 For examples of defining and measuring civic engagement, see the CIRCLE website, and the CNCS 2010 issue brief. For a discussion on the problems of defining and measuring civic engagement, see Berger 2009.
about skills, values, and information. Although the relationship between civic activities and political activities has long been debated, we include all of these activities in our concept of “engaged.” The engaged citizen votes and joins associations, while the disengaged citizen are withdrawn or consumed with private affairs.

**Trends in America**

American skepticism of politics, politicians, and the political system has never been more profound. All time lows were recently recorded for trust in Washington (Pew 2010), approval of congress, trust in government, and confidence in public officials (American National Election Studies 2010).\(^4\) Plummeting confidence first raised attention in the 1990s, when trust and confidence in government first reached unprecedented lows (Pew 2010; American National Election Studies 2010). At that time, scholars documented widespread disaffection in the U.S. and around the world (Craig 1993; Tolchin 1996; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000). They found young Americans to be more cynical than a generation ago—they had a visceral dislike of politics, did not trust politicians, considered government unresponsive, believed average people did not have any political clout, and aw special interest groups as reigning supreme (Bennett 1997). There was a broad cultural conversation about whether American culture had become too cynical for the health of its democracy. Books like *The Spiral of Cynicism* (Capella and Jamieson 1997), *The Cynical Americans* (Kanter and Mirvis 1989), *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Chaloupka 1999), *The Culture of Cynicism* (Stivers 1994) and *For Common Things* (Purdy 1999) were part of a national debate about the dangers of cynicism.

Likewise, the 1990s ushered in a flurry of activity around measuring political engagement and participation in social life. The United States had long enjoyed the reputation as a nation of joiners (Tocqueville [1848] 1988), and many scholars have argued its proclivity for voluntary associations (Almond and Verba 1963; Bellah et al. 1985; Curtis et al. 1992). However, a decline in engagement called this into question.\(^5\) Adult participation in voluntary associations was at an all time low\(^6\) (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Putnam 1995, 2000; Baer, Curtis, and Grabb 2001; Andersen, et al. 2012),\(^7\) as was voter turn out (American National Election Studies 2010),

---

\(^4\) For a discussion of the merits and challenges of measurement, see Norris 2011, chapter 4.

\(^5\) In the 1990s Americans still volunteered at above-average rates for 33 democratic countries, but were matched or surpassed by several countries, including Canada, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (Curtis, Baer, and Grabb 2012).

\(^6\) Some studies contradict this finding. Paxton 1999 argued that membership in voluntary associations remained relatively constant, and Baumgartnera and Walker 1988 and Rotolo 1999 argued that it increased after an initial decline.

\(^7\) These trends were part of what Skocpol calls a “reorganization” of civic life (2011). This included a decline in business and professional groups (Skocpol 2011), as well as trade unions and fellowship federations (Putnam 2000). However, there was an increase in groups focused on social welfare and public affairs (Skocpol 2003), and more causes and constituencies were represented by interest groups than ever before (Berry 1999; Hayes 1986). Organizations also took new forms—professionally staffed associations became omnipotent (Smith 1992; Putnam 2000), and Americans were increasingly joining flexible small groups and engaging in ad hoc
consumption of politically oriented media (Pew Center 1996), and engagement in political conversations (UCLA/HERI 1995). Today, however, engagement is at least persisting, and by many measures increasing: volunteering is at a thirty year high (CNCS 2006: ), and electoral campaigning and voter registration are both on the rise (American National Election Studies 2010).

In the 1990s, the political pulse-takers “registered record lows in political participation, record highs in public cynicism and alienation, and record rates of disapproval of the House of Representatives, the institution designed to present the public will” (Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995: 2). Today, however, Americans are both skeptical (disapproving, disaffected, cynical, distrustful) and engaged (in civic, social, political, and associational life). What does this state of skeptical engagement mean for democracy?

**Implications for Democracy**

The question of how cynical Americans engage in their communities, with government, and in politics is a ultimately a question of meaning of the same sort that Bellah et al. addressed in Habits of the Heart (1985). If that team asked of how individualism and community came together to animate democratic life, here we must ask how skepticism and engagement can come together. What is its impact on democracy, and on citizenship?

The first perspective is that skepticism engenders a form of engagement that is corrosive of democracy. Putnam famously notes that in this context of disaffection, the emergent forms participation “rest on a constricted notion of citizenship—citizen as disgruntled claimant, not citizen as participant in collective endeavor to define the public interest.” People are “shouting and pressuring and suing,” he explains, but “not reasoning together” (Putnam 1996: 26). Similarly, Wuthnow (1991), Goldfarb (1991), and Bellah et al. (1996) express concern that, at best, disaffected and cynical sentiments make for thin, privatist, or selfish kinds of citizen engagements. For Tocqueville, this is the road to despotism. When the citizenry becomes concerned with private gains, he warns, they will “lose sight of the close connection that exists between the private fortune of each of them and the prosperity of all… The discharge of political duties appears to them to be a troublesome annoyance, which [only] diverts them from their occupation and business” (2003 [1840]: 167). A more extreme version is that skepticism will induce a withdrawal from civic life altogether. If participation in political life and voluntary associations promotes democratic values, institutions, and practices (Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1995, 2000; Skocpol 1999, 2003), disengagement compromises democracy (Macedo 2005).

The second argument is that skeptical citizens will withdraw from politics, but actively engage in community life, and that this, too, undermines the democratic condition. Calhoun writes that the “lost faith in our public institutions” leads to a retreat to “community”— away from politics and from the levers of power, but nearer to “a realm in which we have more confidence that we can act efficaciously” (1993: 30). This is problematic because it leads citizens to under appreciate “various virtues of the public sphere” such as caring for strangers, recognizing interdependence volunteering (Wuthnow 1994, 1998).
with neighbors, and transcending cultural boundaries in order to work together (1993: 30). It may also “romanticize” of the “power of local associations” Herbert (2005: 851-852), ignoring inequalities in associational membership (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Scholzman, Burns, and Verba 1999; Putnam 2000; Edwards, Foley, and Diani 2001), representational deficiencies in civic activities (Peter 2009), and disproportionate benefits derived from participating in groups (Miller 2010). A number of critical scholars have argued that the turn away from politics and toward community is part and parcel of the broader neoliberal turn (e.g., Rose 1999, 2000). Critics of this so-called “post-political condition” (Mouffe 2000; Zizek 2003) argue that by turning their back on politics, citizens in advanced democracies are ignoring the central struggles of democratic life, such as membership and belonging—that romantic notions of community and fetishizing technocratic answers will replace political discourse as needed in the democratic system.

The third argument is that skepticism, in and of itself, is a threat to democratic stability. Offe suggests that while the impact of cynicism on democracy would certainly be viewed negatively from the normative republican traditions, actual “(a)ssessments of the causal impact of disaffection, however, range from mildly benign to strongly alarmist” (2006: 43). The most pessimistic arguments have predicted that widespread skepticism will lead to regime failure (Keane 2009). Almond and Verba (1963) famously make the argument that the appropriate constellation of political attitudes is required for the functioning of modern democratic states (see also: Inglehart 1988). For example, cynicism could “serve as barriers to forming productive relations, thus causing social capital to further erode” (Berman 1997: 106). And, if citizens conclude that government is damaged beyond repair, then “little or no incentive exists for individuals to invest time and effort” in engaging the political system (Jackson, Mondak, Huckfeldt 2009: 55). Our argument builds on the counter arguments to this perspective. We find it meaningful that low levels of legitimacy can bolster democratic institutions (Booth and Seligson 2009), that times of distrust can spur unconventional forms of engagement (Inglehart 1990; Cain, Dalton, and Scarrow 2003), and that citizens in advanced industrial countries maintain their commitments to democratic principles in times of distrust and doubt (Dalton 2004). We concur with Norris (2011) who argues that even in times of widespread skepticism, democratic aspirations can—and do—bolster citizens’ interest and activism in public life.

The literature on civic engagement elicits concern about today’s “perfect storm of conditions associated with distrust of government – a dismal economy, an unhappy public, bitter partisan-based backlash, and epic discontent with Congress and elected officials” (Pew 2010: 1). By most accounts, we should expect an unraveling of the American democratic fabric, perverted and sparse engagement, and a turn away from public problem solving. However, Americans have not lost their democratic ideals (Norris 2011). They are voting, campaigning, and volunteering more than ever before. Although we are not the first to acknowledge this paradox, scholarship on civic engagement has paid scant attention to the everyday customs and practices that make skepticism and engagement compatible in everyday life—social scientists have yet to figure out is what “cultural tools” people have to make sense of their democracy (Swidler 1985). To this end, we find analytic leverage in the cultural sociology of civic life.

The Cultural Sociology of Civic Life
In exploring the meaning of politics in the day-to-day we are drawing on a rich tradition of studies in the sociology of culture that have explored the contours of US civil society since the 1980s (Bellah et al. 1985; Wuthnow 1992; Jacobs 1992; Lichterman 1996, 1999, 2008; Eliasoph 1998; Wood 2002; Perrin 2005, 2006; Lee 2007; Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006; Macgregor 2011). These sociologists have by now produced a lively debate on “actually existing civil society” and the potentials of civic life in the U.S., bookended by concerns with voluntary life as a collective source of trust on one hand, and with civil society as a space of deliberation and problem-solving on the other. Scholars from these perspectives argue that it is in civil society that solidarity emerges, where an “I turns into a We” (Putnam 2000), where normative judgments based on a public orientation originate (Habermas 1989 [1962]), or where “the utopia of civil society appears” (Alexander 2006). Whatever their orientation, cultural sociologists have repeatedly called attention to the importance of shared meanings that animate civic life. It is in this work—the fashioning and re-fashioning the symbols and traditions of U.S. civic culture—that civil society participants make meaningful commitments to the public good.

Cultural sociology turns the question of whether Americans are skeptical of their political system into a question of what that skepticism means. Closest to the argument here, Eliasoph has argued that “the refusal to identify with politics” should not be equated with “apathy or disengagement, but can be a complicated and rich terrain of political discourse” (Eliasoph 1998; see also Lipsitz 1970; Hart 1978). Eliasoph (1997) claims that the seeming apathy of Americans “takes work” to produce; it is one way that people preserve faith in democratic ideals in the face of feeling powerless (see Norgaard 2006 for a similar argument about Norway). For example, the University of Chicago’s FeelKit Project, a collection of keywords used in discussing politics, defines “political cynicism” as a form of political passion that claims “dispassionateness.” Likewise, Teske writes that Americans often separate themselves from politics because they see it as a manipulative “dirty game” (1997), and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse suggest that some disaffection is rooted in procedural complaints and desires for more voice (2001) and in intolerance for the messy and inefficient aspects of real, as opposed to idealized, democracy (1995). To make sense of how Americans talk about and engage with politics and civic life, we paid attention to popular “folk” definitions of politics. When people talk about politics, they mean many different things, ranging from explicit democratic practices, such as voting, to abstract judgments about corruption, power and influence. In a year-long, multi-cited collaborative ethnography in Providence, Rhode Island, we examine what this disavowal of politics actually means.

**PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND AS A FIELD SITE**

---

8 The caption reads, “The cynic hates other people's idealism, seeing it as softness. Cynicism is therefore a form of political passion that claims dispassionateness. It thinks of negativity as realism and reason. But it's kidding itself. In order to endure as a believer, the cynic disavows its own belief in belief, its own earnestness. Zizek, citing Slotterdijk, says that the cynic projects belief in itself and lives as if the world could have corresponded with its projections and fantasies. It's a world of engaged disappointment and fury. Cited in Gould (2011) retrieved March 15, 2012 ([https://coral.uchicago.edu:8443/display/utopianfutures/CYNICISM](https://coral.uchicago.edu:8443/display/utopianfutures/CYNICISM)).
Providence is a rich site for research on civil society and civic engagement, and is typical of many contemporary American cities because of its ethnic and racial diversity, boom and bust cycles of industrial activity, economic decline and corresponding budgetary crises, and variety of social problems. With a 2010 population of approximately 170,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2011), Providence was small enough for us to understand many facets of local government and society, and to be familiar with the most active civil society organizations, yet large enough to encounter diverse approaches to civic engagement.

In the 19th century, Providence was home to large manufacturing companies and sustained immigration from Italy, Eastern Europe, Portugal, and Cape Verde. But shifts in manufacturing sectors, national trends of deindustrialization throughout the century, and growing suburbanization post-World War II contributed to the city’s economic decline and shrinking population. Government community development funding and public-private development partnerships in the 1980s and 90s brought new investment and growth to the city. Today, five colleges and universities and an extensive hospital system dominate the city’s economy, requiring a workforce made up of both educated professionals and a larger pool of service employees. Providence, like Rhode Island as a whole, remains overwhelmingly Democratic when it comes to party affiliation in local, state, and federal elections (Rhode Island State Board of Elections 2008). The city continues to host significant immigrant communities, most recently attracting Latinos (Itzigsohn 2009), and recently elected its first Latino Mayor, Angel Taveras, who was born and raised in Providence. In 2010, 50 percent of the population was non-White, and 26 percent lived below the poverty line (American Community Survey 2011; U.S. Census Bureau 2011). Like many cities throughout the United States, these demographics, coupled with a reputation for corrupt politics (Stanton 2003), continue to inspire the work of numerous social justice organizations and have prompted groups to pursue creative ways of engaging the state.

The literature about Providence has described vibrant civil society organizations (Perrotta 1977; Sterne 2003; Rappleye 2006); the (re)development of the city (Khan 1995; Motte and Weil 2000; Peck 2005); gentrification of some neighborhoods (Perez 2007; Jerzyk 2009; Silver 2009); and how people and groups perceive and react to environmental issues (Pang 1997; Thorpe 2004). Providence, while not as widely researched as larger, “global” cities like Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles (Sassen 2001), provides a lens for understanding multicultural communities in America, post-industrial economic transformations, and the myriad ways in which people mobilize and act for social change. It is a local “stage of action” that facilitates understanding of non-local processes (Fine 2010), and paying attention to local practices and events, allows us to understand and theorize more general processes of social action, interaction, and boundary formation.

METHODS

Although skeptical engagement has been empirically documented through quantitative research, different methods are needed to explain its causes and consequences (Eisinger 2000). Political ethnography is uniquely suited to examine and explain political practices (Auyero 2008), the meanings that animate action in civil society (Eliason and Lichterman 2003), and the day-to-day expressions of political life (Baiocchi and Connor 2008). Ethnography allows us to describe and analyze the emergence, forms, and consequences of political disavowal because of its
attention to events as they happen and the way it allows for triangulation of discourse, meaning, and practice.

This article is based on data acquired through an innovative and specific ethnographic approach, *multi-sited collaborative ethnography*, in which all five researchers acted as co-investigators at seven field sites in Providence from the spring of 2010 to summer of 2011. While there are some cases of co-researched and co-written ethnographies (e.g., Auyero and Swistun 2008), collaborative ethnography typically involves multiple researchers studying the same social phenomenon across unique or occasionally overlapping sites divided equally among researchers (May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Holland et al. 2007; Hirsch et al. 2009). Our fieldwork extends this method and increases the depth, breadth, and reliability of data collected in two ways. First, whenever possible multiple researchers attended the same events and each contributed to a single field note document. By often working as a group, we were able to observe events through multiple lenses, increasing the reliability of our data, because, as May and Pattillo-McCoy (2000) note, “there is neither one truth, nor one reality, nor one stable social world to observe” (65). Second, we applied the principle of *symmetry* to our study (Callon 1986). That is, we attempt to employ a uniform and evenly agnostic theoretical and analytic framework to cases that are typically not studied together, and to groups with very different socioeconomic profiles and missions. This symmetrical approach to multiple, diverse field sites, coupled with the collaborative lens of five researchers, allows us to look at forms of variation between and within our groups that go beyond more traditional characterizations of civic involvement based on race, class, or gender.

The seven field sites—three neighborhood associations with different scopes of practice and different membership compositions, two “civic innovation” groups, and two social justice organizations—were civil society organizations oriented toward making Providence a better place to live. We attended over 150 meetings and events across these sites, including political canvassing, social enterprise activism, non-violent direct action, and participatory budgeting. We supplemented this ethnographic research with dozens of structured, semi-structured, and informal interviews with founders, leaders, and members of the organizations. Finally, we systematically collected relevant media and organization documents from mainstream news sources (e.g., *The Providence Journal*), internet-based news sources (e.g., community blogs), and social media (e.g., Facebook pages).

This fieldwork generated over 500 pages of detailed field notes, fliers, newspaper articles, Internet pages, and social media references. We developed both open and focused codes that reflected our field observations and theoretical explorations (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). At least two researchers coded each field note, and all theorizing and writing was done collectively. In this paper, descriptions of events and conversations come directly from our field notes unless otherwise indicated. We use pseudonyms for groups and individuals to protect confidentiality, except when drawing upon publicly available documents such as press releases or news stories.

**DISAVOWAL OF THE POLITICAL**
In a three-hour meeting between neighborhood activists and government representatives to discuss the impact of the recent mayoral election on school policy, a bureaucrat asserted: “I’m a non-political guy – big time. I don’t think it matters.” This assertion by a city government official that politics do not influence school policy exemplifies the phenomenon of political disavowal and political engagement, as well as the productive potential of political disavowal. Indeed, disavowing the political allowed this politician to seek and obtain approval as he engaged in community events. The bureaucrat was one of many engaged citizens who “doesn’t do politics,” whose organization “is not political,” and who does not rely on “politicians” or “political solutions.” We found that when members of civil society claim they are not political, they are not simply defining themselves in negative space. They are disavowing politics: rejecting knowledge of, connection to, or responsibility for the processes and consequences of the political.

**Disavowal and Denegation**

Disavowal in its psychoanalytic usage refers to a kind of an ambivalent psychic distancing that is ego-preserving in face of trauma or taboo (Freud 1964; Germechak 2001; Bass 2011). For Freud, some awkward facts were “too terrible to confront, but impossible to ignore” and were dealt with by simultaneous knowing and not-knowing, or “acceptance and disavowal” (Cohen 2001: 25). Sociologically, this idea has been taken up by Bourdieu, who uses disavowal (sometimes translated as denegation) in diverse works to refer to the “cultivated disinterestedness” that defines a field (Bourdieu 1996). In this way, some “scholastic spaces” are defined by the apparent and constant assertion of the rejection of outside influences that in fact play a role (Bourdieu 1990; 2000). Speaking of the disavowal of the economy on the part of artists and art dealers, disavowal “is neither a real negation of the “economic” interest which always haunts the most “disinterested” practices, nor a simple “dissimulation” of the “mercenary aspects of the practice” (1980: 262). The argument is that in some fields, the notion of autonomy from these influences is a “well-founded illusion” which is part of its necessary functioning (Schinkel 2007). In addition to professional philosophy, he mentions the world of science, the academy, and the realm of novelists, art dealers, and producers. This line of argumentation has been further extended to mountain climbing (Aubel and Ohl 2005), the Victorian novel (Ruth 2006), and professional economics (Lebaron 1997).

In the “relatively autonomous areas of practice” which are thus established, “symbolic interests” are set up in opposition to strictly economic interests. In the case of art, a strictly ‘cultural’ or ‘aesthetic’ interest, “disinterested interest” is the paradoxical product of the ideological labor in which writers and artists, those most directly interested, become autonomous by being opposed to material interests, by being symbolically nullified as interests” (Bourdieu 1994: 172). “The fundamental law of this paradoxical game, is that one has an interest in disinterestedness” (21). Guillory suggests, however, that the point of this analysis is not to “expose this freedom as unreal, when in fact the space cleared by the refusal of market demand is precisely the space in which social determinations can be explored without wholly acceding to market demand and in which many new possibilities for the development of art are created” (YYYY: PP). Guillory and Bennet cite Bourdieu’s admiration of Flaubert, who was able to develop a critical stance that was “simultaneously the product and the guarantee of their autonomy” (339). In other words, by “consolidating both the institutional basis for assertions of intellectual independence and a mass-cultural audience for those assertions, artists and intellectuals created a position of relative
autonomy from which they could then speak about affairs of state and the market with peculiar authority” (Bennett 2005: 6).

**Boundaries and Symbolic Pollution**

The literature on symbolic boundaries has been an exciting area within sociology in the last few years. Taking Bourdieu as a starting point, scholars have pointed to the importance of typification systems and evaluative frameworks for categorizing objects, people, and practices, employed by social actors to define who they are (Lamont 2001: 6). Cultural sociologists examine how this cognitive set of distinctions between ‘worthy’ and ‘not worthy’ helps define self-worth and group boundaries for both “low and high status groups, and more generally how it is tied differently to the meanings associated with various group identities” (Lamont YYYY:PP).

If Lamont (2011) expresses concern with the relationship of symbolic boundaries to social positions, we also draw from an earlier approach attentive to the role of symbolic pollution (and purification rituals) in a social order. Mary Douglas’s famous notion that societies create taboos to protect social order (1966) suggests that the disavowal we observed in our research is a cultural mechanism for dealing with “matter out of place” (Douglas 2002 [1966]: 50). Douglas’s theory is that the ambiguities of matter out of place (which she also calls “dirt” or “pollution”) are uncomfortable and threatening to community values, and that cultures respond through taboos that act as devices for protecting the categories and organization of the universe.

She argues that “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience… By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning” (2002: PP). Disavowal of politics is intimately connected to the ambiguities that result from a shared desire for better democracy, and a concomitant disillusionment with democratic politics as they actually exist. The idea of pollution operate at two levels: instrumentally, to force people into good citizenship, and expressively, as analogies for communicating a vision of good social order. Following Douglas, we suggest that disavowal is a kind of taboo, a cultural mechanism for protecting commonly held democratic ideals from the ambiguities and contradictions of politics in practice. With this definition in mind, we explore how the disavowal of politics emerges to resolve ambiguities and produces cultural norms of good civic engagement. We show how disavowal moves and changes, and explore its consequences for democratic practices and imaginations.

**DISAVOWAL EMERGES TO RESOLVE AMBIGUITIES**

Insert vignette here.

Disavowal is a cultural attempt to resolve the ambiguities of political processes that occur when people’s ideas and expectations of actually-existing political practice do not conform to beliefs about how politics ought to function. Ambiguities are the “matters of out place” that inspire taboos or demand reconciliation (Douglas 2002 [1966]), or the terrible, unavoidable facts that prompt both disavowal and acceptance (Cohen 2001: 25). By responding to these disjunctures with a disavowal of politics, people to maintain some semblance of order in notions of democracy, thus creating an avenue for appropriate engagement. Individuals diagnose many possible political ambiguities, and disavowal can take many forms. In this section, we discuss the
three forms of disavowal prominent in our field sites: general versus particular interests; conflict versus consensus; and participating in a broken system.

Skeptical of special interests, but engaged in promoting community interests

One evening in the spring of 2010, a neighborhood association hosted the spouse of a candidate for local public office as a special guest. Sitting at the head of the room, the guest explained that she was there to “say hi” on her husband’s behalf. In her efforts to promote her spouse as a candidate, the guest said two things about herself: first, that she did not have a history of being “very political”; and second, that she was the principal of a public school. These two statements were intended to bolster the guest’s credibility, to help us believe that the spouse was a “good candidate” and a “good person.” For this guest, “I am not political” communicated, “I am trustworthy.” Likewise, “I am a public servant” communicated, “I am not self-interested.” The guest’s pronouncement transformed the facial expressions of several board members, from skeptical to welcoming. By disavowing self-interested politics, the guest gained credibility.

Engaged citizens see a disjuncture between their perception that politics is about the promotion of self-interest or special interests, and their belief that politics should be about the promotion of universal interests or public goods. This ambiguity leads them to disavow politics as activities or practices that benefit few people, narrow interests, and personal gain. Thus a “political” agent is someone who uses the state to pursue selfish interests, lacks commitment to public goods, or allows elite interests to crowd out benefits to the masses. Involvement in politics of this kind includes both illicit behavior, such as bribery, and legal profiteering, such as benefiting from one’s access to influential decision-makers. In both cases, to be “political” is to exhibit an unsavory characteristic of this kind. This logic rests on the assumption that when one promotes self-interest or interests connected to an identifiable minority group in the political arena, one necessarily becomes self-interested. As the term was used by those in our field sites, “interests” were synonymous with exclusive, rival goods that siphon resources from public, non-rival goods in a zero-sum game. In this sense, being political means being selfish or greedy.

At the systemic level, people disavow a political system that benefits a small group at the expense of the broader community. Participation and engagement is put forward as the antidote to this type of political action. Political activity is disavowed when it refers to a closed, corrupt system that serves narrow interests and ignores the general interest, but political activity is avowed and encouraged when it is the opposite. In a well-attended public forum in Providence, a parent asserted that the Mayor’s decision to close several schools was “political’ because it was based on the recommendations of “two for-profit companies” (construction and architecture) who “stand to benefit financially.” Politics, in this case, was disavowed because it privileged the private interests of a few over broader community needs. In these cases, the signifier of “political” referred to the people and processes that privilege narrow, private interests. To be “non-political” or to make “non-politically motivated decisions” in the political arena was to be community minded, to work for the general good, and to embody public-spiritedness.

Skeptical of conflict, but engaged in polite problem solving
In an interview, a leader of a neighborhood association described her group’s goals and strategies. She said, “I have learned that you can’t start out by attacking. You have to first talk about what they have done that is good, and then go into [your goals].” She spent much of the interview describing a multi-year campaign to shut down a neighborhood business whose noise activities and clientele were perceived as dangerous and harmful to residents’ quality of life. Their main strategies were to engage local officials, raise awareness in the community, and raise funds to hire a lawyer. She did not mention any direct actions, such as protests or picketing, nor did she talk about contentious meetings between residents and city leaders or the business owners. Even surrounding highly charged issues, she said, “we try really hard to get along with people – we don’t want to be naysayers.”

This second form of disavowal results from an ambiguity that, although political avoidance is a central component of American activism (Eliasoph 1997), political action regularly involves conflict and confrontation. This speaks directly to the theoretical discussions in the post-political literature by Mouffe and Rancière. While some civic groups and informants engaged directly in debate with political officials, more often we saw people and groups distance themselves from highly contentious and personal issues. Disavowing politics-as-conflict created space for engagement around a different form of politics defined by civility, communication, and participation.

One of our field sites identified the acrimony that characterizes Providence politics as one of the city’s primary problems. The group’s explicit, primary mission was to promote “harmonious” relations between city government officials. According to one of the organization’s leaders, “mutual respect for each other as neighbors and friends should determine the tone of any and all conversations.” Leaders told us repeatedly that just having Providence residents attend city council meetings would improve city government, because it would encourage councilors to be more civil and well-behaved. Likewise, a leader of a local educational organization said that they “avoid politically charged issues” because they cannot be easily solved by student discussion and are too contentious for classroom presentations. Groups can also take different orientations towards conflict in different contexts. For example, a neighborhood association may protest city actions in public actions at the State House, but keep conflict to a minimum in internal meetings because it is unproductive. To disavow politics, in this sense, is to reject confrontation, to deny potential productive capacity of conflictual behaviors or processes, and to simultaneously promote norms of good civic engagement as polite and harmonious.

**Skeptical of government responsiveness, but engaged in influencing the government**

A leader at one of our field sites said in an interview, “People need to get over their expectations that the government is going to fix their problems. It’s not. The government is not going to fix education, healthcare…At its worst, government is a barrier, at its best, an enabler. That’s as far as it goes.” This individual disavowed the potential of government to solve problems, but in her activities within the group, she organized listening sessions with city officials, attended city council meetings, and wrote about the importance of an active, educated, and connected citizenry.
This third type of disavowal emerges in response to the ambiguities that arise when actors must work within political systems, while believing that those systems cannot or do not solve community problems. While the actors in our study may have disagreed on what, exactly, is broken, they nearly uniformly agreed that the government apparatus could not solve the problems of the city. People who disavow in this way often spoke about trying to change how politics are done. For example, a leader of a neighborhood association described efforts to formalize communication between civic organizations and political bodies: “We can’t have a council that doesn’t talk to each other, or a mayor that doesn’t talk to them. We have to stand up and take our city back.”

People also disavowed politics by pointing to structural inequalities that are embodied in broken political processes. For example, an activist for minority education said that institutionalized racism was visible in political decisions made by the city council, state legislature, mayor, and school board. Similarly, at a public hearing, a young Latino student asked why the city wasn’t closing schools in the more affluent, white neighborhoods. Another participant echoed this sentiment, asking “why do they pick on the poor kids all the time?” These statements reject the political process because it unfairly targets vulnerable segments of the population. We found that when groups disavowed broken political systems, they attributed their political victories not to sympathetic politicians leaders or functioning political processes, but instead to ingenuity in the group’s tactics. For example, after the Governor rescinded an Executive Order on immigration, a community organizer credited this “success” to his group’s direct action tactics. Neither the Governor’s beliefs nor formal political channels were seen as causing the outcome. In this type of disavowal, individuals simultaneously claim that the political system is broken, push for change within the political system, and attribute victories in the political system to non-political activities.

The types of disavowal described here—of narrow interests, of conflict, and of a broken system—are not an exhaustive list, but simply reflect the most salient disavowals in our field sites in Providence. Individuals may disavow one aspect of politics or many, and the object of disavowal may change between contexts. As ideas, projects, and people move between the civic and the political—and as people forge their identities as good, appropriately engaged citizens—the polluted sphere of politics demands a constant reiteration of the practices of disavowal and engagement.

**DISAVOWAL IN MOTION**

This dynamic interplay between disavowal and engagement is dynamic and never complete, and people’s levels of expressed and enacted disavowal vary between contexts, interactions, and political processes. Levels of expressed and enacted disavowal are likely to be lower—and direct engagement with official structures more publicly and strongly embraced—when the ambiguities to which activists are responding are fewer in number or milder in severity. That is, people’s disavowal may take a back seat to direct, “good-faith” engagement when their own ideas about appropriate forms of engagement are more aligned with their perceptions of the formal political processes. The following vignette demonstrates how, when politics in reality are closer to idealized politics — that is, when ambiguities shrink —, people find less need to use disavowal in
order to engage. Alternatively, increased skepticism and pronounced ambiguities lead people to disavow more vehemently.

Civic action around the School District’s proposal to close or restructure several public schools in Providence in the spring of 2010 provides an illustrative account of how disavowing politics resolves ambiguities. Activists and community leaders quickly criticized the idea of closing schools to save money, and the city sponsored a series of six public hearings in which school board members were to receive to public commentary about the proposed changes before arriving at an informed decision. The Mayor’s office, School Board, and School District sent an unequivocal message to the citizens of Providence: public opinion mattered. City and school officials encouraged participation and testimony, made data available for alternate analyses, and acknowledged the tension between harming individual students and benefiting the city as a whole. The description of the political process around school closures that was put forward by the Mayor’s office and school officials focused on universal goods, consensus formation instead of conflict, and the ability of city government to make good, informed decisions. What we observed in response was decreased disavowal and increased engagement in the political process.

Civil society’s response to these hearings was strong and sustained: hundreds of people attended the forums, dozens testified at each hearing, and several new organizations and coalitions formed. The public provided suggestions for saving money without closing schools, such as changing a janitorial contract, and offered alternative figures showing how maintaining neighborhood schools would save on expenses such as transportation costs. A math teacher presented detailed cost estimates using geo-coded address data on students and information from the School District budgets. Community members talked about school closures pragmatically (e.g., if you close this middle school, it will cost millions to retrofit it into an elementary school), appealed to emotion and morality (e.g., it’s wrong to make students transfer schools, because school is like home for many of them), and framed the decision in terms of educational outcomes (e.g., students who transfer schools do poorly on state tests).

Instead of disavowing the political process by which the School Board would make its decision about closing schools, many people engaged it enthusiastically. There was wide support for the city’s depoliticized approach of encouraging solutions to benefit broad interests, participation and consensus building, and pragmatic fixes to serious political problems. The city was embracing and enacting the elements of civic life that were popular among even the most skeptical of civil society groups. Of course, some people continued to strongly disavow the process, believing that the whole system needed to be changed. One activist said these hearings would not influence the Board's decision because the School District and the Mayor’s office had produced data full of lies.

Following this series of hearings, the Board voted at a public, well-attended meeting to close all of the recommended schools. Attendees of the meeting were very upset. Several activists from our social justice field sites left their seats as the votes began, walked to the stage, and, as results were announced, stood and turned their backs to the School Board members. Others followed their lead, and after the final vote, the audience chanted, “Shame! Shame! Shame!” and pumped
their fists into the air. Children, parents, teachers, and community members wept and screamed, “You wasted our time!” The police escorted the Board members home.

In the weeks that followed, coalition groups met to reflect on the process and discuss what to do next and continued to express their disappointment with the vote. They confronted the mayor in public meetings, arguing that his decision to close schools may not actually save money but will likely result in disproportionately bad consequences for black and Latino youth. Many said that they were not surprised that the Board had “ignored” the public, but that they were disgusted with the political process that, only weeks previously, gave them hope that they were actually engaged in a participatory process. In short, they dissavowed the political process in which they had previously engaged.

This sequence of events demonstrates what dissavowal can look like in motion. Dissavowal is a response to ambiguities within the political process. When people perceive that the political process (in this case, the school closure hearings) aligns with their own ideals of civic life (for example, supporting public participation and transparency), they are less likely to dissavow politics and are more likely to engage with the political process on its own terms. In this case, we saw people waiting calmly in line for hours to testify at the six public hearings, submitting additional written comments, and expecting or at least hoping to be taken seriously. When citizens came to see the political process as non-transparent and non-participatory, we saw and heard more dissavowal. This story highlights the dynamic nature of dissavowal, illustrating dissavowal as a changing response to shifting ambiguities. When there are more misalignments between what a person envisions is right in civic life and what a political process will offer, they are likely to dissavow that political process.

Despite dissavowal—and, in fact, often because of it—members of civil society continue to be engaged in the lives and futures of their communities, despite “losing” battles such as the school closures. They develop and act on ideas of shared responsibility and goals for future progress, which often means involvement with political institutions and actors. In the case of the bureaucrat, claiming to be “non-political” makes him more legitimate in the eyes of his audience by demonstrating that he shares their understanding of politics as something worthy of dissavowal. If “political” is opaque, dirty, and exclusive, and he is a “non-political guy,” he is painting his participation in community discussions as transparent, moral, and community minded. By dissavowing, he is able to engage in the neighborhood meeting. Not all dissavowal is explicitly expressed, and not all people who express or act out sentiments of dissavowal would necessarily admit to dissavowing politics if questioned directly. Nonetheless, as events unfolded in cases like the school closure debate, we find dissavowal to be a common solution to the tension between distain for certain dirty aspects of political life, and desire to create positive social and political change.

**DISCUSSION: THE PRODUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF DISAVOWAL**

Throughout this paper, we have shown some of the ways in which individuals and groups maintain their skeptical, sometimes distrustful, attitudes towards politics, while at the same time actively engaging in civic and political life. In order to understand this seemingly paradoxical
state of citizenship, we developed the concept of political disavowal. Disavowal allows members of civil society to act because doing so resolves perceived ambiguities in the political process. Rather than disavowal leading to disgust and disregard for participation, this disavowal generates a sense of what it means to be a good citizen and resident, creates a new pathway to engagement, and thus suggests renewed hope for the democratic process. This activity helps us to understand how skepticism and engagement coexist simultaneously—continual role distancing, new boundaries between politics and engagement, generating new notions of what it means to be a good citizen and resident, and, ultimately, developing new ideas of how and why democracy can and should be rescued.

The disavowal of politics involves, by its very definition, a distancing from what is seen as politics and the political. In this way, Goffman’s concept of role distancing helps to understand how disavowal creates particular boundaries and identities that enable civic engagement. For Goffman, role requirements are a set of expected behaviors that are geared toward maintaining patterned relationships (Coser 1966: 180). When community members perform a role closely aligned with an identity or label that is viewed negatively or seen as contaminated, they wish to distance themselves from the expectations associated with that role. Role distancing is “an active and self-conscious attempt to foster the impression of a lack of commitment or attachment to a particular role in order to deny the virtual self implied” (Snow and Anderson 1987: 1350). In our case, activists disavow politics to separate themselves from the stigma of politics and political people. The disavowal, through role distancing, forms a boundary between what is political, or bad, and engagement, or actions that can be perceived as good. In this way, civil society actors draw boundaries between themselves and the political in order to gain trust and legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

For example, at the end of an interview with Joe, a co-leader of an explicitly non-political group that promotes better communication between citizens and Providence city government to “put the public in public policy,” he mentioned casually, “I don’t like to think of what I do as political.” He grinned and continued, “I’m sure you get that a lot.” In his off-hand remark, Joe distanced himself and his activism from the contamination of politics. By drawing a boundary between himself and the political, Joe created an identity for himself as a good activist and civically engaged citizen. Joe’s disavowal of the political was aligned with his ideas about public participation, discussion, community gatherings, and transparent political processes. We found that individuals who are active in political processes frequently disavow politics to forge their own identities as separate from the stigma of politics and political people. When Providence activists like Joe take on political roles, associate with political people, or use political institutions, this creates a disjuncture with their perceptions of themselves as non-political, an ambiguity that inspires subsequent disavowals of the political.

Joe’s story highlights how disavowal of the political operates not only instrumentally but also symbolically, building a system of sanctioning good and bad civic engagement and expressing cultural views of what democracy should be. When people like Joe describe their work as non-political, they reinforce the idea that good, engaged citizens working to make Providence a better place should do so outside of politics because politics is a dirty word, a taboo, and a “polluted” space (Douglas 1966). Extending Douglas’s work, we suggest that disavowal is a cultural mechanism for protecting commonly held democratic ideals from the ambiguities and
contradictions of politics in practice. By asserting that oneself is “not political,” he or she may engage politics without feeling or being perceived as selfish or self interested, engage politics while rejecting political conflicts deemed unproductive, and engage politics despite feeling that government and political processes are ineffective in solving society’s problems. For example, by forming an organization like Joe’s that “is not involved in politics,” groups are able to pursue their interests without conflating themselves—or being conflated with—special interest groups.

Disavowal is not about bringing previously disengaged individuals to action—though this may, at times, be the case. It is about the iterative process of diagnosing problems in politics, envisioning new notions of appropriate engagement, redrawing boundaries between the “political” and the “appropriate”, and engaging in political life—a process that may be experience by individuals who have always or never been engaged in public life. Skepticism, role distancing, disavowal, and engagement are constantly occurring and being renegotiated—a non-linear and complex process of recreating what it means to be a good neighbor, a good constituent, a good citizen.

Our research demonstrates that skepticism does not preclude involvement with political activities, participating in governmental committees or working groups, engaging public officials, or other civic mobilizations. To the contrary, citizens’ disavowal provides them with the symbolic capital and notions of good citizenship needed to engage politics. Skepticism and disengagement need not—and do not—go hand in hand. By exclaiming, enacting, and promising that an activity “is not political,” citizens simultaneously generate new personal and group identities, alter cultural notions of appropriate and desirable forms of civic engagement, and create avenues to engagement, even in an era of skepticism.
References


Zizek 2000
Zizek 2003