



Towards a Fractal Model of Civic Infrastructure

Vinay Orekondy, Partnerships Director*

Mediators Foundation + Better Together America

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

The ideas in each paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Beyond Intractability, Braver Angels, or the Citizen Scholars Council. The copyright and responsibility for the content of each article is retained by the authors.

This PDF version of the article is intended for printing and reading on desktop computers. An [HTML version](#), suitable for reading on smartphones, is also available.

All authors’ bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

The crisis in American democracy demands a rebuilding of civic infrastructure. This paper proposes a path to get there: stitching together existing local civic, constituency, and issue-based organizations into collaborative hubs that move residents from connection to collective action. This paper proposes replicating these hub structures on a state and national level, resulting in a fractal civic infrastructure.

Purpose and Approach

At [Mediators' Foundation](#), we spend a lot of time thinking about how to stitch the national civic movement together into a structure capable of meeting the moment.

This paper is concerned with what such a structure would need to look like. Despite the title, I only speak about that structure (the fractal model) near the end. It is a complex, multilayered model that has developed over time, and so I want to walk you through the layers as they developed.

Despite leaning heavily on theoretical models, this paper should be viewed as a strategy paper rather than an academic one - both in style and intent. The ideal outcome of this is to build the structures outlined in this paper. I discuss [Braver Angels](#) (hereafter, BA) quite extensively, especially their [Citizen-Led Solutions](#) (hereafter CLS) model. While I am an outgoing co-chair of the Braver Network, and thus speak with a great deal of understanding of BA, this paper is written in my capacity as Partnerships Director at Mediators Foundation (and its fiscally sponsored project [Better Together America](#)).

Some Starting Assumptions

This paper rests on a number of assumptions. First, that polarization - that desire for Americans to organize themselves into opposing tribes - is ultimately being driven by atomization, and the resulting loneliness and loss of identity. Escaping that loneliness is one of the primary reasons people are organizing themselves into tribes.

Second, this paper assumed that the path out of atomization (and therefore polarization) is about creating healthier forms of group identity.

Third, this paper assumes a 'best' form of group identity to pull us out of this crisis. Between distrust of elites, growing uncertainty about what is real or true, a desire for human connection and a desire for empowerment, there is only one form of group identity which healthily meets all these needs - flat, local collaborative community. To use a somewhat wonky term, there is a need to build deep civic infrastructure.

Fourth, this paper assumes that existing efforts at building civic infrastructure are insufficient. There is nothing wrong with any of them but they are failing to scale and meet the moment. A new approach, which builds directly on these efforts, is needed. This approach will be the subject of this paper.

Finally, this paper assumes that BA has already embraced this logic to some extent, and this is manifesting as Courageous Citizenship and the growing number of BA-initiated Civic Hubs.

The existing civic movement

The [Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map](#) shows, at time of writing, more than 11,000 member organizations (including local chapters of national organizations) in the United States dedicated to non-partisan civic health. Collectively, they contain millions of people. Two of those national organizations alone - Rotary and AmeriCorps - each have membership in the millions. So why has this field struggled to move the needle on civic health?

At its core, the field has not taken the necessary steps to scale and has not really had a reason to. Individual civic processes such as bridging, cultural events, service activities, etc. were seen as separate enterprises, not as part of a shared field or mission. As a consequence, very few people within the field knew each other (even in the same locality), and there was never any reason to build shared processes or structures.

‘Team-Ups’ within the Civic Space

A number of these civic processes have recognized the value in teaming up with other civic processes. The most high-profile of these was Americorps making heavy overtures to the bridging space, and [looking for ways](#) to connect their service activities to bridging activities. These include adapting corps member training to emphasize dialogue across differences, integrating bridge-building into grantmaking and program design, and using service to build trust and collaboration in polarized communities.

Another example we discovered was The Brickyard, a veteran-led civic organization with [three pillars](#): social gatherings, service and civic connection. The latter pillar, civic connection, refers to activating people in their community in things like Town Halls, becoming poll workers, local leadership opportunities, etc.

Within BA, we’ve seen team-ups occur in a number of contexts. A number of alliances have spontaneously incorporated service activities into their work because it felt like a logical extension of the Alliance’s work. In Braver Network, many of the state representatives have been heavily engaging local Rotary chapters - for now, as a recruitment strategy, given the heavy values overlap.

BA’s CLS Model

BA’s own [Citizen-Led Solutions](#) (hereafter CLS) Team has created the clearest example of a team-up model at BA, and one of the best in the entire Civic Field. While most of the other models focus on the relationship between bridging and service activities, this model focuses on the relationship between bridging, collaborative problem-solving and resultant action. Specifically, the model involves convening local community members (and relevant local organizations) in a two stage deliberative process - first to choose a local problem in need of solving, and then the problem solving itself. After that, the community is empowered to take action and implement the solution they came up with. Some solutions will involve local government advocacy, while others will not need it.

There's a lot happening in this model which is worth pointing out. First, this model recognizes BA's incredible convening power - its dogged determination to remain politically neutral makes it capable of being a trusted local convenor on most issues.

Second, it recognizes the extraordinary power of solutions-oriented action.

- Action brings conservatives to the table. Internal statistics at BA have repeatedly shown that liberals are far more open to dialogue as an end in itself, while conservatives are much less likely to engage without an action component. This is impacting the ability to maintain red-blue balance, and can be rectified with an action component.
- Action brings issue-based and constituency-based organizations to the table. Most organizations in civil society are organized around specific issues, or advocating on behalf of specific constituencies. These groups (and their members) are far less likely to engage in dialogue unless they see a path to tangibly impacting the issues they care about.
- Action creates momentum. By setting a tangible outcome, the community can gather great momentum in order to achieve it. If successful, that momentum grows even further. If there is a path to solving future problems using this infrastructure (which this model supports), then that momentum can be built on next time around.
- Action changes the narrative. Even if a dialogue is effective in bridging across political divides, its effects may be completely undone when participants go back into a toxic, polarized media environment with no ability to impact it. Solutions change the local narrative about what is possible when a community comes together to solve its own problems. Many communities doing this can change the national narrative.
- Action creates space for a new post-polarized identity to emerge. The surest path out of polarization is for new identities to emerge which synthesize the best of both poles. While we have a reasonable idea of what such an identity might look like (localist, civic/communitarian, anti-elitist, pro-democracy reform, pro-freedom, pro-preservation of culture and history, etc.), such an identity must evolve organically and cannot be forced. By creating a space, a structure and a practical reason for communities to keep reconnecting (solving and acting on problems), the model creates many of the conditions needed for a new identity to emerge.

It is worth pointing out a few challenges with this model.

First, unlike many of the other models, it does not have a component for either social activities or service events. These can be a simple entry point into civics for people who are new to civic engagement. Moreover, they can be an extremely important way for people to connect and build connections, which would in turn make the deliberative and action stages far more successful. However, this is a relatively easy fix - local organizations doing social and service activities can easily connect to this work (see the BTA model discussed below).

Second, on the face of it, this model seems to suggest that BA Alliances must start doing a whole lot of new activities. Not only does this mean our volunteers must learn many new skillsets (collaborative problem-solving, advocacy, organizing, etc), but this also means losing focus on BA's core focus of bridging divides and further stretching our volunteer base. However, this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the CLS model (albeit, an extremely common one). The model is genuinely a team-up - the idea is to connect with other local civic organizations doing other elements of the model, and build a shared process with them. As such, BA should not add new activities, but it should recognize bridging is part of a larger civic process and help convene other civic actors who will contribute the other components of the process.

Third, on the face of it, this model seems to suggest that BA Alliances must start taking positions on policy questions, and even doing advocacy around them. Even if these positions were sourced through a deliberative process that BA itself helped convene, it would likely be a violation of BA's treasured neutrality. This is a valid critique, and the theoretical models in the field have only recently caught up to provide an answer. The answer, like above, is the need for team-ups. Some organizations are temperamentally and legally suited for convening (like BA, deliberative democracy organizations, etc), while others are suited for action/advocacy. There is a need to draw a strong line between the convening organizations, where positions are reached, and those organizations which pick up those positions and see them through to completion. It is likely these organizations will have intertwined membership, especially in small towns, but it is very important that their roles and brands remain distinct.

BTA's Ladder of Engagement

In perhaps the surest sign of an idea whose time has come, BTA had independently begun developing its own team-up model, with heavy similarities to the CLS model. Initially, we (BTA) had approached this work primarily as relationship building - connecting civic organizations to each other within a given locality. This remains a critical first step, as often these organizations don't even know of each other's existence. However, it's not enough by itself.

We found that these kinds of social connections between organizations, without directed purpose, turned into networking. Occasionally two organizations formed some bilateral partnership, but it was a far cry from the sort of movement building we were envisioning. What we realized was missing was a shared mission and purpose across these organizations. Each civic process was considered discrete, and therefore had no clear reason to work with other civic processes.

Our attempt to define a shared mission for the field is as follows: In an era of extreme isolation, where that isolation is in turn driving tribalism and polarization, the civic field is really the only space capable of building healthy group identity. Its role is to rebuild the concept of local community, and it does so by moving individuals from a state of isolation to a state of high civic engagement. However, the vast majority of people in the country are not civically engaged. We cannot expect them to jump headfirst into bridging, collaborative problem solving, etc - rather, we need to meet them where they're at. It is a ladder of engagement, starting from the least complex activities to the most complex.

Thankfully, most of the rungs of this ladder already exist, even if they are yet to coordinate with each other. We have built a version of this ladder, and it is central to guiding BTA's work.

Figure 1: BTA's ladder of engagement, also known as the local system of care for civic organizations

From 'bridging across divides' through to 'policy action' the model is more or less identical to the CLS model. 'Shared Stewardship' refers to taking action on solutions which can be done outside any level of government - they are prioritized over solutions which do require the government, in order to empower the community.

It is worth discussing the differences between the two models.

As noted earlier, the CLS model does not include some of the other community building activities such as social/cultural activities and service activities. The BTA model also includes an earlier set of stages around universal engagement - narrative change, for example, might include seeing a facebook ad which draws an individual to the event to begin with. The BTA model also includes a final stage called 'crisis response'. This is about recognizing that an important part of civic muscle is being able to respond to immediate crises (e.g. an environmental disaster, hostile actions from the government, etc.). These responses would likely be led by the most trusted and experienced members of the community, hence it being the top of the pyramid.

As noted, these models are extremely compatible with each other, and are more a matter of focus than any genuine difference.

CLS-BTA cooperation

Given the deep similarities between the two models, CLS and BTA are working very closely together. The complementary relationship goes even further than the models, and goes to their respective working styles. CLS has a much more focused approach - it has been testing and perfecting its model in a small number of localities. It has learnt a lot and had some great successes, and is now ready to expand its model to other localities who wish to implement it. While it is not restricting itself to BA alliances, it is starting there for many of its future projects.

BTA is less focused on implementing its model, and more about seeing the creation of 'civic hubs' which are exposed to many models and choosing their own direction. This merits some explanation. BTA defines a civic hub as a place where local relationships are created, sustained and converted into places of community-decision making and action. This definition is broad enough to cover all stages of our ladder of engagement. A civic hub is where these individual rungs come together to form the ladder for coordination and scale.

In BTA's approach, a civic hub is generally initiated when an organization working on ONE of those rungs (say, a local service organization) has an identity shift and begins to see the need to team-up with other local civic actors. We call this organization a 'hub initiator' and provide them support in connecting with and eventually convening local civic organizations, with a view to coordination and structure. The ladder of engagement is a broad model to help see participating

organizations how their processes fit together, rather than a specific model to be implemented. It is also very open to modifications based on new information.

Civic hub initiators find themselves 'growing into' other ladder stages - for example, a local service organization initiating a hub may want to learn more about bridging, in order to effectively connect with a local bridging organization. As a result, BTA supports civic hub initiators by connecting them to each other ACROSS localities, in learning cohorts, so they may learn from each other. These learning cohorts prove to also be excellent locations for hub initiators to learn about specific national models like CLS, and if they like them, to implement them. This has the potential to be a very effective partnership. CLS can provide a concrete model for implementation and is looking for places to test it, while BTA can provide many locations looking to try concrete models.

BA more broadly is moving in the direction of the CLS model and civic hubs as part of courageous citizenship. There are already a number of BA alliances who are working with BTA as civic hub initiators (some through CLS, some not). If many BA alliances become civic hub initiators, this has the potential to put the Braver Way at the center of a unified civic movement.

Pulling the Civic Field together around a shared Civic Process

While BTA has a strong partnership with CLS because of the closeness of the models, it is worth noting that CLS is not the only national model that BTA will be partnering with. In simple terms, we are collecting local civic actors, giving them a very broad framework for thinking about how they work with other local civic actors (the ladder), then exposing them to lots of different national models (including from each other).

There's a few assumptions behind this. First, is that the era of top-down thinking is coming to an end - localities will be choosing which models work for them, and so the best thing we can do is give them all the information they need to make the right decision. Second, is that none of the civic hub models out there are finished or complete. They all need testing and experimentation, and very likely can learn from each other. As such, the best thing we can do is create as much room for experimentation as possible and allow the best ideas to rise to the top and influence each other. Ideally, we reach a place where we move toward a shared Civic Process across the field, one which is continuously improved on over time.

A community is more than just civics process

The goal of civic infrastructure is to rebuild local communities. However, so far, we have only talked about pulling civic organizations together (into shared processes and structure). A shared process is an essential backbone to rebuilding a community, and this must be our initial focus as a movement, but it is not enough by itself. Civic organizations, due to their historic decline, are often unrepresentative of the communities they are in or disconnected from the issues facing them. As such, we need to take a more expansive view of the components of a civic hub.

First is the collection of local civic organizations, tied together into a shared process in the manner described above. This might be described as the 'WHAT' of a civic hub, because it is what the hub will actually be doing together.

Second is what we are calling ‘constituency organizations.’ This is an extremely broad term, referring to organizations based on any sort of identity group, whether they be professional, religious, hobby-based, ethnic or any other identity. Given the ultimately subjective concept of identity, the exact constituency groups in a civic hub will entirely depend on how identities are represented and self-organized in a given locality. This might be thought of as the ‘WHO’ of a civic hub, and these groups must be engaged for this process to be successful. It is worth noting that constituency organizations cannot be the only way to reach a majority of people - they are simply a low-hanging fruit. In an isolation crisis like we face, most people are not part of ANY local constituency/identity group. Pulling such organizations together into a hub can help build scale and gravitational force around a hub, which will be needed for the much harder work of reaching isolated individuals (likely requiring things like door knocking, sustained hyperlocal relationship building, etc). It is worth noting that some constituency groups are doing heavy amounts of civic process already, and should be brought early into hub building. Interfaith organizations famously do bridging work and service activities, veterans groups often do service activities and non-partisan advocacy. There is plenty of growing interest from the arts community and the business community in leaning into civic activity.

Third are local issue-based organizations. The second half of the ladder of engagement is concerned with solving practical problems, and that is the entire focus of the CLS model. The involvement of issue-based organizations might be thought of as the ‘WHY’ of civic hubs, because they get to the question of practical problem solving and improving people’s standard of living. These organizations generally come in two flavors - neutral expertise organizations and non-neutral advocacy organizations (and many shades in between those two. Both are extremely valuable in collaborative problem solving. However, if possible, a collaborative problem solving process

Finally is what ties these three pieces together - collaborative backbone leadership and infrastructure (including technology), and partnership coordination team. This may be thought of as the connective tissue within the hub, and ‘HOW’ it all comes together.

Figure 2: A civic hub and its four major components

A fractal model for civic infrastructure

From the above, it’s clear that a single civic hub is a highly complex entity incorporating many local actors. Where things get much more complicated is thinking about the network between civic hubs, and the state, national and international support structures needed for those hubs to succeed.

My colleague Jacob Bornstein has [written a paper](#) for this collection about one particular network between hubs - linking collaborative problem solving efforts together into national deliberative infrastructure. It would be helpful if we had a theoretical model for the entire civic infrastructure network, so the field had a vision to build towards. Such a model would need to be simple enough to understand and explain, while allowing for the extreme levels of complexity. It would necessarily be a decentralized model, where linkages are not about authority but about flow of information between different entities.

At Mediators Foundation, our thinking on this question has led us to a fractal model. A fractal is a never-ending, complex pattern that repeats itself at different scales. This means two repeating patterns in particular:

1. An individual organization existing at the local level should have an equivalent supporting organization at a state, national and international level. For example, a local bridging organization should be supported by state level bridging organizations, which in turn are supported by national bridging organizations, in turn supported by international bridging organizations. This applies to any organization we are engaging with, including constituency organizations and issue-based organizations. The good news is that many such networks already exist and will not require us to build anything - we will need to show these networks where they fit into our model (and why they'd benefit from doing so).
2. The overall hub structure repeats itself at the local, state, national and international level. As such, there will be state hubs and national hubs (and eventually a global hub) structured identically to each other. Below is a diagram demonstrating what this might look like.

Figure 3: A fractal model for civic infrastructure, from the local through to the national

* Vinay Orekondy is an Australian-born attorney, community organizer, and civic-sector entrepreneur focused on strengthening democratic participation and collaboration across ideological and organizational divides. He is co-founder and Director of Partnerships at Better Together America, where he helps build a nonpartisan network of local civic hubs, and he has held leadership roles in electoral-reform, coalition-building, and civic-innovation organizations including Braver Angels, Renew to Thrive and Rank the Vote.