

City of Worcester Human Rights Commission Minutes
VIRTUAL MEETING – Monday, September 12, 2022, 6:00pm

Members Present: Guillermo Creamer Jr., Elizabeth O’Callahan, Edward G. Robinson, Charles Hopkins, Ellen Shemitz, Jorge Lopez-Alvarez, Jamaine Ortiz

Members Absent: LaToya Lewis, Jacqueline Yang

Staff: Jayna Turchek

Guests:

Charles Stewart, MIT

Chuck Corra, Vote 16

Roger Desrosiers, President Massachusetts Center for Civic Education

1. Call to order and Introductions

A quorum was established, and Chairperson Creamer called to order. The Chairperson welcomes members of the commission and those present and introductions of those in attendance as well as roll call were taken.

Chairperson began with an acknowledgement of the traditional, ancestral, territory of the Nipmuc Nation, the first people of Massachusetts and those whose land we are convening on tonight. While the Nipmuc history predates written history, records from the 1600s inform us that the original inhabitants of Worcester dwelled principally in three locations: Pakachoag, Tatasset (Tatnuck), and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave). It is important to make this acknowledgment and to honor the ancestors that have come before us. It is all too easy to live in a land without ever hearing the traditional names and the history of the people who first resided and prospered in these lands and continue to reside and prosper.

The Human Rights Commission was established to promote the city’s human rights policies. It is the policy of the City to assure equal access, for every individual, to and benefit from all public services, to protect every individual in the enjoyment and exercise of civil rights and to encourage and bring about mutual understanding and respect among all individuals in the city. Our work requires us to address institutional racism so that as a community we can achieve racial equity. Our work also requires us to make visible the unheard, unearned, and unquestioned privilege enjoyed by some members of our community to the detriment of others. We take time to make this acknowledgement, to educate, so a path can be cleared for healing.

The term “**institutional racism**” refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies create difference outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and the oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as people of color.

The term “**racial equity**” is the active state in which race does not determine one’s livelihood or success. It is achieved through proactive work to address root causes of inequalities to improve outcomes for all individuals. That is, through the elimination or shifting of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them.

The term “**privilege**” describes the unearned social power and informal institutions of society to all members of a dominant group. For example: “white privilege” and “male privilege.” Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it because we are trained to not see it but nevertheless it puts them at an advantage against those who do not have it.

2. Approval of the meeting minutes from August 1, 2022.

The meeting minute approval has been tabled until next month.

3. Access to the Vote Discussion

A. Election explainers from MIT Election Data and Science Lab

<https://electionlab.mit.edu/research>

Charles Stewart: I want to bring to your attention some resources that we have at MIT and some ways that I believe we would be more than delighted to help the commission in the work that it does. As I understand it, the commission is very interested in engaging, above and beyond, in the work of encouraging voter turnout throughout the city and reducing and eliminating the disparities in turnout that occurs based on race, age, income, and other situations that people find themselves in.

The MIT Election Data and Science Lab (MEDSL) was created about five years ago with the goal of providing scientific information and research into the process of voting. We conduct our own independent academic research of a traditional type, but we also have a goal of outreach.

We have that outreach in a couple of dimensions. One is that we do a lot of outreach with engaging with election practitioners, mostly election officials. We consult with them about the problems that they face, whether it be districting, or shortening lines at polling locations, or talking about misinformation around elections. There are a lot of issues in election administration, and we have done a lot of work with election officials to try to make elections better.

The other thing we do is public outreach. We talk to the press a lot. We write a lot about elections and the popular media. We also have resources on our website that are explainers about a wide variety of topics. One of those topics is voter turnout and what drives voter turnout. So, we know some things about the topic.

One of the things that we know about voter turnout that, I think might be relevant to your work is that, as much as we would like it to be otherwise, it is very hard for government (election officials, legislators, etc.) to drive turnout up through passing laws, and various initiatives and outreach. There are things that they can do to drive it down. That is clear but is it much more difficult for election officials to take positive action and for government officials to drive that up. Instead, the most effective methods of increasing turnout tend to be those that are engaged in by

the political parties, by campaigns, by candidates and by civic organizations, working their individual connections, relationships and knowledge of communities to get people to the polls.

I think that, in order to achieve your goal, partnerships with civic associations who have personnel, the bandwidth, and the energy around turnout and facilitating their work may be the most important thing to increase turnout and decrease disparities that are in the city. The second thing is just to note that we at MEDSL are delighted to work with election officials, with local governments, to try to understand the dynamics of voting and to help facilitate the action of voting. One of the important things in your work is to try to figure out, with whatever actions you take, partnerships you form, whether or not the disparities that exist in the city have merit.

One of the things we are very good at doing at MEDSL is doing analysis of racial disparities in voting. For instance, right now we are working on a report for the state of Massachusetts to look at the effect of the institution of automatic voter registration from a couple of years ago. We are able to estimate the race of everybody in the voter file for Massachusetts and using a highly reliable statistical technique we are able to estimate the race of individual voters on the voter file and compare that census statistics for various precincts.

I have seen, sent by Jayna, a very well-done report by the Worcester Regional Research Bureau which is a really good start in these sorts of efforts. However, while it does look at the racial characteristics of voters by precinct, the technique that I am talking about could go within the precincts to look at individual racial characteristics of voters. We can move the ball a little further in doing analysis within the city. That would not be a hard thing for us to do and it is only one material thing we could contribute to this effort, in addition to our general experiences in this area.

Commissioner Shemitz: I am intrigued by what you said at the outset about how it is very difficult for government, itself, to increase voter turnout. Why is that?

Charles Stewart: Not surprisingly, there is a lot of research and interest into whether various reforms intended to increase voter turnout. Those reforms might be election day registration, voting by mail, automatic voter registration, a number of reforms have been passed over the years with one of the promises being that they will increase voter turnout. Inevitably, whenever the studies are done after the reforms have been implemented, nine times out of ten the result is that there was no increase in turnout. The one out of ten are the forms of reform that are most effective, such as election day registration, may increase turnout by one or two percent. What we do find is that we can explain, in a statistical sense, variation in turnout by other factors. For instance, in the difference for turnout in city elections and state elections, and the upcoming midterm elections and presidential election will be broad, it will be a matter of 20-40%. Part of that is just interest among the voters.

Voters are bombarded with information from all sorts of places and they cannot escape issues related to a presidential election. Whereas it is pretty easy, for a well-informed voter, minding their business to not hear a lot about a city election. What we also know is that the most educated voters may be driven to vote because of the media, and they know an election is coming up. The most powerful factors leading to people, who are not obsessed with politics, to vote is contact. The most powerful is being asked by somebody to turn out and vote. Getting mailers with your name on it is another thing that gets people to vote, so is telephone calls (as annoying as they

are). The reason you get so many telephone calls for voting is because they have been proven powerful in getting people to turnout and vote. The things that appear to be effective in getting people out to vote are: conflicts over elections, the activity of campaigns reaching out to individuals, and flooding the airwaves with information about the elections.

One of the challenges in figuring out and addressing the issue of turnout is that, usually, these discussions occur among people like us who are obsessed with politics. Research indicates that the average American is not interested in politics. So, what will get them to the polls? Being asked by somebody they trust. Now, it is possible for government action to effect turnout on the downside. If the city were to cut the number of polling places in half, you would see a decline in turnout. If we were to go back to how things were 50 years ago when you had to register to vote six months before the elections, that would reduce turnout. If you had armed thugs at the polling places, that would also reduce turnout.

We are at a point where, having looked at the map, it is easy to get to polling places in Worcester and it is relatively easy to register to vote in the state of Massachusetts, so that last mile is the matter of personal relationships and trust. The people we are trying to get to the polls are, frankly, people who might distrust the city government, or government in general. They may need the encouragement from their communities who they trust, personally. That is why I really push engaging with the civil associations who often times have affiliations with affinities within communities, to work with them to drive turnout to the next level, because it is really a matter of trust that gets people, who are skeptical about politics, into the voting booth.

Commission Shemitz: Do you have any data that speaks to whether investments in civic education, whether government support for civic education, has been effective in building that kind of trust and confidence, which relates to an increase in voter turnout? Related to that, specifically, investments into Kids Vote and other efforts to get children to better understand. Does that filter up to their parents in terms of parental behavior?

Charles Stewart: I am less familiar with the last piece that you mention, the filtering from children to parents. I know there are claims along those lines, I just don't know about the research. What I do know, and why I am a big believer in things like civic education and encouraging pre-registration, is that turnout in the United States compared to other western democracies is among the lowest. Turnout for those 30 years old plus is about the same as the rest of the world. The American deficiency in turnout is at the younger end. The best explanation for that deficiency is the high mobility of Americans at an early age. Because we have such residentially based rules around voting, they have to register and re-register making it very easy for younger people to just fall off the map. Of the group of people aged 18-22, many of them are in college. There are efforts on college campuses to get college students to register and to vote. Then they graduate and are not on the college campus anymore. They have moved from the address they resided in during college. This is when they fall off. They start coming back when they get settled. Anything that we can do to get young people registered and keep them on the rolls is a good thing. There is evidence that pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds, does lead to high voter turnout for those 18. So, civic education tied with positive experiences in voting. When you put people in polling places, doing work, love working the polls. When young people

are in polling places, they come away really excited by the experience. It's the long game but the investment is worth it and there is research to back that up.

Commissioner O'Callahan: What factors get people to engage in voting behaviors and are there things that we, as a society or municipality, haven't tried yet? Are there mechanisms that we haven't utilized, that if we did, would make the difference?

Charles Stewart: There is one set of things that research suggests, which also has to do with young people, has to do with the reassurances of the process. There is some very interesting research regarding why young people don't vote and their beliefs about voting. One of the most surprising findings was that a high percentage of young people believe that the ballot is not secret. Reassuring and educating young people about how there is, in fact, a secret ballot, has a pretty strong effect on getting younger people to vote. Which may, by the way, be one of the reasons that programs, such as having high school students work the polls, are effective. They actually see what is happening and the protections in place. Retail politics and retail outreach is the most powerful. This is one of the reasons that over the last twenty years there has been an increase in voter turnout in the United States, because campaigns have recognized through some very rigorous scientific research, that you reach a limit in mass communication and mass-outreach. The major national campaigns are investing heavily in door-to-door personal outreach to voters. In Massachusetts one thing that would increase voter turnout would be a competitive republican and that is simply because the elections would then be more competitive.

Commissioner Ortiz: Also, do you see a future with apps on phones?

Charles Stewart: Regarding phones and the use of technology to vote, there are a lot of perils to internet voting. Technology and voting experts point out that there are serious problems to internet voting which includes if you are voting on your cellphones, how do you know you are actually communicating with the election office? If you are the election office, how do I really know I am communicating with the voter that it says I am? also, it is possible to intercept communications between a server and a client. One of the problems, fundamentally, is that we have a secret ballot.

B. Vote 16 <https://vote16usa.org>

Chuck Corra: Vote 16 is part of a project run by Generation Citizen, the organization which promotes comprehensive experimental civics in classrooms and advocates for legislation that advances access to civics. As many of you know, and as we have talked about, young people are not voting, at least as much as older people or as much as young people in other parts of the world. While turnout ticked up a little in 2020, it has been fluctuating ever since 1968 and has been well below voter turnout for all ages and races. It is something that has been an obvious and constant problem and we are looking for a solution. We hope to find that solution with lowering the voter age.

Around the world places have lowered the voting age to 16 and within the United States, there has been efforts in various places to do the same. Voting is a habit and even for the most

politically attuned interested person, incidents can come up in life that disrupt the ability to vote. If you don't have the habit, the plan, you can easily find yourself not going to the polls. Age 16 is a better time to establish that habit than age 18 and studies have shown that. It's a good age to instill those values. It is also the same age that you are allowed to work and have taxes taken out of your paycheck. If taxes are being taken out and you are paying them then you should have the ability to vote on who is making those policies. Secondly, it ensures that elected officials listen to young people and address their concerns. They feel that they are not represented by their elected officials and by giving them the power to vote and empowering them to do that will not only be an investment in their future but it will allow them to hold elected officials accountable. In turn, it will also obligate elected officials to address those concerns. If 16- and 17-year-olds are able to vote, then it is more important for elected officials to listen to them. It also makes civics classes more relevant and drives the demand for better civics education. If you are able to vote while you are still taking these classes in high school then the concepts that you learn, the importance of it, really resonates more.

Common pushback we see include legal adulthood being 18, that the 16-year-olds are not as mature as 18-year-olds, and also, they are more inclined to copy their parents votes. There are a variety of different responses to these objections. I think that the arguments for previously listed are very compelling ones. When you think about the difference between a 16- and 17-year-old and an 18-year-old, fundamentally, there is not a lot of difference. It is mostly a difference in where we have statutorily decided to consider someone a legal adult. Specifically, we have decided that at 16 you are mature enough to be able to work a job, make a wage, so there is some rationale to say that if one is mature enough to work a job and operate a motor vehicle, they should be mature enough to be entrusted with voting.

The Home Rule Powers where states give cities different amounts of power to make local laws, including for elections. You can petition the state government for it. In general we have found this to be the most effective way to be able to do this at a smaller, more experimental, level.

In the past campaigns, although unsuccessful, were all very close, within a couple of percentage points of passing and lowering the voting age. Oakland and Berkeley CA did successfully pass and lower the voting age and are working on the implementation of that currently. Washington D.C. ran into some issues with the council but are in conversations to see if we can get another robust and well-researched campaign started. Currently, there is a ballot initiative in Culver City, CA (Los Angeles County) on the ballot this November. Almost that entire campaign has been managed by high school students. They got this on the ballot themselves with some guidance from our team and from lawyers that work Culver City, but primarily it was the young people (14-17-year-olds) putting in the leg work and doing this. For future, we have worked in several different states, we are continuing to try to do a localized approach and see if we can start to gain momentum.

In Massachusetts we were successfully able to generate petitions to lower the voting age in Somerville, Brookline and Cambridge. All Home Rule Petitions were successful. Most happened in 2019. That shows a decent amount of momentum. In March 2020, the Boston Globe Editorial Board endorsed the initiative to lower the voting age and Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley has also essentially endorsed lowering the voting age by putting it into an HR1 amendment. Unfortunately it did not pass but it was a good signal of support for her and from the other

members who were onboard with that amendment. It shows that there is a real energy in Massachusetts to be lowering the voting age and empowering young people to be able to vote and be able to have their voices heard in our democracy.

Commissioner Shemitz: Is there any data that speaks to whether or not getting young people involved early impacts the voting habits of the rest of the household?

Chuck Corra: I don't know the answer of the top of my head. I would have to go back and look at some of our research database to see. I would assume it does but I don't want to make assumptions.

Bill Gardner: For the three cities you said passed it in the state, are they voting at all levels and also would it be more important to try and get individual cities to do it or for us to get the entire state to say that all cities and towns would do it?

Chuck Corra: It depends on the petition. I think for the most part it is just local elections. I don't think they were granted the authority to have them for statewide and federal. In most instances it is usually a petition to allow younger people to vote in local elections. In some instances, it has even been scoped so narrowly as to school board related. It would certainly be more meaningful and impactful for our campaign to have the entire state of MA to be in support of this. We just try to do locally because it is an incubator as to how this can work because a lot of people are open to the idea, but they want to see where it has been done before, how was it implemented and was it successful.

Commissioner O'Callahan: What are the potential risks? Are there any? What would be a reason for someone to say this is a bad idea?

Chuck Corra: In my view, the harm is minimal. I understand the reluctance on maturity, but I don't know if there is a tangible harm.

Commissioner Shemitz: For those cities that petitioned, is there any data on voter turnout for those 16- and 17-year-olds? For Professor Stewart, is there any data he is aware of on voting rates either among 16-year-olds or on other age groups?

Chuck Corra: I know that Somerville passed the measure. All three were able to successfully petition the state government to put it on the ballot. I don't know that we have the hard data, I would have to double-check. Implementation of this has been a bit of a rocky road. These were all within 2019 and 2020 so I am not sure if we have reliable information on it yet.

Charles Stewart: What it looks like is that there is no research. What has been done is in the international context, which is consistent with Chuck's notion but even there, there has not been a whole lot of research on the effect of turnout.

Chairperson Creamer: I think it is appropriate for us to vote on whether the Worcester City Council should be looking at this and they should take a vote as to whether they'd endorse it.

*Motion to recommend the city manager to convey the Human Rights Commission's endorsement of the Empower Act that includes the Vote16 initiative and have city council to review in kind.
Approved.*

C. Mass Center for Civic Education – We the People/Project Citizen/Citizen Lyceum

Roger Desrosiers: As Professor Stewart was mentioning earlier, we are one of those Civic Education organizations that believe firmly in the importance of allowing young people to get a strong background in civic education in k-12 time. We have two programs. The We the People Program, which has an emphasis in civic learning and understanding about their government. The second program is called Project Citizen which deals with civic engagement and civic participation. We call these two programs the Book ends. We believe if young people have an understanding of both they have a good understanding of knowing what they need to know, at age-appropriate levels, about what they should have and for their senior year forward, fundamentally, about their government.

The We the People Program

This started 35/36 years ago with the bicentennial of the Constitution and then 5 years later with the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights. The Supreme Court Chief Justice at the time had stepped down and he wanted to devote the remainder of his life to promoting the Constitution as the basis for better understanding. He knew then that civic education was necessary. The Center for Civic Education developed programs allow for that to occur.

The three different levels of the We the People Program were established, one for grades 4-6 depending upon the different states, a middle school program and a high school program. Each includes age-appropriate levels for students to learn about their government so they would understand what they needed to know.

I started teaching that program in 1987 as a high school teacher and I taught it for 19 years. What I learned was that my students understood better than previously what the government was and the activities they understood allowed them to be better prepared to learn best what the government was all about.

A study has been made over the years that 92% of the students who have studied We the People vote in elections. Given the fact that we talk, frequently, about young people not going forward and voting in elections, that is a pretty high number.

Project Citizen

Project Citizen began in 1993 and is a civic engagement program with a focus on civic participation. We think it is very important for students to learn the process of how government works. So frequently students, and adults, don't know the process of how things get done. In 2018, when the Governor of Massachusetts signed the mandate for grade 8 students to do a civics project and for high school students to do a civics project, it is now the responsibility of

school districts to provide opportunities for students to be able to do projects fulfilling their civic engagement responsibilities. In order to do that, we need students to understand the process.

Project Citizen is a program that allows for students to learn how public policy works. What we want students to do is to access the ability to work within the local governments so that they can understand issues within their school district and local communities and be able to take on an issue, research and conduct interviews, and maybe do something with it. All projects are student led with teachers as facilitators allowing students to learn about the problem that they wish to take on, understanding through consensus which problems they should tackle, studying, researching which alternative solutions they should look at and determining the solution based upon the scope, duration, intensity, and resources that are going to have to be dealt with regarding the problem and regarding the solution that they may look at.

In both of our programs the most compelling thing as an outcome is how the students are empowered through their learning. It is that, which is going to determine that they will not want to participate in government. That participation usually takes the initial form of wanting to vote.

We do have a third program that we have as well. It is for adult learning, and it is called Citizen Lyceum. We have a lot of adults who don't understand government very well and we feel we have an obligation to try and help adults to understand the role of government, what government is intended to do, why the founders founded the government that they did, what our principles are, what our values are and what democracy stands for and why we believe the vote is most essential.

Commissioner Shemitz: Do we as a commission have the ability to ask for both the information on the Empower Act and Project Citizen to be shared with the school board with the specific intent, or request that they consider how Worcester might encourage the citizens to learn more and possibly become involved in some local projects to build support at the community level?

Commissioner Shemitz: Is there an opportunity for the commission to become involved in outreach around Citizen Lyceum and promoting some sort of civic education, specifically adult-specific education?

Discussion around prior history on commission actions.

Judy Finkel: I work with local league of women votes and we have been encouraging its chapters to partner with school districts around the new legislation on required mandated civic education for 8th graders and high school students. Last year, our local chapter was in touch with the Worcester Public Schools Liaison for Social Studies who referred us to Forrest Grove Middle School. That teacher does four sections of civic education. We partnered with him on his last session and his students were presenting their projects. The students can choose to do group, full class or individual projects. His students chose to mostly do class projects. And the projects were on climate, water pollution, and discrimination. Everything was done electronically with PowerPoint. We brought in 20 community members from Senator Chandler to State Reps and City Council, school committee members and league of women voters. We had a whole group of people who listened to the presentations. Worcester is on track to ensure that all of its 8th grade

middle school and high schools this year will be doing this. I think for the high schools, it will mostly be tied into their U.S. History courses. The School Committee does know about it but they probably do need to know some more so I do encourage you to go forward with your recommendation. The new Superintendent is aware also.

Motion to share through the city manager the information about the Empower Act and We the People and Project Citizen with the school committee and school administration. Commissioner Shemitz motioned, Commissioner Hopkins seconded. Unanimously approved on a roll call vote.

D. Federal Student Aid – Requirements for Distribution of Voter Registration Forms (Pub. April 21, 2022) <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2022-04-21/requirements-distribution-voter-registration-forms>

"We have also been asked whether Federal Work Study (FWS) funds may be used to support voter registration activities. If a student is employed directly by a postsecondary institution, the institution may compensate a student for FWS employment involving voter registration activities that take place on or off-campus. FWS funds cannot be used for employment by a Federal, State, or local public agency, or a private nonprofit organization, other than the institution, for work involving partisan or nonpartisan political activity, including party-affiliated voter registration activities, as this is expressly prohibited under 34 CFR 675.22(b)(5)."

Motion to advise the City Manager that we will be sharing this information with local colleges within the city and ask if they have a plan in place. Chairperson Creamer motioned, seconded by Commissioner Shemitz. Unanimously approved on a roll call vote.

5. Adjournment

Chairperson Creamer motioned to adjourn, Commissioner Shemitz seconded. Unanimous to close on a roll call vote. Our next meeting will be October 3, at 6pm in person at City Hall and over Webex.