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Enacting Democratic Membership

Finding Time, (Re)Distributing Resources, Building Knowledge, and Protecting Rights

We came here for safety, of course. And also, to practice democracy. . . . It was amazing to participate. To feel that you have a voice. . . . I was happy every time I did it.

—Omar, 14 December 2018

Introduction

This chapter examines how this study’s interviewees understood democratic membership in the United States as resettled refugees, residents, and, in some cases, citizens. As suggested in the introduction, democracy entails processes and mechanisms that facilitate opportunities for members of a political community to participate in making the decisions that affect their lives (Benhabib 2006; Pateman 2012). Hashim’s description of his life in the United States captured democracy well: “I can set up rules that work for me in the things that I experience” (1 October 2017).

As I also argued in the introduction, democracies require porous borders—literal, physical, and territorial as well as social, cultural, and political—that grant newcomers entry and allow those formerly excluded to gain membership and engage in decision-making processes. Moreover, I assume that contestations concerning the character and content of democratic arrangements that include those who do not necessarily “share the dominant culture’s memories and morals” are the mark of a strong “culture of democracy” rather than a threat to its existence (Benhabib 2006, 69). That is, there is no a priori reason to believe that newcomers are any more likely to present a challenge to a culture of democracy than those born into a social

or political community. And essential to such a culture are deliberations by existing members about how to incorporate newcomers. The central analytical questions at issue in such discussions are how a democratic ethos and habits can be strengthened, how the boundaries of those beliefs and mores can be enlarged, discerning where substantive opportunities exist for newcomers to do so, and identifying what factors mediate or, in some instances, constrain such processes.

This chapter first problematizes the degree to which American institutions, and US society more broadly, qualify as democratic. I then explore several interviewees' views that there are reasons to be circumspect about the degree to which American institutions can be expected to provide the mechanisms to help them form and carry out their goals. As several interviewees explained, existing participation mechanisms in the United States cannot always create change in government policy or action, fundamentally calling into question those institutions' democratic character. I then explore individuals' understandings of democratic membership in the United States.

I examine whether and in what ways they understood themselves to have the same or equal rights as native-born Americans to participate in democratic decision-making processes. I then elaborate on four of the barriers and requirements interviewees identified to their engagement in such processes. The first is that participation in the decisions that affect one's life requires time, which is not always available amid the need to work long hours to support oneself and/or one's family. Second, the substantive exercise of democracy requires that members of a political community have a right to public provision of resources and opportunities to decide how those resources are distributed. Third, helping to shape the laws, policies, and rules that govern one's life requires adequate information and knowledge of the processes, institutions, and choices shaping one's environment; building such understanding also requires time. Fourth, a recurring theme in the interviews I undertook was that my interlocutors had lived much or most of their lives in a country governed by an authoritarian regime. For those with whom I spoke, it is necessary to address and reduce lingering suspicions of agents of the state and government officials more broadly to trust that political engagement is safe; some reported that they chose to abstain from democratic engagement and/or interaction with state representatives as a result.

The Character of Democracy in the United States

Before exploring barriers to its exercise in the United States, it is important to assess the democratic character of American society and institutions. One must interrogate the degree to which interrelated spaces such as US electoral political institutions, civil society, and workplaces are democratic in

substantive ways, for newcomers and native-born citizens alike. The formal institutions of American representative democracy were designed by white men, most of them slave masters, to perpetuate a white supremacist state that subjugated and excluded most of the country's population from participation and perpetuated a political economy sustained by forced labor. White supremacy is inseparable from American conceptions and practices of freedom and democracy (Beltrán 2020). As a result, there has been and remains a fundamental contradiction and persistent tension between the universalist ideals articulated in the country's founding documents and their realization for many people who live in the country. Only through significant and sustained struggle in the face of state and vigilante violence have women, African Americans, and many other formerly excluded groups gained enfranchisement.

Moreover, reactionary segments of American society have reacted to democratic gains by these groups by devoting significant resources to attempts to roll them back (MacLean 2017). Efforts continue, particularly although not exclusively by the modern Republican Party, to gain and keep political power by preventing members of ethnic and racial minority groups from voting (Vandewalker and Bentele 2015). Importantly, as Bonnie Honig notes, even with the iterative expansion of rights for those formerly excluded, these groups "have still never come to bear those rights in the same way as their original bearers" (in Benhabib 2006, 112). Various forms of social, economic, and political exclusion continue despite ongoing activism by and on behalf of women, African Americans, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and other marginalized groups. Additionally, despite these struggles, as Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page argue about the formal institutions of American government: "The majority does not rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the US political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it" (2014, 576).

As I write this book, the US Supreme Court, an unelected body of nine individuals with lifetime appointments, is poised to roll back the seminal *Roe v. Wade* ruling. This precedent, supported by 69 percent of Americans (Yi and Thomson-DeVeaux 2022), has protected the right to bodily autonomy and necessary reproductive healthcare for millions of Americans for the last fifty years.

Importantly as well, decades of violent antisocialist and anticommunist campaigns, both domestically and around the world (Bevins 2020), have actively sought to purge economic democracy from American conceptions of a democratic society. In short, there is a significant need to protect and expand existing democratic rights and institutions that a reactionary minority

seeks to undermine, and to continue the work of democratizing American society.

With this in mind, interviewees expressed varying levels of confidence that actions they could take would allow them to exert meaningful influence over the decisions that govern their lives, particularly in relation to the existing institutions of representative democracy. Sarah, for example, questioned the efficacy of discussion with government representatives. She queried: “When we are talking with this person from the government about a problem, can he do something good? Solve this problem? Or just talk and that’s it?” (Sarah 30 November 2017). Sarah went on to express that if the government has been unable to solve issues such as affordable housing for Americans, it would be even less able to do so for newcomers like herself: “So, the American people, it is hard for them to get [affordable housing] and what about me and the Arab people? It’s hard, doubly hard” (Sarah 30 November 2017). Hashim and Mohammed each expressed doubt about the potential that protests have to shape or reshape policies. As Mohammed put it, even “if a million people go to the street, nobody in government will change policies or laws” (2 November 2017).

In prefacing his critique of American electoral democracy, Kasim said “voting is important. You have to use your rights to make change. . . . I went there, I voted” (27 February 2018). Nevertheless, he went on to say, “I knew my vote wouldn’t count, but if everybody doesn’t vote . . . how can you participate? How can you make a difference?” (Kasim 27 February 2018). Kasim voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and continued to support him at the time of our interview in early 2018. “Many people disagree with me,” he said, “but from day one I was like, I knew this guy. The minute I listened to his speeches; he just was in the same line of my understanding of how things work” (Kasim 27 February 2018). He continued to explain:

I lived here in Obama’s time. Obama is a very great guy. He’s very intellectual and he’s probably one of the best presidents. But, when it comes to implementing things, he had a hard time because that’s not how the US [government functions]. . . . For Democrats, it’s always hard to pass legislation because the power is with people who have money, and they are Republicans mostly. The power’s always on the Republican side. Even if they are not in power, still. So, it’s hard to pass legislation [for Democrats]. Whereas this guy [Trump], is a Republican. And whenever he says something, he can do it. Because they have the power. (Kasim 27 February 2018)

Wissam, too, pointed to this sort of corruption in our conversation. As he put it, “You have, maybe, not as much corruption as other countries. But you do have it. You have billionaires who want to use power” (Wissam 22 October 2017).¹ However, he understood the structure of American government to mediate this situation. He was more confident than Kasim that existing

American institutions could effectively address the issue of wealth translating into political influence. As he put it, “You have, maybe, the most billionaires in the world who want to use power. . . . Still, the Constitution is protecting this country from it. . . . We are currently seeing a lot of people abuse power. But at least there are checks and balances” (Wissam 22 October 2017). Wissam went on to say he had been reading about the American system of government. “I think it’s very, very creative,” he said, “They really predicted the right formula on how to create a democracy. But, it’s very hard to stay consistent with it and that’s what we are seeing here” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Wissam works in the dining and restaurant business and discussed food safety laws in the United States as an example of the negative role of money in political processes. He said: “I want to really affect the laws about the standards of food here. It is all controlled by big corporations, it’s very hard to fight them. . . . Not all the laws are for the best interests of the consumer and that’s what I’d like to see changed” (Wissam 22 October 2017). To change such laws, he argued that lobbying was essential. “Mostly it’s about lobbying,” he said. “I don’t know if there’s any other way. Maybe you have a chance to speak with a reasonable government official and show them benefits [of a particular policy]. But if not, you have to go through lobbying. There [in Iraq], it’s kind of illegal. But here, it’s all legal. So, it is easier, of course, if you have the money. But in a way, those officials need to weigh the benefits versus what the lobbyists want. There has to be a balance so, I don’t know” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Ahmed, too, pointed to corruption as a concern, and like Wissam, he stated that it was perhaps not an insurmountable problem. During our conversation on taxes in Chicago, for example, Ahmed remarked: “I know there is . . . corruption, that’s everywhere. But I would rather have corruption and services provided to me than no taxes with 100 percent corruption and no accountability [as was the situation in Iraq]. Here, even with the corruption, politicians still need to be accountable to the people who voted” (2 October 2017). Ahmed, like Wissam, argued that despite the corruption he perceived, US officials were accountable to citizens in ways they were not in Iraq.

Democratic Membership

With the forgoing critiques in mind, I move next to consider interviewees’ understandings of their membership in democratic institutions and processes in the United States. As I illustrate below, their conceptions of substantive membership varied. Some, including Walid and Omar, were very positive about their opportunities for democratic membership while others, including Zaid and Tariq, were significantly less enthusiastic.

Nora, whose asylum application was pending at the time of our interview, said that in the future, she could be a member of formal democratic processes in the United States, but not currently. “I don’t have citizenship to vote,” she said:

I cannot express my opinion about more political stuff, but I do . . . feel the democracy and I belong here because I talk about whatever I want to talk about. And I say that this is right and this is wrong. I should not be treated like this because I am different. So, I do practice . . . democracy here. . . . Like, I just used my rights and was like, even though I’m not American I do have the right to say or I do have the right to be treated differently. But . . . I cannot do any elections when it comes to this city council. . . . I cannot do anything. But I can express my opinion. (Nora 6 February 2018)

Nora’s comments illustrate the different legal rights citizens and non-citizens have in the United States. Citizens can vote in local, state, and federal elections, while permanent residents or those with other immigration statuses typically cannot vote except in municipal elections in a handful of cities. However, all residents, including non-citizens, are formally protected by constitutional rights such as the freedom of speech that allow them to advocate for control of the conditions of their lives.

Walid observed, “I am very attached” to American democracy (27 September 2017). He said of his volunteer work with immigrants in his community: “We try to encourage people to get US citizenship. And we do have a lot of people, they reach five years of residency, so we encourage them to get naturalized and try to practice their rights because we came from the Middle East [where] maybe people they don’t learn how to practice their rights and here we tell them it’s really important. We have a congressman, a Congress. We can go and talk to [our representative]” (Walid 27 September 2017).

As an example of the types of activities he encourages community members to undertake, Walid described how many Iraqi families living in Upstate New York worried about relatives still in Iraq after an attack in the north of the country: “They said ‘Walid, tell us what we do? We want to do something.’ So, to raise awareness [about Yazidi women kidnapped by ISIS], we decided to use our democratic rights to contact the city council member, to invite some faith-based organizations to light candles . . . to express our feelings. We wanted them to not keep this anger and sit home because you are going to be very depressed and very tired if you do. We want to bring the community and teach them how to practice their rights” (27 September 2017).

Ahmed indicated that he had democratic membership “to a certain extent” (2 October 2017). As a resident, he could not vote in 2016. However,

he remarked: “I watched the election. I did not participate in the election. Actually, I watched the election with popcorn. It was super exciting. I know for other people, they don’t feel this way. . . . I met with a few friends after the election and obviously, we have like 50 percent of the population who feel downbeat about it. That’s in any normal election or democratic process” (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

Ahmed counseled his friends to be optimistic, telling them, “No, you don’t need to [be hopeless]. In four years or in two years, you still have the power to change it” (2 October 2017). “For me personally,” he said, “I waited almost more than twenty years of my life to see another country forcing democracy [in Iraq]. I think it will be a super exciting moment for me just to participate” (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

I asked Ahmed whether he viewed it as his right to help decide what the laws are in the United States, to which he replied: “I think so. Not helping with the laws like going and writing them, but having an opinion about something, yes. Because in the end it will affect me and affect my family, it will affect my friends, it will affect the community I live in. I think so, yeah” (2 October 2017). He continued: “I look forward to being part of making a decision in the community, within the small group that I’m interacting with, maybe, if I can give an added value to their discussion. In terms of government? I think that would not be my role. I don’t have, never had, any sort of [desire to go] into that direction I would say. . . . I don’t have political aspirations” (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

Elaborating on how he understood decision making in the realm of government, he discussed the possibilities of changing a law or policy with which he disagreed: “I can voice my opinion, but I will not be in a position to . . . make a different decision. Because again, I don’t think the government here works [in that way]. There will be other people factoring in their voices and their concerns. So, me being the decision maker? I don’t think so” (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

For his part, Omar noted, “We came here for safety . . . and also to practice democracy. Democracy is very important” (14 December 2017). Describing his experience engaging in democratic processes such as voting, he said, “It was amazing to participate. To feel that you have a voice. And I was happy every time I did it” (Omar 14 December 2017). As described in more detail in the following chapter, Omar has been involved in establishing and working with several organizations engaged in a range of activities including education, civic engagement, community organizing, and coalition building since arriving in the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia.

On a personal level, separate from the community work he does, Omar noted that private gun ownership laws were a potential issue in which he desired to have input. He said,

If there is something to change, really, I would change the gun policy. That's very problematic, let me say. I am surprised that we see [such policies] here. Like in our community, the gun should only be restricted to the government. In our country [Iraq], even though it is not sophisticated like here . . . but we never have someone handling the guns. . . . So, it should be restricted. You see from time to time, crazy people. . . . So, why do you give them the opportunity to take these weapons and kill us? So, it is something that hopefully will be gone, so all will live in peace. (Omar 14 December 2017)

Omar proceeded to call gun ownership by private individuals a larger issue than many others, but one he wished could be changed because, in his words: "I love this nation. So, I want it to live in peace. That's the reason why I'm interested. Yeah, others they have the same opinion, but again they don't have the power, or they don't have the means. . . . It's bigger than us. It's business, it's everything" (14 December 2017). To make the change he wished to see, he argued that it had to emanate: "From people. No one can do it by power. When everyone, you and me, and everyone is convinced that my neighbor, why should I be scared of my neighbor? I'm living with my neighbor long, long years. That gun will not protect me from my neighbor. And then that's it. It starts from a member and then the community. And then city, state, that's it. . . . We need peace. Yeah. And the government is very strong, so it can protect anyone" (Omar 14 December 2017).

Like Omar, Kasim also asserted that an issue on which he wanted to have a say in deciding laws in the United States revolved around private ownership of firearms. He took a very different tack. He cited the rise in school shootings in the United States (Walker 2019) saying: "Nowadays, this problem with the shootings in schools. Definitely, I would love to try to push some kind of legislation that protects schools because it's really alarming what's happening. I mean I see my kids' school, they lock the schools, I cannot get in. How come people can get in and kill the kids? Something is wrong. I listened to a speech by someone who had his kid killed. And then he was saying that you cannot get a bottle of water inside a plane, and you can get a rifle inside a school" (Kasim 27 February 2018).

Coming to the opposite conclusion as Omar, Kasim said: "We have to do something about that. It's not about controlling guns. . . . They can come in with knives and kill kids. It's not about guns. Not about gun control. It's definitely not the case. It's about securing the schools from those maniacs. Crazy people. Terrorists, whoever. So yeah. That's really alarming" (27 February 2018).

Hashim, too, wanted to be involved in decisions that affect him and his family. As noted at the opening of this chapter, he said, "I can give my opinion and I can set up rules that work for me in the things that I experience" (Hashim 1 October 2017). However, he said:

Of course, I cannot give an opinion . . . [on subjects] I don't know about. But I can give an opinion on, for example, education for my kids in the community schools, if they have suggestions, if they decided to make some changes to the schedule or on the education guidelines and all of that. So, I really want to be involved in my community, involved in things affecting my family. So, I would really be happy to make, not make decisions because I'm not the decision maker, but at least to participate in the community and participate in decision making. (Hashim 1 October 2017)

Wissam expressed optimism that he was in a position to participate in decisions that affect his life: "I really hope it is my right to change the US in positive ways. . . . What's good about the US is you have all these . . . people from all different backgrounds and it's the most successful model because people are living here peacefully, they are working together peacefully, everything is working" (22 October 2017).

He proceeded to describe democratic membership as providing him "peace of mind." As he elaborated:

There are certain things you don't do, that will keep you safe. If you know what's right, what's wrong, then you are on the safe side to some extent. And being able to petition the government or talk with the politicians, I have never experienced that. But these things are very hard in Iraq and other countries because it's very hard to see someone who is in power, even if he works in the city or is just a manager, something like that. It's very hard, but now [in the United States], it's different. The whole system is different. (Wissam 22 October 2017)

Moreover, Wissam argued that he had an equal ability to give his opinion as Americans "to some extent, in certain areas" (22 October 2017). However, he said about private gun ownership, for example: "I can't speak for everybody who . . . was born with different values, different experiences. . . . Some things I'll feel strongly about but . . . don't control. I can't [control such issues] because people here have it since day one. We didn't back there, so we are not used to having guns at home or using them unless you are in the army [for example]. So, it depends on the topic" (Wissam 22 October 2017).

On issues such as gun control, even though he argued he was not necessarily able to effect change because he had not lived his entire life in the United States, Wissam said he could affect decisions by:

Letting them hear my side of the story. Because, again, they didn't live or go through what I went through. So, they need to listen to my story, what I went through. . . . And the good thing [is that] people here are open-minded, they understand. They understand we are equal. They understand: "Okay, let me listen to what he says," before they just shut you out. . . . But, again, am I the best person to explain it to them? Or convince them? Maybe not. So, it

depends on who can speak [about such issues] well, you know? It's tricky. (22 October 2017)

Like Wissam, Ali suggested that his capacity to participate, and to engage equally, would be stronger if he had been born in the United States: "If I was born here, and an American, [the possibilities to participate would be] stronger. But, my situation, I was not born here . . . and I will remain as a refugee, you know? It's not forever, but this feeling inside you remains, even if you want to be an American" (14 January 2018).

In addition to the internal perception Ali described, he pointed out the distinctions government officials may draw between native-born and naturalized citizens. As an example, he pointed to the potential for scrutiny when interacting with airport security: "Whenever you want to go, especially during this time, if you want to travel, you are going to get questions, even if you have a US passport. You are going to get questions. Especially when it shows country of birth: Iraq. [If it reads] country [and city] of birth: New York City, USA it would be different. This is something that has happened in the past year, 2016. They are taking their phones, they are asking questions, which is not good" (Ali 14 January 2018).

However, Ali also argued that the law in the United States protected everyone living there. Therefore, for example, one could practice their religion freely. Ali stressed that if this legal protection were to change: "I will give my voice. I'll give my opinion. I believe this [equal legal protection] is better because from my experience, what I had back years ago in my country [the breakdown of law and institutions after 2003], this is what happened. So, I don't want this country to go through the same thing that my country went through. I'm talking about civil war, something like that. I don't want that to happen here in the United States" (14 January 2018).

Zaid stated that although he was an American citizen and had a legal right to engage in democratic processes, he did not believe he had earned the right to take part in decisions about laws and policies in the United States. As he explained: "I think it's not my right. No . . . I don't want to be a hypocrite. I have just been living here for seven years. I don't think I gained that right. Yes, I mean, I have the citizenship, but I can't decide for people who were born here, this is just my opinion. I know it's my right . . . but I believe that it's not really my right" (Zaid 27 February 2018).

When I asked Tariq, "Do you feel like you're a part of the democracy in the United States?" he responded:

This is a good question. Part of it, probably yes. . . . But we are a second level. You know China? China has levels, classes. Class one, class two, class three.² . . . So, when you are guilty and you have a bad record and you go to the judge and you say: "No, I didn't do it!" They're not going to trust you. This is what I feel here. We have a democracy, yes. But we can't say anything. We can't

use it. What are you going to do? Everybody is against you, the news, the government. . . . So, you're weak . . . because you're not trusted. . . . So, it's not democracy. (2 November 2017)

He went on to argue that Trump had effectively authorized Americans to treat refugees badly: "We cannot practice our democracy, it's difficult when the government [is led by someone] like Trump, he's against us already, we're done. Now he has legalized people to do whatever they want with us. Right? Because he said: 'If you do anything, you're out!'" (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Tariq allowed that Trump ostensibly took this approach to keep people safe; however, he explained: "He was thinking it's going to be good to keep people away from problems, but you say that for people who make a problem, which is very few of us. Not every immigrant" (2 November 2017). This targeting of all immigrants led Tariq to ask rhetorically: "Is that freedom? Is that a democracy? It's not. It gives you a right to do it again and again and again, because it worked" (2 November 2017).

More broadly than the president's actions, for Tariq, life in the United States is difficult because a segment of the society does not support refugees. He is a US citizen now but still thinks of himself as a refugee. Tariq labeled the lingering tension and antagonism he felt from American society the "taxes" he and other newcomers must pay to live in that society. He said:

Why do I still think I'm a refugee or I'm an immigrant? Because no matter what, this is our taxes. This is how the first generation who moves to the US, I feel, this is our taxes. My kids probably will be better because they have the American accent, so it's hard for you to recognize them in the future. But for us, this is how we pay taxes. We still feel, from the community, from the news, from the politics, or from politicians when they do something against us, you feel like: "Oh, why did they do that against me?" So, you are not a full citizen. US citizen. . . . Why? Because we just moved, no matter what I'm still a foreigner because of my accent, my color, maybe. My whatever. So, still, you will struggle. (Tariq 2 November 2017)

Tariq went on to say that even if he were able to build a sense of belonging and democratic membership, one event could set all of that backward: "It's not going to be easy. . . . When you say something or you live your democracy very well because no matter what, on the news . . . one day if it's a whole year with no problems, people start to do better and you know, forget. And then boom! A shooting happens and they say: 'Muslim, Muslim, Muslim!'" (2 November 2017).

He was certain it would be impossible to have a right to participate equal to that of a native-born American. "That will take time," Tariq said, "it will probably be after I die. My kids at least [may have it]. Maybe, yes. But, no, no we're far behind" (2 November 2017). Moreover, he argued that

the exercise of his democratic rights may place him in jeopardy: “For me, definitely you think you can say it, but I keep reminding you that for us to practice those things, it’s a little for me at least, it’s difficult. I don’t want to put myself in a spot and then you will get hurt by the government. I know, probably, freedom of speech nobody is going to hurt me but, who knows? Probably they will consider it against me down the road. ‘Oh yeah, you have been doing this and now you are a terrorist.’ They can do that, easily” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

This was especially true under Trump, in his view. As he argued, Trump had, for example, directed ICE to take “people from their homes and moms from their kids, without mercy” (Tariq 2 November 2017). During the Trump administration, ICE increased mass raids that “terrorize[d] communities” by “indiscriminately rounding up, detaining, and deporting migrants” (Beltrán 2020, 102). Tariq compared these actions to the situation under Saddam Hussein, saying: “It’s like Saddam Hussein. This is what he did after 1991, after the Gulf War. He sent his army to every house, and he took people from their houses. I almost lost my dad because of that. It’s the same thing. ICE, same thing. They have the right, they have the power, to take anybody. So, it’s easy for them to consider me, I’m the bad guy, easily” (2 November 2017).

Around the time of my interview with Tariq, the Trump administration had directed agencies, including ICE and the United States Border Patrol, to increase arrests, imprisonment, and deportation of immigrants. In June 2017, several months before interviews began, ICE ramped up efforts specifically to target Iraqis. Most of these individuals were Chaldean Christians who left Iraq before and after 2003 to seek refuge from violence directed at their community. A legal petition brought by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in July 2017 successfully halted the immediate deportation of fourteen hundred Iraqis who had been detained, allowing time for individuals to reopen their immigration cases (Kitaba-Gaviglio and Andrade 2017).

Tariq argued that if he were to exercise his freedom of speech by posting something critical about the government on social media, he could be arrested. He stated that immigrants who participated in protests against Trump took the same risk. As he explained, he believed that the government could arbitrarily exercise its authority over those engaged in legal activities because he had personally experienced this reality: “I was born and raised in this same situation,” he said, and the government “can turn easily against you. So, for me, we have to always think ahead” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Religious practice, too, is constrained, in Tariq’s view: “We practice in a small place, and we don’t go every time because I was scared to. Who knows? They come and they [will ask], ‘What are you guys doing here?’ Or they are watching us already. Maybe they’re watching us already and they think that we’re doing something they don’t like” (2 November 2017).

“Maybe I’m wrong,” he said. However, he continued: “it was true before . . . in the country that I come from. . . . You get killed for that. You get arrested for that” (Tariq 2 November 2017). Moreover, Tariq pointed out that the US government maintains watchlists of those targeted for suspicion. As noted in the introduction and Chapter 2, state authorities already disproportionately cast suspicion upon and surveil Muslims, mosques, and Islamic community organizations in the United States. Tariq observed, “Even if it’s not true, this is what I feel” (2 November 2017). He went on to say: “I wish I’m wrong. . . . But, based on the data and [what I] see in the news, I have to be aware of that. Keep away from all the problems. Even if I’m a US citizen now, always keep away from anything because I just want to live my life. I don’t want to do anything. I don’t want anybody [to do] bad things to me and I’m never going to do anything to anybody” (Tariq 2 November 2017). Given these experiences and assessments of his position in American society, Tariq said: “So, it is just the democracy that we are looking for. We hope we’ll be more like anybody else and that our voice can be heard, and they believe us when we say [something] because . . . they don’t believe us” (2 November 2017).

Barriers to Democratic Participation

With these experiences of democratic membership in mind, those I interviewed also highlighted specific barriers as well as requirements to engage with democratic processes in the United States. Their insights on these topics accord strongly with Irene Bloemraad and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan’s argument that: “Beyond language, immigrants may also face cultural gaps in understanding their new country’s political institutions, its taken-for-granted norms about politics and civic activity, and the very ways that politics and civic engagement are understood and discussed. Immigrants must learn the ropes, so to speak, of their host country, and research indicates that those from authoritarian regimes are less prepared to participate in politics” (2008, 5).

Multiple interviewees identified four such fundamental themes. The first was that locating opportunities to participate requires time. Second, substantive exercise of democracy requires public provision of resources. Third, participation requires knowledge of processes and preferences. Fourth, interviewees’ experiences living under an authoritarian regime left some suspicious of political engagement and skeptical that their formal legal rights would protect them in practice.

Additionally, several individuals identified language as an important factor, and in some cases, a precondition, to engagement. Many interviewees described how their knowledge of English facilitated both resettlement processes broadly and opportunities for involvement. In addition to enabling

everyday interactions and the pursuit of daily activities, knowledge of English allowed them to advocate for themselves and to interact with state authorities, neighbors, and others in their communities. I turn next to a discussion of the four barriers/requirements to civic engagement as identified by interviewees.

Participation Requires Time

The majority of those with whom I spoke argued that they lacked sufficient time to participate in democratic processes or activities. Many individuals, including Ahmed, Mohammed, Ali, and Sarah, discussed how the need to work long hours left little time to see family and friends—let alone become involved in broader-scale discussion, debate, or activism. Marwa, for example, told me that voting was the extent to which she wished to engage in democratic activities. I asked her whether she had done so already, and she said: “I didn’t have time. I already registered . . . but I didn’t get [to do so]. I was busy working” (Marwa 25 November 2017).

Ali observed that he worked long hours during the week, occasionally not seeing his children or wife because he returns home late, “So, yeah, the weekend is fully booked for my family. Because the whole week, sometimes . . . I don’t see them because I come late. Sometimes I see them like for half an hour and they have to go to sleep” (14 January 2018).

As Hashim explained, comparing his experience in Chicago to that in Iraq: “We had so many Iraqi friends at the beginning and then, you know, everyone is busy here in their lives. Back in Iraq, we had a lot of time to spend time with family and friends but right here we are so busy so we’re just seeing the closer families and from time to time we can maybe meet with friends” (1 October 2017).

Between work and family, Ahmed, too, had little time to engage in additional activities: “Because I used to live [on Chicago’s Northside] and it’s basically between work and going back and family duties I was not really able to go into the community and talk” (2 October 2017). He said that he discusses important concerns with coworkers and friends, but not in other forums. Ahmed was interested in becoming more politically engaged, “if the opportunity comes my way” and he reiterated “with the time constraints I need to think about” (2 October 2017).

Similarly, Mohammed argued: “There’s no time for American people to go out to talk with the government. Everybody goes to the job and comes back from the job. With this circle, who is thinking about the government? What are they doing? Nobody. Fifty percent of the American people, if you ask them about the name of the [Secretary of Defense] . . . they don’t know” (2 November 2017).

Polls of Americans' knowledge of their government support Mohammed's assertion. For example, a 2014 poll found that fewer than half of respondents could correctly identify which party, Democrats or Republicans, controlled the House of Representatives or Senate at the time of the survey (Rozansky 2014). A 2018 poll found that 57 percent of respondents could not identify how many justices sit on the US Supreme Court (National Survey 2018).

Mohammed went on to argue that "the government puts the people in this situation. Just work, work, work, and don't think about politics. Don't think. Don't talk about politics. Just go to the job and come back home" (2 November 2017). In this way, he concluded, even if someone were interested in engaging politically, "There's no time. Who's going outside to lose his check for a week?" he asked (Mohammed 2 November 2017).³

Although Mohammed argued that he was too busy to engage, such involvement was something he was interested in undertaking, nevertheless. He said that he often speaks with his twenty-three-year-old cousin who graduated from college with a political science degree and moved to Washington, DC, to work for the Democratic Party, imploring her to work for positive change. Mohammed has also prioritized supporting his high school-aged daughter's civic engagement. He supported her participation in a two-week leadership program offered in Washington, DC, where she had the opportunity to meet with members of the government. He said of his hope for his daughter's future: "My plan in the future, I will send my daughter to study political science to do something for the people, not just for refugees, no, swear to God. For the American people, too, to change something in the future" (Mohammed 2 November 2017).

Wissam, too, said, "the problem here is people don't have time, they live in a bubble and life here is very fast. . . . People don't have time here to research" (22 October 2017). As a result of these constraints, Wissam argued: "So, they just trust the government. Whatever those decisions made for them, they don't have the time. I mean, even the elections . . . most people when they vote for senators or representatives, they are going to decide in a few seconds, depends on the picture, which picture is better. . . . They're not going to spend the time to research what this guy's plan is, which is unfortunate. So, people are relying heavily on government to make decisions for them" (22 October 2017).

Moreover, Wissam explained, the United States "is not a small country, it's a continent. So, even the government has limited resources to fight back against all the bad guys or all the lobbyists, everything" (22 October 2017). This situation "makes you lose hope and believe there is no way you can change that" he said with a laugh (Wissam 22 October 2017). For himself, "I just stay busy with . . . my business, and I don't care about anything else"

(Wissam 22 October 2017). Later in our conversation, Wissam said: “Not many Americans are engaged in political life. . . . Maybe now there are more. But I didn’t see that many people care about what’s going on. . . . So, they don’t care, we don’t care what’s going on outside. And I’m busy with my life and my kids, things like that” (22 October 2017).

Kasim, too, contended that Americans he encountered were generally preoccupied with daily concerns: “When you are talking to an ordinary American person, he lives his daily life routine. He doesn’t look outside the box” (27 February 2018). In more personal terms, Sarah said that she would participate in democratic activities in the future, but her work now kept her too busy to do so. For example, the resettlement agency that assisted Sarah and her sister when they first arrived in Arizona held workshops on various topics and, as she explained, “Some people went to the resettlement agency, but me and my sister we go just two weeks and then we started to work. And all my time is busy, we can’t go there. Some people went to the organization to get more information about America. But, me and my sister we are busy all the time working ten hours per day. [Activities were held at] the same times we wanted to go to complete my education as well, but I can’t. No time. No time” (November 2017).

Nora, who has been involved in several different nonprofit and activist organizations said that she had to step away from some of this work because she was caring for her mother, commuting between the Shenandoah Valley and Washington, DC, to complete a master’s degree and working ten-hour shifts at her job four days a week. At one point, Tariq, too, was involved as a volunteer with an organization that assists Special Immigrant Visa recipients in the Upstate New York region. But, because he, too, was busy with work, he had reduced his time spent volunteering at the time of our interview.

Walid, who is very involved with multiple activities, said he knew five to ten people who were “donating their time to the community” in Upstate New York (27 September 2017). However, by and large, most members of the community, he opined, are “focusing on their own needs at this time” (Walid 27 September 2017). As he explained: “For individuals, I know many families in the community who help each other. Reading their mail, calling the doctor to schedule an appointment, we have this kind of help, supporting the community, in some way. But, in terms of taking issues to governmental or local agencies, they don’t have time or ability probably to do that because they are very busy in this life” (Walid 27 September 2017).

Nada expressed a strong desire to be active in her community; however, she said she, too, was not involved in any activities at the time of our interview because: “All of my time [is spent] in my job or studying. Yeah. I don’t have time. Especially my daughter, this year has the SAT. So, this is very important for me. I prepare everything for her to feel very comfortable, to study . . . and really on the weekend, I have one day to spend with her. . . .

Now, all my time is spent for my job and . . . studying and with my family” (1 November 2017). When I asked Nada whether she thought this busy schedule would change in the future or whether she would like it to, she said, “Yeah. Really, now I stopped everything to engage with any community because that means I need time. And, I explained to you, I don’t have time now” (1 November 2017).

Zaid said his daily life entailed “working and working.” He followed up by laughing and reiterating “and working” (Zaid 27 February 2018). “Seriously,” he continued, “this is what I’m doing. Since the day I arrived until now . . . you are struggling against all the needs and demands. I didn’t even get the time to have a life” (Zaid 27 February 2018). As he reminded me with a laugh, Zaid had come directly from work to conduct our interview. He was also caring for his parents who live with him in the Washington, DC, area. So, he said, “unfortunately I didn’t have the free time. I mean, since the day I came here until now” (Zaid 27 February 2018).

Democracy Requires (Re)Distribution of Resources

The substantive exercise of democracy requires that members of a political community have a right to public provision of the individual and collective material resources needed to live full and meaningful lives as well as opportunities to decide how those resources are produced and distributed (Pateman 2012; Wolff 2012). As several individuals such as Tariq and Mohammed pointed out, part of the reason many in the United States must work long hours that limit their opportunities for democratic participation is due to limited social-democratic programs such as universal tax-funded healthcare or postsecondary education provided to residents or citizens in the United States.

According to Tariq and Hashim, in Iraq many essential services such as healthcare and education had been free at the point of service. In the United States, however, the cost of living is high, and one cannot depend upon social supports or public provision to fulfill needs. For that reason, the compulsion to work long hours constrains possibilities for democratic participation. As Mohammed put it: “The US government, they didn’t give the American people anything for free. Nothing is free for you” (2 November 2017). Tariq addressed the trope that refugees come to the United States seeking public benefits, saying: “People think that we come for fun to the United States and to live for free” (2 November 2017). He continued: “What free life are you talking about? Healthcare, free? You got to pay for it. . . . You will struggle with a lot of things. I had it free in my third world country. It’s a developing country [and] I had my healthcare free. I got my bachelor’s degree for free. And we are a developing country. We got my health and school, free. It’s mandated by government. We have to

teach everybody, and we have to give healthcare to everybody” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Hashim, too, discussed the high cost of healthcare in the United States and the fact that many other countries, including Iraq, have public programs that provide universal healthcare as a right to their citizens:

[Healthcare] services are very expensive. It’s too much. This is one of the highest in the world, actually. So, I think we need to reconsider about finding solutions, about how we can provide better services at the same time more affordable to people. When I first came, when I was reviewing healthcare bills I was receiving, like the clinic visits like emergency visits, it’s just too much. For us in Iraq, for example, and most countries in the world, healthcare is free for people, right? So, we never thought about this to be part of our daily life, or our daily experiences. There must be a way. The government [should] be responsible for the healthcare services because this is a right. This is one of the human rights to receive the service, right? It’s not something I [should] have to worry about. . . . If, for example, I got sick, one of my family members had any kind of disease or long-term treatment I was unable to afford so, what should I do? This is not something I have to worry about, this is my right to receive healthcare from the government, just like many countries like Canada, like I think Australia also. The government is responsible for their payments for the healthcare services. It’s not something people worry about. (1 October 2017)

Moreover, substantive democracy requires that members of a political community have a say in how resources are distributed to meet needs and fulfill individual and collective aspirations. Both Wissam and Mohammed argued that a portion of the vast US military budget could be reallocated to civic projects and social-democratic programs, including healthcare and education. Wissam said of the military budget, “You spend trillions on the defense budget” (22 October 2017),⁴ to the detriment of civilian infrastructure. He pointed to the poor quality of American infrastructure (ASCE 2021), suggesting: “If you spend maybe 10 percent of that for the infrastructure of the US, bullet trains . . . or better airports, better roads or maybe to have a cleaner environment like electric cars, things like that and focusing on these kinds of things. It’s better than spending all this money on the military. Especially . . . the problem is, we are, the United States, spending trillions of dollars on our bases outside the country. So, money is coming out of our pockets to those countries” (22 October 2017).

Similarly, Mohammed said, “the government has to think about the American community. . . . Really, this is always my opinion: Why didn’t they support the American community? Why?” (2 November 2017). As evidence, Mohammed also pointed to the vast sums of public resources spent on the military. He noted the then-recent congressional votes to increase the already-large US military budget by tens of billions of dollars for fiscal year 2018 (Stolberg 2017), asking, “Why? Nobody can tell me” (Mohammed 2

November 2017). He continued: “I promise you . . . not after 1,000 years, America is America. It has such a strong military; nobody can seriously threaten it. Be comfortable. So, if you want to spend like \$55bn [roughly the proposed budget increase], you can spend it for the American people. Why are you spending it on the military? Why?” (Mohammed 2 November 2017).

Emphasizing the point, he questioned why the United States had spent billions—or trillions—of dollars fighting against Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.⁵ “Why did you spend all this money?” he asked, “This is from the American people. These people work, pay taxes, and make the government strong. . . . But, the government, they didn’t help the American people” (Mohammed 2 November 2017). He pointed to the economic hardships many Americans face, such as the high cost of healthcare, which only a few miles across the border from where he lives, Canada provides at much lower cost to all its citizens. As he remarked: “It can’t be like this way always. You spend money, spend money on war, the money will run out in the future. So, the people will be angry, and there will be trouble. So, the government should change its mind to help the people, enough war, enough weapons. If you spend these billion, billion, billion dollars for the American people, everybody will be happy, and their lives will be changed. Right?” (Mohammed 2 November 2017).⁶

Programs such as universal tax-funded and government run healthcare and tuition-free higher education are supported by majorities of the US population (Hartig 2021; Galvin 2021). However, public support has not translated into policy. The lack of meaningful mechanisms to ensure that popular social-democratic and redistributive programs can be enacted demonstrates the lack of substantively democratic institutions in the United States (Gilens and Page 2014).

Decision Making Requires Knowledge

In addition to sufficient time and resources, information is required to engage in democratic processes. Many interviewees pointed to the need to make informed decisions as well as noted that they may not have enough information or knowledge of US structures, institutions, or processes to participate productively in authoring laws, policies, or rules affecting their lives. When I asked Nora whether she thought she could discuss her views on laws in the United States, she said, “I cannot do that. Not yet. I’m not knowledgeable about everything, such as what the laws have missed . . . and I have never been in a situation to say that, honestly” (6 February 2018). However, in the future, she was confident she could. “Why not?” she said, “If I cannot change it, at least I will highlight the issues to people who can change it, the policy makers” (Nora 6 February 2018).

Nora went on to say that possibilities for her to engage in democratic decision making existed in some policy areas but not others: “It depends also on what type of law you are talking about. Like, I cannot change, as an example, immigration law. No, I’m not going to change that mostly because they have the right to protect the country” (6 February 2018). But she continued: “If there is some stuff like why are you making people’s lives more complicated and miserable, why not just try to talk about it, try to say something” (Nora 6 February 2018).

Ahmed expressed hope that he would be taken as seriously as native-born Americans when articulating his views: “I still hope so, but honestly speaking, I don’t think so” (2 October 2017). The reason, he elaborated, is that “Americans might think of me, not less, but maybe they think I’m not yet fully integrated and fully involved” (Ahmed 2 October 2017). Therefore, he said: “Maybe they will think my idea is good, from the outside, but if they want to look at it from the community long-term, because I have still yet to get my full grasp of the laws, of the system, so I might say something not relevant” (Ahmed 2 October 2017).

Moreover, he argued that this disparity was not because he was a resident and not a citizen at the time of our interview. Rather, the issue was the short time he had lived in the United States:

It’s not because I’m not American yet or they are, but it’s only how long you have been here, you know the community better, you know the country better, you know your city better. So, you know the laws better. So, for example, if I now go and protest against the [at the time of interview recently imposed] soda tax [in Chicago], okay I want to do that, but did I research the health implications on the American society and obesity? No, I did not. So, someone else might sit next to me: “How long have you been here?” And I would say: “twelve–thirteen months.” They would say: “Okay, thank you for your opinion, but I might want to consider someone who has been here for the last thirty years of their life or [who was] born and raised and suffered health issues that affect all their lives and their families as well.” (Ahmed 2 October 2017)

Sarah expressed uncertainty about her right to participate as a Green Card holder: “I don’t know, which laws . . . allow me to participate. . . . I want to learn about this subject more from people, from organizations here. . . . I think some organizations here, talk about this subject. We are actually looking for it here” (30 November 2017).⁷ She underscored this point, noting that as a resident she cannot vote. However, in the future, she said she would speak out if a candidate can “help the people, for example, to develop education, . . . health, many things. . . . We need the time to make this decision about which one we have to choose. . . . I want to learn. I want to learn first and then to, maybe, make a decision about that one (Sarah 30 November 2017).

Mohammed flatly answered “no” to the question whether it was his right to help decide what the laws are in the United States. He then elaborated:

Do you know why? Because . . . any point in the Constitution, these are the American issues. It’s difficult for me to understand the American life, and decide on any point, which is right for the American people. . . . This is the American right because you were born in America. You know what is needed in the American life. It’s difficult, I don’t have a lot of experience. If you asked me about Iraq, I will tell you: “Yes, 100 percent.” Here, it’s difficult. Just if you’re reading about the tax system in America, you have to read like 100 books to understand it. (Mohammed 2 November 2017)

By way of example, Mohammed asked me to imagine I had moved to Iraq and had a car accident. There is no automobile insurance there, he said. To resolve the situation, one must work out with the other motorist who is at fault and who will pay for repairs. Sometimes in this process, the person at fault will argue over payment and families will become involved, he said. “You don’t know about this process, right?” I said no. So, he said, this is difficult for a newcomer to understand. He also asked me to imagine I moved to Iraq, received three months of support services and, thereafter, was expected to find employment and make a new life. “It’s really difficult” (Mohammed 2 November 2017). Yet, this is the expectation for resettled refugees. Mohammed volunteers to support newly resettled refugees in Upstate New York and often encounters clients who receive letters informing them of decisions made by various agencies that they do not understand. For example, they receive notice that their public assistance has been terminated because they missed an application deadline, or their credit has been negatively affected because of a missed gas bill payment. These routine matters are unfamiliar to newcomers and can be a challenge to understand.

Omar spoke about knowledge of the “tools” of democratic processes as necessary for democratic engagement, not as a barrier, but as a characteristic of such processes: “We are new and also beginners to these things. . . . I’m trying to educate myself in these democratic things, the tools. And so, we have a lot to learn” (14 December 2017). In his volunteer work, Omar educates community members about these processes as well: “We are also teaching our communities about these tools to use them. Right now, we have had a hard time to pull out our community to vote” (14 December 2017). For himself, Omar said: “Being able to also change the rules, I wish to. And I don’t think there is an obstacle for that as far as I work for it and find the opportunities, I think, I will be able to do so” (14 December 2017).

Wissam offered that there ought to be more programs, available sooner, to educate refugees about the structures in American society, such as the purpose and uses of tax revenues:

For refugees, I think there should be more programs to teach them about these kinds of things that you guys know about: renting vs. buying, how to [file your] taxes, what do taxes mean, why do you pay them. Because most of these countries they come from they don't have any taxes. So, they don't know why. I mean, we do have some programs here, brief ones, about bank accounts, taxes, basically knowing your rights, what you can do, what you can say, . . . when you have the right to stay silent, things like that. (22 October 2017)

The wide array of programming Wissam described may or may not be available through nonprofit or resettlement agencies to those who have resettled, depending on several factors including the local resettlement context, whether one has legal status as a refugee, funding availability, and language learning and education support. Wissam argued: "It shouldn't be after getting citizenship [that one can] learn about all these things. It should be when you first come here. You learn about like: This is the Bill of Rights, these are twenty-seven amendments that we have, this is what people are discussing, these kinds of things. It should be available before they come, even before they come, yeah. Just to let them have an idea. And explain to them these kinds of things" (22 October 2017). Wissam was studying for his citizenship exam at the time of our interview, and I asked him whether he was learning about these issues now as he prepared. He said: "A lot of it, yeah. A lot of things I didn't know" (Wissam 22 October 2017).

For Hashim, specific subject area knowledge facilitated participation. At the time of our interview, he was completing a master's degree at a university in Chicago focused on healthcare management: "I'm studying policies and regulations, managing health institutions. This is something I'm going to be specialized in. It is something I can give an opinion about, you know?" (Hashim 1 October 2017). In his graduate work, he and his classmates spent significant time in seminars discussing the ethics and policy questions related to healthcare. As he put it: "This is something I can maybe give my opinion about. I can go into debates [on this topic] but not something related to different fields. So, yeah. I think I can participate in debates related to what I know about. What I'm doing" (Hashim 1 October 2017).

Marwa did not see an equal right to participate because "maybe Americans know more than me. I am still every day learning something" (25 November 2017). As she continued: "My kids now they are different. They know more than me. . . . I came already here, I'm an adult. I grew up there. I grew up in a different culture. I try my best to know. I try now. I try my best to know more. More, more, more. But I miss a lot" (Marwa 25 November 2017).

We returned to this subject later in our interview, and Marwa sketched her understanding of what it requires to make change in society: "It takes time," she said, "if I want to change something, I'm not going to give my opinion. . . . No, it needs research, it needs people who understand maybe . . .

more than me” (25 November 2017). Marwa’s insights point toward the connection between time and knowledge. Sufficient time is required to learn about issues and to engage in democratic processes.

Finally, it is important to note there was a tension in the perception that many individuals lack time and/or knowledge for engagement in their communities and their activities. Individuals, including Mohammed, Marwa, and Ali, explained that they were very busy, which limited their time to engage. Nonetheless, each was involved in various forms of volunteering in addition to their paid jobs, as explored in the following chapter.

Engagement Requires undoing Authoritarian Acculturation

Marwa, Walid, Zaid, Omar, and Tariq suggested that living much of their lives under an authoritarian government had left them without experience to engage in democratic processes, and/or uninterested or afraid to do so. Marwa, for example, discussed how there was no freedom of speech in Iraq. She was highly critical of Saddam Hussein she said, but: “Even inside my home, I can’t [criticize him]. Because my daughter . . . when she goes to school maybe . . . she will say: ‘My mom and my dad they are talking about Saddam Hussein!’ Believe me, the second day, we are going to be killed. That’s how bad Saddam Hussein was” (Marwa 25 November 2017).

Conversely, Marwa said, “I like the freedom here. I like the free speech here” (25 November 2017). As a result, even though Marwa expressed several times in our interview that she did not want to participate in politics or political activities in the United States, she was clear that she does not remain silent if she has an opinion to share.

Although very active in his community, Walid still feared the repressive government in Iraq, which allowed no freedom to criticize it. “There is still fear,” he said, “We came from a security government in Iraq if you say something about the government. . . . I lost my father, because my father, back in Iraq, he used to say things about the Ba’ath Party and they took him, they killed him, they took our home, confiscated it because of that” (Walid 27 September 2017).

In his view, such experiences meant “many Iraqis, they have this kind of fear. Don’t talk about the government. So, don’t talk about these things” (Walid 27 September 2017). Despite this fear, Walid engaged in activities such as protesting policies he did not support. He also invited many people he knows to attend marches organized against the 2017 travel ban, discussed in more detail in the following chapter. However, in his view, many were afraid to engage in such activities because: “They have trauma from police. Police there . . . are not supporting citizens. It’s criminal, like they are criminals. They came to kill people . . . as part of the agenda of the government there. So, they have this kind of PTSD for now. I mean, many families if

they see a police car, they freeze. So . . . they want to live peacefully without touching these things” (Walid 27 September 2017).

Zaid expressed the fear Walid identified in very similar terms. He explained that, in the Washington, DC, area where he now lives:

Whenever I see a police car, I get this feeling that . . . they are going to arrest me. They are going to stop me, and they are going to find something wrong with my ID, with my car, with anything . . . because I came from this background when we really get scared when we see police anywhere. In Iraq, they just tend to harass people and try to get them into trouble and get as much as they can, like money or whatever. . . . So, it’s completely on the contrary. People here feel safe when they see a police car. I get this kind of feeling. . . . By the way, I’ve never been stopped by a police car before. You know? But still. (Zaid 27 February 2018)

Considering this perception, Zaid described his views on participating in American democratic processes:

I know it’s not fair, it’s actually selfish to say that [I am unable to participate in democratic processes] because I am gaining from this democracy . . . but on the other hand, I cannot participate in it. Maybe it’s not just because I cannot, maybe I don’t want to because . . . of my background, we came from this politically corrupt system. So, we have a very, very bad experience with being part of the system. I believe not just me, any people who came from that country, I believe that we would just rather stay away as much as possible from any kind of political system. We just want to live our life as far away as possible from any political things. (27 February 2018)

I asked Zaid if this included opting out of voting as well, and he said, “No, voting, I’m 100 percent with voting. . . . Voting is kind of practicing your democracy but, I don’t think I can do anything other than that” (27 February 2018).

Omar, too, explained that even though he and other members of the Iraqi community had a right to engage in politics, he might hesitate: “Not because I’m scared of something,” he said, “not because we still have the fear of expressing political views. It’s related to back home. Even the community I’d say. Even it’s our right. But sometimes we hesitated to express our perspective towards any case” (14 December 2017). He continued, “but we can do that in our community [of fellow Iraqis]. But with others, it is very hard because still, we have this influence from back home. . . . Because we don’t know, what are the limits of our freedom” (Omar 14 December 2017).

When I asked Tariq whether he believed he was able to express his views and opinions about actions taken by the US government, he responded: “This is the part that I love. Because over there, you can [express views on the government]. But easily you can disappear, too. Here, you can do that;

you can express your views” (2 November 2017). Tariq was clear throughout our conversation that he opposed President Donald Trump’s policies; however, he continued: “At least when I talk to people that support Trump, they’re not going to kill me. At least they will listen and hear and then . . . it’s up to you to decide if it’s wrong or right” (2 November 2017).

Tariq juxtaposed this possibility with his life in Iraq. “Let me tell you something,” he said, “I lived in Iraq twenty-seven years. I witnessed my whole life the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. And we weren’t allowed to talk. You were not allowed to express your opinions about government. So, it’s very difficult for me to express my opinion now” (2 November 2017). Echoing Marwa, he said, “You can’t even whisper because somebody will hear you, and then you’re gone. Even with police. You can easily be taken by police over there. The police arrest you easily without any warrant, without anything. They just take you. Beat you up and leave you, that’s easy” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

As a result of these experiences, Tariq was left with a lingering fear of government authorities and preferred not to interact with them or with the American legal system. As he explained: “I know . . . you have freedom of speech in the US. . . . You can express your feelings. But, it’s still hard for me to say out loud because I still have fear that somebody will knock on the door, or probably break it down and take me out. It’s difficult. It’s not easy. That’s why you guys, you Americans are lucky you didn’t live through this situation” (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Taking a different angle on this same background of insecurity in Iraq, Wissam asserted that his experience under an authoritarian government gave him a special status to observe and comment on current events happening in American society. When I asked him if he believed it was his right to help decide what the laws are in the United States, he replied: “I believe so, yes, because to some extent, people live here in a bubble. This is unfortunate. But, for me, I got to live in a different society, different regime. . . . I had to go through all the processes. So, I know . . . how it starts because maybe I have a background about that. I know how it’s going to go down the road because I’ve lived that, I can tell people what they can expect” (Wissam 22 October 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored ways in which interviewees understood democratic membership in the United States as well as barriers many saw to exercising that status in substantive ways. Individuals’ experiences point toward several important insights about how to bring democratic practices and processes closer to the ideal articulated at the opening of this chapter.

Indeed, these insights are not exclusive to resettled refugees, but likely apply to all members of American society. The need for time to put democratic membership to use and the need for information to engage productively in democratic processes are essential points.

Residents and citizens need sufficient time to engage in activities such as researching issues, voting, joining activist or advocacy organizations, or attending union meetings. A robust democratic society in the United States requires, as Mohammed suggested, an environment in which one need not choose between engaging in political activities and losing wages. Leaving aside whether it is an intentional government strategy, as Mohammed argued, citizens cannot engage in democratic practices if they must spend all their time working. This conundrum points to the realization that strong redistributive social and economic support mechanisms and structures are crucial to ensure that members of American society, resettled Iraqis, and others possess sufficient material security to engage in politics.

Moreover, as Wissam suggested, civil society organizations, political parties, and/or government agencies should prioritize and make educational programming as widely available as possible for residents and citizens to make clear how democratic processes and institutions that govern them function and to encourage widespread participation. Such processes and institutions are only democratic if individuals have meaningful influence within them, and wide and deep knowledge is necessary to exert such control effectively.

Beyond the institutional realm, for activists and those involved with social movements seeking to build a more democratic society, these insights speak to the importance of developing strategies and tactics that engage in the intertwined work of political education, fighting for reallocating resources away from war and toward public provision and social-democratic supports, and directly providing essential programs and services such as food and medical care when government does not.⁸

Finally, the lingering fear and unease individuals described about their experiences in Iraq under Saddam Hussein point to the need for government, media, and civil society to ensure that residents and citizens not only feel safe and protected by the law, but also are actually so treated in practice. It is not only a matter of attenuating the lingering effects of living under an authoritarian regime, but also about ensuring that those who live in the United States are guaranteed protection of their rights and safety. Democratic governance can only be approached in the United States if all residents have an equal right and substantive ability to participate and are guaranteed equitable treatment by governance institutions. This means ensuring that public agencies do not arbitrarily exercise their power against refugees, Muslims, and other groups and ensuring that members of those groups are confident that such will be the case. To realize this aim, it is

essential to end the profiling, surveillance, and discriminatory policies that continue to target Arabs, Muslims, and refugees.

Critically as well, these experiences evince the need to listen to warnings such as Tariq's that actions by US government officials and agencies share qualities with the authoritarianism under which he lived in Iraq. As his interpretations shared in this and the previous chapter have highlighted, it is always possible for governments, local, state, and federal, to undermine the rights of particular groups. The Trump administration not only undercut and/or eliminated legal protections for immigrants and refugees, but also sought to strip protections from others, such as transgender Americans (Alonso-Zaldivar 2019). And, crucially, threats to legal protections are neither unique nor confined to the previous administration.

Consistent with Tariq's fears of expanding, arbitrary government power, while Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, had a comparatively more progressive record on some issues, his administration nevertheless operated and vastly expanded a massive, clandestine domestic surveillance apparatus that aimed to collect all digital communications in the United States (Bamford 2016) and killed American citizens abroad without trial or conviction (Scahill 2015). Further, Obama's attorney general, Eric Holder, asserted in official communication with US Senator Rand Paul (Republican, Kentucky) that the United States military hypothetically had the right to kill American citizens within US borders (Holder 2013). Even though the latter thankfully did not happen, Holder's assertion sets a potential precedent for future administrations.

This is to say that threats to democratic culture do not come exclusively, or even primarily, from "outsiders,"⁹ nor from only one side of the mainstream American political spectrum. Nor, for that matter, is there significant reason to assume that native-born citizens possess or strive to embrace and express a democratic ethos (Carens 2013). There is always potential for the degradation of a democratic ethos and practices among those who have been born and raised in a particular society. Given the critiques of existing institutions of American representative democracy, there is clearly a need to democratize democracy in the United States. Returning to Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan, although there can be barriers to democratic participation, "The immigrant experience can thus create obstacles to political and civic incorporation, but it can also rejuvenate or transform norms and practices in host societies" (2008, 5). Creating and maintaining a substantively democratic society is a perpetually unfinished process. It requires continual work on the part of members to inculcate, defend, and expand norms and institutions that foster participation. Many of the individuals with whom I spoke sought to take part in such processes, and their experiences provide insights into barriers to such engagements.

Chapter 4 builds upon these findings, examining the activities that interviewees have engaged in, such as discussion and debate with coworkers,

friends, and fellow community members, and volunteering with civil society organizations. I also analyze my interviewees' activism, both their own and how native-born Americans' advocacy efforts affected them. As I explore, support, welcoming, and commitment to advocating publicly for the rights of vulnerable groups, including refugees, by native-born Americans are important to pushing government and the population at large to uphold its commitments to creating and perpetuating an open, tolerant, and multicultural society.

Notes

1. A series of US Supreme Court decisions beginning with the 1976 *Buckley v. Valeo* case and culminating in *Citizens United v. FEC* in 2010 have equated "political spending with political speech" (Levinson 2013, 885), upholding limits on direct contributions to politicians while allowing unlimited total expenditures in support of particular candidates or parties. This arrangement has created a system in which "people have as much speech . . . as they can buy" (Levinson 2013, 901). Legalized unlimited political spending has allowed those with money to "buy special access to politicians and [given them] an outsized voice in the political debate" (Levinson 2013, 901–2).
2. Although he did not explicitly name it, Tariq was likely referring to the system of household and internal migration registration called *hukou*, which provides disparate public benefits to Chinese citizens depending upon registration type and location and, as some have argued, has created a type of second-class citizenship within China (Tyner and Ren 2016).
3. Ali expressed a similar view that government, in this case the Iraqi rather than American, keeps individuals focused on daily concerns. He suggested that this was a tactic to prevent organizing against government policy and power: "They [the government] are making people run and care about electricity, care about their life, care about how they are going to feed their children because they don't want them to get involved with politics. They don't want them to get involved to do some kind of revolution against the government right now" (Ali 14 January 2018).
4. US military spending far exceeds that of any other country. According to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)* military expenditure database (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>), the United States spent \$778 billion in 2020. This figure is approximately the same amount spent by the next twelve countries combined including China, India, Russia, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Germany, France, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Australia, and Canada.
5. A 2018 report by the Costs of War project at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs estimated that the so-called War on Terror cost \$5.9 trillion between fiscal year 2001 and fiscal year 2019 (Crawford 2018b).

6. Mohammed's interpretation of a fundamental tension between the US government maintaining a vastly more expensive and powerful military than any other country in the world and its ability to provide basic services to its population echoes former US president Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous 1953 speech, "The Chance for Peace." In this speech, Eisenhower argued that a superpower arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States would most likely end in nuclear war or, failing that catastrophic outcome, would nonetheless result in perpetual fear, tension, and wasting of strength and wealth in both societies. As Eisenhower (2019) famously remarked: "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Eisenhower called for "solemn agreements" between nations to limit the size of militaries around the world and the resources devoted to such purposes. Given the United States's continued imperial pursuit of global military, economic, and cultural hegemony, pushing the American government to adhere to such commitments and limits, as Mohammed has suggested, is as relevant today as it was in 1953.
7. Later in our conversation, Sarah and I discussed the high barriers to home ownership in New York City. I asked her whether this topic, which she cared a great deal about, is something she would consider discussing with a local government representative. She said: "Actually, it's no problem for me. It's no problem because everyone can talk about this subject" (Sarah 30 November 2017). She then asked me: "For the new people here, it's no problem if we wanted to talk with them about that?" I said yes, it is legal, and she has the right to do so, to which she said: "Because we don't want to have a problem, especially me and my sister. We don't want to make a problem [by] talking with someone about subjects that are no good" (Sarah 30 November 2017).
8. The Black Panther Party, founded in 1966, provides a useful example of an organization that combined Black power, anti-imperialist and antiwar activism, political education, and social programs in its work. The Black Panthers ran community breakfast programs that at one time fed as many as ten thousand children every day in cities across the country (Bloom and Martin Jr. 2013). Programs like those the Black Panthers operated not only addressed a need, but also demonstrated that existing government programs were inadequate.
9. Consider, for example, a 2017 Pew Research Center poll that found that while large majorities of Americans surveyed believed that representative (86 percent) or direct democracy (67 percent) was somewhat or very good, a significant number believed that rule by experts (40 percent), a "strong leader" (22 percent), or the military (17 percent) was a good way to govern the country (Gramlich 2017). Certainly, rule by experts, a strong leader, or the military would not qualify as democratic.