

Still Leaving Citizens Behind: Reconceiving the Civic Empowerment Gap as a Democratic Capability Gap

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Introduction

In this essay, I aim to expand the scope of extant theorizing about democratic education beyond formal schooling. To do so, I argue that the effective opportunities children will have as adults to participate influentially in democratic life within their communities are not just matters of political equality, nor are they matters that fall just within the domain of social or political theorizing. Instead, these opportunities must be recognized as part of our understanding of equality in democratic education (broadly conceived) and, therefore, as part of the domain of educational theorizing. I suggest Amartya Sen's capability approach¹ can form the theoretical basis for thinking about equal opportunity for democratic education in this way, and I attempt to demonstrate its value by offering it as a supplement (and, at times, corrective) to the theoretical work in Meira Levinson's² *No Citizen Left Behind* and Amy Gutmann's³ *Democratic Education*.

I begin with an exploration of Levinson's *No Citizen Left Behind*, with particular attention to her argument that a revitalized approach to formal civic education—namely, one guided by an “action civics” model—is essential to efforts to close the “civic empowerment gap” and, thereby, to promote political equality. While I find much value in Levinson's thinking about civic education, I argue that it focuses too intently on formal schooling and gives insufficient attention to the *education*-related importance of non-school institutions. In an effort to correct this shortcoming in Levinson's thinking, I first consider Amy Gutmann's theory of democratic education, noting her clear recognition of the role for non-school institutions as part of nonformal democratic education. However, to my mind, Gutmann ultimately understands the educational role of such institutions too narrowly, as simply helping citizens to cultivate further the democratic knowledge, skills, and values that enable their participation in democratic processes.

I turn, therefore, to Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) in an attempt to theorize more sufficiently and explicitly nonformal

democratic education in relation to formal democratic education. I argue that the CA helps—indeed, forces—us to recognize, first, that to fulfill their educational role non-school institutions must provide citizens with effective opportunities to participate influentially in democratic life and, second—and here is the explicitly education-related point—that such opportunities for participation are also opportunities for citizens to *continue their democratic learning*. In developing these arguments, I author and advance the concept I call “democratic capability” and illustrate the role democratic education—broadly conceived—must play in promoting this capability and, relatedly, in reducing “democratic capability gaps.”

The Civic Empowerment Gap and Nonformal Democratic Education

In her recent and influential book *No Citizen Left Behind*, Meira Levinson calls our attention to “a profound civic empowerment gap” that exists in the United States “between ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens, on the other.”⁴ Because of this gap—that is, because of disparities in the achievement of ostensibly empowering civic knowledge, skills and attitudes—the former groups are less able and less likely than the latter to participate in and “influence civic and political deliberation or decision making,”⁵ to develop and express “democratic values,”⁶ and generally to be “participatory citizens.”⁷

Thus, insofar as the U.S. is committed to robust and equal political participation as central to the vitality and effectiveness of its democracy, there is good reason, Levinson argues, to be concerned with finding ways to close the civic empowerment gap—and to do so with the same urgency and resourcefulness with which the U.S. has sought to address its more familiar *academic achievement* gap.⁸ And given the long history of schools as important locations of civic education, there is also good reason to consider formal education as one important means to doing so. In particular, Levinson argues, schools must help students to develop “knowledge, skills, pro-civic attitudes, and habits of civic participation for the future.”⁹ The possession of such knowledge, skills, and attitudes is significantly correlated, Levinson shows, with the degree to which children become “active participants in American civic and political life” as adults and, therefore, with the degree to which they come to “influence civic political deliberation [and] decision making.”¹⁰

Importantly, however, Levinson recognizes that to empower children civically and politically requires more than simply equipping them with certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Children must also have opportunities for civic participation in and through their formal schooling. For this reason, she advocates an “action civics” approach—one that not only emphasizes the development of students’ “*capabilities* for

civic empowerment”¹¹ but that also provides and facilitates *opportunities* through which students actually can engage in various forms of civic action, for example by “serving on a mock trial jury, engaging in community organizing, participating in Model United Nations, or interning with a non-profit organization.”¹² These kinds of participatory opportunities are essential to children’s developing sense of civic empowerment. Indeed, they serve two related purposes in Levinson’s overall scheme of formal civic education. First, opportunities for guided civic action enable children to put their civic knowledge and skills to use and to demonstrate their civic attitudes (and to recognize the value in doing so). And second, students’ actualization of these opportunities for civic action promotes further civic learning outcomes, particularly those that “can be difficult for teachers and schools to help students achieve in any other way.”¹³ In other words, the opportunities for civic engagement schools provide and facilitate serve *both* to enable children to begin “acting upon” the civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes they are developing *and* to promote children’s achievement of additional civic learning outcomes.¹⁴

The point is that Levinson recognizes formal civic education must cultivate children’s civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes and, relatedly, it must provide and facilitate the kinds of opportunities through which children actually can begin *being* active citizens and generally *doing* what citizenship requires. She recognizes, in other words, that the ultimate goal of formal civic education is for children to achieve what we might call—drawing on the language of Sen’s CA—civic or democratic *functioning*.¹⁵ To function, according to Sen, is to achieve a state of “being” and “doing,” for instance, riding a bicycle, living as a well-nourished person, or participating in civic action.¹⁶ And the two components of Levinson’s approach to civic education—the knowledge, skills, and values component and the opportunities component—would seem to go a long way in helping students to achieve civic or democratic functioning. Indeed, it is through this action civics approach, Levinson argues, that students can begin to “*do civics and behave as citizens.*”¹⁷

This is all to Levinson’s credit. Both her diagnosis of a civic empowerment gap and her plan for reducing this gap through a revitalized approach to civic education in public schools—one that facilitates students’ achievement of civic or democratic functioning—are valuable contributions to our efforts to remediate inequalities in political participation and influence through formal civic education. But as Levinson herself recognizes, schools—no matter how they conduct civic education—cannot “overcome the civic empowerment gap entirely on their own.”¹⁸ She reminds us there are “powerful institutional, political and other factors” beyond schooling that create “multiple barriers to equal civic empowerment.”¹⁹ In light of these acknowledgements, she

also points to the importance of closing “civic opportunity gaps,” that is, disparities in the opportunities citizens have for meaningful civic participation.²⁰ There are two such gaps that are important relative to the broader civic empowerment gap. The first—what Levinson calls, more specifically, a “civic learning opportunity gap”—I discussed previously: this opportunity gap is the one children face in schools and that Levinson’s approach to formal civic education aims to address by providing and facilitating opportunities for students to engage in civic action in and through formal schooling. The second opportunity gap is the one that those who have typically been civically *disempowered* face “in their neighborhoods” and broader communities.²¹ These opportunity gaps, she argues, are not necessarily eliminated by the work public schools do. Rather, she notes, their elimination seems to demand “numerous changes...across multiple sectors of society.”²² Surely this is correct. Eliminating gaps in the opportunities citizens have for civic and political participation in their communities is a broad social, economic, and political endeavor that would necessarily include, as Levinson notes, an expansive list of social, political, and economic reforms.²³

But this does not mean that this wider gap in opportunities for civic or political participation—the one that exists in neighborhoods and communities—is beyond or separable from the domain of education or educational theorizing. The argument here is that these, too, are civic *learning* opportunity gaps. Indeed, we need only to recall Levinson’s own important recognition—as seen in her discussion of civic education in schools—that civic action is itself educative, and, in fact, that it leads to civic learning outcomes that are hard to achieve in other ways. Unfortunately, Levinson does not extend this point explicitly to the opportunities for civic or political participation that children—as adult citizens—will have (or lack) beyond their formal schooling. She does not seem to recognize that *civic* opportunity gaps in our wider communities—the communities in which children will attempt to exert political influence as adult citizens—are also gaps in *educational* or *learning* opportunities. She does not recognize, in other words, that inequalities in opportunities for civic *participation* are also inequalities in opportunities for (further, non-formal) civic *education*.

Instead, Levinson focuses primarily on civic education in schools and only briefly points to—but does not address sufficiently or in any depth—the role of non-school institutions (and of social, political, and economic reform more broadly) in expanding people’s effective opportunities for democratic participation in their wider communities. I want to expand and try to fill out Levinson’s project by arguing that a theory of civic or democratic education that concerns itself with

educational and political equality and with the relationship between them, as Levinson's surely does, must address more than just *schooling*. It is not enough, in other words, to propose a program of formal schooling that includes and facilitates children's opportunities to engage in guided civic action (or, in Senian language, children's achievement of civic or democratic functioning). Beyond this, our educational theorizing must also address those social, political, economic, and other conditions that effectively restrict people's opportunities to function as democratic citizens beyond the context of their formal schooling and that, as a result, restrict their opportunities to continue their democratic learning. After all, such democratic learning happens not just when opportunities for civic or democratic participation are provided and facilitated through one's formal schooling (as in "guided experiential civic education"), but also when they are provided by non-school institutions, as part of what Sen calls one's "wider political education."²⁴ Engaging in democratic practice, Sen reminds us, is an important means through which people learn "to organize, to question established patterns of authority, to demand their rights, to resist corruption, and so on."²⁵ In other words, people—both children and adults—continually learn democracy, in part, by exercising their effective opportunities to engage in the practice of democracy within their communities.

And so if we are concerned with equality of civic or democratic education—inclusive not just of schooling, but also of this democratic learning-through-practice—our theorizing must address inequalities in the effective opportunities that citizens have to practice democracy beyond the context of their formal schooling and, thereby, to continue their democratic learning. And this means addressing the social, economic, and political conditions that enable or restrict such opportunities and, related, it means addressing the failures of *non-school institutions* to provide effective participatory opportunities to all citizens.

Yet too often—and I think this is the case with Levinson—such broad inequalities are recognized, but their education-related importance is overlooked or given insufficient attention in educational theorizing. As a result, potential theories of democratic *education* are reduced to theories of democratic *schooling*. The latter bracket or ignore questions about the importance of non-school institutions—and of external social, economic, and political conditions more generally—to equality in civic or democratic education. They focus too narrowly on whether or not schools are successful in equipping children with empowering knowledge, skills, and attitudes and ignore the external conditions that restrict adults' democratic participation and, therefore, limit their opportunities not only for political influence, but also for democratic learning beyond schooling. Thus, until we recognize that the external

(i.e., the social, political, and economic) conditions that restrict some citizens' effective participation in democratic life are necessarily part of our educational theorizing, we will continue to leave citizens behind. We will continue, in other words, to equip children with empowering knowledge, skills, and values only to watch many of them emerge from their formal schooling into communities that effectively restrict—or otherwise fail to provide—opportunities for them to participate influentially in democratic life and, thereby, to continue their democratic learning.

Democratic Education as the Promotion of Democratic Capability

Of course, some theorists of democratic education have been more explicitly and thoroughly attentive to the educational role for non-school institutions. Amy Gutmann, for instance, emphasizes citizens' access to culture, since this, too, has educational value insofar as adults “learn from books, plays, concerts, museums, newspapers, radio, and even television.”²⁶ Furthermore, she argues for increased opportunities for citizens to “exercise discretion in their daily work and to participate in democratic politics”;²⁷ she also suggests less “authoritarian” family structures can contribute to schools' achievement of their “democratic potential”;²⁸ finally, she recognizes the problematic effects that “economic...deprivations” have on citizens' effective participation in democratic processes.²⁹ Thus, for Gutmann, successful democratic education in the broad sense depends on the nature and workings of the “cultural, economic, and political institutions” that compose society. Like the institution of schooling, these non-school institutions serve an important educational purpose; they, too, contribute to the democratic education of citizens. And, therefore, they, too, deserve attention in our educational—and not just social or political—theorizing.

But in stating explicitly the precise nature of education-related contributions of non-school institutions, Gutmann (over)emphasizes their role in helping adult citizens to acquire knowledge, skills, and values. Indeed, she tells us, ultimately, that “the primary [educational] purpose of the mass media, industry, and government, like that of schools, is to *cultivate the knowledge, skills and virtues necessary for democratic deliberation among citizens.*”³⁰ In other words, for Gutmann, these and other “cultural, economic, and political institutions” have an educational purpose that is identical to that of schools, namely, to equip (or further to equip) citizens with a sufficient store of democratic knowledge, skills, and values that, according to Gutmann, will enable their participation in democratic processes.

Now, I have argued that the goal of *formal* democratic schooling is better understood as the facilitation of children's achievement of

democratic functioning—a process inclusive of *both* their development of the political knowledge, skills, and values their communities agree are important for effective participation *and* their realization of opportunities to begin to function as democratic persons in and through their formal schooling. By this way of thinking, non-school institutions—if they are to meet their democratic educational purpose—would need to be understood as supporting and extending processes through which citizens can function democratically. The educational role of these institutions, in other words, should not be understood as simply equipping citizens with additional democratic knowledge, skills, and values. Rather, they must be designed—and actually operate—in such a way as to provide all citizens with effective opportunities to continue to exercise or utilize such knowledge, skills, and values in ways that enable them actually to influence democratic life. The question, then, is not whether or how non-school institutions can be designed and controlled so as further to “*cultivate the knowledge, skills and virtues necessary for democratic deliberation among citizens.*” It is, rather, whether and to what degree such institutions ensure all adults have effective opportunities to continue to function as democratic persons—and, therefore, continue to have opportunities to learn democracy—beyond and outside the context of their formal schooling.

So, I think Gutmann is right to address the important education-related role of non-school institutions in a democracy. But she limits the force of her theorizing of non-formal democratic education by arguing that these institutions fulfill their educational role simply by promoting further citizens’ acquisition of democratic knowledge, skills, and values. According to a more thoroughly Senian way of thinking about democratic education, the relationship between schools and non-school institutions would have to be understood as one through which children achieve *democratic functioning* and, as adults, are provided with *effective opportunities* to continue to function as such in their communities (if they so choose) and, thereby, to continue their democratic learning. This is precisely what it means to enjoy what I term *democratic capability*. To have this capability is to have *both* the developed ability or capacities to function as a democratic person (however these are defined) *and* the effective opportunities to continue to function as such in one’s wider (non-school) communities. Our educational theorizing—and our educational and other reform efforts—should aim to address both of these aspects of one’s democratic education. And addressing the latter aspect means identifying clearly and working to address—and not simply bracketing off—the social, political, and economic conditions that restrict one’s effective opportunities for democratic participation.

Consider an example that helps to make clearer this way of conceiving the relationship between formal schooling (aimed at

children's achievement of democratic functioning) and the educational role of non-school institutions (aimed at providing adult citizens with effective opportunities to continue to function democratically). In *Women and Human Development*, Martha Nussbaum tells of an Indian woman who has earned a nursing diploma by taking advantage of "affirmative action programs in education aimed at the lowest castes."³¹ Thanks in part to the affirmative-action program, this woman has been provided with the opportunity to be educated as a nurse. We can presume, furthermore, that she has also received the proper kind and amount of resources and assistance needed to enable her to exercise this opportunity and, we might say, to begin functioning as a nurse within the context of (and with the guidance provided by) her formal education. As a result, she has earned a diploma. This may initially sound like a success story of an educational program meant to improve gender equity in education. But, as it turns out, this woman cannot use her diploma in a meaningful way because "corruption in the hospital system means that she would have to pay Rs. 2,500 upfront money to have a chance at a nursing job." Because the woman cannot afford the payoff, she "sits at home all day doing housework; she keeps the nursing diploma in a box, and shows it sadly to visitors."³²

This woman's example illustrates clearly that, despite her opportunity to be educated as a nurse and her apparent achievement of the functioning—the "beings and doings"—related to nursing, her effective opportunities to function as a nurse beyond the context of her formal schooling are restricted by external factors beyond her control, namely, corruption in the hospital system and the requirement of a payoff she cannot afford. Now, imagine a second woman who similarly earns her nursing diploma but is not forced to make any kind of payoff in order to obtain a job as a nurse in the hospital system. In such a situation both women have, in and through their formal schooling, achieved an adequate level of the functionings relevant to nursing—they have begun, as Levinson might put it, to *do* nursing and *behave* as nurses—and so they have earned nursing diplomas. In this sense, equality has been achieved in their formal nursing education.

But non-school institutions are failing to provide both women with equally effective opportunities to continue to function as nurses beyond their schooling, that is, in their communities. And, importantly, the inequity in these women's opportunities to function as nurses beyond their formal schooling also means one has the chance to further her education as a nurse in ways the other does not. After all, the woman who goes on actually to work as a nurse—that is, the woman who enjoys and exercises the opportunity to continue to function as a nurse beyond

her formal schooling—is likely, as a result, to learn more about her profession and to improve her practice. This is simply to say that actually to function as a nurse is likely to provide her with additional opportunities to learn and improve her practice. We have already, with Levinson’s help, made a similar point about civic or democratic functioning, namely, that to function as a democratic citizen *is itself educative*. It is an important—possibly the most important—means through which a person learns to function more effectively as a democratic citizen. Thus, the *effective opportunities* people have to continue to function in the ways their schooling enables them to function—whether as citizens or as nurses—are important to our thinking about *educational* equality.

Returning to the specific context of democratic education, what this example helps us to recognize is that even when various individuals and groups develop equal (or adequate) *abilities* to function as democratic persons and even when they actually achieve democratic functioning in and through their formal schooling, they may not enjoy equal—or equally effective—*opportunities* to function democratically beyond formal schooling. And, therefore, they would still lack *democratic capability*, which is, as I have illustrated, inclusive of *both* the knowledge and skills required to do or be something *and* the effective opportunities actually to be and do those things. In other words, it depends inescapably *both* on people’s developed abilities (i.e., capacities and skills) *and* on the social, cultural, and other conditions that characterize their various communities. Furthermore—and this conclusion is the explicitly education-related point—the individuals or groups who lack the opportunities to function as democratic citizens also lack additional opportunities to continue learning democracy, since democratic functioning is itself educative. Thus, we have good reason for thinking more carefully about inequality in adult citizens’ effective opportunities to participate in democracy—and about the conditions that cause such inequality—as part of our thinking about *educational* (and not just *political*) equality. In other words, our thinking about democratic education needs to address children’s internal development of empowering democratic knowledge, skills, and values *together with*—not *separately from*—the external conditions that characterize the communities in which they will attempt to (continue to) function democratically as adult citizens and, thereby, to continue their democratic learning.

The current debate over voter identification laws in several U.S. states helps to illustrate further the point about the importance—as a matter of both political and educational equality—of adults’ opportunities and freedoms to participate in democracy (to function as

democratic citizens). As part of its “Democracy Program,” The Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law published a report in 2012 that focused on the enactment of these laws in ten states, including Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin, all of which now require voters to show an approved photo identification.³³ Importantly, the states are legally required to provide free photo identification to all eligible voters who do not have one. But the problem is that some citizens face significant difficulties in obtaining such identification. For instance, the report shows that among eligible voters lacking the proper identification, nearly 500,000 of them “do not have access to a vehicle and live more than 10 miles from the nearest state ID-issuing office open more than two days a week. Many of them live in rural areas with dwindling public transportation options.”³⁴ Furthermore, even though the approved identification itself is free, actually to obtain one requires certain documentation, for instance a birth certificate, obtaining a copy of which can cost upwards of twenty-five dollars.³⁵ Thus, these laws effectively exclude certain individuals or groups—typically ethnoracial minorities, women, and lower-income earners—from voting.

To be sure, the citizens directly affected by such laws likely possess the skills, knowledge, and values that would enable them to vote and to be participatory citizens and, in general, to function as democratic persons. For instance, we can presume that they possess—and perhaps have even developed through their formal education—the ability to read and understand the ballot and the process of voting itself and that they can do what is necessary to cast an informed vote, and so on. Furthermore, they still possess the formal opportunity to vote and the legal freedom to do so. But because of the restrictive nature of such laws—particularly in combination with other problematic social arrangements and economic conditions—these citizens’ effective opportunities to vote have been significantly limited. Thus, despite whatever formal education they received and however much it prepared them to function as democratic citizens—even in this most basic way (i.e., by voting)—their capability to function as democratic citizens is not equal to the capability enjoyed by those citizens who are not effectively excluded by these laws. Two consequences follow: First, a democratic capability gap remains between these citizens and those not directly affected by the laws; second, the affected citizens have less chance to engage in whatever learning might take place through the act of voting, and, therefore, they are denied further democratic education. These are, therefore, not just political inequalities but also—and importantly—inequalities in (democratic) educational opportunities.

A *capability*-based approach to democratic education enables—indeed, requires—us to theorize democratic education in a way that accounts more thoroughly for such inequalities. Sen’s CA recognizes that individuals’ knowledge, skills, attitudes, capacities, and other “*internal factors*” or “*personal traits*” tell only half the story about their attainment of capabilities. Beyond this, we must also be attentive to the “*external factors*”—social, economic, political, and even environmental conditions—that enable or prevent one’s attainment of a capability.³⁶ Thus, having a capability—including democratic capability—is a *social* achievement, not strictly an *individual* one. One cannot, therefore, focus attention on internal factors—schooling individuals in certain ways in order to develop an individual’s civic capacities and help him or her achieve democratic functioning—and simply leave the external factors to one side. One’s enjoyment of democratic capability—or any capability—is just as much a matter of the external conditions in one’s communities (and in society more broadly) as it is of one’s internal capacities. Thus, conceiving of equality of democratic education and of political equality more generally in terms of democratic capability necessarily means focusing *both* on the democratic development of individuals (internal factors) *and simultaneously* on the democratization of society itself (external factors). The latter includes (and depends upon) the development and evolution of a robustly democratic culture—what Sen has called a “culture of political participation”³⁷—that provides all individuals and groups with sufficient, effective opportunities for democratic participation and, therefore, for continued democratic learning.

Conclusion

I have argued that a Senian approach to formal civic or democratic education generally endorses the idea of “action civics”—particularly its emphasis on facilitating the process through which children begin to “*do civics and behave as citizens*” or, as I have put it, to function as democratic persons in and through their schooling. But beyond this, it would also have us adopt the concept related to functioning in Sen’s thinking, namely, the concept of *capability*, or the real freedom—inclusive of the general abilities and the effective opportunities—a person has to function in various ways. From this Senian perspective, the gap we should be concerned with is what we can call the “democratic capability gap,” that is, the disparities in the capabilities that some individuals and groups enjoy for meaningful and consequential democratic participation in their communities.

The upshot of this argument is that, when it comes to democratic education, we must ask not just whether schools are doing their part to facilitate children’s democratic functioning. We must also take a broader and longer view by asking whether non-school institutions are fulfilling

their democratic educational purpose, namely, providing all adult citizens with effective opportunities to function as democratic citizens in their communities *and, thereby, to continue their democratic learning*. Inequalities in such opportunities for civic and democratic participation are, in fact, inequalities in educational opportunities. Thus, until children (as adults) come to enjoy equal, effective opportunities to engage meaningfully and consequentially in democratic practices and so come to have equal opportunities to continue their democratic learning, the democratic capability gap will remain. At best, schools will have equipped children with what we might call “diplomas in democracy,” but we will have failed to address the social, economic, political and other conditions that prevent them either from using those diplomas or building on them with additional democratic learning-through-practice.

Going forward, these conditions demand greater and more direct and sustained attention in educational theorizing and research. Indeed, philosophers of education and educational theorists would do well to remember the ubiquity of democratic education.³⁸ In particular, we must theorize more thoroughly and explicitly the democratic educational role for non-school institutions in relation to schools. And we must recognize that restrictions on one’s effective opportunities to participate in democratic processes are also restrictions on one’s opportunities to continue to learn democracy beyond schooling. Thinking more deeply about, identifying and, ultimately, removing such restrictions are, therefore, essential steps not only to political equality but also, and importantly, to educational equality.

Endnotes

- 1 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).
- 2 Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- 3 Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 4 Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 31–32.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 31–32. The language of “gaps” deserves comment here. In particular, it is worth noting the potential criticism that Levinson’s

arguments—and, perhaps by extension, my own arguments—represent or even endorse a deficit orientation (on deficit thinking see, for example, Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Pushing Past the Achievement Gap: An Essay on the Language of Deficit.” *Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (2007): 316–323). Levinson herself explicitly rejects the idea that she has offered a deficit-oriented argument because she does not see “gaps” as necessarily implying “deficits” (46). I agree with her on this point—and I am sympathetic in general to her attempt to engage in non-ideal theorizing—even if I am not entirely convinced that she has avoided the problem of deficit thinking. Regardless, my own argument, as I hope will become clearer, moves further away from deficit-oriented thinking, specifically because disparities in what I call “democratic capability” are primarily *opportunity* gaps and not gaps in some *specific* achievement—for instance, the achievement of certain (i.e., privileged) political knowledge and skills. What a community considers essential democratic knowledge and skills (or, in my Senian language, however a community defines what it means to function democratically) should be open to broad and inclusive public discussion that honors the various modes of communication within that community. It should not simply be a reflection of the dominant, privileged mode of political participation. And regardless of the knowledge and skills a community decides are essential to democratic participation, the point is that we must provide sufficient effective opportunities (not just in schools, I argue, but also through non-school institutions) for all persons to learn and to participate in (and thereby to continue learning) democracy. That is what I am concerned with here—disparities or gaps in these *effective opportunities* to learn democracy. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me that my initial silence on this question of deficit thinking in Levinson’s work could have been read as an endorsement of what is clearly problematic about such thinking.

⁹ Ibid., 185.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹¹ Ibid., 33, emphasis added.

¹² Ibid., 216.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵ Tony DeCesare, “Theorizing Democratic Education from a Senian Perspective.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no. 2 (2014): 149–170.

¹⁶ Sen, *Development as Freedom*.

¹⁷ Ibid., 224.

¹⁸ Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind*, 51.

¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 50–51.

²⁴ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 363.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 257.

²⁷ Ibid., 282.

²⁸ Ibid., 284.

²⁹ Ibid., 264.

³⁰ Ibid., 288.

³¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 19.

³² Ibid.

³³ Keesha Gaskins and Sundeep Iyer, *The Challenge of Obtaining Voter Identification* (New York: New York University School of Law, Brennan Center for Justice, 2012).

³⁴ Ibid., 1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ David A. Crocker, *Ethics of Global Development: Agency, Capability, and Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 172.

³⁷ Dreze and Sen, *India*, 362–363.

³⁸ I owe this phrasing to an anonymous reviewer.