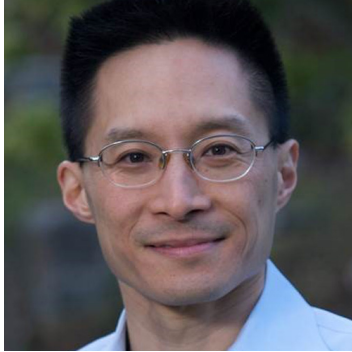


Video and Discussion Guide



American
Spaces

TED Talk: ***Why Ordinary People Need to Understand Power***



Speaker: Eric Liu

Year made: 2013

Length: 17:15 min

English level: Medium-hard

Themes: Civic Engagement; Democratic Values

https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_liu_why_ordinary_people_need_to_understand_power#t-1972

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Please note:

- **American Spaces Coordinators should work together with their Public Affairs Sections** in planning programs for the American Space, and to determine appropriate programming themes and content.
- **Ted Talk videos are available for download.** This is recommended for American Spaces with low or unstable bandwidth.

Context (from Ted Talk summary)

Far too many Americans are illiterate in power — what it is, how it operates and why some people have it. As a result, those few who do understand power wield disproportionate influence over everyone else. “We need to make civics attractive again,” says civics educator Eric Liu. “As attractive as it was during the American Revolution or the Civil Rights Movement.”

About the Speaker (from https://www.ted.com/speakers/eric_liu)

Eric Liu is an author, educator and civic entrepreneur. He is the founder and CEO of [Citizen University](#), which promotes and teaches the art of great citizenship through a portfolio of national programs, and the executive director of the [Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program](#). Mr. Liu's books include the national bestsellers [The Gardens of Democracy](#), and [The True Patriot](#), co-authored with Nick Hanauer. A former presidential speechwriter, Mr. Liu lives in Seattle where he teaches civil leadership at the University of Washington. Mr. Liu is a graduate of Yale College and Harvard Law School.

Key Vocabulary

- **Civics** – the study of the rights and duties of citizens and of how government works. In the Ted Talk, Mr. Liu defines civics as the art of being a pro-social, problem-solving contributor in a self-governing community.

- **Illiterate** – the inability to read or write.
- **Subsidy** – money granted by the government to a business or industry to reduce costs and help keep prices low.
- **Bias**– a preference for one thing over another, usually in a way that is considered to be unfair.
- **Partisan**- as a noun, a strong supporter of a party, cause or person. As an adjective, strongly supporting a particular person or cause, often without thinking carefully about the matter.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Mr. Liu says that in America, “far too many people are illiterate in power – what it is, who has it, how it operates...” What does he mean? According to Mr. Liu, what happens when people have high levels of civic illiteracy?

“As a result of illiteracy, those few who do understand how power operates in civic life....wield disproportionate influence..... Politics becomes subcontracted out to a band of professionals, money people, outreach people, message people, research people.”

- 2) Mr. Liu gives many reasons for why he believes there are low levels of civic knowledge, civic engagement, participation, and awareness in America. He says that “if people don’t learn power, people don’t wake up, and if they don’t wake up, they get left out.” How does he encourage people to become involved in civics?

*People can start their civic engagement in **cities**. “Think about a problem in the common life of your city. It can be something small, like where a street lamp should go, or something medium like which library should have its hours extended or cut, or maybe something bigger, like whether all the businesses in your town should be required to pay a living wage...”*

- 3) What do you think of Mr. Liu’s call to action? What is the opportunity that you’d like to create in your city or the problem that you’d like to fix?
- 4) For these opportunities or challenges within our cities, do you know how to make that change happen in your cities? How easy or difficult is it?
- 5) Mr. Liu gives us examples of how “civic imagination, innovation, and creativity are emerging from local ecosystems and radiating outwards.” For example, strategies for making cities more bike-friendly have spread from Copenhagen to NY to Boston. What are some innovative and effective civic practices that you think should be shared globally?

This TED Talk is translated into 24 languages. A transcript of the talk is also available here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_liu_why_ordinary_people_need_to_understand_power/transcript