

Introduction

Our Common Purpose: Democratic Citizenship at America's 250th Anniversary

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As the United States marks its 250th anniversary this year, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is not far behind. The Academy was founded in 1780, before the end of the Revolutionary War, by many of the same people who launched and prosecuted that war: John Hancock, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and others. John Adams was the first president of the Academy. These English subjects turned American revolutionaries recognized that they were embarking on something novel in the history of the world: establishing a self-governing society with the promise that its citizens would be free and equal. To advance this political experiment, they created the Academy, an organization to convene members of “the learned professions,” as those with professional expertise were called at the time. The charge assigned to this membership: “to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.”¹

It is important today to recognize what a leap of faith it was to create such an institution when the war was not yet won and the Revolution not yet secured. It is equally important to recognize the gap that existed even then between the new nation's creed and its deeds.

The dilemma of slavery and its contradiction to the stated ideals of the founding were apparent to the founders of both the nation and the Academy. They recognized that this half-free, half-slave nation would have to innovate continuously, finding new ways of governing to help society navigate and negotiate the social and economic changes and crises that arise when there is a gap between our ideals and our institutions. They faced these realities with clear eyes and knew that this radical and flawed experiment in self-government would need to be capable of ceaseless adaptation and renovation.

In that spirit, the Academy has pursued projects to understand its own history and has also, in recent years, launched commissions to tackle the thorniest con-

temporary problems. This includes the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, a group of thirty-five practitioners and scholars – diverse in professional expertise, geography, demographic background, and viewpoint – that we had the privilege to cochair starting in 2018. The Commission set out to answer the question of how we could improve American democratic self-government, with an emphasis on the centrality and agency of citizens, for the remainder of the twenty-first century and beyond. In 2020, in a time of growing concern about the vitality and resilience of American democracy, the Commission published *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.²

Our *Common Purpose* was shaped by the ethos of the Academy's and our nation's founders. We listened, learned, and deliberated. Notably, we achieved unanimity on thirty-one concrete recommendations for reinventing our democracy for the conditions of this century. And we worked with awareness of both the Academy's strengths and weaknesses. We determined not to rely only on experts but to seek input from people in all walks of life. While we commissioned expert research as part of our foundational work for developing recommendations, we also conducted fifty listening sessions across the country in all kinds of communities: avid voters and people who had never voted; Naval Academy midshipmen and Cambodian refugees; Midwestern suburbanites and Angelenos of a range of political backgrounds. We asked people what they thought Americans shared, what their experience of our democracy was, and what the obstacles to their effective engagement were. We wanted to understand their frustrations, aspirations, and hopes.

We discovered the paradox that Americans have in common the feeling – amplified by media – that they have little in common. Yet we also found that people are hungering for connection, agency, and recognition. We learned that people find our political institutions nonresponsive and alienating. We heard a litany of challenges to participating in voting and in the civil society organizations of communities, from a disintegrating news environment to increasing polarization to opaque bureaucracy. We heard time and again that Americans feel they have little or no voice or power in our democratic institutions and processes. As such, they feel they have lost the ability to self-govern.

The central conceptual discovery of the work was offered by a listening session participant in Ellsworth, Maine. As he put it, in conversation, “A democratic society is a set of shared ideals, right? It only works as a group. That’s sort of its definition. And that, I think, can become a vicious circle. The worse the system’s working, the less effort people are going to put into the system.”

Here was a truth and plain recognition of our problem. We have been trapped in a vicious cycle: dysfunctional institutions diminish interest in participation; reduced engagement in civil society organizations means less learning and practice

of the habits of compromise and negotiation; a weaker civic culture leads to worse decision-making inside our political institutions and concentrations of power in our society. And the cycle turns.

This diagnosis then made it possible for us to name the solution. We needed to flip the cycle from vicious to virtuous. In a healthy democracy, inclusive and responsive institutions motivate and facilitate participation; active participation in civic life cultivates and is sustained by a civic culture of mutual respect, willingness to compromise, collective problem-solving, and responsibility-taking; that vibrant civic culture, in turn, ensures that our institutions function well and remain responsive and adaptive to change.

But how can Americans flip the cycle from vicious to virtuous? There is no single way to do it. We realized that securing a healthy democracy to meet the profound challenges ahead in the remainder of the twenty-first century would require working to improve our political institutions, civil society infrastructure, and civic culture simultaneously. Our Commission set out to develop, vet, debate, and prioritize recommendations in all three domains.

We set ourselves a high bar for adopting recommendations. We are a cross-ideological group, and we wanted every recommendation we developed to have support from both sides of the political spectrum. We would not require unanimity for any individual recommendation because we did not wish any single Commission member to have veto power. But we would reject any proposal that did not win support from both sides of the political spectrum. We took inspiration from Benjamin Franklin at the end of the Constitutional Convention: putting aside concerns he may have had with any particular article, Franklin offered support for the whole and urged the other delegates to do the same.³ The Commission acted in this spirit. We aimed for unanimous approval of a set of recommendations even if individual members of the Commission had reservations concerning one or another in particular.

This we achieved. Our cross-partisan Commission unanimously approved a set of thirty-one recommendations across strategies, addressing six imperatives:

1. to *achieve equality of voice and representation* through our political institutions;
2. to *empower voters* in a lasting way;
3. to *ensure the responsiveness* of our political institutions;
4. to dramatically expand the capacity of civil society organizations that foster “*bridging*” across lines of difference;
5. to build *civic information architecture that supports common purpose*; and
6. to inspire a *culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another*.

The response to the report was galvanic. A diverse array of organizations became champions of *Our Common Purpose*, using it as a blueprint and a catalyst for action. Just as important, local leaders across the country raised their hands to become “OCP communities,” committing themselves to put our ideas into practice where they live. In short order, the Academy took a step with little precedent: it committed to a multiyear multimillion dollar initiative to make substantial progress on the implementation of these recommendations by the semiquincentennial in 2026.

We, our fellow Commission members, our broad network of champions, and the formidable Academy staff have for the past six years vigorously made the case for the strategies and recommendations intended to advance these imperatives. So how have we done? We can report remarkable advances across all six strategies, while also acknowledging that much work remains to be done.

Our collective efforts have inspired legislation, catalyzed public and private investment in civic life, and broadened support for the report’s theory of change and recommendations. Among our significant advances is the establishment of the Trust for Civic Life, a pooled fund and learning network to invest in local civic infrastructure in rural and small-town America. Other accomplishments include legislation introduced to increase the size of the House of Representatives, robust public discussion of establishing eighteen-year term limits for Supreme Court justices, bipartisan federal and state action to expand national service opportunities and funding, and the adoption of ranked-choice voting, automatic voter registration, and felon re-enfranchisement in several states and localities.

In 2021, a bipartisan group inspired by *Our Common Purpose*, the Educating for American Democracy initiative (EAD), released a roadmap for excellence in civics and history education. Twenty-eight states now have policy aligned with that roadmap; in thirty-nine states, schools and community learning partners like museums and historical societies are running EAD-aligned curricular or program pilots; and, by a conservative count, thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students are engaged in EAD-aligned civic learning. National philanthropic endeavors like the New Pluralists Collaborative and place-based civic ventures like the Arizona Civic Life Partnership have embedded the concepts and narratives of *Our Common Purpose* into their work and strategies.

We also convened a working group of practitioners and scholars to more fully develop the concept of civic culture that was so central to the theory of action of our report. The result was *Habits of Heart and Mind*, an influential playbook on what civic culture is, why it matters, and how to fortify it.⁴ This was part of a series of blueprints for action developed by diverse expert working groups organized by the Academy. These working group reports addressed the following Commission recommendations:

- Supreme Court justice term limits;⁵
- Expanding the House of Representatives;⁶
- Ranked-choice voting and multimember districts (proportional representation in the House of Representatives);⁷
- Establishing a Trust for Civic Life;⁸
- Fortifying civic culture;⁹ and
- Preparing democratic citizens in higher education.¹⁰

One more feature of our work deserves explicit mention. As noted above, the Constitution adopted in Philadelphia carried into the early life of our nation moral contestation over enslavement. Our social, political, and economic institutions entrenched racial domination. Successive generations of Americans have sought to rectify those original wrongs and build a true democracy for people of all backgrounds. In *Our Common Purpose*, we reviewed the history of the foundations and re-foundings of our nation: the original founding in 1776, the re-founding of Reconstruction, and another re-founding in the Civil Rights Movement. Even with the victories and triumphs achieved in each of these moments, it is also true that one after another generation of Americans has also failed to live up to our original founding aspirations. We have continually made our nation more perfect, but never perfect. Yet with each try we have fallen somewhat less short of our goals.

With our recommendations, we sought a fourth founding of the United States. Our age, too, has the responsibility to overcome fully the wrongs of racial domination and other forms of discrimination present in the original founding. We named this challenge as a central part of our diagnosis and wrote in our report: “Inequities continue to track lines of race, gender, and ethnicity, revealing deep structural unfairness in our society. A surge in white nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant vitriol has flooded our politics with sentiments corrosive to the ethic of a democratic society, while people of color continue to confront barriers to opportunity and participation.”¹¹

Our recommendations sought to address these challenges. Our strategy was novel and unfamiliar. It was not couched in an older language of procedural justice or color-blindness, nor in the now-common language of racial equity, racial justice, or antiracism. We focused on the question of how power is allocated and operates. In *Our Common Purpose*, we wrote:

The form of health needed by a constitutional democracy, even in times of crisis, flows from exactly the areas of focus in this report: equality of voice and representation, empowerment of voters, responsiveness of political institutions, bridging ties across lines of difference, civic information architecture that supports common purpose, and a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another.¹²

Our conviction was that reforms to achieve *equality of voice and representation* through our political institutions; to *empower voters* in a lasting way; and to *ensure the responsiveness* of our political institutions would rebalance power and undo the long-lasting mechanisms of domination, whether racial, economic, or otherwise, that have characterized life throughout the history of our constitutional democracy.

We laid out a set of reforms designed to achieve a full sharing of civic power among all the members of this country's incredibly heterogeneous population. A particularly good example is the recommendation for the use of multimember districts, coupled with ranked-choice voting, for congressional elections. This voting methodology delivers emergent proportional representation, ensuring that the full spectrum of opinion in a district is represented in Congress and that minority perspectives are represented, regardless of whether those minorities are racial, cultural, or ideological. With the protections of the Voting Rights Act disassembled, this kind of reform provides an avenue for ensuring that power is fully shared across this nation's diverse citizenry.

Now, as we observe the nation's 250th anniversary, we have invited fresh perspectives on the future of our constitutional democracy. What should come next? For this volume, we have asked nine authors – many of them members of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship – and sixteen respondents – practitioners and scholars with significant experience in these areas – to take up the strategies that we laid out in 2020 and to consider whether they remain fit for purpose. Where can we see progress? Where have we fallen short? How does each strategy matter for the future? Where should we put our energies and efforts? Should we prioritize any particular individual recommendations in the original report, or should we be turning our attention toward some new objectives? The collection is organized into six sections, each representing one of the report's strategies.

- Wallace Jefferson commends three institutional reforms in particular as worthy of continued effort: increasing the size of the House of Representatives, achieving term limits for Supreme Court justices, and spreading the use of ranked-choice voting.
- Lisa García Bedolla evaluates our recommendations of reforms to empower voters and finds that – while they put the right incentives in place – they will not significantly drive the inclusion of those currently left out unless supplemented by robust work on civic culture and practices of inviting people into participation.
- Carolyn Lukensmeyer surveys the rapidly burgeoning field of democratic deliberation and citizens' assemblies – conducted in both analog and digi-

tal forms – and finds that this new institutional design is finally taking flight within the institutions of American representative democracy. She considers this a success and urges further effort in this direction.

- Ethan Zuckerman offers a bleak assessment of the state of journalism and social media and underscores how far away we still are from having the research access that we need into the operations of social media platforms. There has been productive experimentation with decentralized forms of technology, but the balance of power still resides very much with the closed and opaque industry titans.
- David Campbell celebrates the growing civic education movement and argues that it requires sharper focus on one civic skill in particular: how to disagree better.
- On expanding civic bridging capacity, Charlie Brown and Christina Jodice outline the Trust for Civic Life's mission and progress in deploying \$50 million across communities in rural America; Daniel Stid highlights the Trust as a breakthrough for democracy-related philanthropy and suggests how national foundations broadly can innovate and reorient funding patterns to support associational life; and Kristen Bennett looks toward national service as a means to connect across lines of difference and foster democratic participation.

Taken together, the reflections, ideas, and responses in this volume form a composite picture of the state of the democracy-renovation movement today. The institutional and civic culture work that *Our Common Purpose* catalyzed has coalesced into a well-understood and widely affirmed agenda. The champions and allies we activated have gained ground on some parts of the agenda and have faced setbacks on others, and their efforts continue.

The 250th anniversary is an appropriate time to celebrate our achievements as a nation, to identify our shortcomings forthrightly, and to imagine how to advance the aspirations embedded in the ethos and ideals of 1776 – the “electric cord” of the commitment to human equality, as Lincoln called it. At the same time, we are also in an era of rapid transformation; looking backward will not suffice. We can learn from Lincoln here too: “As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”¹³

This next phase of work requires us to integrate the powers of AI into this agenda for democracy renovation. How can we put powerful new agentic technologies to work to help us solve the problems of representation, participation, civil society engagement, media, and civic education? Of course, AI tools will also bring further challenges for democracy, and so our work on governance must equip our constitutional democracy also to govern AI. Successful governance through such rapid social and economic transformation requires civic strength cultivated through a

renewal of our civic culture, and responsive, agile governance achieved through renovation of our political institutions.

In addition, we must focus more on the relationship between economic conditions and the vitality of democracy, between economic and political inequality. In recognition of the problems with the nation's political economy, the Commission recommended in 2020 that the Academy organize a separate group to examine the economic realities of Americans and offer recommendations to improve their economic well-being. That body, the Commission on Reimagining Our Economy (CORE), issued its report, *Advancing a People-First Economy*, and a companion photo-journal, *Faces of America*, in fall 2023.¹⁴

But there is more to do, and these issues have only grown more urgent in the years since CORE released its recommendations. The rise of an AI-dominated economy threatens to undermine the promise of shared prosperity – and our fundamental humanity. The continued concentration of political power in the federal executive and economic clout in a tiny oligarchic elite runs counter to both conservative principles of decentralized power and progressive principles of justice. What will it take now to make our economy more democratic and more committed to individual flourishing? What will it take to reduce the distorting effect of hyper-concentrated wealth on our democracy? How can we fortify a cross-ideological commitment to the local, to the role of place and relationship in making both our economy and polity more inclusive? These are questions the Academy is taking on in new initiatives inspired by the precedents of *Our Common Purpose* and CORE.

Though the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship has concluded its six-year mission to change the frame of the possible in democracy renovation, we three coauthors and our flotilla of affiliated organizations and allies remain dedicated to its purposes. We expect to stay at this work through at least the 250th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, in 2041. If we and our fellow champions can bring the same clarity of focus, creativity, energy, and goodwill to this work for the coming fifteen years, we believe a fourth founding of the United States will indeed unfold.

As you read the essays in this volume, we hope you will keep active in your minds the image of the cycle that is either virtuous or vicious, in which our political institutions, civic culture, and civil society influence each other. Then keep active in your hearts the sense of responsibility for pushing that cycle in the direction that advances the “interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.” That is the spirit of *Our Common Purpose*, of the American Academy, and of the experiment in constitutional democracy that all Americans have the blessing and the burden to steward and reinvent.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Danielle Allen, a Member of the American Academy since 2009, is the James Bryant Conant University Professor, Director of the Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Ethics, Director of the Allen Lab for Democratic Renovation, and Director of the Democratic Knowledge Project at Harvard University. She is the author of *Justice by Means of Democracy* (2023), *Democracy in the Time of Coronavirus* (2022), *Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.* (2017), and *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014). Her most recent book is *The Radical Duke* (2026), a biography of an eighteenth-century British political reformer.

Stephen Heintz, a Member of the American Academy since 2013, is President Emeritus of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a family foundation that advances social change for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Before joining the Fund in 2001, he was Cofounder and President of Dēmos, a public policy organization working to reduce political and economic inequality and to broaden citizen engagement in American democracy. He also serves as Chair of the Academy's Trust and Vice Chair of its Board.

Eric Liu, a Member of the American Academy since 2020, is Co-Founder and CEO of Citizen University, which works to build a culture of powerful and responsible citizenship in the United States. He is the author of numerous books, including *Become America: Civic Sermons on Love, Responsibility, and Democracy* (2019), *You're More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen's Guide to Making Change Happen* (2017), and *A Chinaman's Chance: On the American Dream* (2014). His latest book, *Live Like a Citizen: Eight Ways to Change Your Mindset and Our Country*, will be published in October 2026.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "An Act to incorporate and establish a Society for the cultivation and promotion of Arts and Sciences. Granted May 4, 1780, by an Act of the Legislature of Massachusetts, and amended by the Acts of 1910, 1911, 1931, 1947, and 1974," <https://www.amacad.org/archives/charter>.
- ² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/how-to-fortify-civic-culture-america>.
- ⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Case for Supreme Court Term Limits* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2023), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/supreme-court-term-limits>.
- ⁶ Lee Drutman, Jonathan D. Cohen, Yuval Levin, and Norman J. Ornstein, *The Case for Enlarging the House of Representatives* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/enlarging-the-house>.

- ⁷ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Expanding Representation: Reinventing Congress for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/congressional-reform-proportional-representation>.
- ⁸ “Trust for Civic Life,” <https://trustforcivillife.org> (accessed July 22, 2026).
- ⁹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind*.
- ¹⁰ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Preparing Students for Civic Life: A Guide for Higher Education Leaders* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/students-civic-life-higher-education>.
- ¹¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 2.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹³ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Annual Message,” December 1, 1862, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/202180>.
- ¹⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Advancing a People-First Economy* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2023), <https://www.amacad.org/publication/american-economy-recommendations-people-first>; and American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Faces of America: Getting By in Our Economy* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2023), <https://www.amacad.org/publication/faces-of-america>. See also American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Community Partnership Visas: How Immigration Can Boost Local Economies* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2025), <https://www.amacad.org/publication/community-partnership-visas-immigration-local-economies>.