

From Access to Agency: Civic Infrastructure, Federated Democracy & the Organizational Work that Policy Cannot Do

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Scholars of American civic life have documented the decline of federated membership associations and the participatory costs of their replacement by professionally managed advocacy organizations. That literature treats cross-level coordination largely as a feature of a vanished organizational era. This essay offers a practitioner's account of the mechanism operating today. Drawing on the recent litigation, election protection, and voter engagement work of the League of Women Voters, it describes how "federated coordination" – addressing problems identified at one organizational level with resources from another – can sustain civic infrastructure under contemporary conditions. Engaging Lisa García Bedolla's analysis of disengagement among eligible voters, it suggests what durable voter participation requires.

The United States has made progress through policy change and structural reform designed to increase formal access to the ballot. Automatic voter registration, expanded ability to vote by mail, different structural models of voting, and same-day registration have reduced many of the procedural barriers that once excluded millions of eligible citizens. Election administration reformers continue to push for further changes, from ranked-choice voting to automatic registration expansion. Yet persistent gaps in voter turnout across race, class, and community remain, even in states that have implemented many reforms aimed at improving participation and turnout. The lesson is not that policy change or structural reform is insufficient in principle, but that access alone – however well designed – cannot produce durable democratic participation.¹

Lisa García Bedolla's scholarship, and her essay on increasing turnout among nonvoters, reframes this problem with precision. Disengagement, she argues, is rarely the product of ignorance or apathy. It is the product of accumulated experiences: institutions that have failed communities, generations of exclusion and surveillance, and an informational environment that leaves many citizens uncertain about the most

basic mechanics of civic engagement. A focus on election policy or deep structural reforms opens a door but it does not ensure that anyone feels invited – or safe – to walk through it.²

That invitation, and the trust it requires, is the work of core civic infrastructure. Among the organizations doing that work, the League of Women Voters (LWV, or the League) offers an instructive model in American public life: an organization that is nonpartisan, largely volunteer powered, and structured to operate simultaneously at the national, state, and local levels. For over a century, the League has functioned not only as an advocate for democratic access but as a practitioner of civic engagement grounded in relational trust and community presence.³ Its architecture, reach, and tactic-agnostic methods illuminate what political and legal scholars have described as democratic infrastructure – the human, relational, and organizational capacities required to animate the formal rights a democracy confers and to ensure that those rights are exercised, not merely held.⁴ As a federated organization built across all three levels, the League’s practice of building democratic infrastructure from the inside is among its most distinctive contributions.

This essay draws on that experience to argue that volunteer-supported civic organizations hold a position that, for structural reasons, government agencies, partisan campaigns, and fully professionalized nonprofits often struggle to fully occupy. Election administrators are often rightly limited to holding the election and providing official, sometimes dry, nonpartisan information; campaigns are driven by electoral incentives – such as reaching the “next most likely voter” – that shape both whom they engage and how they do so; and national nonprofits often lack the deep local roots necessary to cultivate trust at the grassroots level. Federated civic organizations like LWV sit between these gaps. At a moment defined by both democratic innovation and democratic backsliding, that position is not a supplement to reform – it is a precondition for its success. The argument here is not simply that civic organizations help implement reform; it is that democratic participation is itself a social good produced by the continuous organizational work of invitation, translation, and belonging.

The case for provoter policy reform rests on a straightforward theory of change: lower the costs of participation and more people will participate. This is a sound framework, and structural reforms are essential – they remain a necessary condition for democratic inclusion. To be clear, structural reform measures and law and policy changes have demonstrably expanded the electorate. Automatic voter registration and compliance with “motor voter” legislation since the 1993 passage of the National Voter Registration Act, for which the League was instrumental in campaigning, have added millions of Americans to the rolls; the loosening of mail-in voting restrictions in 2020 helped produce

the highest presidential turnout rate since 1908.⁵ But turnout fell back to 64 percent of eligible voters for the 2024 election, meaning more than one-third of the electorate stayed home even after decades of reform. Meanwhile, the ground is actively shifting in the other direction: as of April 2026, thirty-six states require voter identification, and the rate of voter list purges increased 21 percent between 2014–2016 and the most recent reporting period.⁶ The reforms that have passed have not closed the stubborn gaps in turnout between white and nonwhite voters, between wealthy and working-class citizens, or between communities with deep civic networks and those without.⁷

García Bedolla's analysis in her contribution to this volume explains why. Many nonvoters are not uninformed – they are unconvinced. Their skepticism is a rational response, rooted in lived experience with institutions that have historically failed or actively harmed them. That skepticism is often compounded by gaps in access to reliable election information. Large numbers of potential voters do not know how registration works in their state, what to bring to the polls, or how local offices relate to the issues they care most about. And beyond knowledge lies emotion: the trepidation of the first-time voter who fears “doing it wrong,” and the wariness of communities whose members have faced harassment or intimidation at polling places. These barriers are invisible yet decisive in shaping voter turnout.⁸

The implication is not that structural reform should be abandoned, but that it must be accompanied – and in many communities, preceded – by sustained relational investment. Someone must do the work of translating legal access into felt belonging, of demystifying procedures that feel foreign, of showing up in communities year-round rather than appearing just before elections. That is the work civic organizations are uniquely equipped to perform, and it is work that market logic, partisan incentives, and government mandates cannot accomplish on their own.⁹

A parallel limitation operates upstream in the philanthropic ecosystem that funds much of the civic work structural reform depends on. As recent analysis of nonprofit-foundation relationships shows, even well-intentioned philanthropy can reproduce distance from community realities when power rests primarily with funders rather than with those whose work is grounded in field experience. Short grant cycles, prescriptive strategies, and limited mechanisms for grantees to honestly voice their concerns often privilege measurable outputs over the slow, relational work required to build civic confidence and trust. In this way, philanthropic structure can inadvertently mirror the shortcomings of policy structure, resourcing participation in the abstract while underinvesting in the human and organizational capacities that convert access into agency. When civic organizations are treated primarily as delivery vehicles instead of as partners with valuable local knowledge, the infrastructure necessary for sustained democratic participation remains fragile – even in environments rich with reform opportunities.¹⁰

Understanding the League of Women Voters' contributions begins with understanding its organizational structure. The League operates through a *trifederated* structure: a national body that sets strategic direction, helps develop capacity across leagues, and coordinates national campaigns; state leagues that manage statewide policy advocacy, litigation, and relationships with election administrators; and almost eight hundred local grassroots leagues that run programs and remain embedded in communities across every region of the United States.¹¹ This architecture enables LWV to connect national strategy and expertise with action at the local level where problems are actually experienced. This is what scaling civic infrastructure looks like in practice: not the replication of a single model across contexts, but the alignment of local trust with institutional capacity, so that neither has to do the other's work alone. Sociologist and political scientist Theda Skocpol's historical analysis describes such membership federations – linking local chapters to state and national governance across class lines – as the organizational form most capable of sustaining broad democratic participation.¹²

The League's response to *Moore v. Harper* illustrates this model in action. When the Supreme Court rejected the independent state legislature theory in the case – a ruling that preserved state courts' authority to review all state laws governing federal elections – LWV had already filed amicus briefs signed by all fifty state leagues at the federal level; supported active litigation through the North Carolina league challenging the underlying partisan gerrymander by its state legislature; and mobilized local leagues across the country to hold community forums explaining the ruling's implications for voters in their own states.¹³ No single-level organization could have operated across all three tiers simultaneously. That capacity also enables LWV to function as a bridge within the election administration system itself. García Bedolla's analysis of the Future of California Elections (FOCE) coalition illustrates why this matters: the political mechanism behind California's landmark reforms was not advocacy pressure alone but the creation of a collaborative space where voting rights advocates, civil rights organizations, and county registrars and recorders worked together rather than in opposition.¹⁴ LWV's partnerships with secretaries of state and election officials, its observer role in postelection work, and its efforts to educate the public on complex ballot measures all reflect this principle – that lasting structural change requires civic organizations operating internally to support the administration of elections, not only advocating externally for reforms.¹⁵

Equally distinctive is LWV's use of volunteer leadership to carry out its mission. Some paid staff at the national, state, and occasionally local levels provide legal, legislative, membership, and communications expertise to volunteers. Volunteers, members, and leaders – anchored in neighborhoods and trusted by their neighbors – provide the relational presence that translates institutional capacity into community reach. This combination allows the League to pursue what no organization relying on full-time staff and no government agency can: nonpartisan, year-round

engagement, grounded in trust, with no electoral stake in who participates.¹⁶ LWV's tactic-agnostic approach reinforces this position: the League litigates when litigation is required, organizes when organizing is required, educates when education is required, and deploys election protection volunteers when protection is required. Some league members focus on local committees (such as voter services committees), while other volunteer leaders contribute different skills. The League's power does not reside at any single level; it lies in its ability to move resources, in its legal strategy and community intelligence, up and down the trifederated structure in real time, so that a Supreme Court ruling in Washington, D.C., can be translated into a voter forum in Greensboro, North Carolina, within days or weeks.

The empirical evidence for relational organizing in community is robust. Voters are significantly more likely to participate when invited by someone they know and trust than when contacted by a campaign mailer or digital advertisement. They are more likely to vote when they see people who resemble them – in background, language, or experience – already engaged.¹⁷ These dynamics are precisely what volunteer networks are uniquely positioned to activate and what professional get-out-the-vote (GOTV) operations are not built to prioritize, because they optimize outreach toward “likely voters” while volunteers are motivated by democratic inclusion.¹⁸

This is not to romanticize volunteerism. Sociologist Nina Eliasoph's ethnographic work is a needed counter: volunteer-driven civic programs do not automatically produce engaged citizens, and can just as easily teach participants to avoid political conflict, defer to short-term funders, or mistake activity for impact. What distinguishes an effective civic organization is not the presence of volunteers but the structure around them – training, continuity, accountability, and a clear theory of how local effort connects to broader change. The League's tactic-agnostic, trifederated model can be such a structure, which is why its volunteer base translates into durable participation rather than diffuse good intentions.¹⁹

The League of Women Voters' 2024 election work makes the scale and durability of its civic infrastructure unmistakable. Across that election cycle, leagues made over thirty million voter contacts through a mix of on-the-ground organizing and digital outreach, while over nine million people relied on VOTE411.org – LWV's non-partisan voter guide platform – for trusted, nonpartisan election information. At the same time, the League helped protect the voting rights of more than nine million voters through litigation and legal advocacy. These efforts spanning voter registration, education, mobilization, and defense of democracy reflect a nationwide, year-round civic presence that operates well beyond Election Day. Through a grant program coordinating with state and local leagues, LWV volunteers maintained a presence at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) naturalization ceremonies in dozens of cities, including Phoenix and Tucson, registering newly

naturalized citizens the same day they took the oath of citizenship. The national infrastructure funds and replicates what local volunteers execute on the ground.²⁰

Volunteers also reach constituencies that conventional targeting ignores entirely – including Native American communities that face severe structural barriers to voting, such as limited polling locations, English-only materials, and inadequate transportation. The tribal partnership model that emerged from local service has since been shared throughout the national league’s network as a replicable template – exactly the kind of federated knowledge transfer the organization’s trifederated structure is designed to enable. The League of Women Voters of the District of Columbia innovated jail voter registration and voting opportunities and worked with corrections officers to reduce errors in civic information, a model that has since informed jail-based voting efforts in other jurisdictions.²¹

Volunteers also serve as a frontline defense against misinformation and play a key role in election protection efforts. In Arizona in 2022, when armed individuals in tactical gear began surveilling ballot drop boxes – photographing voters and threatening to publish their personal information online (sometimes called doxing) – it was local league leaders and community volunteers who stepped forward as witnesses in federal court, testifying about voters they knew who had been deterred from casting their ballots. The state league subsequently filed a federal lawsuit under the landmark Voting Rights Act, and the national LWV provided legal resources to make this possible, winning a court order within days that blocked unlawful intimidation tactics like armed surveillance of ballot drop boxes before the election.²² In 2022, Houston’s LWV discovered it could not obtain the voter registration forms legally required to register new citizens at naturalization ceremonies. The Texas Secretary of State’s office, citing a paper shortage, told the league to “find donors” to pay for or supply the forms. The president of the Texas LWV publicly challenged the state’s failure to meet its federal obligations under the National Voter Registration Act, and the Texas and national leagues elevated the story. The incident drew national media attention and made the issue visible to a broad public. The prospect of federal litigation – backed by the legal capacity of the national league – ultimately prompted a response from the state.²³ In all of these instances, no level of LWV engagement operates in isolation. Each is supported, replicated, and, when necessary, legally protected by the organizational infrastructure of the state and national leagues. The institutional capacity is what makes local action sustainable and reproducible across communities.

If García Bedolla’s central contribution is to show that structural reform without relational investment is insufficient, this essay offers one practitioner’s account of what that investment looks like at scale. The League’s practice does not simply confirm the scholarly literature – it extends it, offering a tested model that combines institutional longevity with tactical flexibility and community embeddedness. Four dimensions of that work suggest a framework others can learn from.

The first dimension is civic activation and education grounded in what García Bedolla identifies as deeper engagement – the recognition that you cannot begin a civic conversation by asking someone to vote, any more than you can open a relationship with a marriage proposal. The proper sequence is: *What do you care about? Who is responsible for that in your city, your county, your state? Here is what this ballot does about it.*

García Bedolla refers to “scaffolding” as one way to approach this kind of engagement. This issue-first, jurisdiction-specific approach is the antithesis of the rote civics instruction she questions – the kind that teaches students to name the three branches of government without ever connecting government to the problems outside their classroom door. Smart programming can be built around this sequence: approaches to civic education that ask students to identify a community problem and trace which level of government owns it; volunteer-led voter forums that open with constituent priorities, not candidate bios; and canvasser training that equips volunteers to start conversations with issues before they ever mention the ballot.²⁴ For adults navigating recently changed voting systems – vote centers, new identification requirements, purged rolls – volunteers also provide the procedural demystification García Bedolla identifies as essential: showing people, concretely, what a voting machine looks like, how to track mailed ballots, and what to do if their name is missing from the rolls.²⁵

The second dimension is institutional credibility built through honest self-reckoning. Beginning with an organizational assessment in 2016, the League’s “Transformation Journey” examined how it could better serve and engage communities. That process led to concrete changes such as diversifying the organizational leadership, building authentic partnerships with underserved communities, and recognizing that trust in those communities must be earned through demonstrated action rather than stated values alone. This work of self-reckoning is ongoing, but sustained community presence – showing up year after year, not only during election season – is central to rebuilding trust in communities that, historically, have not been regularly engaged.²⁶

The third dimension is information infrastructure at scale. VOTE411.org served over nine million users during the 2024 election cycle, offering side-by-side candidate comparisons across nearly twenty-nine thousand races in local, state, and federal elections that major media rarely covers. Because the platform depends on local league volunteers to collect and verify candidate responses, it is simultaneously a technology product and a civic organizing tool. It is also a vehicle for one of the most powerful resources in American civic life: ordinary people and communities engaging with politics and making a difference. García Bedolla argues that disengaged voters rarely encounter such “stories of success” that “make people feel like agents in their own lives,” and that the scarcity of these stories is precisely why they have outsized impact on political efficacy when they do appear. Sharing them is not

merely good communications practice; it is a corrective to a chronic information deficit that civic organizations are uniquely positioned to fill. García Bedolla's key point is that voting, though cast as an individual act, is fundamentally a form of collective action – and that American democracy has lost much of the connective tissue that once made that collective action possible. Rebuilding it, encounter by encounter, story by story, is the full scope of what civic infrastructure must do.²⁷

A fourth, underappreciated dimension is what may be called *federated coordination* – the infrastructure that allows problems identified at one level to be addressed with resources from another. The Arizona ballot drop box litigation illustrates that upward flow. Local volunteers identified voters who had been deterred and stepped forward as witnesses; the state league converted that testimony into federal litigation under the Voting Rights Act; and the national league's legal infrastructure made it possible to obtain a court order within days to stop further intimidation. The Texas voter registration story illustrates the full circuit: a local chapter discovered the state was withholding federally required forms, the state league president turned that local problem into a public accountability issue, and the legal capacity of the national league provided pressure that produced a resolution. Neither outcome was possible at any single level alone. This is a form of scaling that neither the “thousand flowers” model of grassroots experimentation nor the top-down deployment model of national nongovernmental organizations can replicate. It requires all three levels to exist simultaneously and deliberate investment in the connective infrastructure between them. Coalition umbrella structures can approximate this model, but without the internal accountability relationships of genuine membership or organizational affinity, they lack the same binding force.

Structural reforms are the hardware of democracy – necessary, but insufficient without the software of human connection, institutional trust, and civic knowledge that makes those reforms meaningful in practice. García Bedolla's framework in her essay and scholarship helps practitioners understand why that gap exists. The League's century of practice suggests how to close it, while its structure also offers one answer to that challenge by showing what it looks like, in organizational terms, to actually produce democratic participation rather than merely enable it.

The lesson may not be that local is insufficient, but that local action without alignment and connection to a broader movement remains at risk. It may not outlast a single election cycle or funding period or survive the departure of a trusted organizer or local leader. In some cases, local leagues have closed after the departure of a dynamic leader or team. Yet in other cases, a new organization emerges under the League's umbrella, allowing the work in a community to restart when new leadership steps forward.²⁸ That regenerative capacity is itself a product of the federated structure: because the state and national scaffolding persists even when a local league lapses, the work can be reconstituted when new leadership steps

forward. An established framework, with capacity and volunteer service in community, can be an easier way for people to work toward core civic infrastructure.

The conditions that make this work urgent are not temporary. Political trust has not recovered. Misinformation has not receded. The communities most systematically excluded from democratic participation have not been integrated by structural reform alone. What is required now, and in each election cycle that follows, is sustained investment in the relational infrastructure that converts formal rights into lived agency. That investment requires organizations with the longevity to build trust, the flexibility to deploy multiple tactics, and the reach to operate at every level of a federal system. Volunteer power is the engine, but organizational resources – both financial and institutional – are the multiplier that makes that engine run. The League of Women Voters’ model is certainly not the only form that investment can take, but it is among the most proven, most adaptable, and most durable available to practitioners working to close the distance between access and agency.²⁹

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ENDNOTES

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²³ For statements from Grace Chimene, president of the League of Women Voters of Texas, see Ashley Lopez, “Texas Says Supply Chain Issues Have Limited the Number of Voter Registration Forms It Can Give Out,” KUT News, January 18, 2022 (updated January 21, 2022), <https://www.kut.org/politics/2022-01-18/texas-says-supply-chain-issues-have-limited-the-number-of-voter-registration-forms-it-can-give-out>. See also League of Women Voters of Texas (@LWVTexas), “Thanks @colbertlateshow @StephenAtHome for highlighting the issues we had obtaining voter registration forms. We are happy to announce @lwvhouston received 7000 Voter registration forms from from [sic] the Texas Secretary of State on Saturday! #lwv #vote2020 #votingrights #VRA,” post thanking comedian and former *Late Show* television host Stephen Colbert for coverage, X (formerly Twitter), January 23, 2022, 3:27 p.m., <https://x.com/LWVTexas/status/1485272966715920388>.

²⁴ “I have found that the best place to start this educational conversation is by asking the individual what they care most about. . . . From there, a canvasser can then talk to them about who is responsible for addressing that issue and how what is on the upcoming election ballot may help them move the needle on what they care about.” García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 50. On problem-based civic education as the pedagogical basis for this approach, see Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, “High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?” *Social Education* 72 (1) (2008): 34–39. For documenting of the structural reasons most civics classrooms fail to adopt this approach, see also Daniela Krue DiGiacomo, Erica Hodgins, Joseph Kahne, and Sara Trapp, “Civic Education in a Politically Polarized Era,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96 (3) (2021): 261–274.

²⁵ “They had seen video on the news of voting booths with curtains, but no one had ever shown them what, literally, was to be found behind the curtain.” García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 51. For documenting of political socialization and voting anxiety among first-generation young voters, see also Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2005), 112–134.

²⁶ League of Women Voters, “LWV Transformation Journey”; Celina Stewart, “How DEI Impacts Us—And Democracy,” League of Women Voters blog, last updated February 19, 2025, <https://www.lwv.org/blog/how-dei-impacts-us-and-democracy>; and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Indiana University Press, 1998), 1–15.

²⁷ García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out”; League of Women Voters, 2024 *Election Impact Report*; League of Women Voters Education Fund, “VOTE411”; and Center for Information

& Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), “The Youth Vote in 2022,” Tufts University, <https://circle.tufts.edu/2022-election-center> (accessed July 2, 2026).

²⁸ See, for example, Kennedy Scales, “League of Women Voters’ Relaunches in Staunton,” WHSV3 News, January 13, 2026, <https://www.whsv.com/2026/01/13/league-women-voters-relaunches-staunton>.

²⁹ Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*, 185–210; and Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland, *Civic Innovation in America* (University of California Press, 2001), 275–305.