

Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Summer 2026

How Do We Renovate American Democracy at the 250th?

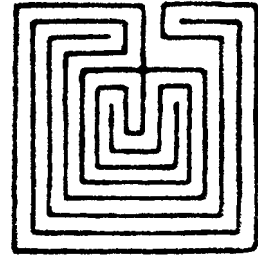
Danielle Allen, Stephen Heintz
& Eric Liu, guest editors





*Representing the intellectual community in its breadth
and diversity, Dædalus explores the frontiers of
knowledge and issues of public importance.*

Dædalus



Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

“How Do We Renovate American Democracy at the 250th?”

Volume 155, Number 3; Summer 2026

Danielle Allen, Stephen Heintz & Eric Liu, Guest Editors

Phyllis S. Bendell, Editor in Chief

Peter Walton, Senior Editor

Maya Robinson, Assistant Editor

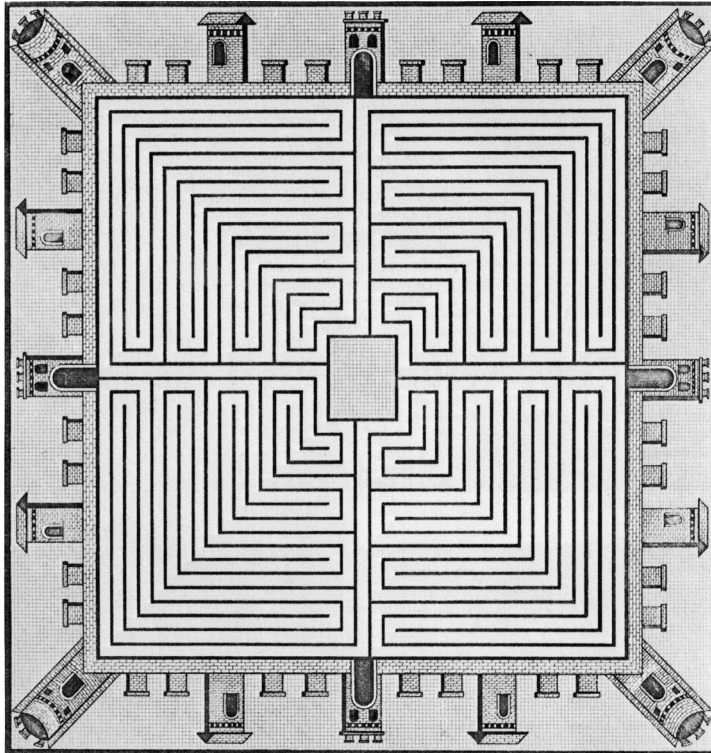
Contents

- 6 *Introduction*
Our Common Purpose: Democratic Citizenship at
America's 250th Anniversary
Danielle Allen, Stephen Heintz & Eric Liu
- 16 Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a
New American Century
Wallace B. Jefferson
 - 26 Upgrading Congress to Meet the Demands
of the 21st Century
Kevin R. Kosar
 - 33 Architects for a Fourth Founding
Cynthia Richie Terrell
 - 39 Term Limits & Democratic Renewal
Kermit Roosevelt
- 45 Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement
Lisa García Bedolla
 - 56 High School Voting Can Activate the Left Out
Jahnvi Rao
 - 63 From Access to Agency: Civic Infrastructure,
Federated Democracy & the Organizational Work
that Policy Cannot Do
Adam Ambrogio
- 76 Democracy in Practice: A Report on Innovations
in Participatory Governance
Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer
 - 89 Toward a Framework & Evidence for Innovation
in Co-Governance
Amy E. Lerman
 - 100 From Participatory Experiments to
Democratic Infrastructure
Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling & David Lazer
 - 106 Consensus Without Consequence
Matthew Weil

- 111 **Trust for Civic Life: America's Civic Future Starts in Local Communities**
Charlie Brown & Christina Jodice
- 122 **Rebuilding the Art of Association: Philanthropy & the Renewal of American Civic Life**
Daniel Stid
- 128 **From Common Purpose to Common Practice: National Service & the Rebuilding of Civic Infrastructure for the 21st Century**
Kristen Bennett
- 134 **Civic Information Architecture**
Ethan Zuckerman
- 152 **The Hardest Part Is Always People**
Sandra González-Bailón
- 158 **Community News Is the Key**
Steven Waldman
- 165 **Civic Media in the Second Gilded Age**
Darryl Holliday
- 178 **Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture**
David E. Campbell
- 189 **Disagreeing to Build: Civic Renewal in an Age of Polarization**
Rajiv Vinnakota
- 195 **Every Student, Every Degree: Bold Higher Ed Action to Renew U.S. Democracy**
Carol Geary Schneider
- 203 **Building Institutions to Improve Civic Culture**
Peter Levine

Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences



Nineteenth-century depiction of a Roman mosaic labyrinth, now lost, found in Villa di Diomede, Pompeii

Dædalus was founded in 1955 and established as a quarterly in 1958. Its namesake was renowned in ancient Greece as an inventor, scientist, and unriddler of riddles. The journal's emblem, a labyrinth seen from above, symbolizes the aspiration of its founders to "lift each of us above his cell in the labyrinth of learning in order that he may see the entire structure as if from above, where each separate part loses its comfortable separateness."

The American Academy of Arts & Sciences, like its journal, brings together distinguished individuals from every field of human endeavor. It was chartered in 1780 as a forum "to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honour, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people." Now in its third century, the Academy, with its more than five thousand members, continues to provide intellectual leadership to meet the critical challenges facing our world.

Dædalus Summer 2026

Issued as Volume 155, Number 3

© 2026 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Editorial offices: *Dædalus*, American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 136 Irving Street, Cambridge MA 02138. Phone: 617 576 5085. Email: daedalus@amacad.org.

Library of Congress Catalog No. 12-30299.

Dædalus publishes by invitation only and assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. The views expressed are those of the author(s) of each essay, and not necessarily of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

Dædalus (ISSN 0011-5266; E-ISSN 1548-6192) is published quarterly (winter, spring, summer, fall) by The MIT Press, 255 Main Street, Suite 9, Cambridge MA 02142, for the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. An electronic full-text version of *Dædalus* is available from amacad.org/daedalus and from The MIT Press.

Dædalus is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license. For allowed uses under this license, please visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>.

Members of the American Academy please direct all questions and claims to daedalus@amacad.org.

Advertising inquiries may be addressed to Marketing Department, MIT Press Journals, 255 Main Street, Suite 9, Cambridge MA 02142. Phone: 617 253 2866. Fax: 617 253 1709. Email: journals-info@mit.edu.

To request permission to photocopy or reproduce content from *Dædalus*, please contact the Subsidiary Rights Manager at MIT Press Journals, 255 Main Street, Suite 9, Cambridge MA 02142. Fax: 617 253 1709. Email: journals-rights@mit.edu.

Corporations and academic institutions with valid photocopying and/or digital licenses with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) may reproduce content from *Dædalus* under the terms of their license. Please go to www.copyright.com; CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers MA 01923.

Printed in the United States by The Sheridan Press, 450 Fame Avenue, Hanover PA 17331.

Postmaster: Send address changes to *Dædalus*, 255 Main Street, Suite 9, Cambridge MA 02142. Periodicals postage paid at Boston MA and at additional mailing offices.

The typeface is Cycles, designed by Sumner Stone at the Stone Type Foundry of Guinda CA. Each size of Cycles has been separately designed in the tradition of metal types.

Introduction

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

Danielle Allen, Stephen Heintz & Eric Liu

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>.

Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century

Wallace B. Jefferson

Equality of voice and representation is a foundational value of American democracy and a prerequisite for democratic renewal and adaptation in the twenty-first century. This essay considers the potential and progress made toward three structural reforms – expanding the House of Representatives, implementing Supreme Court term limits, and introducing ranked-choice voting – designed to increase genuine representation. It also finds that their transformative potential is increased by a fourth reform: multi-member congressional districts. America’s 250th anniversary offers a rare opportunity for democratic renewal that we cannot afford to waste or allow to succumb to partisan politics. The alternative – accepting institutional dysfunction and democratic decay – is unacceptable.

In his second address to Congress, delivered in the crucible of civil war, Abraham Lincoln confronted the challenge of national renewal with a question that still reverberates: “Can we do better?” His answer, strikingly apt for our time, was a call for transformation:

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.¹

Now, as the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, Lincoln’s challenge confronts us again. His question has gained fresh urgency in the face of democratic erosion, civic disillusionment, and institutional drift.

Recognizing this moment, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences convened the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. Its landmark 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* answers Lincoln’s call with clarity and conviction.

The report – at once sobering and hopeful – offers a blueprint. It aims to rebuild the architecture of self-government so that citizens have reasons to reengage, restoring trust and cultivating a more vibrant democratic culture. Better institutions will yield a stronger democracy.

At the heart of this transformation lies Strategy 1: *achieve equality of voice and representation*.² It is the foundation upon which the report's other reforms depend. Without genuine representation, other efforts to revitalize democracy falter. The strategy has eight recommendations, three of which have gained significant traction since 2020:

- Expand the House of Representatives to reflect population growth and ensure more equitable representation.
- Implement eighteen-year terms for U.S. Supreme Court justices to reduce politicization and enhance legitimacy.
- Introduce ranked-choice voting to foster broader consensus, reduce polarization, and empower voters with more meaningful choices.

These reforms are structural commitments to a democracy that listens, adapts, and includes. They answer Lincoln's call to "think anew and act anew," and they invite us to disenthral ourselves from outdated assumptions about what our democracy can achieve.

From the beginning, the American experiment has rested on a simple but profound principle: representation as the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. The institutions that ensure representation require carefully calibrated safeguards to function effectively. For example, Alexander Hamilton defended life tenure for judges as a bulwark against the "occasional ill humors in the society."³ Yet he also acknowledged that representative bodies must remain tethered to the will of the people. Independence may protect institutions, but accountability sustains their legitimacy.

The tension between independence and responsiveness has shaped American constitutional history. In an 1804 letter to Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson warned that judicial supremacy over other branches "would make the judiciary a despotic branch."⁴ Jefferson grasped a central truth of constitutional democracy: institutions must be independent to deliberate freely, but also accountable to maintain the people's trust.

Today, this balance is under acute strain. The Supreme Court's approval ratings have plummeted to historic lows, and congressional districts – distorted by outdated apportionment – no longer reflect the nation's demographic realities. The result is a growing disconnect between the governed and their governing institutions, a drift that threatens our freedoms, cleaves our unity, and weakens our influence in the world.

Strategy 1 of *Our Common Purpose* – to achieve equality of voice and representation – aims to restore this balance. Its structural reforms seek to strengthen the integrity of our institutions by renewing their connection to the public they serve. It reaffirms a founding insight: that democracy flourishes when representation is real, responsible, responsive, and resilient.

History affirms that democratic rebalancing is not only necessary, it is achievable. The Civil War amendments marked a second founding, radically expanding the constitutional promise of equality. A century later, the Civil Rights Movement ushered in a third founding, breathing new life into those ideals and confronting the exclusions that had long undermined them. Today, we stand at the threshold of a fourth founding, one that seeks to make democracy not just aspirational but truly representative and responsive.

The founders designed the House of Representatives to grow with the nation. In Federalist No. 10, James Madison envisioned a chamber large enough to include citizens “of the most diffusive and established characters” – a body capable of reflecting the diversity and complexity of the American public.⁵ The Constitution sets two requirements: each state must have at least one representative and seats must be apportioned by population every ten years.

Yet, since 1913, the House has been frozen at 435 members, even as our population has more than tripled. This artificial cap has distorted the very principle of representation. Today, each member of the House serves approximately 760,000 constituents, a ratio that would have shocked the founders and that renders meaningful representation increasingly elusive. As congressional scholar Kevin Kosar has observed, the current imbalance undermines the House’s ability to serve as the people’s chamber.⁶

The mathematics of democracy matter. Oversized districts dilute the connection between representatives and constituents, making government feel distant and unresponsive. Massive districts also skew the Electoral College, amplifying the influence of certain states in presidential elections. And they promote gerrymandering, allowing mapmakers to fracture communities across sprawling districts.

Since *Our Common Purpose*’s publication in 2020, momentum for expanding the House has accelerated. Three bills have been introduced in Congress proposing to add between 138 and 150 seats. In 2021, the American Academy published *The Case for Enlarging the House of Representatives*, and the Academy has briefed more than fifty congressional offices on the proposal.⁷ Civic organizations like Protect Democracy and the POPVOX Foundation have developed practical plans to accommodate a larger House, including architectural adjustments to the chamber and proposed changes to House rules.

Expanding the House envisions a structural reform to restore core purposes of representation. It brings government closer to the governed, strengthens the legitimacy of our institutions, and reaffirms the foundational belief that democracy begins with the people.

Historical precedent confirms that expanding the House is both feasible and consistent with the founders’ vision. Until 1913, Congress routinely added seats following most decennial censuses, allowing the chamber to grow alongside the nation. The current cap of 435 members was not the product of constitutional design

but of political and infrastructural convenience. Nothing prevents Congress from revisiting that decision.

A democracy cannot abide a judiciary that answers only to itself. As a former chief justice of a large and diverse state, I have seen up close how courts earn – and lose – public confidence. Judicial legitimacy depends on the same careful balance between independence and responsiveness that shapes other constitutional institutions. Courts must be free to decide cases according to law rather than political pressure and accountable in a measure sufficient to sustain the public's faith that judges do not stand above democratic restraint. When either side of that balance is perceived to be missing, the institution suffers, regardless of how well-reasoned its opinions may be.

Texas offers a vivid illustration of the tradeoff. Our state-court judges stand for election in partisan races. That structure can promote accountability: judges must defend their record, listen to communities, and accept that the people ultimately decide who serves. But partisan elections also carry a real cost. When judicial campaigns are conducted through party labels, fundraising networks, and interest-group mobilization, it becomes harder for the public to believe that legal judgment is insulated from political currents. Even when judges are faithful to the law, the appearance of political influence can undermine confidence – and appearances matter because courts rely on public acceptance rather than force.

The Supreme Court of the United States sits at another pole. Life tenure is designed to protect independence, and it has done so in important ways. But life tenure also creates its own legitimacy problem. It can separate the Court from regular accountability and make the Court's composition turn on a combination of events, like retirements timed to political conditions and vacancies created by unexpected illness or death. In a system in which a single appointment can shape constitutional law for a generation, a vacancy lottery inevitably raises the stakes of each nomination, invites hardball tactics, and feeds the perception that the Court is simply another arena of partisan sport. That perception – whether fair or not – decreases confidence in the Court and, ultimately, in constitutional governance.

Term limits offer a structural, nonpartisan reform that can better align independence and accountability. An eighteen-year, nonrenewable term – paired with staggered appointments so each president makes two appointments per four-year term – would regularize the process and reduce the sense that any single vacancy is a once-in-a-generation event. Predictability changes incentives. It lowers the temperature of confirmations by ensuring that no single health crisis or strategically timed retirement determines the Court's direction for decades. It also reduces the pressure on justices themselves to time retirement to orchestrate a political outcome – an odd and unhealthy power for any person to wield, and one that can distort public perceptions of impartiality.

The most serious objection to term limits is that they might compromise judicial independence. That concern is understandable but ultimately misplaced. Independence is not an all-or-nothing proposition, and it does not require life tenure. A lengthy, nonrenewable term preserves the conditions necessary for principled decision-making. A justice can decide cases without fear of removal, without needing to curry favor for reappointment, and without calibrating decisions to future electoral outcomes. Indeed, as constitutional law scholar Kermit Roosevelt has persuasively argued, term limits can *enhance* independence in an important respect. Under life tenure, a justice's personal decision about when to retire can exert outsized influence over the Court's ideological trajectory. A regularized term reduces that leverage and returns the timing of appointment to an orderly constitutional cadence rather than an individual strategy.⁸

The framers designed the federal judiciary with independence in mind, but they could not have anticipated modern longevity, nor the degree to which extended tenure would make each appointment a deeply consequential political trophy. When Justice Antonin Scalia died unexpectedly in 2016, the resulting vacancy became a focal point of intense partisan conflict precisely because vacancies are so rare and unpredictable. That kind of conflict is not a sign of constitutional health; it is a symptom of a design that increasingly turns the Court's membership into a high-stakes contest. Term limits would not eliminate disagreement, but they would reduce the incentives for partisan gamesmanship by making appointments routine rather than exceptional.

History also suggests the value of periodic renewal. At several critical moments, the Court has entered sustained conflict with democratic institutions and emerging constitutional understandings. The *Dred Scott* era illustrates how a Court can become detached from the nation's evolving constitutional commitments, with consequences that harmed both the country and the Court's reputation. The Court's resistance to early New Deal reforms produced institutional confrontation so severe that it threatened the Court's standing. In other periods, the Court has preserved its authority more effectively by maintaining sufficient institutional capital, earned in part through public confidence that the Court is neither frozen in time nor captured by transient politics. The point is not that the Court should track opinion polls. It should not. But the Court's legitimacy is strengthened when the public can see the institution as durable, principled, and periodically renewed rather than locked into a composition determined by chance and strategy.

Term limits would preserve what is essential about judicial independence while restoring a degree of regular accountability that modern life tenure lacks. Like judicial elections, they recognize that courts operate within a constitutional democracy and depend on public acceptance. Unlike partisan elections, they do so without asking judges to campaign, raise money, or run under party labels. Term limits are a prudent institutional adjustment that safeguard the Court's authority by reducing

the perception of politicization and by reaffirming a core democratic principle: no office of such immense and enduring power should depend on the happenstance of timing or remain insulated from meaningful accountability across generations.

Winner-take-all plurality voting – the system most Americans take for granted – was inherited from England and designed for an era of limited suffrage and two dominant parties. It forces voters to choose the “lesser evil” rather than their preferred candidate, distorts representation, and reinforces polarization. Ranked-choice voting offers a straightforward alternative that better reflects voter preferences and encourages coalition-building.

Under the ranked-choice model, voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their supporters’ ballots are redistributed to each voter’s second choice candidate. This process continues until one candidate secures a majority. The result is a more accurate reflection of voter preferences and an incentive for candidates to appeal to a broader coalition.

Ranked-choice voting has been successful throughout the United States and at different levels of government. Maine became the first state to adopt it for federal elections in 2016, and Alaska followed in 2020. In local elections, jurisdictions from New York City to San Francisco have implemented the system, reporting higher voter satisfaction and more-civil campaigns. Research confirms that ranked-choice voting reduces negative campaigning, as candidates have an incentive to seek second-choice support from their opponents’ voters.

This system also shows particular promise for improving women’s representation. Cynthia Terrell and her colleagues at RepresentWomen have documented that ranked-choice voting helps reduce the barriers women candidates face in traditional partisan primaries.⁹ When voters can express nuanced preferences rather than choosing a single candidate, the electoral landscape becomes more welcoming to a broader range of candidates.

While these reforms – expanding the House, implementing Supreme Court term limits, and introducing ranked-choice voting – each stand on their own merits, their transformative potential is amplified by inclusion of a fourth reform, which has not yet gained the same traction: allowing multi-member districts. The pairing of ranked-choice voting and multimember districts, in particular, would create proportional representation, ensuring that diverse perspectives – whether racial, cultural, or ideological – gain voice in Congress regardless of how district lines are drawn.¹⁰

Federal law requires single-member districts for House elections, but this wasn’t always the case. Many states used multimember districts in the nineteenth century, and other democracies use various forms of proportional representation today. The

1967 law mandating single-member districts could be repealed through regular legislation, allowing states to experiment with different approaches.

Multimember districts with ranked-choice voting would address several democratic deficits. Instead of drawing districts where one party dominates, states could create larger districts that elect multiple representatives, allowing the full spectrum of opinion to be represented in Congress. This approach could ameliorate the effects of residential segregation and partisan polarization.

The reform would also substantially reduce the incentive for gerrymandering. When districts elect multiple members proportionally, manipulating boundaries becomes far less effective. Politicians would need to appeal to broader constituencies, rather than designing districts to guarantee safe seats.

The six years since *Our Common Purpose*'s publication have witnessed meaningful progress on the Strategy 1 recommendations to achieve equality of voice and representation. Beyond the legislative proposals already in motion, the broader conversation about democratic reform has evolved. Across the political spectrum, organizations now recognize that structural change – not just procedural tweaks – is essential to revitalizing American democracy.

This momentum reflects a growing consensus that incremental reforms are no longer sufficient. Americans of all political affiliations express deep frustration with institutions that feel distant, unresponsive, and resistant to change. Yet the Commission's listening sessions revealed something more enduring: an abiding commitment to democratic ideals, especially when citizens feel they have agency and institutions demonstrate that they can serve the public effectively.

Still, formidable challenges remain. Entrenched interests benefit from the status quo and resist disruption. Polarization complicates cooperation, and constitutional constraints limit what is legally possible without amending the Constitution, even as political constraints narrow what is feasible. Most fundamentally, reform requires a leap of civic faith: Americans must believe that democratic institutions can be improved rather than simply endured.

The success of individual reforms depends on understanding their interdependence. Expanding the House without changing how representatives are elected risks amplifying existing distortions. Imposing Supreme Court term limits without broader attention to the appointment process could intensify polarization rather than mitigate it. Introducing ranked-choice voting in single-member districts would enhance representation, but without broader structural changes, it may fall short of transformative impact.

Democracy is an architecture that requires constant maintenance and periodic renovation. The founders built well, but they did not fully anticipate that the three branches could drift so far from the foundation of democracy that the foundation itself is imperiled. Each generation must decide whether to preserve, repair, or

reimagine the structures they inherit based on contemporary needs and constitutional principles.

The reforms in Strategy 1 represent targeted renovations designed to strengthen democracy's foundation while preserving its essential character. They address the cycle of declining participation and institutional failure by creating institutions worthy of public trust and engagement.

Democracy also requires citizens who understand their role in maintaining democratic institutions. This means engaging beyond voting: participating in civil society organizations, attending public meetings, supporting journalism, and building relationships across lines of difference. It means understanding that democracy is not a spectator sport but a participatory enterprise that succeeds only when citizens invest in its success.

The 250th anniversary of American independence provides a unique opportunity to celebrate an American democracy that is capable of renewal and improvement. The work is difficult and the outcome uncertain, but the alternative – accepting institutional dysfunction and democratic decay – is unacceptable.

One of the greatest dangers of our present moment is the reflex to treat any proposal for structural reform as inherently partisan. In an era of such polarization, even neutral design improvements can be dismissed as power grabs. That impulse must be resisted. The *Our Common Purpose* reforms emerged from a bipartisan commission and reflect principles that transcend party loyalty: that representation should be authentic, that institutions should be accountable, and that democratic systems must be capable of renewal as circumstances change.

These reforms are not designed to advantage one political party at the expense of another. They are structural adjustments aimed at strengthening democratic legitimacy itself. Expanding the House, implementing term limits for Supreme Court justices, adopting ranked-choice voting, and eliminating the single-member district mandate would foster a more responsive and representative democracy, regardless of which party is in power at any given moment.

Expanding the House to better reflect population growth would benefit states governed by Republicans and Democrats alike. A regularized system of Supreme Court appointments through term limits would ensure that every president – Republican or Democrat – has a predictable and equal opportunity to shape the Court. Ranked-choice voting and proportional representation would allow a broader range of views to be expressed, giving voice to voters across the ideological spectrum who are currently underrepresented or disengaged. And multimember districts would both ensure diversity of voice in the House and disincentivize gerrymandering, increasing public confidence in the institution in the process.

The breadth of thoughtful commentary on these proposals reinforces their nonpartisan attributes. Kosar emphasizes that institutional effectiveness depends

not only on outcomes but on internal capacity and design. Roosevelt's analysis of Supreme Court term limits demonstrates how regularized appointments prevent durable minority control, regardless of which party holds power. Research from RepresentWomen shows that electoral reforms expand opportunity and representation for a wide range of groups, not for any single political coalition.

If we allow these reforms to be dismissed as partisan simply because our politics are polarized, we will forfeit a rare opportunity for democratic renewal. As the nation approaches its 250th anniversary, the task before us is not merely to commemorate what has endured, but to strengthen our institutions so that they remain worthy of the constitutional ideals they were designed to serve – ideals that transcend party, ideology, and circumstance.

We stand at a pivotal moment, one that invites us to show that our democracy is not only enduring but capable of renewal, adaptation, and growth. The institutions we shape over the next decade will determine whether future generations inherit a democracy that invites thoughtful improvement, not emergency reconstruction.

The reforms in Strategy 1 matter not just for their technical merits but for what they signal: a renewed commitment to making democratic institutions worthy of democratic citizens. When Americans believe their voices count, they participate more fully. When institutions respond to public needs, citizens invest in their improvement. When representation is authentic, democracy becomes a source of pride rather than frustration.

These reforms return us to core democratic principles: that representation is the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, that institutions require both independence and accountability, and that democracy must adapt to serve each generation. Lincoln's question – *Can we do better?* – demands not just contemplation but action.

Democratic renewal is a collective endeavor to reimagine how institutions serve the people. Strategy 1 offers a blueprint for that effort, rooted in the conviction that democracy must adapt to remain legitimate, inclusive, and responsive. We can do better. We must think anew, act anew, and disenthral ourselves from dogmas of the past.

This is our inheritance and our common purpose.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wallace B. Jefferson is former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas, Partner in the law firm Alexander Dubose & Jefferson LLP in Austin, Texas, and President of the American Law Institute. As a lawyer, he has successfully argued cases before the United States Supreme Court, and his scholarly writings have been published in *Judicature*, *New York University Law Review*, and *Seattle University Law Review*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Annual Message,” December 1, 1862, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/202180>.
- 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/section/6>.
- ³ Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 78, May 28, 1788, <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-71-80#s-lg-box-wrapper-25493470>.
- ⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, September 11, 1804, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-15-02-0238>.
- ⁵ James Madison, Federalist No. 10, November 23, 1787, <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10#s-lg-box-wrapper-25493273>.
- ⁶ Kevin R. Kosar, “Should We Expand the House of Representatives? The Founders Thought So,” The Hill, January 10, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/588859-should-we-expand-the-house-of-representatives-the-founders-thought-so>.
- ⁷ 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).
- ⁸ Kermit Roosevelt III, “Why SCOTUS Term Limits Will Lead to a Fairer Court,” *Time* magazine, July 29, 2024, <https://time.com/7005039/scotus-term-limits-fairer-court-essay>.
- ⁹ Cynthia Richie Terrell, Courtney Lamendola, and Maura Reilly, “Election Reform and Women’s Representation: Ranked Choice Voting in the U.S.,” *Politics and Governance* 9 (2) (2021): 332, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i2.3924>.
- ¹⁰ 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>.

Upgrading Congress to Meet the Demands of the 21st Century

Kevin R. Kosar

Americans' dissatisfaction with Congress is long-standing; its public approval rating has hovered between 10 and 30 percent for the last two decades. This discontent threatens national unity and democratic confidence, especially amid polarization and partisan political conflict. Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson's proposals to expand the House and adopt ranked-choice voting with multimember districts are worth serious consideration – as are their potential effects on the day-to-day functioning of Congress. Reformers, however, should give additional consideration to the sorry state of the institution of Congress. Its staffing, technology, and internal processes need upgrading to better direct popular energies and representative actions toward competent governance.

That the American public is dissatisfied with Congress is not news. We the people have always had a love-hate relationship with our national legislature. On the one hand, we take immense pride in being a representative democracy. We Americans, or at least those of us who vote, have a role in deciding who gets to be a legislator. That is thanks to the First Amendment, which protects our right to tell Congress what we would like it to do and to “petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

On the other hand, Americans' rebellious yet moralistic character streak has always fueled a suspicion of government and the people within it. The word “politician” long has been used as an epithet, one hurled at officeholders who are thought to be duplicitous or outright corrupt.

Yet the public's abysmally low opinion of Congress over the past couple of decades has been too little discussed. A mere 15 percent of individuals surveyed by Gallup in autumn 2025 approved of “the way Congress is handling its job.” Some 79 percent of respondents disapproved of the national legislature's performance.¹ This is no mere blip; public approval of Congress has hovered between 10 and 30 percent for twenty years. Only rarely over the past fifty years has public approval crossed 40 percent.

Persistent negative opinion toward Congress is a problem because it is, to use Abraham Lincoln's turn of phrase, loosening “our bonds of affection.”² Surveys

also show widespread public anxiety about the health of democracy in America and flagging belief in our national governance among younger Americans.³ Which is to say nothing of the uptick in partisan polarization, toxic political dialogue fomented by “conflict entrepreneurs,” and political violence. Americans increasingly are eyeing one another nervously.⁴

America is a creedal nation.⁵ We are not united through a shared ethnicity; blood and soil do not bind us. Rather, we are held together by various ideas, one of which is the belief in self-government through representative democracy.

And Congress is the centerpiece of our national system of self-rule. It is the institution in which the great diversity of the United States may convene and consider today’s challenges large and small. Congress was designed to be the place where *e pluribus* could be forged into *unum*. This is why thinking long and hard about Congress’s problems is an essential component of any effort to improve national governance.

So I was heartened to read Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson’s essay.⁶ He takes seriously our challenges and presents a bold agenda to “rebuild the architecture of self-government” that includes major reforms of Congress: expanding the membership of the House and transforming how Americans elect House members.

The House of Representatives has been frozen at 435 members for more than a century. This was not what the founders intended. They expected the membership of the most democratic of our national institutions to grow as the population increased. That is why the U.S. Constitution’s Article I, Section 2, Clause 3 mandates the taking of a population every ten years: to enable representatives to be apportioned.

Between 1790 and 1910, our national legislatures regularly got bigger.⁷ The body went from 105 to 435 legislators. Due to the swelling U.S. population, the average number of voters per representative expanded substantially. In 1790, the typical House member answered to 34,436 individuals. By 1910, that number was 210,583.

Today, as Chief Justice Jefferson notes, the average House representative has 760,000 constituents, an enormous number that will keep increasing unless a lot more legislators are promptly added to the chamber. “Oversized districts,” Jefferson observes, “dilute the connection between representatives and constituents, making government feel distant and unresponsive.”⁸ This is true. One reason that members of Congress spend so little time in Washington, D.C., is because they fear being tarred as “out of touch” and booted from Congress. They return to their home districts almost every week to hedge against that risk, which, obviously, means they are cutting short their time to get things done on behalf of the public they are supposed to serve.

Too few legislators make for additional problems. It is nearly impossible for 435 members of the House to oversee 180 federal agencies and roughly \$7 trillion in spending.⁹ When Congress capped itself in 1910, there were fewer than a dozen executive branch agencies and a budget of about \$6.4 billion. Additionally, having a

static number of House members means that every ten years reapportionment takes representatives away from some states. The 2020 reapportionment took a legislator away from Ohio, California, and five other states, leaving voters less well heard.

Jefferson does not stipulate exactly how many more House members there should be. It is a difficult question to answer. If we wanted to return to the 1910 ratio of 210,583 Americans per legislator, we would need 1,614 House members to serve the 340 million Americans. This would not quite quadruple the present membership of an already unruly chamber, and would be a tough sell to the American public. They already dislike the members of Congress, so why would they want to pay for more of them?

Possibly, Jefferson agrees with the authors of the Academy's report on expanding the House, which argues for 150 new legislators.¹⁰ Having 585 House members would lower the representation ratio to 581,196 per legislator. That is an improvement, but it is unclear how much of one.

Chief Justice Jefferson understands that an expanded House that behaves the same as the current House is not going to make representative government better. Having more fire-breathing left-wing or right-wing public officials will not *make Congress great again*.

Thus, he advocates remaking the electoral process by implementing ranked-choice voting and multimember House districts. The former reform aims to allow voters to better express their true preferences. No longer, he writes, would citizens feel a strong incentive to "choose the 'lesser evil'" among the bevy of candidates seeking office. Instead, citizens could vote for the candidate they like best as well as for other candidates they favor.

There is something to be said for replacing the current winner-takes-all style of voting, which has a whole host of pathologies. Yet whether ranked-choice voting is the best option remains disputed among election reformers. Others make persuasive cases for other forms of preferential voting, such as approval voting.¹¹ The average voter can quickly learn how to rank candidates. More difficult is for them to understand how votes get tabulated into final results. Many of them find the vote transferal process mystifying and struggle to understand how one candidate may lead at the end of the first round of voting yet ultimately lose.

Partly, Americans have been habituated to single-choice voting and plurality winners. Hence, it is important to remember that the success of whatever preferential system a reformer decides to back will depend very heavily on both voter education and competent administration.

Chief Justice Jefferson understands that ranked-choice voting alone may not be strong enough medicine for curing what ails Congress. Thus, he joins political scientist Lee Drutman and a growing chorus of thinkers advocating that America move to multimember representation.¹²

Multimember districts with ranked-choice voting would address several democratic deficits. Instead of drawing districts where one party dominates, states could create larger districts that elect multiple representatives, allowing the full spectrum of opinion to be represented in Congress. This approach could ameliorate the effects of residential segregation and partisan polarization. The reform would also substantially reduce the incentive for gerrymandering.¹³

Indubitably, the average American views gerrymandering as a political grotesquerie. “Voters should choose their politicians and not the other way around” goes the old saw. Putting an end to gerrymandering certainly will appeal to the many Americans who are exhausted by the relentless partisan machinations to rig districts. Most voters also would appreciate legislators feeling stronger incentives to solve complex national issues rather than use them first for personal and party branding.

Nevertheless, it would be prudent for reformers to discuss further how they envision this new system coming to be and operating.

Quite probably a federal law would have to be enacted to force steps to adopt a ranked-choice (or preferential-voting), multimember-district system. Plainly, getting that change through Congress presents a formidable challenge. For all the unhappy legislators, very few thus far have shown any desire to let go of the system they know.

But assuming the political will did exist, there are myriad, important questions to consider about the details of the new electoral system. For example, should federal law dictate the number of districts relative to the number of voters in each state? California’s fifty-two representatives would look very different if they all were drawn from four giant districts rather than thirteen smaller districts. In the former structure, the thirteen members elected to each of the four giant districts probably would represent a whole range of political parties, including Greens, socialists, conservatives, and libertarians. In the latter example, the four winners drawn from each smaller district probably would be mostly Democrats.

Furthermore, reformers should devote more discussion to envisioning the repercussions for the day-to-day business of the House. A system of preferential voting and multimember districts raises the prospects of additional parties finding representation in Congress. That may well be a good thing, but much of the House’s rules and practices are based upon two-party bargaining. Would it be easier or harder for legislators to agree on who is named Speaker of the House? Would multimember districts change the very nature of the speakership in ways positive or negative? How would multiple legislators from a single district respond to constituent requests for help? Would the selection of the chairmen of committees be less about their fundraising prowess and dutiful partisanship and more about their subject matter knowledge and leadership qualities? Would bargaining between the House and the Senate over draft legislation be easier or more difficult?

Assuredly, Congress can be made better with reforms. But we would be wise not to inadvertently and needlessly tear down a Chesterton's Fence. Five decades ago, following the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation, reformers made a host of changes to Capitol Hill that aimed to make the institution more democratic and transparent. In some ways, they improved the place, as John Lawrence, a former adviser to Speaker Nancy Pelosi, has described.¹⁴ Other changes, unfortunately, paved the way for the polarized, toxic congressional politics of today.

Chief Justice Jefferson's reform proposals all aim to incentivize Congress to better serve its constitutional and representational purposes. Each of them deserves serious consideration.

I would, however, be remiss if I concluded this essay without mentioning another route to congressional renewal.

Like any other organization or entity, Congress's performance is affected by its capacity: its people, internal structures and processes, and technology. By all accounts, Congress's capacity is inadequate. A 2024 survey of senior congressional staff found that half of them thought congressional capacity was inadequate.¹⁵ An earlier study identified significant gaps in legislative staff understanding of governance issues, and found the House had fewer committee staff and nonpartisan legislative branch support agency employees than in the 1980s.¹⁶ It also found that each House member has only twenty staff to serve the three-quarters of a million constituents they have on average. House legislative staff regularly complain about the shoddy software they have to use to handle the crush of constituent communications.

And this is to say nothing of the frozen-in-amber aspects of the House's structure and operations. Committee jurisdictions, which decide who gets to do what work, have barely changed since the 1980s. The legislative process has devolved from an orderly, predictable process into an incoherent mess of backroom dealing that makes it inordinately difficult for individual legislators to move bills to a floor vote. That the chamber has a rule that empowers the speaker to unilaterally shut down the people's house for multiple weeks, as occurred in autumn of 2025, is indicative of the desperate need for enacting internal reforms that better enable the House to work for the people.¹⁷

The good news is that for the past six years, small, internal reforms have been pushed through the House by the Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation (formerly named the Select Committee on Modernization).¹⁸ The House has acquired artificial intelligence licenses to help legislators and staff better digest data and information, for example. Very few people outside of the U.S. Capitol are aware any of this is happening, which is too bad, because it offers us some hope that more consequential changes are possible. The U.S. Constitution gives Congress immense authority to organize itself, devise its processes, and spend as much

money as it likes on staff, technology, and resources. More Americans would be wise to exhort Congress to use this authority to increase its capacity to meet the demands of our immense and growing country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin R. Kosar is a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He edits UnderstandingCongress.org and coedited *Congress Overwhelmed: The Decline in Congressional Capacity and Prospects for Reform* (with Timothy M. LaPira and Lee Drutman, 2020). He previously served as a nonpartisan analyst at the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, where he regularly assisted legislators and Capitol Hill staff.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Congress and the Public,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ² Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, Washington, D.C., March 4, 1861, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.
- ³ Jeffrey M. Jones and Ellyn Maese, “Americans Show Consensus on Many Democracy-Related Matters,” Gallup, November 20, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/696494/americans-show-consensus-democracy-related-matters.aspx>; and Deborah Apau, Sara Suzuki, Alberto Medina, and Ruby Belle Booth, *How Does Gen Z Feel About Democracy? Insights from Three Profiles of Youth and Democracy* (CIRCLE and Protect Democracy, 2025), <https://circle.tufts.edu/report-genz-attitudes-democracy>.
- ⁴ Marina Ottaway, “Combating Conflict Entrepreneurs,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 7, 2002, <https://carnegieendowment.org/events/2002/02/combating-conflict-entrepreneurs?lang=en>.
- ⁵ American Enterprise Institute, “2025 Irving Kristol Award Presentation,” November 17, 2025, <http://aei.org/research-products/speech/2025-irving-kristol-award-presentation>.
- ⁶ Wallace B. Jefferson, “Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 16–25, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/reimagining-democratic-institutions-new-american-century>.
- ⁷ 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>.
- ⁸ Jefferson, “Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century,” 18.
- ⁹ Kevin R. Kosar, “How to Strengthen Congress,” *National Affairs* 25 (2015), <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/how-to-strengthen-congress>.
- ¹⁰ Drutman, Cohen, Levin, and Ornstein, *The Case for Enlarging the House of Representatives*.

- ¹¹ Steven J. Brams and Peter C. Fishburn, *Approval Voting* (Springer, 2007).
- ¹² Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
- ¹³ Jefferson, “Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century,” 22.
- ¹⁴ John A. Lawrence, *The Class of '74: Congress after Watergate and the Roots of Partisanship* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).
- ¹⁵ Mary-Molloy Blackstock and Kevin R. Kosar, “State of the Congress 2024: An Assessment of the Civility, Functionality, and Capacity of the 118th Congress by Senior Congressional Staff,” UnderstandingCongress.org, September 19, 2025, <https://www.understandingcongress.org/state-of-the-congress-2024-an-assessment-of-the-civility-functionality-and-capacity-of-the-118th-congress-by-senior-congressional-staff>.
- ¹⁶ Timothy M. LaPira, Lee Drutman, and Kevin R. Kosar, eds., *Congress Overwhelmed: The Decline in Congressional Capacity and Prospects for Reform* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).
- ¹⁷ Kevin R. Kosar, “The Speaker’s Authority to Convene and Adjourn the House,” UnderstandingCongress.org, November 13, 2025, <https://www.understandingcongress.org/the-speakers-authority-to-convene-and-adjourn-the-house>.
- ¹⁸ House Administration Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation, “Jurisdiction and Recommendations Status,” <https://cha.house.gov/modernization> (accessed March 24, 2026).

Architects for a Fourth Founding

Cynthia Richie Terrell

The United States has never achieved a truly representative democracy: women constitute half the population yet have never held close to half of elected offices. Responding to Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson's case for a "fourth founding," this response argues that the structural reforms he endorses – ranked-choice voting (RCV), multimember districts, House expansion – are all necessary but incomplete unless gender representation is treated as a foundational test of democracy, not an afterthought. Evidence from RCV cities, where women hold a majority of council seats, and from Australia's RCV-elected Parliament shows what's possible when electoral structure changes who can win. As the nation marks its 250th anniversary, the task is not to renew the democracy we inherited, but to build the one not yet realized.

Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson's essay offers one of the most compelling arguments to date for the structural electoral reforms advanced in the American Academy's 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.¹ His invocation of Lincoln's charge to "think anew and act anew" is not a rhetorical flourish but a necessary provocation in a moment when the gap between democratic ideals and democratic practice has widened to alarming proportions. Jefferson's framing of this moment as the threshold of a "fourth founding" is particularly apt: our institutions – strained by polarization, mistrust, and imbalances in representation – require not incremental adjustments but a new imagining of their democratic foundations.

I appreciate Jefferson's engagement with our work at RepresentWomen on ranked-choice voting (RCV), including our research on how RCV improves representational outcomes. His treatment of RCV correctly identifies it as a system that broadens voter choice and improves democratic responsiveness. What his analysis only begins to suggest, and what our findings make clear, is that these reforms also alter the demographic and relational dynamics of who can win elected office and how they govern. This response, therefore, builds on Jefferson's foundation by demonstrating how the structural changes he endorses are inseparable from progress toward gender-balanced governance, and is grounded in my perspective on how we might best write the next chapter for American democracy.

My purpose in this response is to extend Jefferson's arguments, starting with an essential dimension of equality: gender. In 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her hus-

band urging him to “remember the ladies”; her warning is as urgent now as when the ink on the Declaration of Independence was drying.² I am heartened that Jefferson’s analysis rightly centers the architecture of representation as a means to a better future. Yet the structure remains incomplete until we consider whom that architecture has historically excluded – and what a modern democracy must do to repair these omissions. To fulfill the democratic promise Jefferson describes, gender must be understood not as an afterthought but as a foundational test of whether representation is fully manifested.

I agree with Jefferson that legitimacy depends on a lived sense of connection between the governed and those who govern. But a central truth remains: the United States has never experienced a truly representative democracy. Women make up more than half the population yet have never held close to half the seats in Congress, governorships, or positions of meaningful political power.

RepresentWomen’s Gender Parity Index, now in its twelfth year, documents this failure: Progress toward gender balance has stalled and remains uneven.³ At the current pace, parity at the federal level will not be achieved for generations. For a country that has long positioned itself as a global democratic exemplar, our ranking well below that of leading democracies on women’s representation has become a stark international warning sign.

The consequences are substantive. Research across decades shows that women legislators are more likely to cosponsor bills, build cross-party coalitions, and advance policy solutions that address the lived experiences of families, caregivers, working women, and communities whose needs are often sidelined. Electing women changes what legislatures debate, how they negotiate, and which issues reach the floor. As Jefferson argues, institutions must be both independent and responsive; the presence of women strengthens both qualities.

Jefferson is at his strongest when he warns about evaluating reforms in isolation. His assertion that “the success of individual reforms depends on understanding their interdependence” resonates deeply.⁴ Indeed, the history of women’s representation supports his insight: no single reform has ever been sufficient to produce gender-balanced governance. A system designed without women in mind requires systemic recalibration and, in doing so, upholds voting rights and a more responsive government for all.

Here, I extend Jefferson’s framework: Achieving representational equality requires both structural reform and institutional support for candidates. RepresentWomen refers to this as the “twin-track” approach. Voting systems, district design, and institutional rules shape who can win; recruitment networks, caregiving policies, proxy voting, and legislative culture shape who can serve. Both tracks must advance together. Structural reform without candidate support risks replicating inequality; candidate support without structural change leaves intact the systems that produce disparity.

Jefferson's emphasis on structural reform provides the necessary scaffolding for this broader vision. His acknowledgment that the 435-seat cap in the House is a political artifact, not a constitutional principle, is an essential corrective to the narrative. However, expanding the House without changing how representatives are elected risks amplifying distortions.

A larger House should be paired with multimember districts and RCV, as suggested by the Fair Representation Act in Congress. Implementing both would: 1) create more open seats, enabling more women and candidates of color to win; 2) provide representatives with smaller constituencies, enabling more meaningful engagement; 3) better align partisan seat and vote share, correcting disproportionality; 4) defang gerrymandering by design rather than litigation; 5) create incentives for candidates to find common ground and work collaboratively on behalf of their constituents; and 6) produce a chamber whose legitimacy derives from its resemblance to the public.

To underscore this, note that the country's 5,413 state legislative seats – despite smaller district sizes – have not produced more competition, reduced polarization, or strengthened civic engagement. Simply increasing the number of representatives does not automatically yield representative democracy; the electoral structure used to select those representatives determines whether new voices enter public life.

Jefferson is right to provide a robust case for RCV on its own. RepresentWomen's research shows that in single-winner elections, RCV reduces the spoiler effect, rewards coalition-building, and loosens the grip of traditional gatekeepers – with women holding 52 percent of city council seats in cities with RCV.⁵ Maine elected its first woman governor after its first use of RCV in primaries in 2017, and Alaska now has a majority of women in its House. In these jurisdictions, women run – and win – in greater numbers because the system allows multiple qualified candidates to compete and promotes more positive, civil campaigns. These improvements are not theoretical: they are observable, measurable, and transformative. And they are already reshaping candidate pipelines.

International evidence reinforces this point. Australia now elects its House through RCV and its Senate through RCV in multimember districts. The result is a national parliament in which women hold the majority of seats. It's no accident that Australia's prime minister earned reelection in 2025 on a platform commentators described as a "politics of kindness," and that it was the first nation to ban social media platforms for children. The presence of women in meaningful numbers changes governance, legislative culture, and the quality of deliberation. The value of electing women is not a footnote; it is central to building the collaborative, responsive democracy Jefferson envisions.

The same pattern is emerging in pockets of the United States. RepresentWomen's research on RCV confirms what democratic theorists have long intuited: when gatekeepers lose monopoly power over who can run, and when voters sup-

port candidates without fear of splitting the vote, women break through. New York City's first RCV election saw women increase their representation from thirteen to thirty-one seats on a fifty-one-member council. St. Paul, Minnesota, now has an all-women city council, and a woman won election as a late entry candidate under RCV in 2025. Another jurisdiction with RCV, Salt Lake City, Utah, elected a majority of women to its council last year. These are not anomalies; they are early indicators of what becomes possible when electoral structures reward candidates who find common ground, civility, and broad voter engagement.

Crucially, RCV matches the scale and character of American democracy and is best suited for nonpartisan local elections. More than 80 percent of the 520,000 elected offices in the United States are local, nonpartisan positions, making party-list proportional representation inapplicable to those elections. If we want fair representation across the ballot, RCV is essential. It keeps elections rooted in communities, preserves voter-centered competition, and ensures that every voice shapes representation.

At the same time, while roughly 420,000 of America's elected offices are well-served by single-winner RCV, the remaining seats – particularly legislative bodies where proportionality truly matters – require the added strength of proportional RCV (PRCV). This is where Jefferson's openness to multimember districts becomes essential. RCV provides the foundation; PRCV completes the structure. The task before us is not to choose between them but to apply each reform where it delivers the most significant benefit: RCV for the vast majority of local elections, and PRCV where fair representation requires proportional outcomes. In combination, these reforms respond directly to Jefferson's call for institutions that broaden participation, elevate underrepresented voices, and restore democratic legitimacy. PRCV has already launched in major cities like Portland, Oregon, and its long history in Cambridge, Massachusetts, suggests a powerful impact on policies to address needs like housing.

Where Jefferson gestures, I endorse emphatically: PRCV is the most viable American form of proportional representation. It preserves candidate-centric elections, supports independents, and aligns more effectively with Voting Rights Act jurisprudence than party-list systems – with the Supreme Court's likely gutting of traditional remedies for racial minority vote dilution making an alternative remedy all the more urgent. It also addresses Jefferson's foundational concerns: PRCV enhances responsiveness, accountability, and fairness. Giving parties control of their nominations is a nonstarter politically. Many state parties are run by dogmatic insiders who may not recruit and support women, men of color, young people, or party insurgents, and voters have grown deeply invested in choosing party nominees. On a practical level, for House elections, more than half of the states have fewer than seven House seats, meaning candidates often

need at least 16 percent of the vote to win; in fourteen states with one to three seats, they may need more than 25 percent. Small parties and emerging constituencies struggle under these conditions. PRCV is the most viable way to ensure real voter choice and fair representation.

PRCV also changes how legislators govern. Americans do not expect representatives to simply toe the party line; Congress functions best when leaders have individual agency. Illinois's one-hundred-year history with a similar system shows that PRCV supports this norm. Rather than proliferating small parties, PRCV allows major parties to breathe while enabling independents and smaller groups to hold them accountable.

In this way, PRCV does more than improve election mechanics; it operationalizes Jefferson's ideal of equality of voice. It creates conditions in which women, communities of color, and underrepresented constituencies can participate fully and lead effectively. It makes representation responsive and democratic legitimacy durable.

As Jefferson writes, moments of institutional crisis demand transformation. The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence offers not commemoration but accountability. Two hundred and fifty years after declaring equality, the United States still relies on an antiquated winner-take-all system inherited from the very nation we sought independence from. Two hundred and fifty years after rejecting monarchy, our institutions face tests of executive power that would have alarmed Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson alike.

What we need now is not a renewal of the democracy we inherited but the construction of a democracy we were promised and have never fully built. This anniversary is therefore not a milestone but a mandate for action.

The 250th anniversary of American independence should not simply honor what has been achieved, but should challenge us to build what has never yet existed: a truly representative democracy. The following two hundred and fifty years must center women – fully included, wholly represented, and completely empowered to lead.

Jefferson is right: a “fourth founding” is within reach. But it will only succeed if women are not merely present but central; not merely beneficiaries but architects.

The representation-concerned reforms in *Our Common Purpose* – RCV, multi-member districts, House expansion, and Supreme Court term limits – are not just technical adjustments. They are the scaffolding for a democracy worthy of its people, one that reflects the nation it serves.

Let us, as Jefferson urges, disenthral ourselves from the dogmas of the quiet past. And let us do so with women at the table, shaping the future of American democracy; not as an afterthought, but as its foundation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Richie Terrell is the Founder and Executive Director of RepresentWomen, an organization that advances women's representation by researching, understanding, and championing evidence-based solutions that break down structural barriers to women's political leadership. She is also the Cofounder of FairVote, a nonpartisan champion of electoral reform. She writes a weekly column for *Ms. magazine* and has published in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Nation*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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>.
- ² Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776.
- ³ Courtney Lamendola, 2025 *Gender Parity Index: A Weighted Measure of Women's Representation* (RepresentWomen, 2025), <https://representwomen.app.box.com/s/epcvgswnpgopz4oot196xnhkr13lxuyg>.
- ⁴ Wallace B. Jefferson, "Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century," *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 22, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/reimagining-democratic-institutions-new-american-century>.
- ⁵ RepresentWomen, "Women Mayors and Council Members in RCV Cities—January 2025 Snapshots," January 23, 2025, <https://www.representwomen.org/research/women-mayors-and-council-members-in-rcv-cities-january-2025-snapshots>.

Term Limits & Democratic Renewal

Kermit Roosevelt

Responding to Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson's assessment of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Our Common Purpose report, this essay focuses on the proposal of term limits for Supreme Court justices. It argues that life tenure is not necessary for judicial independence and that in fact it produces a judiciary susceptible to permanent capture by a minority party. There is no theoretical reason to think that minority capture is a good thing. Historical analysis supports the point: when the composition of the Court departs from what it would have been if each president had equal influence, the Court tends to clash with the elected branches and render decisions that are later repudiated.

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to comment on Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson's assessment of Strategy 1 of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' *Our Common Purpose* report: to achieve equality of voice and representation.¹ Anyone paying even cursory attention to the state of the nation can see that we are at a moment of crisis. Our governing structures and institutions are being tested more severely than at any other time in living memory. And some of them do not appear to be up to the task of sustaining the American experiment in self-governance.

Crisis provides both clarity and a moment at which the nation's attention can be focused on change. A critical look at which institutions are failing and why can offer us a path forward to a renewal of our fundamental democratic commitments.

That is the goal of *Our Common Purpose*: to reinvent American democracy for the twenty-first century. The report is, in Jefferson's words, "at once sobering and hopeful."² It offers concrete proposals to improve the functioning of our democracy and to connect our citizens more closely to each other and to the ideals of our nation.

Jefferson focuses on three recommendations from Strategy 1: expanding the House of Representatives, implementing eighteen-year term limits for Supreme Court justices, and introducing ranked-choice voting. I believe that all of these are important and valuable. Enlarging the House of Representatives will reduce the number of people each representative represents, allowing for a tighter and more meaningful connection between the governors and the governed. It will also improve the structural problems of partisan and incumbent-protective gerrymandering, helping the electoral system to reflect the true wishes of the people.

Ranked-choice voting, likewise, nudges our system closer to a true democracy. Under the current approach of partisan primaries and plurality voting, the winners of “safe” congressional districts are effectively determined by the primary elections. Turnout for primary elections tends to be around 20 percent. Thus, in many cases, the most politically engaged and extreme 20 percent of one party’s voters pick the ultimate winner. Ranked-choice voting allows moderates who represent the median voter the chance to prevail. It produces representatives who have incentives to cooperate across the aisle to get things done, rather than engage in political showboating to please extremists.

Other recommendations from Strategy 1 are also important. Repealing the requirement of single-member districts for the House would allow for proportional representation, increasing diversity and reducing the incentive to gerrymander. Independent redistricting commissions provide a direct way to address the problem of partisan and incumbent-protecting gerrymanders. And campaign finance reform would help our political system respond to the will of the people rather than the money of the powerful. Many of these reforms supplement each other synergistically. Together, they offer a powerful blueprint for improvement.

I focus here, however, on another recommendation in Strategy 1: term limits for Supreme Court justices. I have been interested in this issue for years, and I was a member of both President Joe Biden’s Commission on Supreme Court Reform and the American Academy’s Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship working group that produced the report *The Case for Supreme Court Term Limits*.³ I am gratified that Jefferson endorses the proposal and I agree with his assessment: term limits are a nonpartisan solution to a structural flaw in our appointments process. In what follows, I attempt to make this case by unpacking the concept of judicial independence and considering the history of the Court.

Everyone agrees that judicial independence is a good thing. And most people agree, at a high level of generality, on what judicial independence is. A judge should decide cases without fear or favor: judges should not be influenced by the prospect of being rewarded or punished for decisions that other people like or dislike. A desire to preserve judicial independence is one of the main arguments that people offer in opposition to term limits.

But the leap from judicial independence to life tenure is a large one. No other modern democracy gives life tenure to its apex judges, nor does any American state with the exception of Rhode Island. It is hard to see how a sufficiently lengthy and nonrenewable term is less effective at protecting judicial independence. And, I will argue, according to a more sophisticated understanding of independence, term limits are actually a substantial improvement.

First, what is the concern that opponents of term limits have? A common assertion is that a term-limited justice will be thinking of a post-Court career. They might

have an incentive to decide cases in a way that will, for instance, please a large corporation that could then hire them at a lucrative salary.

This suggestion has always struck me as fanciful. Such a justice is, by hypothesis, greedy and corrupt. A greedy and corrupt justice could strike such a bargain in a life-tenure system, too: nothing prevents a justice from doing favors for a corporation and then resigning. For that matter, nothing prevents a justice from receiving substantial benefits while continuing to serve for life. (Recent news accounts have revealed the extent to which some justices have done this.)

In fact, life tenure may make the problem worse because it gives the justices themselves extra leverage. A justice might, for instance, express dissatisfaction with their salary and grouse about their finances. They might suggest that if they are unable to improve their financial situation, they will resign in search of a higher-paying job. Depending on who is president at the time, such a resignation might have an enormous impact on the partisan balance of power on the Court. If, for instance, a conservative justice suggested such a thing while a Democrat were president, conservatives would be highly motivated to act to retain that justice.

Second, we should consider what it means for the Court to be independent. We should ask from whom it is supposed to be independent. The conventional answer is: everyone. No one outside the Court should be able to influence its decisions. This is, I think, more or less true in terms of influence over particular decisions as the Court is making them. But threats or promises related to particular decisions are not the only way to influence the Court. Indeed, they are obviously improper and, one hopes, vanishingly rare. The way that people influence the Court is through the appointment process.

Because the Court is constituted through periodic appointments, there is actually no way to prevent appointments from influencing it. The question is, what kind of influence should appointments have or, more precisely, what should determine who gets to influence the Court through the appointment process?

Our current system embraces chance (unexpected death) and the decisions of the justices themselves as means to determine when vacancies arise. Because these factors are not tied directly to elections, they may seem pleasingly nonpartisan, especially if one believes that the justices themselves are simply neutral oracles of the law. But a look at patterns of judicial decision-making shows that justices embody particular worldviews and visions of the Constitution. They are not fungible. And a look at patterns of judicial retirement, especially recently, shows that elections do matter: justices time their retirements so that their replacement will be appointed by a president who shares their worldview.

What this means is that our current system gives substantial power over the composition of the Court to the justices themselves. Justices may even play a direct role in picking their successors, agreeing to retire only when presented with an acceptable list of potential replacements. That might sound like judicial independence,

and in a sense it is: it produces a Court that is largely insulated from the popular will.

But is that the Court we want? Consider this hypothetical. One political party, through good fortune and some political hardball, obtains a 6–3 majority on the Supreme Court despite winning a minority of presidential elections. (Suppose, for the sake of argument, that if each president had appointed two justices per four-year term this Court would lean 6–3 in the opposite direction.) Going forward, that party remains the choice of a minority of Americans: it wins the presidency once every twelve or even sixteen years. But the sitting justices time their retirements so that they will be replaced by a congenial president, with the result that the 6–3 tilt continues forever.

What has happened in this scenario? The Court has been captured by one political party. It is independent from the voters in the sense that the will of the people cannot restore balance. But that is not a desirable kind of independence. America is, after all, a democracy. Control of the judiciary, no less than the presidency or Congress, should not forever be taken away from the American people. A Court perpetually in thrall to a party that does not represent the popular will is not independent either.

I once debated a conservative law professor about the wisdom of term limits. They were dangerous, he said, because if the parties alternated presidential victories, control of the Court might shift back and forth. Or if one party won a majority of elections, it might control the Court for an extended period of time. I agreed that both of these things were possible. But what is the alternative to shifting control or extended majority control? Extended minority control. We should all be able to agree that that is the worst possible outcome.

History supports this view. It is relatively easy to figure out what the composition of the Supreme Court would be at any moment in history if we had been following a system of term limits under which each president gets to make two appointments per four-year term. Just go back five presidential terms and allot the appointments accordingly. (It is this method that suggests that the 2024 Court should have had six Democratic appointees and three Republicans: two Democrats from Biden and four from Obama, then two Republicans from Trump and one from George W. Bush.) Using this methodology, we can see how close to or far from this baseline the actual Supreme Court was at particular moments in history.

It turns out that periods of significant departure from this formula have featured conflict between the Court and other branches of government, as well as decisions that history has judged harshly. By contrast, periods in which the Court has remained closer to this baseline have generally featured cooperation between the Court and the other branches of government and have been marked by decisions that history has viewed more favorably.

Dred Scott, for instance, was the product of an out-of-balance Court. If each president had appointed two justices, that Court would have had four Whig appointees (two each from the Taylor/Fillmore and Harrison/Tyler administrations) and five Democrats (two from Pierce, two from Polk, and one from van Buren). Instead, it was a 7–2 Democratic majority with four justices, including Chief Justice Roger Taney, appointed by Andrew Jackson.

Dred Scott, of course, is now a reviled decision. And Congress soon thereafter enlarged the Court to give Lincoln another appointment in order to reduce the influence of the Democrats.

In 1935, what would have been a 6–3 Republican Court tilted further away from the Democrats than it should have; the actual composition was 7–2. FDR had no appointments during his first term; giving him two would likely have shifted the balance of power on the actual Court such that 5–4 decisions like *Carter v. Carter Coal* (which limited Congress’s power to regulate interstate commerce) and *Morehead v. Tipaldo* (which found a minimum wage law for women to be unconstitutional) would have gone the other way. The Court’s opposition to the New Deal is now generally rejected. And FDR proposed his court-packing plan in response to the inability of the people to affect the composition of the Court in the landslide Democratic victories of 1932 and 1936.

Dred Scott and the battle over the New Deal occurred, at least in part, because the composition of the Court strayed from the national will as expressed in presidential elections. By contrast, the Court that decided *Brown v. Board of Education* and the “one person, one vote” cases that significantly enhanced the responsiveness of our democracy was largely in line with where it should have been. That Court cooperated with Congress; *Brown* was supplemented by civil rights acts and the Voting Rights Act.

We are now three justices away from where we should be, further than the *Dred Scott* Court. It is not surprising that today’s Court has found itself in conflict with the other branches of government. It is not surprising that court-packing has been floated as a solution. But court-packing is a one-time partisan fix that risks an escalating cycle of retaliation. Term limits are a forward-looking, nonpartisan structural improvement to the system that can prevent the problems from arising.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kermit Roosevelt is the David Berger Professor for the Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Penn Carey Law School. He is the author of *Conflict of Laws* (2010) and *The Myth of Judicial Activism: Making Sense of Supreme Court Decisions* (2006), as well as the novels *Allegiance* (2015) and *In the Shadow of the Law* (2005). His latest book, *Advanced Introduction to the US Supreme Court*, was published in July 2026.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 22, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose.pdf.
- ² Wallace B. Jefferson, “Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 16, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/reimagining-democratic-institutions-new-american-century>.
- ³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Case for Supreme Court Term Limits* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2023), https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2023_SCOTUS-Term-Limits.pdf.

Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement

Lisa García Bedolla

In the 2020 presidential election, the highest-turnout U.S. election in decades, only 67 percent of eligible voters participated; almost one-third stayed home. This essay explores how to activate nonvoters through electoral reforms such as those proposed in Our Common Purpose, many of which have been implemented in California. It also looks at the importance of voter education and mobilization efforts using effective messaging and trusted messengers to engage nonvoters. I argue that, if we want our democracy to be as healthy, robust, and inclusive as possible, then we need intentional action, as was laid out in Our Common Purpose. We need to change how we administer elections. And we also need to make the investments necessary to educate and mobilize disengaged eligible voters and scaffold them into the electoral process.

Democracy in the United States was never meant to be fully participatory.¹ For much of the nation's history, the franchise was limited to those who owned property, were white, or were male.² Even though many of those legal restrictions were lifted by the mid-twentieth century, other barriers to enfranchisement remain: Election Day is not a holiday as it is in many other democratic systems; eligible voters are, in most states, required to register to vote well before Election Day; and ballots tend to be long and confusing, making engaging in the political process challenging for those with limited political knowledge, or for whom English is not their first language.

In recent years, states have been engaged in practices that can be expected to lower voter turnout even further. For example, as of April 2026, thirty-six states require that voters provide some form of identification in order to vote.³ Although analysts may disagree as to whether requiring voter identification is a good electoral policy, studies exploring its impact strongly suggest that the implementation of voter identification requirements can be expected to depress voter turnout.⁴ In addition, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission found that “states reported removing 21,298,175 records from their voter lists,” which “was equal to 9.1% of the total number of voters who were registered in the United States as of the close of registration for the 2024 general election.”⁵ That rate of purging was 21 percent higher than was reported by jurisdictions from 2014 to 2016.⁶

It should not be surprising, then, that voter participation rates in the United States are among the lowest of any advanced industrialized country. In presidential elections, U.S. voter turnout over the last two decades has hovered around 50 to 60 percent of eligible voters.⁷ The 2020 presidential election, when states and localities loosened restrictions on absentee voting and sent mail-in ballots to all registered voters, was the high-water mark for presidential voter turnout in the United States, with almost 67 percent of eligible voters turning out to vote.⁸ Even so, that means almost one-third of eligible voters stayed home. That turnout rate decreased in 2024 to only 64 percent of eligible voters. Given how close U.S. election results have become, one could argue that our elections are being decided, by and large, by who chooses to stay home on Election Day.

It is important, then, to consider the motivations and behavior of the nonvoting segment of the U.S. eligible voter population: those who can vote but choose not to. We know that nonvoters are not randomly distributed; they skew younger, poorer, male, and nonwhite.⁹ These voters are not apathetic. In fact, they often are highly engaged in U.S. political discourse.¹⁰ But, they – for good, logical, and historic reasons – do not see electoral politics as a place that is going to address the very real problems they face on a daily basis. I would note that a focus on engaging nonvoters should not be seen as a partisan issue; ensuring that all Americans feel empowered and engaged in our democracy is a goal we should all share – for the good of our democracy and the legitimacy of our democratic institutions.

This is why *Our Common Purpose*, the 2020 report published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, lays out a series of strategies and recommendations designed to empower voters and encourage higher levels of U.S. voter engagement, particularly among those currently disenfranchised.¹¹ The report focuses on procedural changes to make voting easier, such as establishing vote centers with early voting opportunities, making Election Day a federal holiday honoring our veterans, implementing same-day registration and automatic voter registration, and allowing sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to preregister to vote, along with leveraging the role that schools can play in helping to integrate young people into the voting process. The report also focuses on how to encourage behavioral changes. For this essay, using electoral reforms in California as a case study, I explore what would need to change in our electoral system for U.S. democracy to reach its full, participatory potential.

Over the past decade, California has been home to some of the most dramatic changes to electoral administration of any state in the country. It is important to note how these changes came about politically and what their impacts have been. In terms of their genesis, The James Irvine Foundation, a private foundation that had long funded voting rights work, decided to try to address the historically adversarial nature of this domain, which often pitted voting rights advocates against county registrars and others who managed the state's

electoral administration infrastructure. They founded the Future of California Elections (FOCE) in 2011, a “nonpartisan network of election officials, reform advocates, civil rights organizations, and civic engagement groups collaborating to advance effective and inclusive election policies and practices.”¹² Over the course of many years, FOCE convened these groups in order to arrive at a set of agreed-upon priorities and policy changes designed to streamline and improve electoral administration in California.

The result has been extraordinary. The most transformative piece of legislation to come out of the FOCE coalition is the Voter’s Choice Act (VCA). Passed in 2016, the VCA “modernizes elections in California by allowing counties to conduct elections under a model which provides greater flexibility and convenience for voters. This election model allows voters to choose how, when, and where to cast their ballot by: mailing every voter a ballot; expanding in-person early voting; allowing voters to cast a ballot at any vote center within their county; [and] providing secure ballot drop off locations throughout the county.”¹³ Because the VCA entails fairly dramatic changes to voting methods and systems, the act also requires that local jurisdictions conduct significant outreach and provide information to voters about these changes. However, the VCA is an optional law: counties are not required to participate, and the state provides few resources to help them with implementation. As is true in all states, registrars across California’s fifty-eight counties have differing capacities, in terms of staff and resources, to implement the changes required under the VCA. It is therefore not surprising that, as of 2026, only thirty of California’s fifty-eight counties have agreed to adopt the law’s requirements.¹⁴

In addition to the VCA, California allows sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds to preregister to vote, provides for conditional voter registration on Election Day, and has instituted automatic voter registration when eligible individuals visit the Department of Motor Vehicles and other state agencies.¹⁵ Thus, California has implemented many of the changes recommended in *Our Common Purpose*, with many democratic successes as well as a few lessons learned.

In terms of automatic voter registration, according to the California Secretary of State’s fifteen-day registration reports, by the November 2024 general election, the first after automatic voter registration went into effect under Assembly Bill 1461, nearly 84 percent of California’s eligible voters were registered to vote, compared to 78 percent in November 2016.¹⁶ So registration rates have increased in nontrivial ways since the law was passed. However, California has yet to implement an automatic preregistration system for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. To preregister, this demographic must opt in when offered the opportunity, such as when applying for a driver’s license or in a school setting; it does not happen automatically. In terms of the impact of preregistration, a 2024 report from California’s Secretary of State found that about 1.2 million sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds in California had preregistered to vote since they became eligible in 2016.¹⁷ This comprises about 13

percent of eligible young voters in California during that eight-year period. Critics contend that neither automatic voter registration nor sixteen- and seventeen-year-old preregistration was implemented as effectively as it could have been. Instead, they argue, California should institute a fully automatic voter registration system and, for preregistration to be as effective as possible, it needs to be coupled with a civic education effort in schools that would teach young people why preregistration and, subsequently, voting are important things for them to do, as *Our Common Purpose* recommends.¹⁸

The importance of education is a key lesson learned around the Voter's Choice Act as well. It is worth noting that the VCA has not been fully implemented in the state, so its long-term impact is as yet unknown. But the preliminary studies so far suggest how difficult it is to change voting systems and educate voters about those changes. The VCA requires that registrars conduct outreach and engage their community as part of the VCA transition. A study looking at implementation efforts in the March 2020 primary election found that, despite the registrars' significant outreach efforts, two-thirds of voters were unaware of the VCA changes.¹⁹ Even with these difficulties, the act does seem to be having a positive impact on voter turnout. In the 2022 midterm election, the most recent election for which the California Secretary of State provides data, there was a 4 percentage point difference in turnout when comparing VCA counties to non-VCA counties when Los Angeles (LA) County was excluded.²⁰ It is important to look at the non-LA-county VCA outcomes because LA County has historically had voting rates that were significantly lower than the state as a whole. For example, in November 2022, statewide turnout was 50.8 percent but only 44 percent in LA County.²¹

The lesson from California, then, is that changes to electoral administration that make voting easier are necessary, but not sufficient, ingredients to engaging disengaged voters. Voter education is a difficult and long-term process that takes intentional investments, strategies, and resources. California is on the cutting edge of these efforts, but much work remains to be done before these structural changes to election administration make a difference at the ballot box, particularly in places like LA County.

*Knowledge will forever govern ignorance ; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.*²²

—James Madison

The other ingredient essential to voter engagement is direct voter education and mobilization. My analysis in this section draws on more than two decades of work with community-based organizations in California and

nationally. Those efforts have included direct evaluation of canvassing efforts, examination of political discussion networks and their impacts on feelings of political agency and civic engagement, and dozens of focus groups and surveys I conducted in order to explore political attitudes and engagement in the pre- and post-COVID eras.²³ A common thread that runs through all of this work is that the way we teach civic engagement in schools – namely, without helping future voters connect what they are learning in school about the federal government to their daily lives – and how we run political campaigns – with a focus on engaging likely voters and little attention to those who are less engaged – combine to help explain why voter participation is so low in the United States.

Civic education is about more than just fostering civic knowledge, such as the ability to know one's congressperson or name all three branches of government.²⁴ Civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of giving students the confidence to become actively engaged in civic life. Yet that is rarely what students get in school. Instead, civics is often taught as rote memorization of facts rather than the development of culturally competent democratic understanding and engagement. We need a broader understanding of civic learning as

a process through which young people develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with fellow community members to address shared problems. It includes preparation for both civic engagement (or practices seeking to promote the public good through non-governmental organizations and informal community work) and political engagement (or activities aiming to influence state action through formal avenues such as voting, lobbying, petitioning, or protesting).²⁵

This definition from education scholar John Rogers and colleagues assumes that civic education is about more than just fostering civic knowledge. In like manner, it recognizes that civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of helping students become actively engaged in civic life. Research shows that problem-based approaches to civic education are most effective. By problem-based, I mean that students are asked to identify a problem in their community and then, working in groups with a mentor to guide them, study who is in charge of that problem in order to arrive at an approach for addressing it. Having students learn about federalism, jurisdictional overlap, and the role of governmental and nongovernmental actors in this way gives them a much more grounded understanding of government, its forms, its powers, and, most important, the avenues into government that are available to them to foster change regarding the things they care most about.²⁶

Yet few civics classrooms are structured in this way, for important political reasons. In a recent study of civics teachers in a racially diverse school district, learning scientist Daniela Kruei DiGiacomo and colleagues found that teachers lacked a shared understanding of the purpose of civic education and the appropriate methods for teaching civics, as well as adequate professional development in this area.²⁷

These challenges made many of the teachers in their study shy away from addressing political issues within their classrooms.²⁸ In their analysis of a 2023 nationally representative study, education scholars Joseph Kahne and John Rogers found that “25% of teachers reported that their school or district told them to limit discussions about political and social issues. In addition, because of concern regarding conflict, 65% decided of their own accord to limit such discussions!”²⁹ Yet, as they note, “Research has consistently shown that student engagement with informed examination and discussion of controversial issues promotes skills and commitments tied to democratic participation and, in particular, the capacity to dialogue productively across difference.”³⁰ The pressure teachers face not to do so negatively affects schools’ ability to effectively prepare their students for democratic citizenship.

There is a vast literature looking at voter mobilization in the United States.³¹ However, because the overwhelming majority of U.S. voter engagement efforts focuses on likely voters, we know little about the attitudinal orientations of eligible voters who do not go to the polls on Election Day. Scholars who have studied low-propensity voters have found that political education is key, as are conversations that meet prospective voters where they are, centering their day-to-day struggles, and messages that foster agency, hope, and possibility. I will discuss each in turn.

Political Education: Voters Need Onboarding. As was mentioned in the previous section, the information taught in civics classrooms in U.S. K–12 schools is often superficial. It also tends to focus on the federal government, with little information about state government, and rarely any mention of what local government does. This is ironic given that local government arguably has the most direct influence on citizens’ daily lives through zoning and housing laws, trash pickup schedules, and public schooling, among other policy areas. Because of this, most Americans do not know what their congressperson is responsible for, what state legislators do, or why it is important to vote in their city council election. Many voter engagement efforts start by asking the target individual to vote. That is, in some ways, the equivalent of asking someone to marry you before dating them. In the first place, the target voter needs to better understand why their vote matters within the context of a particular election.

In my research, I have found that the best place to start this educational conversation is by asking the individual what they care most about or what they see as the most important issue in their community. 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. Given the level of voter disengagement that exists in the United States, this scaffolding is critical to helping nonvoters understand what is at stake in our political system and, most importantly, see themselves as having the power to change it.

That scaffolding extends to information about the voting process itself. For potential voters who come from families with a large number of nonvoters, heading to the voting booth can be intimidating. Many of the high school-aged respondents I interviewed for my 2005 book *Fluid Borders* talked about being afraid to vote because they did not know how to vote.³² 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. To this end, one simple thing that schools can do is show their students what the voting machines look like in their county and how to use them. They can also walk their students through voting by mail and how to ensure that their ballots get counted. These things may seem obvious, but for young new voters from families in which no one votes, providing this type of information can be critical to getting them to turn out and vote. That is also true for, as we saw with the Voter's Choice Act, changes in traditional approaches to voting. Vote centers are a great innovation, but they can only be effective if prospective voters know about them and feel comfortable using them.

Messaging the Disengaged: Stories of Success and Trusted Messengers. Disengaged eligible voters also need to feel that their vote matters and will have an impact on the things they care about. It is important to consider what types of messages and messengers help these voters connect with the political process. Research suggests that motivating infrequent and nonvoters requires messages that are rooted in their lived experience, speak to their shared values, name the harm being addressed in terms of values, make people feel like agents in their own lives, and describe a solution, not just a critique of current actions.³³

This “stories of success” piece is very important, particularly at a time when people can feel they have little impact on political outcomes. In research polling and focus groups, telling stories of “people like me” winning an election, changing a policy, or making a difference in their communities has been found to have a meaningful impact on people’s feelings of political efficacy.³⁴ In other words, seeing someone “like you” make a difference makes it more likely you will feel you can too. I would argue that part of the reason why voter participation rates are so low in the United States is because it is so rare that disengaged voters hear stories of democracy *working* for everyday people. Perhaps that is why such stories can have such a big impact on listeners.

Who tells those stories also matters. According to the Pew Research Center, trust in the federal government has shifted from 73 percent of Americans in 1958 saying “they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time” to 22 percent saying they felt that way in 2024.³⁵ Similarly, interpersonal trust, measured as the percentage of people agreeing with the statement “most people can be trusted,” has gone from 46.3 percent of Americans who agreed in 1972 to 31.9 percent in 2018.³⁶ A 2025 data essay studying interpersonal trust published by the Pew Research Center also found that people who were less educated,

lower income, had lost a job, or experienced racial discrimination had the lowest levels of trust in others.³⁷ We know that disengaged American voters tend to hold those demographic and life characteristics, making it reasonable to assume many have lower levels of trust in others. That is why the messenger matters. Research has shown that engagement efforts that use “trusted messengers” – community members with similar life experiences, from the same neighborhood – are much more effective than those that bring in canvassers from the outside.³⁸

The principle underlying all these points – the need for more practical, applicable political education and hearing stories of success from trusted messengers – is that political engagement is a form of collective action, even when we are talking about an individual-level activity like voting. People act politically because they care about something bigger than themselves, be it their families, their local communities, the larger polity, or all of the above. Politics, therefore, is fundamentally relational. It is about connecting people to a greater purpose. That is the core of our democracy. But as our cities have grown and people have become more residentially mobile, we have lost the connective tissue that binds us together as a polity. If we want our democracy to be as healthy and robust as possible, and to be inclusive of all eligible voters, then we need intentional action, as was laid out in *Our Common Purpose*. We need to change the structure of how we administer elections. And we also need to invest in efforts to educate and mobilize disengaged eligible voters in order to scaffold them into the electoral process. All are necessary ingredients for us to strengthen and support U.S. democracy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa García Bedolla is Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Hitchcock Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California, Berkeley. She is also Chancellor’s Professor of Education in the Berkeley School of Education. She is the author of six books, including *Talking Politics: Political Discussion Networks and the New American Electorate* (with Taylor N. Carlson and Marisa Abrajano, 2020), *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (with Melissa R. Michelson, 2012), and *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (2005).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This essay is grounded in the normative claim that, for democracy to be strong, electoral engagement should not vary significantly by socioeconomic status, racial group identification, gender identity, or other positionalities that have historically been marginalized in the United States. It is important to note that not all members of the American

Academy's Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship would necessarily agree with this claim.

- ² Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (Yale University Press, 1997).
- ³ National Conference of State Legislatures, "Voter ID Laws," last updated April 24, 2026, <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id>.
- ⁴ Ballotpedia, "Voter Identification Laws by State," https://ballotpedia.org/Voter_identification_laws_by_state (accessed June 15, 2026). The Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University School of Law compiled a list of studies that have shown how voter identification laws depress turnout. See Brennan Center for Justice, "Research on Voter ID," April 11, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/research-voter-id>.
- ⁵ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Election Administration and Voting Survey 2024 Comprehensive Report: A Report from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to the 119th Congress* (U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2025), 152, https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/2025-07/2024_EAVS_Report_508.pdf.
- ⁶ Brennan Center for Justice, "Voter Purges," <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/vote-suppression/voter-purges> (accessed June 15, 2026).
- ⁷ Ballotpedia, "Election Results, 2024: Analysis of Voter Turnout in the 2024 General Election," https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results,_2024:_Analysis_of_voter_turnout_in_the_2024_general_election (accessed June 15, 2026).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ PRRI Staff, "Breaking Down the Differences Between Voters and Non-Voters in the 2024 Election," Public Religion Research Institute, February 10, 2025, <https://prri.org/spotlight/breaking-down-the-differences-between-voters-and-non-voters-in-the-2024-election>.
- ¹⁰ Taylor N. Carlson, Marisa Abrajano, and Lisa García Bedolla, *Talking Politics: Political Discussion Networks and the New American Electorate* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Lisa García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (University of California Press, 2005); and Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa R. Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (Yale University Press, 2012).
- ¹¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 6, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report/section/3>.
- ¹² Future of California Elections Network, "FOCE—Future of California Elections," <https://futureofcalelections.org> (accessed June 16, 2026); and Future of California Elections Network, "About Us," <https://futureofcalelections.org/about-us> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ¹³ California Secretary of State, "California Voter's Choice Act," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/voters-choice-act> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ¹⁴ California Secretary of State, "VCA Participating Counties," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/voters-choice-act/vca-participating-counties> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ¹⁵ California Secretary of State, "Pre-Register at 16. Vote at 18.," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/pre-register-16-vote-18> (accessed June 16, 2026); California Secretary of State, "Same Day Voter Registration (Conditional Voter Registration)," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/same-day-reg> (accessed June 16, 2026); and Bridget

- Clerkin, "CA DMV to Automatically Register Millions to Vote," dmv.org, October 13, 2015, <https://www.dmv.org/articles/ca-dmv-automatic-voter-registration>.
- ¹⁶ California Secretary of State, "Historical Voter Registration Statistics—15-Day Report of Registration," October 21, 2024, <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/15day-gen-2024/historical-reg-stats.pdf>; California Secretary of State, "Historical Voter Registration Statistics—15-Day Report of Registration," October 24, 2016, <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ror/ror-pages/15day-gen-16/hist-reg-stats.pdf>; California Secretary of State, "Report of Registration—October 21, 2024," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/report-registration/15day-gen-2024>; California Secretary of State, "Report of Registration—October 24, 2016," <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/report-registration/15day-general-2016>; and California State Legislature, *An Act to Amend Sections 2100 and 2102 of, and to Add Chapter 4.5 (Commencing with Section 2260) to Division 2 of the Elections Code, Relating to Elections*, AB 1461, Regular Session 2015–2016 (2015), https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201520160AB1461.
- ¹⁷ California Secretary of State, "California Secretary of State Shirley N. Weber, Ph.D., Announces More Than 1.2 Million Youth Have Pre-Registered to Vote in California," September 26, 2024, <https://www.sos.ca.gov/administration/news-releases-and-advisories/2024-news-releases-and-advisories/california-secretary-state-shirley-n-weber-phd-announces-more-12-million-youth-have-pre-registered-vote-california>.
- ¹⁸ Laura Brill, "California: 16 & 17 Year Olds Preregistration is Abysmally Low," The Civics Center, October 16, 2024, <https://www.thecivicscenter.org/blog/california-16-17-preregistration-abysmally-low>; and American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 37–38.
- ¹⁹ Center for Inclusive Democracy, *2020 Primary Election: Voter Outreach and Education in Counties Adopting the California Voter's Choice Act* (USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, 2020), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/623d63ee28438102beccca3d/1648190450246/2020+Primary+Election++Voter+Outreach+and+Education.pdf>.
- ²⁰ California Secretary of State, *2022 General Election VCA Report* (California Secretary of State, 2022), <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vca/2022-vca-report/vca-2022-general-election.pdf>.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² James Madison, "Securing the Republic: James Madison to W. T. Barry," University of Chicago Press, August 4, 1822, <https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html>.
- ²³ García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*; and Carlson, Abrajano, and García Bedolla, *Talking Politics*.
- ²⁴ This section was adapted from Lisa García Bedolla, "Race, Equity, and Civic Education," in *Civic Education in Polarized Times*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont and Eric Beerbohm, Volume LXVI of NOMOS (New York University Press, 2024), 143–153.
- ²⁵ John Rogers, Erica Hodgkin, Joseph Kahne, et al., *Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools* (Leveraging Equity & Access in Democratic Education Initiative at UCLA & UC Riverside, 2020), 2, https://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Reclaiming_the_Democratic_Purpose_of_CA_Public_Schools_Final.pdf.
- ²⁶ Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?" *Social Education* 72 (1) (2008): 34–39.

- ²⁷ Daniela Kruei DiGiacomo, Erica Hodgin, Joseph Kahne, and Sara Trapp, “Civic Education in a Politically Polarized Era,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96 (3) (2021): 261–274.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Joseph Kahne and John Rogers, “Facing Partisan Conflict: How Social Studies Educators Can Lead Towards a Diverse Democracy,” *Social Education* 88 (1) (2024): 13–19, 15, <https://www.socialstudies.org/social-education/88/1/facing-partisan-conflict-how-social-studies-educators-can-lead-towards>; and Sy Doan, Elizabeth D. Steiner, Rakesh Pandey, and Ashley Woo, *Teacher Well-Being and Intentions to Leave: Findings from the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey* (RAND Corporation, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1108-8.html.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ For a review and summary of that literature, see Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, 5th ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 2023).
- ³² García Bedolla, *Fluid Borders*.
- ³³ García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*. On messaging to Latine voters, see Equis, “Messaging Recommendations,” <https://www.weareequis.us/category/messaging> (accessed June 16, 2026). On understanding differences in the Black electorate, see Katrina Gamble, Terrance Woodbury, and Roshni Nedungadi, *Black Values Survey 2024* (Democracy & Power Innovation Fund, 2024), <https://blackvaluesresearch.org>. The Topos Partnership has done much narrative work in the vein of low-information and low-engagement voters. See, for example, Joe Grady, “Distressed Voters,” Topos Partnership, January 24, 2025, <https://topospartnership.com/distressed-voters>.
- ³⁴ Nicolas M. Anspach and Gorana Draguljić, “Efficacy and Action: How Targeted Messages Influence Support of Social Advocacy Organizations,” *Political Studies Review* 23 (3) (2025): 886–905, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299241296794>; and García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*.
- ³⁵ Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2025,” December 4, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/12/04/public-trust-in-government-1958-2025>.
- ³⁶ Our World in Data, “Interpersonal Trust in the United States, 1972 to 2018,” last updated March 7, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/interpersonal-trust-in-the-us>. Data from NORC at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey, “Interpersonal Trust (%)” [dataset] (2021), processed by Our World in Data.
- ³⁷ Laura Silver, Scott Keeter, Stephanie Kramer, et al., “Americans’ Trust in One Another,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another>.
- ³⁸ Olivier Bergeron-Boutin, Katherine Clayton, Thad Kousser, et al., *Communicating with Voters to Build Trust in the U.S. Election System: Best Practices and New Areas for Research* (MIT Election Data + Science Lab, 2025), <https://electionlab.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2023-10/voter-trust.pdf>; and Mitchell Brown, Kathleen Hale, Soren Jordan, and Ryan D. Williamson, “Restoring Trust in U.S. Elections through Effective Election Administrator Messaging,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88 (S1) (2024): 632–655, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae033>.

High School Voting Can Activate the Left Out

Jahnavi Rao

Meaningful voter engagement may require increasing sustained investment in four underutilized areas: low-propensity voters, civic education that fosters civic action, voter education that links ballots to local change, and trusted messengers. Advocates for election reform are correct to emphasize the need for more practical solutions to mobilize and scale these criteria, but what if a low-cost, scalable intervention already exists? This essay highlights the work being done by New Voters, a youth-led non-profit that promotes peer-to-peer civic engagement and education efforts in U.S. high schools through student-led voter registration drives.

As the President and Founder of New Voters – a youth-led nonprofit that has directed over one thousand voter registration drives nationwide since 2017 – I have found much of the academic literature on voter engagement difficult to translate into practice, either because its theoretical frameworks do not map cleanly to everyday life or because the interventions it evaluates are costly and difficult to replicate.¹ Yet, in the *Our Common Purpose* report and in Lisa García Bedolla’s contribution to this volume of *Dædalus*, we see practical, achievable recommendations that pair policy reforms with the evidenced-based, relationship-centered strategies needed to make those reforms effective.²

In her essay on U.S. voter engagement, García Bedolla argues that meaningful engagement requires sustained investment in:

1. low-propensity voters;
2. civic education that fosters civic action;
3. voter education that links ballots to local change; and
4. trusted messengers.

But what if there already exists a low-cost, scalable intervention that meets all four criteria? That intervention is peer-to-peer high school voter registration led by organizations like New Voters.

To explain why high school voter registration operationalizes García Bedolla’s recommendations, it is first necessary to examine why her framework is correct.

Policy is necessary but not sufficient. It is common to argue that policy reform is the primary or even sole way to increase voter turnout. The United States has one of the lowest turnout rates of any developed country, exacerbated by uniquely regressive laws that actively suppress voter turnout.³ From purging registered voter lists to voter identification requirements to polling place inaccessibility, structural reform is certainly necessary.⁴

However, García Bedolla's case study of electoral administration changes in California illustrates that even the most voter-expansive law cannot overcome a lack of knowledge among the voting population. The Voter's Choice Act (VCA) in California significantly expanded access by mailing ballots to all voters, extending voting periods, and adding polling places.⁵ However, implementation of this optional law has been uneven since its passage in 2016, and in places that adopted the law, nearly two-thirds of voters were unaware that the VCA had changed the voting process.⁶ This finding is not an indictment of the VCA; it did increase voter turnout by 4 percentage points in the state's 2022 midterm election.⁷ It instead shows that administrative reform without voter onboarding leaves participation inequities intact.

Target low-propensity voters. Effective voter engagement begins with whom we choose to target. Most research focuses on likely or already registered voters, rarely examining unregistered voters. However, elections today are regularly decided at the margin, with a handful of votes determining the difference between one candidate or the other in many local elections.

As García Bedolla observes, "one could argue that our elections are being decided, by and large, by who chooses to stay home on Election Day."⁸ In my hometown of Chester County, Pennsylvania, local elections are often close enough that tied races are routinely decided by a random drawing using a bingo ball machine; some counties are even left to select winning candidates by casting lots.⁹ It then stands to reason that voter engagement strategies that prioritize low-propensity voters are not only the most equitable but will likely have the highest impact on electoral outcomes.

Civic education to make people engaged in civic life. Among the goals of K–12 education is preparing young people for adult life by helping them build interpersonal networks, develop life skills, practice critical thinking, and participate meaningfully in communities. Civic engagement is an essential part of adulthood that is often linked to voter turnout and other broader positive social behaviors like volunteering or interpersonal trust. García Bedolla states, "Civic knowledge is only valuable insofar as it serves the purpose of giving students the confidence to become actively engaged in civic life."¹⁰

However, current civic education's focus on rote memorization of checks and balances and the number of congressional representatives does not meet García Bedolla's ideals. Her research points toward more effective civic education that

engages students in identifying shared problems and working together to address them.¹¹ High school voter registration is one of the few civic learning experiences that meets these criteria simultaneously.

Connecting elections to local issues. To make voting feel meaningful, it must be connected to issues people care about. García Bedolla's emphasis on this point is straightforward but essential. Effective engagement begins by understanding what people care about, then making the link to elections explicit. This looks like informing voters about what is on the ballot this cycle, identifying how they relate to problems addressed on the ballot, and showing how their voting will connect to concrete outcomes.

Trusted messengers. When it comes to voter engagement strategies, face-to-face canvassing is one of the most effective.¹² In García Bedolla's essay, she illustrates that conversations with people from the same community with similar experiences are more effective than outside canvassers. These "trusted messengers" come to conversations with shared experiences and language that make political information more credible and relatable. Ideally, the trusted messenger is someone voters already know and trust.

In this response, high school student-led voter registration refers to the act of a high school student registering their peers to vote. For the twenty-three states (plus the District of Columbia) with preregistration for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, this often includes junior, senior, and some of the sophomore classes of students.¹³ In the other twenty-seven states, this applies only to seniors, with additional students becoming eligible to register to vote at the end of the school year, after the spring elections in their area have concluded.

With these core determinants of youth voter engagement established, the question becomes how does high school voter registration operationalize them?

Target low-propensity voters. Eighteen-year-olds are the least likely to vote of any eligible age group in the United States.¹⁴ This pattern is especially pronounced among young people who do not go on to college, with 52.5 percent turnout for high school graduates compared to 77.2 percent among those with a bachelor's degree.¹⁵ High school is the last universal touchpoint for young people, with 38 percent of graduates not continuing on to higher education.¹⁶ As a result, high school seniors constitute a low-propensity but electorally important group.

Civic education to make people engaged in civic life. Peer-to-peer high school voter registration embodies the problem-based approach to civic education that García Bedolla describes in this volume.¹⁷ Students begin by identifying a concrete problem in their own community; in this case, low voter participation among their peers. They then work collaboratively to address it, mobilizing classmates across different social groups, such as athletic teams, music ensembles, or extracurricular organizations, to encourage registration within their "cliques."

I would add that another critical part of civic education is that civic action produces tangible results. Students can observe voter registration numbers increasing, hear conversations around civic engagement in the school, and sometimes even see local election results and turnout rates change.

Positioning voter registration as an action-based project in civic education accomplishes two goals at the same time. Students can register their peers to vote and help increase turnout rates and, in doing so, instill a lifelong belief that they can act on a problem they see and mobilize others to join them in fixing it.

Trusted messengers. American community life is in rapid decline, with a lack of third spaces and fewer opportunities for in-person social interactions – that is, for adults.¹⁸ For high school students, trusted messengers are in abundance, from their teachers, coaches, and, most important of all, classmates. Students mobilize each other constantly, leading laps around the field as captain of the soccer team, ensuring people hit their marks as drum major in the marching band, hounding people for service hours as president of their National Honor Society chapter, or just getting their friends to show up to help with household projects or chores like packing up their basement.

These same social dynamics perfectly position students to register their peers to vote. Because classmates have often known each other for years, sometimes since elementary school, student-led outreach has a level of trust that is difficult to replicate through any other kind of canvassing.

Connecting elections to local issues. There is no election more local than a school board race and no community more directly affected by its outcomes than the students at the school. Other local offices, like the district attorney setting policy for youth crimes or the city controller budgeting for various public programs like the arts or sports, also impact the daily life of a student. The opportunity to connect important issues to local elections is clear for students. That is why equipping student registration drive leaders with information on these local races and their potential for impacting peers is critical.

Beyond the previously stated reasons, there are two additional factors that make high school voter registration uniquely well suited for voter engagement.

Captive audience. Having structured access to a population makes any type of face-to-face interaction and trusted communication possible. Schools have repeated, predictable opportunities for classmates to engage, such as classes, lunch, prom, graduation, and more. This allows the trusted student messenger to reach their peers often and at scale, without the high costs of canvassing.

Habit formation. Research suggests that voting is habit forming, with individuals who vote early in life more likely to continue voting in subsequent elections.¹⁹ Intervening at the first moment of eligibility therefore yields outsized long-term returns. High school voter registration reaches young people at precisely this point of entry into the electorate, creating the potential for a single registration intervention to influence participation across decades of future elections.

This is not to suggest that high school voter registration is without challenges. The majority of students in a high school aren't eligible to register to vote, especially at the beginning of the school year. By the end of the school year, when most high school seniors across the country are eligible to register to vote, they are often academically disengaged or difficult to reach. Additionally, around 20 to 30 percent of students leave their home state for college, complicating turnout in local elections after initial voter registration.²⁰ There are also concerns of partisanship and class disruption that make some risk-averse school administrators resist such interventions.

These constraints underscore the importance of thoughtful program design. Student leaders need training, mentors, and clear compliance guidance. These can look like sample scripts, nonpartisanship rules, and step-by-step instructions for submitting forms correctly.

Administrative resistance, while common, is not insurmountable. Nonpartisan voter registration activity in public high schools is protected under the First Amendment, subject to reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions. A majority of states have statutes that explicitly permit, encourage, or mandate voter registration access in public high schools.²¹ Unfortunately, most of these laws are unfunded mandates and are not enforced, often putting additional work onto county election officials or state governmental entities, so they do not result in higher youth voter registration. However, they do provide a legal basis and justification for students to lead their own drives and combat administrative concerns. Civic organizations can help students further by providing free materials, prizes, training, and guides for students to lead their own nonpartisan voter registration drives.

Roughly four million students graduate from high school every year, and they are significantly less likely to vote than older age groups. They are not being targeted by traditional campaigns or voter outreach, and that's a mistake. Students can serve as trusted messengers when registering their peers to vote and in doing so can connect local elections to the issues that matter to young people most, all while practicing the habit of civic action.

If we are serious about building a participatory democracy, high schools cannot remain peripheral to voter engagement strategy. They must be treated as foundational democratic institutions and resourced accordingly. The question is no longer whether high school voter registration works, but why it remains so underutilized.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jahnvi Rao is President and Founder of New Voters, a youth-led 501(c)3 that empowers high school students through nonpartisan near-peer mentorship, voter registration drives, community-driven advocacy initiatives, and youth-led research on political behavior. Since she started New Voters in 2017 as a junior in high school, it has run over one thousand high school voter registration drives and civically engaged tens of thousands of high school students across forty-two states. She is a Senior Fellow at the University of Maryland Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement and graduated from Harvard College with a concentration in Government in 2023.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ New Voters, “Mobilizing Youth for Democracy,” <https://www.new-voters.org> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- 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/section/3>; Lisa García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026), <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/activating-left-out-enhancing-us-voter-engagement>; and Brennan Center for Justice, “Automatic Voter Registration,” <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/voting-reform/automatic-voter-registration> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ³ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), “Voter Turnout Database,” <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ⁴ Lyon Nishizawa, “How Does U.S. Voter Turnout Compare to the Rest of the World’s?” Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-does-us-voter-turnout-compare-rest-worlds>.
- ⁵ California Secretary of State, “California Voter’s Choice Act,” <https://www.sos.ca.gov/voters-choice-act> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ⁶ Center for Inclusive Democracy, 2020 *Primary Election: Voter Outreach and Education in Counties Adopting the California Voter’s Choice Act* (USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, 2020), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/623d63ee28438102becca3d/1648190450246/2020+Primary+Election+-+Voter+Outreach+and+Education.pdf>.
- ⁷ California Secretary of State, 2022 *General Election VCA Report* (California Secretary of State, 2022), <https://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/vca/2022-vca-report/vca-2022-general-election.pdf>.
- ⁸ For a review and summary of that literature, see García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 46.
- ⁹ Carter Walker, “Why Marbles, Playing Cards, and Ping Pong Balls Decide So Many Local Pennsylvania Races,” *Votebeat Pennsylvania*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.votebeat.org/pennsylvania/2025/11/24/why-marbles-playing-cards-and-ping-pong-balls-decide-so-many-local-pennsylvania-races>.
- ¹⁰ García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 49.

- ¹¹ Lisa García Bedolla, “Race, Equity, and Civic Education,” in *Civic Education in Polarized Times*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont and Eric Beerbohm, Volume LXVI of NOMOS (New York University Press, 2024), 143–153.
- ¹² Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “Does Canvassing Increase Voter Turnout? A Field Experiment,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 96 (19) (1999): 10939–10942, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.96.19.10939>.
- ¹³ Rock the Vote, “Nationwide Voter Pre-Registration for Under 18,” <https://www.rockthevote.org/how-to-vote/nationwide-voting-info/voter-pre-registration> (accessed June 23, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Laura W. Brill, “Smoothing the On-Ramp to Democracy: Voter Registration as a Staple of American High Schools,” The Civics Center, August 28, 2023, <https://thecivicscenter.substack.com/p/smoothing-the-on-ramp-to-democracy>.
- ¹⁵ United States Census Bureau, “2024 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available,” April 30, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2025/2024-presidential-election-voting-registration-tables.html>.
- ¹⁶ Melanie Hanson, “College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics,” Education Data Initiative, last updated March 17, 2025, <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates Summary,” April 22, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nro.htm>.
- ¹⁷ See Joseph E. Kahne and Susan E. Sporte, “Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students’ Commitment to Civic Participation,” *American Educational Research Journal* 45 (3) (2008): 738–766, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27667149>. García Bedolla describes “working in groups with a mentor to guide them.” New Voters provides high school students with personal, near-peer mentors to map the landscape in their school, create a school-specific solution to register their peers to vote, and troubleshoot throughout the process!
- ¹⁸ Bruno V. Manno, “The Shrinking Space Between Home and Work,” *Washington Monthly*, January 30, 2026, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2026/01/30/the-shrinking-space-between-home-and-work>; and Melissa L. Cannon, “COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Community Connections and Third Place Engagement: A Qualitative Analysis of Older Americans,” *Journal of Aging and Environment* 38 (4) (2024): 381–397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26892618.2023.2225179>.
- ¹⁹ Donald P. Green and Ron Shachar, “Habit Formation and Political Behaviour: Evidence of Consuetude in Voter Turnout,” *British Journal of Political Science* 30 (4) (2000): 561–573, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400000247>.
- ²⁰ National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 4. Number of First-Time Degree/Certificate-Seeking Undergraduate Students Enrolled, Residence, and Migration at Title IV Institutions, by State or Jurisdiction: Fall 2024,” U.S. Department of Education, Spring 2025 (fall enrollment component provisional data), <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/search/viewtable?tableId=36545&returnUrl=%2Fsearch%2F>.
- ²¹ Pre-published research circulated among partner organizations by the New Voters Research Network and the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement at the University of Maryland, *Typology of High School Voting*, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Fb_Sas32G3wk_1e86wP5TrgGLz1GYz8We-7-S9xg9vg/edit?gid=0#gid=0 (accessed June 23, 2026).

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

Adam Ambrogi

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Ambrogi is Chief of External Affairs and Strategic Partnerships at the League of Women Voters of the United States, working on strategy, growth, thought leadership, and partnerships. Previously, he directed the Elections and Voting Program at the Democracy Fund, where he led strategy, grantmaking, and advocacy, granting millions of dollars to support voting rights and trusted, voter-centric elections. He has held senior legal and policy roles across the federal government, including as Chief Counsel for the U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, leading work on election law, campaign finance, Senate rules, and ethical matters. His key contributions included leading the legal team on Senate rule changes and working on significant legislation such as the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act and the DISCLOSE Act of 2012. He recently served as a Visiting Fellow at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, where he taught undergraduates on using election law and policy disputes as a lens to assess how to craft social impact campaigns.

ENDNOTES

¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 14–32, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>; and Brennan Center for Justice, “Voting Laws Roundup: October 2023,” October 19, 2023, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2023>.

² Lisa García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out: Enhancing U.S. Voter Engagement,” *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026), 45–55, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/activating>

- left-out-enhancing-us-voter-engagement; Lisa García Bedolla and Christian Hosam, *Latino Politics*, 3rd ed. (Polity Press, 2021), 112–134; and Lisa García Bedolla and Melissa R. Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion: Transforming the Electorate through Get-Out-the-Vote Campaigns* (Yale University Press, 2012), 1–24.
- ³ League of Women Voters, “History,” <https://www.lwv.org/about-us/history> (accessed July 2, 2026).
- ⁴ Hahrie Han, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–18; Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 74–126, especially 78–79, 124; and K. Sabeel Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman, *Civic Power: Rebuilding American Democracy in an Era of Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). See also Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 48–64.
- ⁵ League of Women Voters, “League of Women Voters Marks 30th Anniversary of NVRA,” last updated May 20, 2023, <https://www.lwv.org/newsroom/press-releases/league-women-voters-marks-30th-anniversary-nvra>; Kevin Morris and Peter Dunphy, *AVR Impact on State Voter Registration* (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/avr-impact-state-voter-registration>; and Hannah Hartig, Scott Keeter, Andrew Daniller, and Ted Van Green, *Behind Trump’s 2024 Victory, a More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition: A Study of the 2024 Election, Based on Validated Voters* (Pew Research Center, 2025), 13–21, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2025/06/26/voter-turnout-2020-2024>.
- ⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, “Voter ID Laws,” last updated April 24, 2026, <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id>; and Brennan Center for Justice, “Voter Purges,” <https://www.brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections/vote-suppression/voter-purges> (accessed June 15, 2026).
- ⁷ Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 267–293; Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, 4th ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 29–55; and Hartig, Keeter, Daniller, and Van Green, *Behind Trump’s 2024 Victory, a More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Voter Coalition*.
- ⁸ García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out.” The argument that nonvoters are rational rather than apathetic runs throughout García Bedolla’s research program. See also García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*, 1–24; and Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, *Who Votes Now?* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 48–73.
- ⁹ Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 15–40; and Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–22.
- ¹⁰ Adam Ambrogi, “Rethinking Philanthropic Partnerships: Wisdom from Nonprofit Leaders on Trust, Collaboration, and Empowered Support,” white paper (Georgetown University Center for Public & Nonprofit Leadership, 2024), <https://cpnl.georgetown.edu/news-story/research-paper-rethinking-philanthropic-partnerships>; Cynthia M. Gibson, Chris Cardona, Jasmine McGinnis Johnson, and David Suárez, “Introduction: Participatory Approaches to Philanthropy: The Distinct Role of Participatory Grantmaking,” in *Participatory Grantmaking in Philanthropy: How Democratizing Decision-Making Shifts Power to Communities*, ed. Cynthia M. Gibson, Chris Cardona, Jasmine McGinnis Johnson, and David Suárez (Georgetown University Press, 2024); and Stanford

Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, “Trust-Based Philanthropy and Participatory Philanthropy,” in *The Stanford PACS Guide to Effective Philanthropy* (Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, 2020), <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/philanthropy-tools/stanford-pacs-guide-effective-philanthropy>.

¹¹ For descriptions of around eight hundred active leagues in all fifty states, engaged in advocacy, education, litigation, and organizing, see League of Women Voters, “About Us,” <https://www.lwv.org/about-us> (accessed August 10, 2026). For the steps the League took to engage in its modern strategy, see League of Women Voters, “LWV Transformation Journey,” March 21, 2023, <https://www.lwv.org/transformation>.

¹² Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 74–126.

¹³ League of Women Voters, “Moore v. Harper,” last updated June 27, 2023, <https://www.lwv.org/legal-center/moore-v-harper>; League of Women Voters, “League of Women Voters of North Carolina,” <https://my.lwv.org/north-carolina-state> (accessed July 1, 2026); and League of Women Voters, *2024 Election Impact Report* (League of Women Voters, 2025), <https://www.lwv.org/2024-election-impact>.

¹⁴ García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out.” Her essay traces the genesis of California’s Voter’s Choice Act to the FOCE coalition’s years-long effort to move beyond the adversarial relationship between voting rights advocates and county registrars—a model of collaborative civic infrastructure that produced legislation increasing voter access through mail ballots for registered voters, expanding in-person early voting, and allowing voters universal access to any vote center in their county. See California Secretary of State, “California Voter’s Choice Act,” <https://www.sos.ca.gov/voters-choice-act> (accessed June 16, 2026); and Future of California Elections Network, “About Us,” <https://futureofcaelections.org/about-us> (accessed June 16, 2026).

¹⁵ Toussaint Fancher, “Michigan League of Women Voters Launches Election Observer Program,” *Michigan Public*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.michiganpublic.org/politics-government/2022-08-03/michigan-league-of-women-voters-launches-election-observer-program>.

¹⁶ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 304–333.

¹⁷ García Bedolla cites research showing engagement efforts using “‘trusted messengers’—community members with similar life experiences, from the same neighborhood—are much more effective than those that bring in canvassers from the outside.” García Bedolla, “Activating the Left Out,” 52; Green and Gerber, *Get Out the Vote*, 80–107; and García Bedolla and Michelson, *Mobilizing Inclusion*, 78–102.

¹⁸ Green and Gerber, *Get Out the Vote*, 80–107.

¹⁹ See, generally, Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life after Welfare’s End* (Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁰ League of Women Voters, *2024 Election Impact Report*; League of Women Voters Education Fund, “VOTE411,” <https://vote411.org> (accessed July 1, 2026); and Elena Moore, “In Their Own Words, New U.S. Citizens Look to Voting in 2024,” NPR, December 24, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/24/1221288961/new-citizens-voting-arizona>.

²¹ Bernard Fraga, *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 113–140; League of Women Voters and Communications Shop, “How Barriers to Voting Impact Native American Communities,” League of Women

Voters blog, last updated November 25, 2025, <https://www.lwv.org/blog/how-barriers-voting-impact-native-american-communities>; and Tova Wang, *Jail-Based Voting in the District of Columbia: A Case Study* (Harvard University, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, 2024), https://ash.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/jail-based_voting_in_the_district_of_columbia_case_study_2.6.24-1.pdf.

²² *League of Women Voters of Arizona v. Lions of Liberty LLC*, No. 3:22-cv-08196 (D. Ariz., filed Oct. 25, 2022); League of Women Voters, “Federal Court Issues Order Barring Defendants from Confronting, Photographing, Doxing Voters, and Carrying Guns and Wearing Body Armor Near Drop Boxes,” last updated November 1, 2022, <https://www.lwv.org/newsroom/press-releases/federal-court-issues-order-barring-defendants-confronting-photographing>; and League of Women Voters, “League of Women Voters of Arizona v. Lions of Liberty (now AARA v. Jennings),” last updated May 22, 2023, <https://www.lwv.org/legal-center/league-women-voters-arizona-v-lions-liberty-now-aara-v-jennings>.

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.

Democracy in Practice: A Report on Innovations in Participatory Governance

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer

Americans' disconnect from their elected officials has reached crisis levels. What potential do citizens' assemblies and participatory decision-making hold for restoring people's trust in their democracy? This essay explores three case studies of participatory governance at three levels – in California, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and in Fort Collins, Colorado; virtually and in person – and finds that Americans are ready and willing to participate in well-designed deliberative processes and are willing to accept the outcomes of deliberative bodies. But representativeness and accountability in those processes are essential and not easy to come by. This analysis invites the question of whether these democratic experiments can scale up to where they are needed most: our national politics.

The crisis of trust in American democracy continues to deepen. Surveys consistently document widening gulfs between citizens and their elected representatives, between communities and the institutions meant to serve them. This erosion of trust is not abstract: it manifests in declining civic participation, increasing polarization, and a pervasive sense among ordinary Americans that their voices do not matter in decisions that shape their lives.¹ When citizens believe government operates beyond their influence, democracy itself becomes vulnerable.

In 2020, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship published *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, a comprehensive report addressing this democratic distress.² Among its strategies and recommendations, Strategy 3 focuses on what the Commission calls the Responsiveness Imperative, or the necessity of restoring meaningful connection between citizens and their representatives. The strategy proposed four specific reforms: improving public hearings across all levels of government, requiring members of Congress to interact regularly with constituents on policy issues, experimenting with citizens' assemblies to enable direct public interaction with Congress, and expanding participatory opportunities for citizens to shape policy and budget decisions.

Six years since that report was published, progress on these recommendations has been uneven. Congressional engagement practices remain largely unchanged. Public hearings continue to follow familiar, often frustrating formats. But the latter two recommendations have sparked an explosion of experimentation: citizens' assemblies and expanded participatory decision-making at local and state levels. While the national government has not yet embraced these innovations, communities across America have been building, testing, and refining new models for bringing citizen voice back into governance.

This essay examines three of these experiments. In California, a state-level initiative launched in response to the Palisades Fire crisis created infrastructure for large-scale digital deliberation. In Bowling Green, Kentucky, a midsized city facing rapid growth combined face-to-face relationship-building with sophisticated technology to engage 10 percent of its population in shaping its community vision. In Fort Collins, Colorado, a randomly selected citizens' assembly produced recommendations that were then validated through direct public vote – a first in American history.

These cases are not isolated curiosities. They represent a broader movement of democratic innovation happening in dozens of American communities. They matter not simply as interesting experiments but because they directly address the trust deficit that threatens democratic legitimacy. When citizens participate meaningfully in deliberation and see their input genuinely influence decisions, trust begins to return. When communities create processes that transcend traditional interest-group politics and bring diverse residents together in good-faith conversation, possibilities for collective action emerge that seemed impossible through conventional channels.

The focus of this essay on local and state innovation is therefore deliberate. While national-level citizens' assemblies remain aspirational, state and local governments are demonstrating what works, what challenges persist, and how deliberative democracy can be woven into existing governance structures. These experiments are building both practical knowledge and political will – resources that will prove essential if and when citizens' assemblies are seriously considered at the national level.

The three case studies that follow reveal different dimensions of this democratic renewal. They show how scale, technology, and institutional integration can be configured in various ways. They demonstrate both the promise of deliberative methods and the hard work required to make them succeed. And they pose questions about whether innovations proven at local and state levels can ultimately be brought to the national stage, where citizen trust in government is most damaged and most urgently needs repair.

Three American communities – California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins – have pioneered distinct approaches to bringing citizens back into the democratic process. Each case reveals different dimensions of what works, what

challenges persist, and how technology and traditional engagement can be woven together to restore trust between residents and their representatives.

When the Palisades fires tore through California in early 2025, they left behind more than charred landscapes and displaced families. They exposed a fundamental gap in the state's capacity to engage citizens at scale during moments of crisis. Governor Gavin Newsom recognized that recovery would require not just rebuilding infrastructure but reintroducing community voice in the decision-making process. Out of this urgency, Engaged California was born.

Embedded within California's Office of Data and Innovation (ODI) and directed by Jeffrey Marino, who reports directly to the governor, Engaged California represents the state's commitment to creating permanent infrastructure for large-scale democratic participation. Marino understood that this could not be a top-down initiative. He forged partnerships across sectors – with technology platforms, community organizations, and local leaders – to ensure the legitimacy and reach necessary for genuine citizen engagement.

The fires created an unmistakable imperative: thousands of residents needed to be heard about their priorities for recovery, their visions for rebuilding, and their concerns about displacement and community preservation. Traditional town halls and public comment periods would never suffice. The state needed a platform capable of facilitating genuinely large-scale community conversations.

Drawing inspiration from Audrey Tang, Taiwan's minister of digital affairs who had pioneered online platforms for citizen engagement, Engaged California developed a multiphase strategy designed to move systematically from large-scale listening to focused deliberation to actionable recommendations. The Taiwanese model had demonstrated that digital tools, if designed thoughtfully, could scale democratic participation without sacrificing nuance or depth.

Engaged California created a platform for residents to submit their ideas, respond to others' proposals, and indicate their priorities through voting mechanisms. Tens of thousands of Californians participated in the initial listening phase, creating a vast repository of community wisdom about recovery. But the organizers knew that raw input, however voluminous, does not automatically translate into coherent policy. The second phase involved synthesizing this input – identifying themes, clarifying tensions, surfacing areas of consensus and disagreement – and then inviting participants into deeper deliberation on the most complex questions.

Yet even as Engaged California demonstrated the possibility of deliberation at scale, persistent challenges emerged. Representativeness remained elusive. Despite efforts to reach all communities, digital-access barriers meant that residents without reliable internet connections or digital literacy were systematically underrepresented. The organizers experimented with hybrid approaches – community centers with internet access, printed materials, phone-based participation – but achieving

true demographic representativeness across California's vast and diverse population proved to be an ongoing struggle without a simple solution.

Language translation presented an additional challenge. All the information was available in eight different languages: English, Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, and Armenian. Participants could post their comments in their own language, but their comments and comments posted in other languages were not translated. So, while people could participate in discussion using their own language, they could not necessarily read what others posted, which severely limited crosslinguistic deliberation. This issue needs to be addressed in future initiatives.

Perhaps more fundamentally, the question of sustainability loomed over the entire enterprise. Engaged California was launched under a particular gubernatorial administration with particular commitments to participatory governance. Would it survive a change in administration? Would future governors maintain the infrastructure and investment required to sustain large-scale deliberation? Or would it follow the familiar pattern of democratic innovations that flourish under champion leaders only to wither when political winds shift?

These questions about representativeness and sustainability echo through every deliberative democracy initiative across the country. But California's experiment had established crucial precedents, showing that large-scale digital engagement was possible, that crisis could catalyze democratic innovation, and that state government could create dedicated institutional homes for citizen voice. The next question was whether similar approaches could work at smaller scales, where face-to-face relationships still anchored community life.

If California's fires created an urgent need for large-scale engagement, Bowling Green, Kentucky, faced a different but equally pressing challenge: how to manage population and economic growth deliberately, rather than simply allowing growth to happen to the community. The question Warren County Judge-Executive Doug Gorman posed to residents captured the stakes perfectly: *Do we want growth to happen TO US or do we want growth to happen FOR US?*

The Bowling Green community was staring at projections showing that its population would double by 2050. This was not abstract demographic modeling; it was a near-certain future bearing down on a midsized Kentucky city. The question was not whether growth would come but whether the community could shape that growth in ways that preserved what residents valued most about the place they called home.

Community leaders recognized that top-down planning would fail. They learned that lesson from other cities that had experienced rapid growth, where traffic suddenly choked once-peaceful streets, where the character of neighborhoods changed beyond recognition, where longtime residents felt displaced in their own commu-

nities. If Bowling Green was going to grow well, genuine citizen voice would have to drive the planning process from the beginning.

What made Bowling Green's approach distinctive was the public-private partnership at its heart. The BG2050 initiative brought together appropriate city and county agencies with unexpected partners: Google's Jigsaw research unit and the online conversation platform Polis. These two partners would facilitate a month-long conversation with citizens in early 2025, but only after crucial groundwork had been laid.

The organizers studied the earlier iterations of deliberative democracy in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s. They understood that people have to be invited to engage by people they trust, and they have to be confident that leaders will genuinely listen to what they say. Technology alone could not create that trust. So before any digital platforms launched, trusted local leaders – clergy, teachers, business owners, neighborhood association presidents – sat down in living rooms all over Bowling Green and Warren County. They listened to people of every background, every neighborhood, every demographic. These face-to-face conversations created the foundation of legitimacy that would allow the subsequent digital engagement to succeed.

When the Polis platform opened, participation exceeded all expectations. Nearly eight thousand residents – roughly 10 percent of the community's entire population – engaged with the process. They submitted two thousand distinct ideas about Bowling Green's future. They cast over one million votes on proposals submitted by their neighbors. This was not a self-selected group of usual suspects who attend every public meeting. The participant demographics closely mirrored the community.

The sheer volume of input created a new challenge: how to make sense of two thousand ideas and a million votes without losing the nuance and local context that made them meaningful. This is where Jigsaw's artificial intelligence (AI) tools proved essential. The AI analyzed the input and identified 3,940 unique concepts organized into twelve broad topics and seventy subtopics. But – and this was critical – the AI did not flatten the input into bland generalizations. It captured nuance. It reflected understanding of Bowling Green's physical geography and cultural context.

One example illustrates this capacity for contextual understanding. Jigsaw's AI highlighted a major theme running through the community input: respondents wanted Bowling Green *to build its own identity and not try to be Nashville*. This insight required intimate knowledge of regional dynamics, including the relationship between Kentucky's midsize cities and Tennessee's booming capital ninety miles to the south, the anxiety about losing local character in pursuit of growth, and the desire to learn from nearby examples without simply imitating them. A generic sentiment-analysis tool would have missed this entirely. But the AI captured it, flagged it as significant, and ensured it would inform the recommendations that emerged from the process.

The synthesis of this input – combining the face-to-face conversations, digital deliberation, and AI analysis – produced a comprehensive vision for growth that reflected genuine community priorities. Residents wanted economic opportunity but not at the expense of quality of life. They wanted new housing but with careful attention to neighborhood character. They wanted transportation infrastructure designed to connect communities rather than divide them. They wanted Bowling Green to become more than it was without ceasing to be Bowling Green.

This process gave Gorman and other local leaders something invaluable: a mandate grounded in broad community participation. The recommendations carried legitimacy because they emerged from a process that had genuinely engaged thousands of residents. And critically, those residents knew they had been heard. They could see their ideas reflected in the synthesis. They could trace the connections between what they said in their living rooms, what they submitted on the platform, and what appeared in the final vision for BG2050.

Bowling Green's success highlighted another question relevant to every deliberative process: What happens next? Having created this rich picture of community priorities, how would leaders ensure that subsequent decisions aligned with it? How would accountability be maintained? Would there be mechanisms to return to the community as implementation proceeded, to check whether the reality of growth matched the vision? These questions about closing the loop – about ensuring that deliberation actually influences decisions – would become even more urgent in Fort Collins, where a deliberative process confronted the ultimate test: a public vote.

Both California and Bowling Green demonstrated that deliberative processes could engage citizens at scale and produce substantive recommendations. But neither faced the ultimate question: Would the broader public – including those who had not participated in the deliberative process – trust and support the recommendations that emerged from it? Fort Collins would answer that question directly, in the most democratic way possible, through a ballot measure.

The Hughes Stadium site in Fort Collins had become a wound in the city's civic fabric. A 165-acre plot of public land where Colorado State's Hughes Stadium stood before it was demolished in 2018, it lay at the intersection of passionate, incompatible visions for the city's future. Environmental advocates saw it as crucial open space that should be restored to native habitat. Recreation enthusiasts envisioned trails and sports facilities. Neighbors worried about traffic and noise. Voices citywide argued for uses that would benefit all residents, not just adjacent neighborhoods. Each group had legitimate interests. But traditional politics had produced only stalemate and deepening acrimony.

A citizen-initiated ballot measure in 2021 required the city to purchase the site and rezone it as public open lands but settled nothing about actual use. If anything,

it intensified the conflict. Every proposal triggered immediate opposition. Public meetings devolved into shouting matches. Competing interest groups hardened their positions. City council members faced impossible choices, with any decision bound to enrage a substantial portion of their constituents.

In this context, the Fort Collins city council made a remarkable decision: they would step back and trust everyday residents to find common ground where elected officials and organized interest groups had failed. They commissioned a civic assembly, a small-scale, face-to-face deliberative body that would bring together randomly selected residents representative of community demographics.

Twenty residents were chosen through a sortition (lottery) process designed to create a microcosm of Fort Collins. They ranged in age from their twenties to their seventies. They represented different neighborhoods, different educational backgrounds, and different political perspectives. Most had no strong prior opinion about the Hughes Stadium site. They were not activists or stakeholders with organizational interests. They were simply residents who happened to be selected and who agreed to undertake this work on behalf of their community.

These twenty people committed to thirty hours of deliberation over two weekends. (Given the significant commitment of time, the members of the citizens' assembly were paid a small stipend and had their meals and childcare expenses covered.) They were not asked to compromise between preexisting positions. Rather, they were asked to learn, to deliberate, and to recommend what they genuinely believed would be best for Fort Collins. To support their work, an information committee of twelve residents reviewed and determined what background materials the assembly should receive. Other residents hosted mini-deliberations throughout the city to gather broad input to inform the assembly's work.

The assembly's process was carefully structured but not constraining. Trained facilitators helped the group surface their values and priorities before diving into specific proposals. Expert presentations from city staff, environmental scientists, recreation planners, and community development specialists provided factual grounding. The participants heard from advocates of different approaches but were free to chart their own course. Crucially, they deliberated together rather than merely listening to presentations and voting individually. The conversation itself – the exchange of perspectives, the testing of assumptions, the gradual emergence of shared understanding – was the heart of the process.

The large group learning sessions of the citizens' assembly were held in public and could be observed by anyone in the community interested in attending. The small group deliberation sessions at which delegates worked through options and built consensus were held in private. This is a typical design in citizens' assemblies: small group deliberations require psychological safety; people need to feel free to express uncertainty, to change their minds and freely move back-and-forth among different opinions without being observed by people outside the process.

What emerged was something none of the organized interest groups had proposed: a multiuse vision for the site that wove together recreation, environmental restoration, outdoor learning, and cultural spaces for community gatherings. The assembly's recommendations showed remarkable sophistication. They identified specific areas of the site suited for different purposes. They proposed phases for implementation that would allow environmental restoration to proceed while gradually developing amenities. They addressed neighborhood concerns about traffic and noise while ensuring citywide access and benefit.

The assembly's report carried moral weight because of the process that produced it. Here were twenty ordinary residents, demographically representative of the city, who had given thirty hours to learning and deliberation and had found consensus where experts and activists had found only conflict. The city council received the recommendations with genuine appreciation and began working on implementation.

But the vested interests that had previously fought for single-use visions were not ready to accept defeat. One group gathered enough signatures to place their preferred alternative – a single-use approach – on the November ballot. This created a defining moment for deliberative democracy in America. The city council could have allowed only that single-use measure to appear on the ballot, effectively overriding the assembly's work. Instead, they made a bolder choice: they placed the multiuse recommendation from the assembly on the ballot as well, creating a direct comparison and competition.

The city council asked Fort Collins voters to decide whether to trust the deliberative process. The citywide vote became a referendum not just on the use of the Hughes Stadium site but on the legitimacy of deliberative democracy itself. If the alternative measure prevailed, it would suggest that interest-group politics would always trump citizen deliberation. If the assembly's recommendation won, it would validate the investment in bringing everyday residents into complex decision-making.

The result was unambiguous. Sixty-seven percent of Fort Collins voters supported the civilians' assembly's multiuse vision. The alternative measure garnered 45 percent support. The overlapping support suggested that many voters appreciated both approaches but trusted the deliberative process more. For the first time in U.S. history, the recommendations of a civilians' assembly had been ratified by direct public vote.

The Fort Collins result carried profound implications. It demonstrated that the broader public – including those who had not participated in deliberation – could recognize the legitimacy of deliberative processes and trust their outcomes. It showed that investment in genuine deliberation could overcome the polarization and stalemate of traditional interest-group politics. And it provided a template for how deliberative recommendations could be integrated into existing democratic

institutions, including ballot measures, rather than remaining parallel or advisory processes with uncertain influence on actual decisions.

These three cases represent different scales, different technologies, and different integration points with existing governance. California operated at the state level with tens of thousands of participants and digital platforms. Bowling Green engaged with nearly 10 percent of the city population through a hybrid of face-to-face and digital methods. Fort Collins relied on just twenty residents in intensive face-to-face deliberation that was then validated by citywide vote.

Yet these cases share fundamental insights. First, citizens are ready and willing to participate in well-designed deliberative processes. The myth that Americans are too polarized, too busy, or too disengaged for serious civic work is contradicted by thousands of Californians contributing recovery ideas, eight thousand Bowling Green residents shaping their growth vision, and Fort Collins voters validating a deliberative process. The demand for meaningful participation exceeds the supply of quality opportunities.

Second, representativeness matters profoundly. California struggled with digital divides. Bowling Green invested heavily in face-to-face groundwork before digital engagement. Fort Collins used sortition to ensure demographic representation. Each approached the challenge differently but all recognized that legitimacy depends on inclusion. Deliberative processes that systematically exclude voices – whether due to technology barriers, time constraints, or selection methods – cannot claim to represent community wisdom.

Third, accountability mechanisms are essential. California's challenge is ensuring ongoing, cross-administration influence on policy. Bowling Green's recommendations must shape actual growth decisions. Fort Collins succeeded precisely because the deliberative outcome faced a democratic accountability test. The connection between deliberation and decision-making cannot be assumed; it must be designed into the process. Without visible impact on policy outcomes, these participatory processes risk increasing distrust and further eroding people's sense of civic agency.

Fourth, technology's role must be enabling but not determining. Jigsaw's AI in Bowling Green succeeded because it drew on face-to-face trust-building and captured local context. California's digital platforms struggled with access barriers despite sophisticated design. Fort Collins succeeded without relying on technology at all. The lesson is not that technology should be embraced or avoided but that it should be deployed thoughtfully in service of genuine deliberation, not as a substitute for it.

Finally, these cases reveal that deliberative democracy builds civic capacity in multiple directions simultaneously. Participants gain understanding of complex issues and appreciation for diverse perspectives. Community members who do not

participate directly but observe the process gain trust in democratic institutions. Officials and staff develop new skills in facilitating rather than merely presenting. The infrastructure created – whether California’s Office of Data and Innovation, Bowling Green’s public-private partnerships, or Fort Collins’s deliberative protocols – becomes available for future challenges.

The question these three cases invite is whether their lessons can scale up. What role can deliberative democracy play in national governance? Can citizen voice be brought back to the table where it may matter most and where its absence is most acutely felt?

The innovations documented in California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins demonstrate once again that deliberative democracy works. Citizens participate when given meaningful opportunities. Diverse groups find common ground through structured conversation. The broader public trusts deliberative outcomes when processes are transparent and representative. These are established facts, proven through dozens of experiments across American communities over many decades beginning in the 1990s.

Yet state and local success cannot substitute for national-level reform. Federal policies set frameworks that shape what states and localities can accomplish in education, health care, infrastructure, environmental protection, and countless other domains. Federal dysfunction – the gridlock, the polarization, the disconnect between Washington and ordinary Americans – undermines trust in democratic governance writ large. If deliberative democracy is to fulfill its promise of renewing American democracy, it must reach the national stage.

The United States has experimented with national-level deliberation before. Between 1998 and 1999, Americans Discuss Social Security (ADSS), led by AmericaSpeaks and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, engaged nearly forty-five thousand Americans across all fifty states in direct discussions about Social Security reform. Participants deliberated on whether to raise the payroll tax ceiling, to invest trust funds in the stock market, and/or to adjust benefit formulas. The initiative demonstrated that large-scale national deliberation was logistically feasible and that citizens could engage thoughtfully with technical policy questions and reach consensus on critical policy options. Subsequently, as part of a larger tax reform package, Congress did raise the cap on payroll taxes, which was supported by ADSS participants in all fifty states and at all levels of income.

A second demonstration on the U.S. national level took place in 2010. “Our Budget, Our Economy” engaged more than 3,400 demographically representative citizens in nineteen cities across the country, connected by satellite television, to respond to the question: How should America grapple with its growing national debt? After a day of deliberation supported by facilitators and subject experts, the participants were able to come to collective agreement on solutions to reduce

the national debt that involved both raising revenues and cutting expenditures. Unfortunately, in the same time frame, the U.S. Congress was unable to reach an agreement and failed to take meaningful action to address the deficit.

Outside the United States, citizens' assemblies have successfully influenced national policy. Ireland's assemblies led to referendums legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 and liberalizing abortion laws in 2018, with formal processes whereby recommendations went to parliamentary committees that reported to government. France convened a Citizens' Convention on Climate in 2019, which directly influenced its 2021 Climate and Resilience Law. The United Kingdom held Climate Assembly UK in 2020 to deliberate on how to meet the nation's goal of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Belgium established a permanent citizens' council and citizens' assemblies in its German-speaking community and the Brussels-Capital Region. No two contexts are the same: population size, geography, and political culture help shape receptivity or resistance to deliberate democratic practices. And challenges in ensuring consistent governmental responsiveness have persisted. Nonetheless, these examples demonstrate that citizens' assemblies can operate at national scale and influence significant policy decisions.

The path forward is incremental. Congress could begin with a single pilot project: select one significant but not existentially divisive issue, convene a nationally representative citizens' assembly to deliberate, and observe what emerges. This would test logistical feasibility, build institutional knowledge, demonstrate that diverse Americans can deliberate productively, and generate concrete policy recommendations.

The design matters enormously. The selection process must ensure genuine demographic representativeness across region, race, age, education, and political perspective. Participants need adequate compensation. Information must be balanced and accessible. Expert facilitation is critical – not to steer outcomes but to ensure productive conversation among people with different perspectives.

Technology requires careful thought. California's experience shows that digital platforms can enable participation at scale but also create access barriers. Bowling Green's success with AI synthesis demonstrates that technology can make sense of large-scale input while preserving nuance, if properly designed. A national citizens' assembly might combine face-to-face deliberation among a core group with broader digital engagement, ensuring that technology serves deliberation rather than replaces it.

Transparency is nonnegotiable. Fort Collins succeeded partly because residents could observe the process and judge its integrity. A national citizens' assembly should operate in full public view, allowing Americans to watch the expert testimony, review materials, and evaluate whether diverse voices are genuinely heard. This builds trust and models reasoned, respectful disagreement.

The relationship between citizens' assembly recommendations and congressional action must be defined at the outset. The assembly would be advisory, not

legislative. Congress would retain full authority to accept, modify, or reject recommendations. What Congress would gain is input qualitatively different from polling or interest-group advocacy – recommendations emerging from sustained deliberation by a representative sample of Americans who have studied the issue carefully.

One institutional innovation could address the accountability challenge: the outputs of a citizens' assembly formally requested and endorsed by Congress could go directly to the floor of the full Senate and House, bypassing traditional committee structure. This would create an immediate relationship between collective citizen voice and the legislative bodies with power to act. Rather than disappearing into committee deliberations where they compete with countless other proposals and interest-group pressures, the assembly's recommendations would receive floor consideration and debate. Members of Congress would be compelled to publicly engage with citizen recommendations, explaining their support or opposition. This would not guarantee adoption but would ensure serious consideration and create accountability.

Pathways beyond Congress also merit exploration. Federal agencies could convene citizens' assemblies to inform regulatory decisions. Presidential commissions could incorporate deliberative elements. Research funders could prioritize studies documenting best practices. State and local governments should continue to innovate and share learning. Networks connecting practitioners can accelerate the spread of successful practices. Foundations and civic organizations can provide funding and technical assistance. Each successful local implementation builds the case for national adoption.

The obstacles to bringing deliberative democracy to the national level are real but not insurmountable. Achieving representativeness across a continental nation with 340 million people will challenge even the most sophisticated selection methods. Building trust faces headwinds from pervasive cynicism about Washington. The logistics demand resources and organizational capacity beyond what most local initiatives require. The political incentives for members of Congress to share agenda-setting power with citizens' assemblies are unclear.

But consider what is at stake. American democracy confronts challenges – polarization, distrust, declining civic participation – that conventional reforms have failed to address. Public faith in Congress hovers at historic lows. Political dysfunction persists despite clear public desire for action. The distrust between Washington and ordinary Americans continues to widen. Against this backdrop, citizens' assemblies offer something rare: a reform with proven effectiveness at bringing diverse people together in productive conversation, with demonstrated capacity to generate recommendations that earn public trust, and with potential to rebuild the civic relationships that democratic governance requires.

The experiments in California, Bowling Green, and Fort Collins point toward possibility. They show that the infrastructure exists, that the methodologies work,

that Americans will participate meaningfully when given genuine opportunities. What we need is political will, specifically the willingness of national leaders to experiment, to trust citizens with complexity, and to create space for deliberative voice alongside traditional forms of representation. The question is whether national institutions will respond to what local experience has already demonstrated: that democracy is strengthened and that we come closer to achieving the aspiration of self-governance embedded in our founding documents when citizens have meaningful voice in the decisions that shape their lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is Executive Director Emerita of the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona and Co-Director of the Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Mapping Initiative at the National Civic League. She previously served as Founder and President of AmericaSpeaks, Consultant to the White House Chief of Staff from 1993–1994, and Chief of Staff to Ohio Governor Richard F. Celeste from 1986–1991. She is the author of *Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: A Guide for Public Managers* (2012) and *A National Town Hall: Bringing Citizens Together through Interactive Video Conferencing* (1999).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kevin Conway, “Marquette Law School Poll Finds Most Americans Are Somewhat Skeptical of Trusting Government, While Confidence in Institutions More Generally Varies Widely,” *Marquette Today*, June 25, 2026, <https://today.marquette.edu/2026/06/marquette-law-school-poll-finds-most-americans-are-somewhat-skeptical-of-trusting-government-while-confidence-in-institutions-more-generally-varies-widely>; Daniel A. Cox and Sam Pressler, “Disconnected: The Growing Class Divide in American Civic Life Findings from 2024 American Social Capital Survey,” American Enterprise Institute, August 22, 2024, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/disconnected-places-and-spaces>; Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Swift Press, 2021); and Jenn Hatfield, “More than 80% of Americans Believe Elected Officials Don’t Care What People like Them Think,” Pew Research Center, April 30, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/30/more-than-80-of-americans-believe-elected-officials-dont-care-what-people-like-them-think>.
- 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>.

Toward a Framework & Evidence for Innovation in Co-Governance

Amy E. Lerman

A growing interest in collaborative governance has led to exciting new projects at both the state and local levels, aiming to expand and improve civic engagement by bringing communities more fully into public-sector decision-making. These innovations in co-governance will be critical to bolstering democratic institutions and practices, with the potential to reduce harmful polarization and rebuild trust in democracy. But we will need intentional design, careful implementation, and systematic research to ensure that new models of engagement do not reproduce existing inequalities in participation or produce largely symbolic interactions between government and communities that do not lead to real or meaningful reform.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the potential of civic (or citizens') assemblies, deliberative engagement platforms, participatory budgeting models, and other democratic reforms that directly engage government entities with the communities they serve.¹ At best, these efforts seek to advance a form of collaborative governance (or co-governance), defined as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.”² This movement describes a much-needed set of projects and processes that hold significant potential to revitalize civic participation, build civic capacity, and improve public-sector problem-solving. Indeed, new models of participation arguably lie at the heart of reinvigorating our democracy and improving our policymaking processes.

However, advocates' enthusiasm for co-governance projects can sometimes outpace the empirical evidence supporting them. Put another way: we don't just need more and different ways for residents to engage in democracy; we need better ways. And to accomplish this goal, we need to take design, implementation, and evaluation seriously. Democratic reformers must be skeptics even of their own good ideas, to ensure that new models of engagement don't simply reproduce the patterns of inequality and ineffectiveness that characterize our current modes of participation.

It has become almost trite to point out that American democratic institutions are failing. Public trust in government is at historic lows,³ political polarization is at an all-time high,⁴ and disillusionment with the basic tenets of democracy itself has become relatively more common, especially among young people.⁵ More broadly, Americans on both sides of the aisle have become less convinced that government is actually capable of real problem-solving or effectively providing for residents' basic needs.⁶

Civic practices have failed to adapt to this growing sense of frustration, reinforcing the perception that government is unresponsive to the needs and priorities of everyday people. Anyone who has attended a local town hall meeting is familiar with the largely performative processes that call for public comment: residents are granted one or two minutes to speak, often being cut off mid-sentence when their allotted time is up, while government representatives sit in silence, legally or procedurally barred from responding. There is rarely any formal follow-up or accountability. The only outcome is the final vote of local representatives, which may or may not align with residents' input. In many cases, residents might reasonably wonder whether these outcomes were largely predetermined.

In light of these concerns, advocates and policymakers are advancing new models of co-governance to address a wide range of political failings. The premise of this work is clear: communities have unique insights and expertise stemming from their lived experiences, which public agencies can aggregate to better understand social problems, identify promising solutions, and implement successful policies and programs that address residents' most urgent needs. In her essay, Carolyn Lukensmeyer describes recent examples of this type of civic-sector innovation across three distinct contexts: in the State of California, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and in Fort Collins, Colorado. Each provides an intriguing example of how such efforts are being deployed.⁷

But building a robust movement for co-governance will require a framework for replicable and scalable design, as well as rigorous evidence of "what works," in what ways, and for what types of communities and what sorts of public problems. Without establishing clear parameters for the purpose and goals of engagement, and without rigorous and specific evidence of how new forms of engagement lead to (or fail to produce) expected outcomes, the promise of deeper and more meaningful co-governance may be compromised from the outset. If residents come to perceive these initiatives as duplicating the ineffectiveness of our existing engagement approaches, we are likely to undermine the important goals we hope to achieve.

A key question for those interested in improving and institutionalizing participatory co-governance is: What does success look like, and how do we know if we are achieving it? Are we trying to solve for individual-level transformations (such as increasing intergroup empathy and institutional trust

among participants), induce collective attitudinal and behavioral shifts (such as decreasing partisan polarization and increasing voter turnout), or produce utilitarian policy outcomes (such as sourcing and implementing practical reforms to improve public programs)? Different models of engagement are likely to be best suited to achieving these distinct outcomes.

Is the primary goal of the engagement to get strangers who live in a single community to talk to one another in order to generate new solutions to a problem? Great! Metrics for success may include how many participants contributed to brainstorming sessions and how many new ideas were surfaced. Is the goal of the engagement to help a specific government entity narrow down the options for how to implement a local tax bond approved by voters? Measuring success in this case may require focusing on different outcomes such as whether there was consensus on how to prioritize ideas, as well as how funds were ultimately spent.

In addition to clarifying the specific goals of co-governance, building an evidence base means we need to avoid the blurring of distinct forms of participation. Civic engagement is a broad term that can encompass many strategies and methods. Digital engagement tools that aggregate public opinion at scale, for instance, likely fulfill a different purpose than in-person civic assemblies, which are geared toward deliberation, the “slow thinking” and weighing of trade-offs.

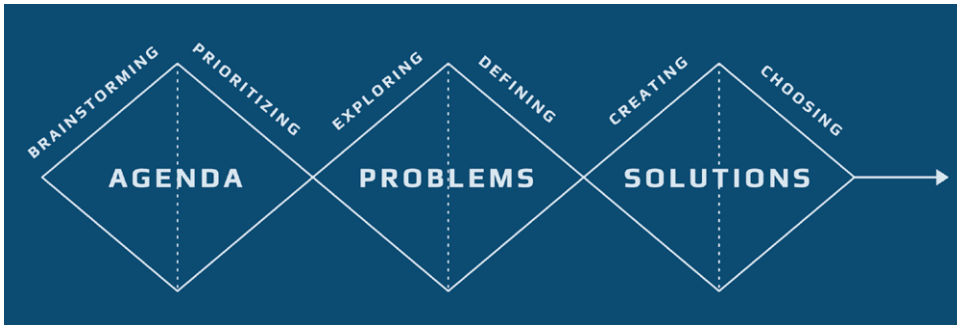
When considering the diverse set of activities that make up the broad field of co-governance, three important distinctions are worth noting.

1. *Community engagement is not synonymous with co-governance.* Some recent innovations in civic engagement are led by state or local government,⁸ while others have been conducted as research experiments or community-led initiatives.⁹ While these latter efforts are important, the lack of formal leadership from government agencies runs the risk of creating a feedback loop to nowhere, whereby citizens talk to one another but don’t engage in a sustained two-way conversation with public-sector representatives. If the state does not have initial ownership or “buy in” on the project, it leaves open the question of whether and how resident input will be incorporated into the policymaking process.

If we are to build meaningful co-governance, it is essential that government officials are involved from the outset, not to dictate the outcome or ensure residents are constrained by prevailing politics, but to explain budget constraints, legal hurdles, and implementation challenges and (more importantly) to ensure positive feedback loops in which input gathered from residents is used to directly inform public programs and policies. While government cannot be expected to adopt every recommendation (as wrestling with conflicting and/or mutually exclusive input from community participants is often a significant challenge for government agencies doing this kind of work), they must at minimum be committed to a reporting-back process that explains why certain suggestions were adopted and why others were not. Without this accountability, these efforts risk undermining trust rather than

Figure 1

Policymaking Processes: Divergent & Convergent Thinking



Source: Figure by the author.

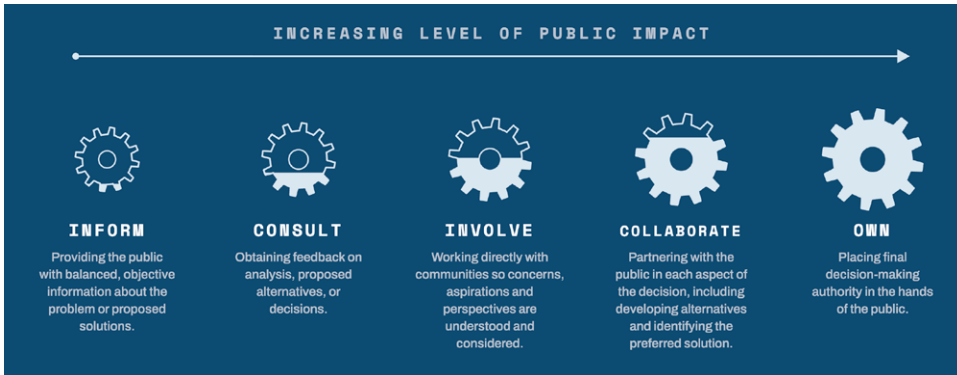
building it. When residents are asked to contribute their expertise to co-governance efforts but then see no changes stemming from their input, they may leave the process feeling more cynical and alienated than when they arrived.

2. *The intentional design of co-governance activities requires ensuring that the method matches the purpose and context.* To ensure that engagement activities are meaningful and productive, government entities must first articulate *why* they seek public input and *how* that input will be used to advance their policy goals. This information is crucial to determining what type of community engagement will be most useful and which community representatives should be invited into the process.

For example, each stage of the policymaking process can have either *divergent* or *convergent* goals (see Figure 1). Divergent stages, like understanding problems or sourcing solutions, allow the problem or solution space to expand via exploring and creating (that is, broadening out). For instance, a public agency that has been tasked to address disparities in internet connectivity might start by gathering more information about why those disparities exist in the first place. Such an investigation places them in the *exploring the problem* phase, and engagement with communities at this point in the process can be oriented around this broad goal. In contrast, convergent stages of the policymaking process include prioritizing issues or choosing solutions (that is, narrowing down). The same public agency considering internet connectivity might discover that research has already been done to understand the problem and identify a set of possible solutions. In this case, the department might focus its energies on *choosing an approach*, using engagement with the affected communities to help prioritize among possible solutions and select a path forward.

3. *At the same time, participatory efforts can range in how deeply they engage residents.* Before embarking on community engagement, government partners must decide

Figure 2
The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



Source : Figure by the author.

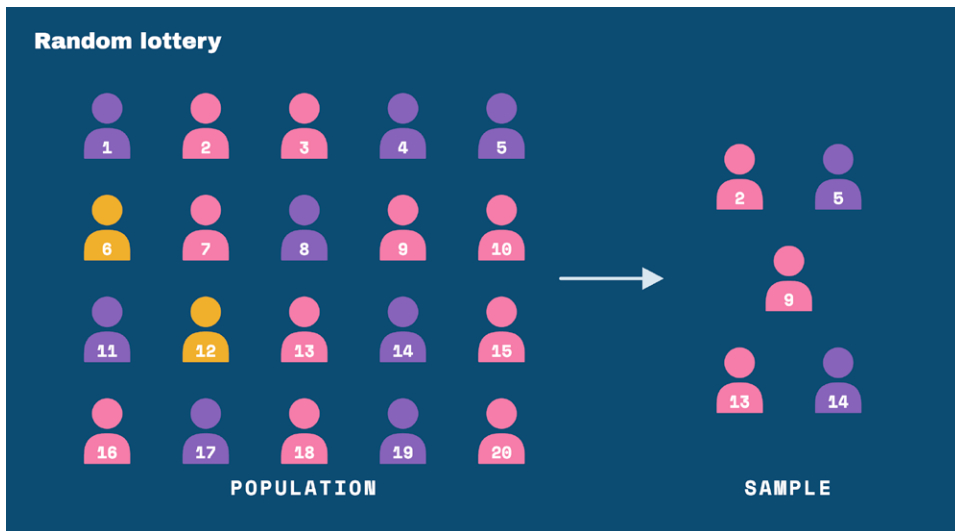
how much influence the engagement will have on policy decisions – and they must set expectations accordingly with the communities who are invited to engage. For example, civil servant Sherry Arnstein’s “ladder of citizen participation,” developed in 1969, is a conceptual framework that evaluates the degree of citizen involvement in decision-making processes.¹⁰

The ladder distinguishes between tokenistic approaches that draw from impacted communities without necessarily incorporating their contributions (at the bottom of the ladder) and power-sharing approaches that provide meaningful levers for community members to directly influence the design and implementation of policies and programs (at the top of the ladder). The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has since adapted this into a practical framework for practitioners that outlines five types of citizen engagement (see Figure 2).

In modern framing, there is no “better” or “correct” level of control; rather, the goal is to be specific about how to optimize mutual benefits from civic engagement and to clearly communicate a role for communities that best respects their contributions and leverages their expertise. Crucial to this process is being honest and clear with communities from the outset about how their input will be used.

In designing and evaluating the next generation of civic innovations, there are a variety of additional challenges to consider. While there are far more considerations than can be outlined here, two especially important issues are outlined below.

Figure 3
Representation from Random Lottery



Source: Figure by the author.

The problem of representation. New forms of civic innovation, such as civic assemblies, often tout the importance of bringing together a “representative” group of residents who are chosen through sortition, or lottery. However, a relatively small group of people is not substantively representative of a large and diverse population, even if they were selected by random draw. That’s because the group is likely to have only one or two people (or in some cases, no one at all) who “represent” demographic groups that are numerical minorities in the broader population (see Figure 3). Additionally, who is selected and invited to participate is not always the same as who chooses or is able to attend. Some people who are invited may not want to participate, while others may face barriers that preclude participation. To ensure equitable participation, organizers can consider providing stipends, child-care, food, and reimbursement for travel costs that make it as easy (and enticing) as possible for everyone who has been selected to engage.

Conversely, simply increasing the volume of participants through an open invitation does not guarantee a representative cross-section of the public. That’s because the people who most commonly self-select into civic participation are likely to be systematically different from those who do not choose to participate.¹¹ Indeed, self-selection into newer engagement activities is likely to replicate the same sorts of biases we see in voter turnout, donating to campaigns, and other more tradi-

tional forms of engagement.¹² For example, attendees of public hearings on zoning laws have been shown to be disproportionately older, whiter, and wealthier than the surrounding community.¹³ When these groups participate at systematically higher rates than others, government officials receive “distorted information on preferences and opinions.”¹⁴

The importance of facilitation. Any co-governance project that involves deliberation and debate remains susceptible to pressure from the loudest voices in the room, groupthink, and majority rule. In particular, underlying power asymmetries can make authentic dialogue difficult. In such cases, well-facilitated, structured dialogue can allow less powerful or underrepresented groups to challenge dominant narratives about an issue and thus shape the framing of discussion. Facilitation can also help surface existing power imbalances by directly identifying and discussing who the usual decision-makers are, who has the most resources, and who is most harmed when policies fail to address persistent social problems.

Additionally, certain approaches are better suited to cases in which people from very different walks of life come together to collaborate. For example, when deliberators come from diverse perspectives, making decisions by supermajority or consensus might be preferable to relying on majority rule. This is because a consensus approach typically requires participants to come to some sort of agreement on a course of action, reducing the likelihood of a more established, powerful bloc of participants ignoring the concerns of another, less powerful group.

Likewise, deliberating in more similar subgroups can be helpful. This is sometimes called “enclave deliberation” and involves discussion in smaller groups whose members are more similar in terms of class, ethnic background, neighborhood, and other demographic traits.¹⁵ This approach can help level the playing field by allowing people to speak more freely, enabling disadvantaged communities to make sense of their shared situation and organize what might otherwise be a more fragmented set of interests. Following enclave deliberation, groups might then come together to share their collective experiences with others who come from more dissimilar backgrounds.

Society faces increasingly complex challenges. Revolutionary new technologies, growing economic inequality, and decreasing trust in a range of institutions are changing relationships between governments and the people they serve. In this context, government innovators are seeking ways to better incorporate community voices into the policymaking process. These new models of co-governance aim to tap into the immeasurable creativity and wisdom that community members hold about the problems they face and how best to solve them. Through innovative models of engagement, residents’ ideas and perspectives can inform everything from the definition of policy problems to the prioritization of solutions.

Figure 4
The UC Berkeley Possibility Lab IMPACT Model



Source: Figure by the author.

To ensure the success of these initiatives, the field will need a rigorous evidence base focused on high-quality design, implementation, and evaluation. One such model comes from UC Berkeley’s Possibility Lab, where we have worked with dozens of state and local partners to build an iterative framework and practical set of tools for co-governance. This IMPACT Model helps government entities address public problems through meaningful collaboration with community partners (see Figure 4).

The first three steps of the IMPACT process (Initiate, Mobilize, and Plan) are about establishing the conditions for effective collaboration. These stages help define and refine a shared understanding of which problems need to be solved and how solutions should be developed. Through these steps, government practitioners are also able to build collaborative power-sharing partnerships with local and community organizations. Together, these partners can drive projects forward in a way that focuses on the needs of the impacted community, as those needs are understood and articulated by community members themselves.

Initiate	Determine the purpose and goals for engaging with impacted communities and define the questions to answer.
Mobilize	Assemble a team of targeted partnerships to help make decisions around the engagement process and establish rules for collaboration.
Plan	Together, select an appropriate method or methods of engagement.

The second half of the process (Act, Catalyze, and Test) is when the plan is put into action, learnings are synthesized, and the model and process are rigorously

tested. Ultimately, this learning process is designed to enable the government and community to move forward with implementing and testing policies, programs, or other next steps. During all of these activities, government practitioners work directly with people affected by the problem at hand, who help guide processes, interpret community input, and determine criteria for success.

Act	Take action by designing and deploying engagements that are best suited to meet predetermined goals.
Catalyze	Compile the information from the engagement and synthesize to highlight findings and/or actionable recommendations.
Test	Implement, evaluate, and iterate on civic engagement activities and recommended actions. Together, plan for next steps.

The IMPACT process is designed to be iterative, inclusive, and intentional. Rather than ending the project following the “Test” phase, collaborators from both government and community should evaluate what they have learned, where they are in the policy process, and how their work together can continue to evolve. This engagement process can sometimes reveal new ideas to be piloted and evaluated, or uncover more questions about how to improve conditions. While the same collaborators should only continue to work hand-in-hand if it is mutually beneficial, doing so can help build mutual trust and momentum, making good on the many opportunities for action that the process will likely reveal.

Models of co-governance hold enormous potential to revitalize our democratic processes at a critical moment in American history. At the same time, we have little rigorous evidence that co-governance projects, broadly defined, consistently decrease polarization, increase trust, or lead to “better” policy outcomes. If the field of co-governance is to expand, new forms of civic innovation must be held to the same standards of transparency and accountability as any other public program.

Without establishing a rigorous evidence base, the field will likely suffer from a cheerleader bias; after all, advocates, facilitators, and funders all have a vested interest in declaring every experiment a success. And they might all be successful! But more civic engagement is not necessarily net positive – and it is almost never net neutral. When government engages with the community, its efforts can build trust, but they can also further erode it. The latter outcome is especially likely when attempts to gather community perspectives are rushed, lack a clear purpose, or are initiated without a clear implementation plan. If residents participate in co-governance efforts but don’t feel that their input is heard and valued, it can serve to reinforce the idea that engagement with government is not worth residents’ time or energy.

To ensure the movement toward co-governance achieves its enormous potential, the field would benefit from a shared framework for design, implementation, and evaluation; the Possibility Lab's IMPACT Model provides one example of how this might be conceptualized. A reliable evidence base will require systematically documenting how projects are conceived and implemented: how topics were selected, how participants were recruited, what the attrition rates were, and what specific policy changes – if any – resulted from the work. Only through intentional design and a commitment to transparency can we ensure that civic innovation leads to its intended outcomes, rather than exacerbating the detachment and disillusionment that has come to characterize many of our status quo practices of democracy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy E. Lerman, a Member of the American Academy since 2023, is the Michelle Schwartz Professor of Public Policy and Political Science and Executive Director of the Possibility Lab at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America (And What We Can Do to Fix It)* (2019), *The Modern Prison Paradox: Politics, Punishment, and Social Community* (2013), and *Arresting Citizenship: The Democratic Consequences of American Crime Control* (with Vesla M. Weaver, 2014).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Shaibya Dalal and Loren DeJonge Schulman, "Public Participation IS the Ingenuity We Need," Federation for American Scientists, April 29, 2026, <https://fas.org/publication/public-participation-ingenuity>; and Hollie Russon Gilman, Lizbeth Lucero, Mark Schmitt, et al., "Revitalizing Civic Engagement Through Collaborative Governance," New America, December 16, 2022, <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/revitalizing-civic-engagement-through-meaningful-power-shifts>.
- ² Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18 (4) (2008): 544.
- ³ Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx> (accessed June 29, 2026).
- ⁴ Pew Research Center, *Political Polarization in the American Public: How Increasing Ideological Uniformity and Partisan Antipathy Affect Politics, Compromise and Everyday Life* (Pew Research Center, 2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public>; and Megan Brenan, "U.S. Political Parties Historically Polarized Ideologically," Gallup, January 16, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx>.
- ⁵ Christopher Claassen and Pedro C. Magalhães, "Public Support for Democracy in the United States Has Declined Generationally," <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles>

- /PMC10662659; and Jonathan Schulman and Richard Wike, “Multiple Indicators Show a Decline in the Health of America’s Democracy in 2025,” Pew Research Center, April 15, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/15/multiple-indicators-show-a-decline-in-the-health-of-americas-democracy-in-2025>.
- ⁶ Amy E. Lerman, *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America (And What We Can Do to Fix It)* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).
- ⁷ Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, “Democracy in Practice: A Report on Innovations in Participatory Governance,” *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 76–88, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/democracy-in-practice-report-innovations-participatory-governance>.
- ⁸ For example, the state-level Engaged California project designed by the California Office of Data and Innovation and the local-level project commissioned by the Fort Collins City Council.
- ⁹ For examples, see the America in One Room project designed by Stanford’s Deliberative Democracy Lab and NORC at the University of Chicago as well as the California Considers project designed by the California 100 initiative.
- ¹⁰ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4) (1969): 216–224.
- ¹¹ Ellen C. Reinhart, Monique M. Turner, David M. Markowitz, and Dustin Carnahan, “Perceived Social Contribution and Its Associations with Political Participation,” *PLOS One* 20 (9) (2025).
- ¹² Michael Barber and John B. Holbein, “400 Million Voting Records Show Profound Racial and Geographic Disparities in Voter Turnout in the United States,” *PLOS One* 17 (6) (2022); and Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Harvard University Press, 1995).
- ¹³ Katherine Levine Einstein, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer, *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America’s Housing Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- ¹⁴ Bai Linh Hoang, “Racial Disparities in Public Meeting Participation? Examining Past Evidence and Nationally Representative Data,” *Urban Affairs Review* 57 (1) (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419844024>.
- ¹⁵ Christopher F. Karpowitz, Chad Raphael, and Allen S. Hammond IV, “Deliberative Democracy and Inequality: Two Cheers for Enclave Deliberation among the Disempowered,” *Politics and Society* 37 (4) (2009): 576–615.

From Participatory Experiments to Democratic Infrastructure

Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling & David Lazer

Carolyn Lukensmeyer's apt observations about Engaged California, BG2050, and the Fort Collins citizens' assembly prove that, when given the chance, ordinary citizens can enrich the quality and legitimacy of the policy process. We share her enthusiasm but draw different conclusions about priorities, if not ultimate goals. Lukensmeyer's emphasis is on continuing these sorts of experiments and moving them from cities to states to the national level. We urge reformers to prioritize embedding participatory and deliberative innovations (PDIs) into existing representative institutions. We draw on two decades of work studying deliberative town halls, alongside research on citizens' assemblies and other PDIs, to argue that only by embedding such forums within statutory pathways can one-off experiments become durable democratic infrastructure.

Carolyn Lukensmeyer's case studies – Engaged California, Bowling Green's BG2050, and the Fort Collins citizens' assembly – establish convincing proof of concept. When conveners offered regular citizens opportunities to deliberate, they responded admirably. Tens of thousands of Californians weighed in thoughtfully on postfire recovery. Roughly one in ten people in Bowling Green contributed to the city's fifty-year growth plan. When twenty of their neighbors were randomly selected to develop a major land-use plan, two-thirds of Fort Collins voters ratified it. Skeptics argue that ordinary Americans are either too disengaged or too overengaged (that is, polarized) to make constructive contributions to the policy process. Lukensmeyer's examples and others like them show that such blanket claims are false.¹

While we agree with Lukensmeyer's critique of strong skeptics, we see the positive upshot of the cases differently. She believes these successes should encourage upward scaling, from cities to states and from states to a national pilot. We think that jump is less clearly warranted given the evidence. Each case illustrates ways participatory and deliberative innovations (PDIs) *can* enhance democracy. But each case also offers a distinct lesson about where PDIs tend to stall. California faces a *sustainability* question. Veteran reformers tell disheartening stories of making progress with one set of officials only to see it evaporate when the political winds or personnel change. The California case study does not consider what will happen

when the current administration cycles out. Bowling Green faces an *agenda-control* problem. Nearly eight thousand residents generated two thousand ideas and more than one million votes. But no one has specified the path by which any of that even constrains, much less determines, the next zoning decision or capital budget. Fort Collins faced (and only partly solved) an *accountability* problem. The city council placed the citizens' assembly's recommendation on the ballot, and that institutional move gave deliberation a real role in the legislative process. Elected officials, however, tend to cede their authority only when they *want* to avoid accountability for difficult decisions.

Each process helped solve a specific local problem. But that is not the same as contributing to ongoing governance. Rather than further proliferating one-off experiments, we urge democratic reformers to prioritize building durable channels for PDI into institutions that have the authority to act on their recommendations. That is, now that we have successful examples of PDI *events*, reformers should turn their efforts toward building PDI as democratic *infrastructure*.

In the short and medium run, we need to build PDI infrastructure within existing institutions of representative democracy, rather than running them in parallel or as replacements. When PDIs bypass or substitute for representative institutions instead of deepening them, innovations flourish only briefly or over a limited set of issues. They wither when personnel or interest configurations change. We should focus less on multiplying PDI episodes and more on weaving them into the routine workings of institutions that already exercise democratic authority.

Lukensmeyer's cases thus suggest that, for the foreseeable future, touting PDIs as *alternatives* to representative institutions often impedes our ability to transform episodes into infrastructure. Episodes can be successful while leaving the background practice untouched. Infrastructure changes the background. A citizens' assembly that produces a binder of recommendations (or even decisions) is still an episode. A statutory or constitutional requirement that legislative or regulatory bodies respond on the record to an assembly's recommendations is infrastructure. We see our proposal as both more modest and more ambitious than current reform practice. It is more modest in its aim of supporting representative democracy rather than replacing it. It is more ambitious in its aim to institutionalize PDIs rather than merely proliferate them.

Observers cite citizens' apathy or ignorance as the main impediment to converting episodes into infrastructure. Lukensmeyer's cases blunt that objection. Institutional uptake, not citizen competence, is the main limiting factor. Even when a PDI produces solid recommendations, the people running institutions with authority to act on them often cannot, will not, or do not believe they should. Most public hearings remain ceremonial. Constituent-communication systems reward volume, intensity, and organized mobilization rather than con-

sidered public reasoning. Under polarized conditions, legislators have stronger incentives to respond to mobilized factions than to reflective majorities. When a PDI ends with recommendations but no formal pathway, the failure does not lie with the citizens who took part; it lies with the institutions. Representative bodies were not designed with deliberative citizen input in mind. Retrofitting them should rise to the top of reformers' to-do list.

Institutional uptake requires a motivating and organizing principle. We argue that the most promising is "recursivity."² The ideal of recursive representation is rooted in the beliefs that representation works better as dialogue than as monologue, and that the dialogue should be ongoing rather than episodic. Election campaigns bundle many issues into a single (often) binary choice, muddling mandates and obscuring accountability. The harried heat of campaigns is also not a good environment for constructive conversation. The long stretches between elections (where most actual *governing* happens) present a more generative climate for the dialogic cycles we have in mind. Citizens articulate their problems and goals, officials propose ways to address those problems and achieve those goals, and citizens then revise in light of that response. The loop runs again.

The cycle is not just an abstract ideal. Over the past twenty years, we have run deliberative town halls (DTHs) that connect members of Congress with their constituents. DTHs are structured events in which officials discuss a single policy area with a random sample of their constituents, who receive simple but high-quality, nonpartisan background information in advance. The results are consistent and striking. Real two-way communication on difficult issues like immigration and health policy yields gains (for both citizens and officials) in knowledge quality, warranted trust, substantive persuasion, and other democratic goods.³ The demand matters as much as the supply. When offered the chance to deliberate with their representative, randomly selected constituents participated at rates several times higher than in conventional outreach. The participants were not the usual suspects either. Habitual nonvoters, the politically disengaged, and constituents with low prior trust in Congress took part at the same rate as everyone else, and their trust and political efficacy increased the most after the session. Good design, in other words, can reach the people who believe that representative democracy has been failing them. And elected officials are more apt to embrace opportunities to reach disaffected voters.

DTHs promise to provide especially valuable subsidies to representative governance, complementing smaller, more-intensive PDIs such as the citizens' assembly (CA) in the Fort Collins case. CAs are mini-publics designed to elicit novel ideas and considered judgments in ways that interest-group politics cannot. They also ground those judgments in knowledge, reflection, and community in ways no opinion poll can match. Yet, because of their expense and complexity, they remain episodic and often run parallel to the institutions whose authority makes deliberation con-

sequential. Perhaps more important, CAs face two challenges to their perceived legitimacy. First, conveners typically prestructure CAs quite substantially. Doing so may be necessary for CAs to produce their intended results within the allotted time. But observers and participants raise concerns that such prestructuring takes some options off the table and creates a favorable gradient toward others. Admirably, the Fort Collins experiment included an initial “mini-deliberation” stage to uncover latent community perspectives as input to the CA. We recommend including a more comprehensive DTH before the CA is convened, to advise, revise, and provide assent to the initial protocol proposed by the organizers. Doing so would lend democratic legitimacy to the agenda-setting stage.

The second challenge to CAs’ perceived legitimacy arises at the other end, after participants make their recommendations. Conveners typically use stratified random sampling to populate the assembly. CAs, however, require intensive commitment, so the number of participants is typically small and the acceptance rate (or compliance, in the terms of field experiments) is very low. That combination suggests that, despite stratified random sampling, strong selection on unobserved characteristics weakens the warrant for believing that the CA results represent the whole constituency well. For example, we may stratify to ensure that we include poor single mothers in the sample. Within that group, however, only those with a grandparent or other childcare support would be able to spend multiple weekends away from home. Yet disadvantaged people embedded in strong social networks are likely to experience policy problems and solutions in substantially different ways than people who are truly on their own. In general, more intensive deliberative formats face greater challenges around agenda-setting, participant selection, expense, and moderation.⁴ We have run successful DTHs with over seven thousand participants, and the lower barriers to entry in terms of time and travel mean that our selection pressures are much less severe. We propose running a DTH after CAs deliver their recommendations to create a broader democratic review and ratification stage. Doing so could greatly enhance the recommendations’ actual and perceived legitimacy with the general public, in addition to reassuring officials that they are robust and will be popular.

Imagine Lukensmeyer’s cases reconfigured as infrastructure. Fort Collins’s citizens’ assembly would be bookended by DTHs and extended from a one-off land-use decision to a recurring practice on the city’s most contested questions. Elected officials would participate at certain stages rather than merely receive output. We could pair Engaged California with a standing legislative commitment to deliberative consultation on disaster recovery, so the platform’s value would not depend entirely on the current governor’s appetite for participation. We could tie Bowling Green’s BG2050 vision to an annual deliberative review in which the county executive and council members report to participating residents on whether implementation is tracking the original vision. The actual cases stopped short not

because the deliberative elements were poorly executed but because the representative elements were detached from the CAs.

Some worry that bringing representatives into deliberation risks politicizing or distorting the process. The risk is real. But it is a design challenge to be mitigated – and balanced against problems in the status quo – not a decisive reason for separation. The alternative is deliberation that remains normatively attractive but politically peripheral. Others worry that institutionalization will drain deliberation of its democratic energy. That risk is also real. But the alternative risks – fragility, *ad hoc* effort, dependence on champion leaders – are evident in Lukensmeyer’s three cases. The design task is to build durable institutions that preserve contestation, transparency, and public reason. The alternative to that work is not purity. It is marginality.

Many democracies have already begun converting deliberative and participatory experiments into more durable democratic infrastructure. Participatory budgeting has become routine or required throughout Latin America. Australia, Belgium, the European Union, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, South Africa, and Switzerland have all built PDIs into formal government work, with many other nations considering such provisions. (A recent OECD report, *Catching the Deliberative Wave*, consolidates the growing global movement.)⁵

Lukensmeyer’s cases should both encourage and redirect us. The question is not whether to scale up deliberative experiments. It is whether the representative institutions that already structure American political life can be redesigned to make deliberation routine rather than occasional. The future of deliberative democracy depends less on proving (again) that citizens can reason together and more on building institutions that can receive, respond to, and learn from what they hear. The “responsiveness imperative” named in *Our Common Purpose* is the right frame for the work ahead.⁶ But the biggest roadblock is institutional responsiveness, not citizens’ willingness. We strengthen democracy when citizens can see their considered judgments reflected in the decisions that shape their lives. That is the work of building democratic infrastructure.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Neblo is Professor of Political Science and (by Courtesy) Professor of Public Affairs and Director of the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability (IDEA) at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (with Kevin Esterling and David Lazear, 2018) and *Deliberative Democracy between Theory and Practice* (2015).

Kevin Esterling is Chair and Professor of Political Science, Professor of Public Policy, and Director of the Laboratory for Technology, Communication and Democracy (TeCD-Lab) at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author of *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (with Michael Neblo and David Lazer, 2018) and *The Political Economy of Expertise: Information and Efficiency in American National Politics* (2004).

David Lazer is University Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Computer Sciences and Co-Director of the NULab for Digital Humanities and Computational Social Science at Northeastern University. He is the author of *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (with Michael Neblo and Kevin Esterling, 2018) and has published in *Science*, *Nature*, and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, “Democracy in Practice: A Report on Innovations in Participatory Governance,” *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 76–88, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/democracy-in-practice-report-innovations-participatory-governance>.
- ² Jane Mansbridge, “Recursive Representation,” in *Creating Political Presence: The New Politics of Democratic Representation*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Johannes Pollak (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 298–338.
- ³ William Minozzi, Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M. J. Lazer, “Field Experiment Evidence of Substantive, Attributional, and Behavioral Persuasion by Members of Congress in Online Town Halls,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112 (13) (2015): 3937–3942; and Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, and David M. J. Lazer, *Politics with the People: Building a Directly Representative Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- ⁴ Euchan Jang, William Minozzi, and Michael A. Neblo, “Deliberation’s Dark Matter: Silence, Incivility, and Systematic Exclusion,” working paper (n.d.).
- ⁵ OECD, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (OECD Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.
- ⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 41, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>.

Consensus Without Consequence

Matthew Weil

Citizens' assemblies are generating renewed interest as a tool for democratic renewal, but their promise requires honest assessment. While deliberative processes can improve the quality of public input, they consistently leave unresolved the harder challenge of converting consensus recommendations into durable policy outcomes with legislative champions. Carolyn Lukensmeyer's case studies reveal a common pattern: citizens' assemblies function best not as alternatives to representative institutions but as complements to them. Attempts to circumvent legislatures risk sidelining the very actors responsible for implementation. Scaling these models nationally compounds challenges of representativeness and political complexity. Democratic renewal depends not on expanding citizen input alone but on building better pathways from deliberation to decision to implementation within existing governing structures.

It is a familiar refrain in modern political debate to hear diametrically opposed groups claim to speak for *We the People*. In an era of sharply divided parties, maximalist rhetoric, and institutions that often appear stuck in place, Carolyn Lukensmeyer is right to diagnose a crisis of democratic responsiveness. Americans feel disconnected from the decisions that shape their lives, and that perception is not without basis. While Lukensmeyer's analysis is sound, her proposed remedy of national citizens' assemblies risks misidentifying the system's core constraint. Attempts to circumvent governing institutions (even if they might retain the power for an up or down vote at the end of the process) will struggle to produce durable outcomes, especially at the federal level because the difficult step of garnering legislators' input will have been sidestepped. Policymakers must feel they have skin in the game to incentivize their ongoing support, which is essential to the successful implementation of any policy.

The trust gap between governing institutions and their constituents is real and well-documented. Citizens increasingly doubt that their voices matter in policymaking, and that skepticism deepens as one moves from local government to Congress. Yet it is a mistake to conclude that American democracy primarily suffers from a lack of public input. Americans are highly engaged in politics, participate in frequent elections, and have numerous avenues to petition government. The deeper problem is not input but conversion to policy success. The system struggles to translate competing preferences into decisions that can be enacted, implemented,

and protected. Put differently, the challenge is not hearing from “We the People” but building consensus around solutions when preferences do not overlap.

Lukensmeyer’s case studies show that citizens’ assemblies, broadly defined, can improve the quality of democratic input. Structured deliberation, especially when supported by skilled facilitation and/or technology, can help participants weigh trade-offs and move beyond the limitations of traditional public debate. But the same cases also reveal a significant limitation. Citizens’ assemblies do not resolve the institutional constraints that block action. In fact, they replicate them. Questions of representativeness, information access, and long-term accountability do not disappear when policy development or authority is temporarily shifted to a smaller group of citizens as opposed to elected legislatures.

The strongest evidence in Lukensmeyer’s essay shows that citizens’ assemblies are effective at structured participation but less effective at governance. The Engaged California initiative, launched in response to the 2025 Southern California wildfires, shows that large-scale citizen input can be gathered and synthesized in ways that go well beyond traditional hearings. Tens of thousands of participants contributed ideas for rebuilding their communities, and the process clearly produced more deliberative input than static public comments ever could. But the same initiative also struggled with representativeness, even after repeated efforts to broaden participation. More important, the connection between citizens’ input and concrete policy outcomes remains unclear. California is struggling to rebuild. Engaged California produced a listening tour, but the policymakers still need to decide.

Bowling Green, Kentucky, offers a more compelling example of what citizen engagement can achieve. Facing rapid projected growth, local leaders engaged roughly 10 percent of the population in shaping a long-term vision through the BG2050 initiative. The process combined face-to-face trust-building with digital participation and AI-assisted synthesis of thousands of ideas. As Lukensmeyer notes, this approach produced a nuanced and widely supported vision for the community’s future.

But even here, the limits are clear. BG2050 did not create binding policy. It produced a strategic roadmap that local officials are now implementing through existing institutions. That is no small accomplishment. It reflects real alignment between citizen input and policymaker action, and the assembly work may have given the policymakers the political cover or will to make more difficult choices. However, the process worked only because it fed into established governance structures, not because it replaced them. There was no automatic mechanism to ensure implementation. Elected officials keep discretion over which elements to adopt, how quickly to act, and how to allocate resources. BG2050 is best understood not as a citizens’ assembly exercising authority but as a politically useful source of input that improved decision-making within traditional institutions. And because local governments often struggle to garner public input, that has real value.

The Fort Collins, Colorado, case, which Lukensmeyer presents as a breakthrough moment for deliberative democracy, warrants closer scrutiny. A randomly selected citizens' assembly developed a multiuse plan for the redevelopment of the Hughes Stadium site, which the city council then placed on the ballot to compete with a single-use alternative proposal from one of the initial interest groups. As Lukensmeyer notes, this was the first time in the United States that the recommendations of a citizens' assembly was subject to a direct public vote. And voters approved the assembly-backed plan by a large margin. Lukensmeyer interprets this outcome as evidence that the broader public validated the deliberative process itself.

That conclusion is plausible but not necessarily without question. Voters were presented with two competing visions: a multiuse plan and a single-use alternative. It is entirely possible, and in many ways more likely, that voters evaluated the substance of the proposals rather than the process that generated them. The ballot language of the successful multiuse initiative did not ask voters to endorse deliberative democracy as a method, though it did refer to a "civic assembly," which was left undefined. It asked them to choose between policy options. The fact that a majority preferred the multiuse approach tells us something about land-use preferences in Fort Collins. It tells us less about broader support for the citizens' assembly deliberative process.

The design of the assembly raises additional questions. By relying on sortition, the process intentionally excluded many of the individuals and groups with the strongest interests in the outcome. This may have reduced conflict within the assembly itself, but it did not eliminate those interests from the broader political system. They reemerged in the initiative process, in which interested actors mobilized to advance an alternative proposal. Legislatures working efficiently should be able to engage directly with competing interests, not sidestep them. Citizens' assemblies can produce consensus among those less invested in the issue, but that consensus may reflect the structure of the process rather than an optimal policy outcome. Direct democracy that doesn't include those most interested seems less a success than presented.

A common pattern emerges from these case studies. Citizens' assemblies can generate thoughtful recommendations and, in some cases, broad public engagement. But they leave unresolved the hardest question of all: How do the recommendations they generate move from deliberation to decision to implementation? Lukensmeyer acknowledges the importance of accountability and follow-through. Someone must own the recommendation, advocate for it within government, secure funding, and manage implementation over time. Those responsibilities will never fall to the citizens' assembly. They fall to policymaking institutions and ultimately civil servants who must be involved throughout the policy process, not just at the end of it.

This connection between deliberation, decision, and implementation becomes even more tenuous in Lukensmeyer's argument for scaling deliberative democracy to the national level. The success of local and state-level experiments does not prove that similar models will function effectively in a national context. Two challenges become exponentially more difficult at scale: representativeness and policy complexity.

Representativeness is difficult even in small settings. California's experience shows that participation disparities persist despite deliberate and persistent outreach. At the national level, constructing a body that credibly reflects the demographic, geographic, and political diversity of the United States would be extraordinarily complex. These challenges mirror existing debates about representation in Congress itself. Many Americans already feel there is unfairness built into the makeup of the Senate, and the legitimacy of the House is under attack due to successive rounds of partisan gerrymandering. There is every reason to believe that a national citizens' assembly would face similar tensions.

Policy and political complexity also increase dramatically at the federal level. Local land-use decisions, as in the Fort Collins case, often allow for compromise solutions that incorporate multiple interests. National policy questions are more likely to involve tradeoffs shaped by deeply held ideological commitments. These are not problems that can be resolved through short-term deliberation. They require sustained engagement, technical expertise, and ongoing negotiation. Even with all three, success is never assured. For the same reasons that cities and states often appear more capable of governing than federal bodies – namely, their relative insulation from nationalized and polarized politics – local citizens' assemblies likely appear more capable of generating compromise. But this also suggests that national citizens' assemblies are likely to be stymied by that same polarization that defines our current political era.

Lukensmeyer proposes that a national citizens' assembly could convey recommendations directly to the floor of Congress, potentially bypassing the regular order. This suggestion undervalues the role that committees play in Congress. Committees are the venues where policy is refined, tradeoffs are negotiated, and coalitions are assembled. They perform significant refinement of legislation through hearings and markups on issues ready for political movement. This frustrating step in the legislative process is essential for members of Congress to identify what collection of policy options has enough votes to pass as an entire package. Bypassing committees would not empower citizens. It would weaken the very mechanisms through which policy becomes viable and durable solutions can form.

What ultimately distinguishes citizens' assemblies from the institutions we already have? Elected legislatures are themselves a form of citizens' assembly. Members of Congress and state legislatures are chosen by voters, must stand for reelection, and bear responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions. Citizens'

assemblies are advisory. They generate ideas but do not bear the consequences of implementation.

None of this is to suggest that citizens' assemblies lack value. On the contrary, Lukensmeyer is right to emphasize the importance of creating opportunities for citizens to engage more deeply with policy questions. Deliberative processes can provide policymakers with the best information about public preferences and build public legitimacy for the hardest decisions. The case studies she presents illustrate these benefits clearly. But their success depends on integration with existing institutions, not separation from them.

A more realistic path forward would treat citizens' assemblies as complements to representative government rather than alternatives. They can be embedded in prelegislative processes and used to surface areas of consensus. There could be ways to have policymakers participate alongside citizens, ensuring that deliberation is informed by both public input and practical political constraints. In that way, citizens' assemblies would enhance governance by improving the inputs into policymaking while elected officials keep responsibility for making and implementing decisions.

The risk in overextending the promise of citizens' assemblies is that they deepen frustration among the most committed citizens. If citizens invest time and effort into participatory processes only to see their recommendations ignored or diluted, trust in institutions may erode further. Participation without results is damaging too.

Lukensmeyer is right to argue that democratic renewal requires more meaningful engagement between citizens and their government. But engagement alone is not enough. The central challenge facing American democracy is not the absence of public input but the difficulty of converting that input into action. That's where we need to focus reform efforts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Weil is Vice President of Governance and Bipartisanship at the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC). His work on the foundations of effective, representative government includes elections and voting administration, structural electoral reform, interbranch relations, and building a new American federalism. Prior to the BPC, he served as a Media Affairs Specialist at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and as a Research and Policy Analyst at the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Trust for Civic Life: America's Civic Future Starts in Local Communities

Charlie Brown & Christina Jodice

To advance Strategy 4 of the Our Common Purpose report and its first recommendation, the American Academy convened a working group in 2021 to incubate a national trust for civic infrastructure that could help dramatically expand civic bridging capacity. In 2024, the Trust for Civic Life was launched with the goal of deploying \$50 million across five hundred communities in rural America by 2028. This essay covers where the Trust is now by exploring some of the primary successes and challenges from its first few years of operation. Discussion draws on annual survey reports of hundreds of rural leaders and community members and spotlights recent grantees who are exemplary builders of civic infrastructure.

In the center of an idyllic college town surrounded by lentil fields sits a red brick building where anyone can enjoy a free community meal one Monday night a month. Anyone joining the three-course dinner, which is cooked and served by a rotating group of volunteers, should expect to sit across the table from someone outside their usual social circle. The crowd is full of notable contrasts, with college students sitting across the table from local leaders in suits, and conservative churchgoers holding trays for business owners who display gay pride banners at their place of work. No one is required to talk, but everyone is expected to participate.

This is a Welcome Table event at the 1912 Center in Moscow, Idaho. Since the community center began hosting these dinners in 2019, the gatherings have been quietly building a sense of local connection in a town that is known as the headquarters of a highly influential white Christian nationalist congregation, and at the center of a region with a long, storied history of extremist violence.

The dinners are not an aggressive or head-on counter to antidemocratic sentiments circulating across the community, but they are defying them nonetheless. People who did not think they could be in the same room have come to realize they all want a vibrant and connected town. Those who had never been “civically engaged” are now regularly committed to serving their community once a month. One resident who used to drive through the streets waving a Confederate flag

stopped after he became a regular at the community dinners. “We all have a lot of things in common,” said Jenny Kostroff, executive director of the 1912 Center. “And if you start with those little things, it starts to percolate up where you’re going to have greater levels of trust.”

The program is not the only attempt to bring neighbors together across divides. Throughout rural America, a constellation of locally led efforts like this are giving people reasons to trust each other, build common ground, and work on the problems that stand between them and the quality of life they desire. Volunteers in Central Appalachia are converting empty churches into public spaces their community did not have before. Neighbors in a rural Minnesota town got tired of having nowhere to shop and formed a grocery co-op together.¹ In the Adirondacks, small, informal gatherings are defusing tensions between longtime residents and owners of vacation homes. These acts may not look like obvious democracy in action, but each time Americans step outside their immediate circles to build something alongside their neighbors, they are practicing the most fundamental habits of democratic life.

Unfortunately, these types of hyperlocal efforts are often disjointed, occur in isolation, or lack resources to stay afloat or grow over time. As a result, they have been almost completely ignored by or off the radar of national philanthropy or prodemocracy agents who are understandably looking for a major national fix to our major national challenges. They are precisely the little-known efforts that the Trust for Civic Life was created to find, fund, and scale across rural America.

When the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published its landmark 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, researchers had expected to document a nation defined by anger and disengagement.² At that time, a record-low 28 percent of Americans were satisfied with how democracy was functioning, fewer than half reported any consistent civic participation, and affective polarization was accelerating faster in the United States than in any other peer democracy.³ Americans were withdrawing from the connective institutions like churches, civic organizations, and local associations that had long anchored shared community life.

But beneath the cynicism and exhaustion, researchers discovered something else. “As we . . . listened to Americans from many walks of life,” they wrote in the report, “we heard a yearning to believe again in the American story, to feel connected to one another.”⁴ There was a desire for a shared purpose and to believe their participation mattered, but the right civic infrastructure to enable and unlock it was missing.

That finding reframed the crisis threatening American democracy not purely as a political or systems issue but as a relational and cultural crisis in need of urgent repair. Through Strategy 4, “dramatically expand civic bridging capacity,” and its first recommendation to establish a national trust to scale up civic infrastructure, *Our Common Purpose* issued a direct challenge to the philanthropic community

to make a serious, sustained investment in the people, places, and programs that would bring Americans together and enable civic participation across the country.

The Trust for Civic Life was founded in 2024 as a direct answer to that challenge. The goal of this young grantmaking collaborative is to deploy \$50 million across five hundred communities in rural regions of the United States by 2028, supporting locally led work like the 1912 Center and hundreds of other community efforts nationwide. In under two years, the Trust has grown into a collaborative network of twenty-three national funders and philanthropists and has established a new grantmaking approach that invests in efforts that spark and sustain civic renewal in hard-to-reach areas of the country. Already, three hundred thousand Americans are participating in local civic life through programs and projects directed by Trust for Civic Life grantees. The task ahead is to scale what is working.

The dominant approach to civic repair has traditionally focused on reforming government institutions, expanding voting access, and combatting misinformation. These are necessary tactics, but they also assume America's civic culture and shared identity flow down from Washington, D.C. They never have. The promise of American democracy has always been a ground-up proposition, as something that emerges from the habits, values, and actions of its citizens.

Doubling down on national fixes while neglecting local community life is no longer a strategy the country can afford. The foundational social traits that hold democracy together – such as trust, belonging, and a sense of agency – are not built through legislation or national campaigns but through repeated encounters and shared action with other people in daily life. A growing body of research supports this, and insights from hundreds of Trust for Civic Life partners confirm it. Local communities are not a secondary venue for civic life – they are the source.

The data on trust in America make this concrete. Americans' confidence in national institutions has collapsed, but the picture shifts dramatically at the local level. People consistently report much higher trust in the institutions that touch their daily lives, such as their library, their children's schools, and their local nonprofits. In *The Local Advantage*, a new survey of one thousand rural community members conducted by the Trust for Civic Life and the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, researchers found that 74 percent of people believe their community can work together to implement solutions and 50 percent believe their participation influences local decision-making. But less than 11 percent believed their input mattered in helping solve national problems.⁵

Polarization and division follow the same pattern. National statistics paint a picture of a country locked in irreconcilable political division. But in local communities, another story is unfolding. In the same survey, over 30 percent of respondents said they engage in regular acts to work across differences with others in their communities.⁶ A 2025 report from More in Common, a global nonprofit that works to

tackle us-versus-them divisions, found that the primary reason people gave for not reaching across differences was not unwillingness but the lack of opportunity.⁷

The consequences of investing in communities are significant and well documented. A 2023 Appalachian Funders Network study of 270 counties found that the single common factor in positive health and economic outcomes was local civic engagement.⁸ Strong local civic ecosystems also provide meaningful protection against extremism and crisis. Communities with deep civic foundations are more resilient when disruption comes, whether in the form of radicalization efforts or natural disaster.

Before launching the organization, the team behind the Trust for Civic Life spent a full year in conversation with more than sixty local leaders and community members across the United States to understand what efforts were sparking and sustaining local civic life, and where national dollars would have the most impact. The findings pointed to a clear and largely overlooked opportunity for renewing civic culture: engaging rural America.

Rural regions represent 20 percent of the U.S. population but receive just 3 percent of national philanthropic spending.⁹ Sixty percent of rural youth grow up in civic deserts – places with few organized opportunities for civic participation – while many of these same communities are managing economic distress, workforce decline, and the steady erosion of the local institutions that once held community life together.¹⁰

Despite the high need, the Trust team also found rural communities were not waiting to be rescued. In places where resources and assistance never arrived, civic life has taken its most durable form. Showing up, pitching in, and working across differences are not aspirational values in these communities, they are practical and necessary ones. As one leader in a four-hundred-person town in Western North Carolina explained, “Everyone has to help out because we all rely on each other.”

The reason these organizations had been overlooked by national philanthropy had little to do with their effectiveness and everything to do with how national grantmaking works. Most national funders are simply not structured to source, vet, and sustain relationships with hyperlocal organizations scattered across geographically dispersed rural regions. Finding a high-impact community organization in a rural county in an isolated geographic area requires time, local knowledge, and relationships that the standard national philanthropy is not built for.

The Trust for Civic Life designed its grantmaking to bridge that gap by building a pipeline into communities that national funders had been unable to reach and providing unrestricted grants that give local organizations the freedom to direct resources toward what their communities need and the efforts they already know work.

In just two years, the Trust has directed nearly \$27 million in fast, flexible capital to over 250 groups and projects across the country, with roughly 60 percent for

four underfunded priority regions: the Southern Black Belt, Central Appalachia, the Southwest border, and tribal communities.¹¹ Its first year of funding generated a two-to-one match by grantees, infusing these underresourced regions with nearly double the capital. In 2025, the Trust secured \$4 million in additional cofunding dollars for its grantees from regional philanthropic partners. These results reflect a highly intentional and rapidly expanding investment in the civic infrastructure and civic networks that create vibrant rural communities.¹²

Throughout continued conversations with hundreds of local leaders across rural America, one pattern kept emerging. Regardless of mission or organizational structure, the groups that were consistently driving civic participation and local problem-solving all played the same fundamental role: they created the conditions for people to show up as neighbors, work on problems they shared, and experience the kind of collective agency that national politics has largely stopped providing.

The Trust has come to call these organizations “Civic Hubs,” and what defines them is not what they are but how they work. Always locally based and locally led, their credibility comes from years of showing up in ways that mattered to a community and working side by side with residents. Rather than arriving with a fixed agenda, Civic Hubs create the culture and conditions for communities to decide together what matters most and then act on it. Stephen Heintz, cochair of the commission that issued the *Our Common Purpose* report and a founding funder of the Trust for Civic Life, summed it up simply: “These are remarkable examples of citizens coming together and saying, ‘We’ve got to fix something.’”¹³

For funders, this distinction is the critical one. In communities that are geographically remote, politically complex, and historically underserved, Civic Hubs provide something no outside funder or nonprofit can replicate. They provide the trust, relationships, and local knowledge needed to direct resources toward opportunities and entry points that will resonate with residents and motivate them to become involved. They are one of the most effective vehicles available for getting national dollars into the hands of those closest to the most effective work.

Eighty percent of the Trust’s annual grantmaking flows to its Civic Hub grant program. Today there are forty-six active Civic Hub grantees, many of which were previously working in isolation and are now connected into a network – sharing insights, accessing new funding opportunities, and spreading effective models within and across regions. In July 2026, a new cohort of twenty Civic Hub grantees was selected and will continue to build out this network.

Concepts like “civic infrastructure,” “collective agency,” or “civic hubs” can feel abstract until you see them in action. The two grantee stories below showcase the realities of rural communities and what it looks like when

the right organization is present, trusted, and resourced to lead our country's civic renewal.

Chinle Planting Hope, Chinle, Arizona, 2024 Civic Hub Grantee. Tucked into the northeast corner of Arizona near a breathtaking river canyon, Chinle is a majority Native community of fewer than four thousand people, with two stoplights and dust storms fierce enough to stop traffic. For years, if a child wanted a place to run around, the only option was the indoor play structure at a former Burger King. Play came at the price of a soda or fries.

A handful of local parents decided that had to change. They started meeting in each other's homes, and without a formal roadmap or outside funding, began working on community pain points using whatever people, resources, and ideas they could find in Chinle. What started as a push for a playground grew into something much larger: a local problem-solving organization called Chinle Planting Hope (CPH).¹⁴

Today, CPH runs a community center with a bike repair shop that trains young people, a volunteer-run thrift store, a bookmobile that has put thousands of books into the hands of residents across the region, community gardens growing local food, and more. In late 2026, it will open the Imagination Station, an educational play and learning center with the potential to serve families well beyond Chinle. As a Civic Hub grantee, CPH put the majority of its flexible funding toward that building.

The numbers from its first year are striking: more than two hundred civic opportunities facilitated, including seventy-five bookmobile events, forty community-led solar installations for families living without electricity, and three hundred food boxes distributed to elderly residents. The organization estimates that more than two-thirds of the people it engages were previously disconnected from community life.

"Every program we started has been because there has been a need, or because someone in the community had a dream to share," said Amber Drinen, CPH's program coordinator. "You can have two people who are very different, and who vote for very different things, but they can still be interested in working on something together."

Nebraska Community Foundation, Omaha, Nebraska, 2025 Civic Hub Grantee. People who have never been to Nebraska often picture a long, flat stretch of interstate highway flanked by cornfields. But veer off the road in almost any direction and the state comes to life: winding rivers, vibrant main street murals, rodeo arenas glowing under night-lights. What defines Nebraska, as much as any landscape, is an instinct for neighborliness and cooperation. These are qualities that have long held rural communities together and now shape how they welcome rapid demographic change.

Nebraska is diversifying at twice the national rate, with many new residents arriving from Hispanic communities; yet nearly one-third of the state's population live in rural areas where opportunities to connect across social circles can be scarce.

The Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) has spent thirty years helping those communities imagine and invest in their own futures. NCF operates as a statewide "mothership" by offering legal and financial expertise, leadership devel-

opment, and community training to 270 hometowns across the state, but its real power lies in what it deliberately does not do: give orders. Since its founding in 1994, NCF has reinvested more than \$594 million into Nebraska people and places, but the engine of that work is a network of fifteen hundred volunteers who serve as advisors, conveners, and catalysts in their own communities. In each town, the priorities are set locally. NCF provides the tools, frameworks, and connections to help communities act on what already matters to them.¹⁵

One of the foundation's signature programs helps communities build unrestricted endowments. These are funds that stay local and are entirely controlled by residents who learn to manage shared resources and make joint decisions about how the funds should be used. As one community leader put it, these endowments allow residents to "save something important, create something new, or adapt to the future."

With support from the Trust for Civic Life, NCF is expanding that model and adding staff capacity to meet growing demand, and is launching a new small grants campaign to fund locally designed "community sparks": civic experiments in bringing people together, especially those who have felt disconnected from community life.

Jeff Yost, head of the Nebraska Community Foundation, connects these hyper-local interventions to democracy: "Community dynamism is exactly what a democracy is built on. It's about people that live and work in a place doing the right thing, for the right reasons, over time – for themselves and for the others who live there."¹⁶

Two years of grantmaking and original research, conducted in partnership with the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University and with Indiana University, have sharpened how the Trust for Civic Life thinks about where to invest and why. One of the most significant findings is that action outperforms dialogue.¹⁷

The 2025 survey report *Action over Dialogue* found that taking action with other community members was closely tied to feelings of social trust, agency, and belonging. Meanwhile, dialogue alone appeared to have very little correlation to these three traits. This matters because the philanthropic sector has put significant money into dialogue-based bridge-building. The Trust's research – which compliments decades of social science, including social psychologist Muzafer Sherif's landmark work in the 1950s on intergroup conflict resolution – points toward collective problem-solving as the more reliable path.¹⁸ The Trust now directs all of its grantmaking to action-based efforts.

This research has also clarified where civic participation tends to start. Across the grantee network, the most effective on-ramps into community life have been informal and accessible ones, like a neighborhood work project, a local festival,

or a shared gathering space. Programs that lead with civic or democratic framing tend to struggle to reach the people who would benefit most. Programs that lead with something tangible that people actually want to do, and let civic habits grow from there, tend to work better. This finding is now shaping how the Trust identifies and evaluates grantees.

The challenges are worth naming plainly. Local context matters and strategies that work in one region don't transfer automatically to another. What works in a Southwest border community does not automatically translate to Central Appalachia or the Southern Black Belt, and the Trust has learned to treat that variation as a given rather than a problem to solve.

Underfunding at the local level in rural areas remains a serious constraint. Too many grantees are still spending time chasing short-term grants or tending to funder priorities rather than deepening the work that is producing results. And while the Trust has made progress connecting organizations that were previously working in isolation, significant gaps remain. Building coordination across communities, not just within them, is one of the Trust's key priorities going forward.

The Trust for Civic Life's initial five-year strategy was designed with a clear objective: by 2028, it will have invested \$50 million across five hundred communities, built a research base capable of translating local approaches into replicable models, and established a network of Civic Hubs with meaningful coverage across the rural regions that national philanthropy has long underserved. Most important, it will have produced something American philanthropy is in dire need of: a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap for place-based civic investment.

That roadmap fills a critical gap. For decades, national funders have invested in civic life with a top-down lens through institutions, campaigns, and policy advocacy. The result is a well-funded national infrastructure and a chronically underfunded local one. There is no established framework to help funders identify the right local organizations, understand what kinds of support produce lasting impact, or see how community-level efforts can reinforce each other across regions. This roadmap will serve national and local philanthropy across the country and drive the strategic plan for the Trust beyond 2028.

Early evidence fuels the ambition of building this resource. With the Trust's Civic Hub grantees now engaging more than three hundred thousand rural Americans and reaching over 35 percent of rural counties across the country, it has demonstrated that the pipeline into these communities can be built, the organizations worth funding can be identified, and unrestricted capital directed to the right places produces impact that is both measurable and durable.¹⁹ The opportunity is for national philanthropy to join in expanding this effort to rapidly identify and amplify the infrastructure that works, spreading civic renewal across rural communities and increasing our collective investment in civic life.

What the Trust's two years of grantmaking and research have made clear is that the raw material for the nation's democratic repair – such as local leadership, committed groups, resourcefulness, ideas, and motivation – are all there. The Trust's own work with local leaders and community members has reinforced the original findings of *Our Common Purpose*. Across hundreds of rural towns, counties, and regions, people are rallying to improve quality of life and shared experience on their terms. Their yearning for a different American story is an opening, and communities are ready for the investment and infrastructure to make it real.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Charlie Brown is Executive Director of the Trust for Civic Life, working with the organization's funding partners to champion locally led efforts that bring people together, strengthen civic participation, and build trust in communities across the country. In 2026, he was recognized on the TIME100 Philanthropy list as one of the most influential leaders shaping the future of giving. Previously, he led democracy grantmaking as Director of Democracy and Climate at Alta Futures, founded Context Partners, a global design strategy firm that served major philanthropists and Fortune 500 companies, and created an online community of social innovators across one hundred countries as Executive Director of the Changemakers initiative at Ashoka.

Christina Jodice is Director of Strategy and Partnerships at the Trust for Civic Life, where she oversees the initiatives and collaborations that build the case for greater investment in local civic efforts and the rural communities driving change across the country. She was a Founding Partner at Statements Strategic Communications, a West Coast agency advising family offices, high-growth startups, and thought leaders, and led communications for major global philanthropic initiatives as a Publicist for Microsoft cofounder Paul G. Allen and his company Vulcan Inc.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ryan Eller and Hollie Russon Gilman, "15,000 Churches Will Close This Year. Each Could Be a Home for Civic Revival," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.philanthropy.com/news/churches-close-community-revitalization>; and Trust for Civic Life, "Can Real Estate Drive Civic Participation? In Minnesota, It's Working," May 12, 2025, <https://trustforciviclelife.org/can-real-estate-drive-civic-participation-in-minnesota-its-working>.
- 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 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record Low in U.S. Satisfied with Way Democracy Is Working," Gallup, January 5, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/548120/record-low-satisfied-democracy>

-working.aspx; “Almost half (45%) of Americans report not being civically or politically engaged at all, having done none of these activities over the past year. A little over one-third (35%) report being modestly engaged, having done between one to three of these activities in the last year. Around one in five (21%) are highly engaged, having participated in at least four of these activities over the last 12 months.” Robert P. Jones, “American Democracy in Crisis: Civic Engagement, Young Adult Activism, and the 2018 Midterm Elections,” PRRI, October 11, 2018, <https://prri.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-civic-engagement-young-adult-activism-and-the-2018-midterm-elections>; Brown University, “U.S. Is Polarizing Faster than Other Democracies, Study Finds,” January 21, 2020, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2020-01-21/polarization>; and Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization,” NBER Working Paper 26669 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020 [revised 2021]), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26669>.

⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 2.

⁵ Trust for Civic Life, *The Local Advantage: How Community-Based Efforts Build the Trust and Agency America Needs* (Trust for Civic Life, 2026), 13, https://trustforcivicle.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/Trust-for-Civic-Life_The-Local-Advantage_Web.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 20.

⁷ Calista Small, Daniel Yudkin, and Jordan Wylie, *The Connection Opportunity: Insights for Bringing Americans Together Across Difference* (More in Common, 2025), https://moreincommonus.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The-Connection-Opportunity_More-in-Common_2025.pdf.

⁸ Reinvestment Fund and Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky, *A Road Map for Asset Based Investing in Central Appalachia* (Appalachia Funders Network, 2023), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6a15aceodfdo6673b8d2d71d/t/6a67a9fd489a0c6b1d97e5a3/1785178625247/AFN_Paper_Final_Aug19-3.pdf.

⁹ Nicholas Chiumenti and Andrew M. Dumont, *Rural America's Philanthropic Sector: Grantmaking and the Role of Philanthropy in Rural Communities* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2026), <https://www.rd.usda.gov/media/file/download/usda-rd-rural-philanthropy-report-03122026.pdf>.

¹⁰ Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Felicia Sullivan, “Study: 60 Percent of Rural Millennials Lack Access to a Political Life,” *The Conversation*, March 26, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/study-60-percent-of-rural-millennials-lack-access-to-a-political-life-74513>.

¹¹ Trust for Civic Life, “Trust for Civic Life Awards \$7.6 Million to 20 New Civic Hubs,” July 29, 2026, <https://trustforcivicle.org/trust-for-civic-life-awards-7-6-million-to-20-new-civic-hubs>.

¹² Trust for Civic Life, *2025 Annual Report: Investing in America's Civic Hubs* (Trust for Civic Life, 2026), <https://trustforcivicle.org/annual-reports>.

¹³ Trust for Civic Life, “What is a Civic Hub?” July 17, 2024, <https://trustforcivicle.org/what-is-a-civic-hub>; and Trust for Civic Life, “Grants,” <https://trustforcivicle.org/grants/#why-civic-hubs> (accessed July 13, 2026).

¹⁴ Chinle Planting Hope, “Programs,” <https://www.chinleplantinghope.com/programs.html> (accessed July 13, 2026).

¹⁵ Nebraska Community Foundation, “Nebraska Community Foundation Makes the Good Life Possible,” <https://www.nebcommfound.org/about/overview> (accessed July 13, 2026).

- ¹⁶ Trust for Civic Life, “Nebraska Community Foundation,” <https://trustforciviclife.org/grantees/nebraska-community-foundation> (accessed July 13, 2026).
- ¹⁷ Trust for Civic Life, *Action over Dialogue: The Case for Prioritizing Local Civic Engagement* (Trust for Civic Life, 2025), https://trustforciviclife.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Trust-Community-Survey-Report_Apr2025.pdf.
- ¹⁸ Muzafer Sherif, “Experiments in Group Conflict,” *Scientific American* 195 (5) (1956): 54–59, <https://www.csc2.ncsu.edu/faculty/mpsingh/local/Social/f16/wrap/readings/Sherif-robbers-cave-1956.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ Trust for Civic Life, *The Local Advantage*, 8.

Rebuilding the Art of Association : Philanthropy & the Renewal of American Civic Life

Daniel Stid

The Our Common Purpose report stood out in 2020 for its emphasis on civic culture as a foundation for democratic renewal and on the role that philanthropy and Americans' associational lives can play in strengthening it. Six years on, we can see that the report not only anticipated important developments but also helped catalyze them with its strategic recommendations to "dramatically expand civic bridging capacity." Promising new philanthropic institutions and initiatives have emerged – as have new challenges that must be tackled to sustain bottom-up civic renewal.

In his classic work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans have a knack for what he termed “the art of association” – the ability to join forces and solve problems together. The health of democracy in America depends on it. Yet this ability has diminished in recent decades.

For this reason, I welcomed the American Academy’s *Our Common Purpose* report in 2020.¹ I was then in my eighth year as the inaugural director of the U.S. Democracy program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. While we had already committed more than \$100 million in grants to nonprofit organizations working to strengthen democracy in a time of polarization, our goal seemed more remote than ever. Amid the upheavals of that year, I saw the need for a new path forward.

In a public review of the report in fall 2020, I shared two reasons it offered a fresh roadmap to reinventing American democracy.² The first was its emphasis on the interplay between democratic institutions and civic culture. Those working to bolster democracy had increasingly focused on institutions and elections while ignoring the cultural underpinnings that enabled their effectiveness and legitimacy.

The second reason was the recognition, as *Our Common Purpose* put it, that “institutions and culture intersect in the realm of civil society: the ecosystem of associations and groups in which people practice habits of participation and self-rule and reinforce norms of mutual obligation.”³

I noted that this recognition – still rare among democracy reformers – was fundamental:

We cannot bring about the changes needed in our politics and civic culture without tending to the health of our civic infrastructure and leadership in our associational life. And this work needs to happen in local communities where the lion's share of social capital formation and bridge-building occurs.

I devoted the bulk of my review to discussing Strategy 4 (“Dramatically Expand Civic Bridging Capacity”) and its two recommendations:

- Establish a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure to scale up social, civic, and democratic infrastructure; and
- Activate a range of funders to invest in the leadership capacity of the so-called civic one million: the catalytic leaders who drive civic renewal in communities around the country.

Six tumultuous years later, how are these recommendations holding up? What progress has been made? And what will it take to sustain and accelerate the bottom-up civic renewal the report envisioned?

The people behind the Trust for Civic Life, the manifestation of the first recommendation of Strategy 4, describe their institution's work in more detail in a companion essay in this issue.⁴ I will thus focus on why I regard the Trust as a breakthrough in practice; one that has avoided three patterns that have come to dominate in this area of philanthropy.

First, democracy-related philanthropy has grown increasingly polarized and politicized.⁵ Much of it now aligns with one or the other bitterly divided camps in our politics. And it seeks to create change within the narrow confines of electoral cycles. In contrast, the Trust for Civic Life – a pooled grantmaking fund – has assembled a cross-ideological group of national funders and is supporting civic hubs and social entrepreneurs in red and blue communities alike. Rather than seeking proximity to politics, it deliberately steps back, focusing instead on boosting shared and pre-political affinities in the communities it supports.

Second, large-scale national funders have long focused their grantmaking on metropolitan areas. This has led to less developed civic infrastructure in other parts of the country, making it even harder for them to secure philanthropic funding. The Trust's alternative focus on rural and small-town America is creating a virtuous cycle, underwriting civic hubs that can in turn attract more support.

Third, national funders have developed a reputation for micromanaging local partners, especially in locations that are less familiar to grantmaking staff based in wealthy coastal enclaves. They do this with rigid grant restrictions, exhausting proposal and reporting requirements, and slow grant cycles. The Trust for Civic Life has taken a different approach, exemplifying the trust-based grantmaking ethos that many funders espouse but fail to practice. It has also moved nimbly to

get resources out to the field. As a result, the Trust has earned growing goodwill and influence among its grantees.

So far, so good. But now the hard work starts. The Trust needs to answer a key question: How is all the activity it supports adding up to strengthen democracy? In developing its answer, the temptation will be to focus on scale and quantity – communities served, participants engaged, attitudinal measures improved. Instead, the Trust should prioritize scope and quality – the extent to which the civic infrastructure it has invested in can be used, repurposed, and sustained over time.

There is a model for creating enduring civic infrastructure. In the early 1900s, Andrew Carnegie invested in public libraries so that community members could use them in myriad ways that they, not Carnegie, saw fit. This approach contrasts with today's outcome-focused strategic philanthropy. Yet Carnegie libraries pay dividends for democracy and civic life in the United States to this day. The Trust should invest in the same spirit, with a view to century-long returns.

Our Common Purpose anticipated that, after proof of concept funded by philanthropy, the federal government would come to support the Trust and help it get to scale. Given worsening fiscal conditions and partisan conflict in Washington, D.C., that is unlikely – but that may well be a blessing, insulating bottom-up civic renewal from top-down democratic dysfunction.

Still, the money will need to come from somewhere. One emerging direction is for the Trust to engage regional and place-based foundations as partners. These underappreciated civic institutions include, for example, foundations like the T.L.L. Temple Foundation in East Texas, or the Dogwood Health Trust in Western North Carolina. Such funders share the Trust's aim of fostering civic health in the communities they care about.

Partnering with regional funders will expand the philanthropic network the Trust has already developed with its national funders and community foundation grantees. A key long-term measure is whether this work becomes self-sustaining. This will require philanthropy that originates within those same places – not only from institutional funders and wealthy individuals but also everyday givers, giving circles, and members of civic groups.

The second recommendation under Strategy 4 has a more diffuse goal. Unlike the first, it is not about establishing one new entity but rather reorienting the funding patterns of many philanthropic actors, especially private foundations.

Here too there has been progress on the supply-side of philanthropy. Community foundations have stepped forward in an impressive way. In part, this reflects the Trust's support for over twenty community foundations as civic hubs. Moreover, in a promising new coalition, CFLeads, the Rhode Island Foundation, and the National Civic League are rallying community foundations to support civic health.⁶

Another important development has been an ideologically diverse set of funders pooling tens of millions of dollars for regranting via the New Pluralists funding collaborative. Their approach focuses on “connecting, aligning, and accelerating the work of leaders and organizations who care about improving trust, cooperation, and belonging in communities across the country.”⁷ As with the funders of the Trust for Civic Life, the New Pluralists avoid the polarized and politicized funding patterns that have become so prevalent elsewhere.

On the demand side, entrepreneurial nonprofits have emerged and secured ample funding. Many seek to replenish, expand, and support the ranks of civic leaders in communities across the country. Others are advancing democracy reforms or protecting democratic institutions and values at the state and national levels. The American Academy maintains a list of “Champions”: dozens of organizations working along these lines and in support of the *Our Common Purpose* report and its strategic recommendations.⁸

The 2020 report suggests that more funding is needed for democracy and civic life relative to other areas of philanthropic giving. That may be true, but there has been a surge of support over the past decade, and not just via the initiatives outlined above. Estimates vary but prodemocratic philanthropic funding has increased from roughly \$1 billion–\$2 billion to \$3 billion–\$4 billion annually.⁹

The constraint may thus not be primarily in the amount of funding but in how it is deployed. What is needed is funding that flows differently to support the work of the civic one million. As I noted in my 2020 review – a point that alas still holds today:

Philanthropic foundations can and should step up to underwrite their leadership. The report does not touch on this, but doing so would entail a substantial shift in how foundations make grants in this area. Instead of smaller, highly-specified, short-term project grants furthering their own strategies, funders need to provide larger, unrestricted, multi-year grants that keep civic leaders and their organizations in the driver’s seat.¹⁰

Another area of opportunity is providing more support for leaders and organizations playing critical field catalyst roles. As the Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit consultancy, has observed, these emerging actors are an

often unseen – at least by funders – yet highly effective type of intermediary or collaborative. . . . Each works to mobilize and galvanize myriad actors across a social-change movement, or field, to achieve a shared goal for equitable systems change. Many of society’s major social-change successes have benefited from their critical work, and aspirations for population-level change will remain elusive until we unlock significant capital to support them.¹¹

One further change is needed. The *Our Common Purpose* report suggested traditional philanthropic foundations needed to step up. It now seems more likely that

the greater need is for more democratic and place-based sources of philanthropy to come to the fore. As I have noted elsewhere, “These alternative forms of philanthropy have the added benefit of helping their small ‘d’ democratic donors connect the dots between their goals and interests and those of the broader community of which they are part.”¹²

Looking back across the initial ripple effects of *Our Common Purpose*’s strategy to dramatically expand civic bridging capacity, we can see several shifts in priorities underway: from national conflict to local legitimacy, from electoral mobilization to civic formation, from ideological purity to pragmatic pluralism, from financial dependence to institutional autonomy, and from mission-driven moralism to the “self-interest, well understood” of American society, to use Tocqueville’s term.

If these shifts continue, they would amount to a recovery of “the art of association.” Americans may yet regain this essential civic capacity – and, in doing so, renew the democratic life that depends on it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Stid is a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where his work focuses on civil society, philanthropy, and democratic governance. Before joining AEI, he served as the Executive Director of Lyceum Labs, a nonprofit focused on improving political leadership at the state and local levels, and he advised philanthropists seeking to improve civic life in America. Previously, he was the Inaugural Director of the U.S. Democracy grantmaking program at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and a Visiting Fellow at Johns Hopkins University’s SNF Agora Institute. He is the author of *The President as Statesman: Woodrow Wilson and the Constitution* (1998) and currently publishes *The Art of Association*, a fortnightly newsletter on philanthropy, civil society, and democracy in America.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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>.
- ² Daniel Stid, “A Playbook for Regaining Our Common Purpose,” *The Art of Association*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.amacad.org/news/regaining-our-common-purpose>.
- ³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 3.
- ⁴ Charlie Brown and Christina Jodice, “Trust for Civic Life: America’s Civic Future Starts in Local Communities,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 111–121, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/trust-civic-life-americas-civic-future-starts-local-communities>; American

- Academy of Arts and Sciences, “The Trust for Civic Life,” <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/initiative/trust-civic-life> (accessed July 8, 2026); and Trust for Civic Life, *2025 Annual Report: Investing in America’s Civic Hubs* (Trust for Civic Life, 2026), <https://trustforciviclife.org/annual-reports>.
- ⁵ Daniel Stid, *Taking Democracy for Granted: Philanthropy, Polarization, and the Need for Responsible Pluralism* (SNF Agora Institute, 2024), <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Taking-Democracy-for-Granted.pdf>.
- ⁶ Matt Leighninger, *Community Foundations for Civic Health: Learning & Action in 2025 and Directions for 2026* (CFLeads, Rhode Island Foundation, and National Civic League, 2026), <https://cfleads.org/resource/community-foundations-for-civic-health-learning-action-in-2025-and-directions-for-2026>.
- ⁷ New Pluralists, “Vision and Strategy,” <https://newpluralists.org/vision> (accessed July 6, 2026).
- ⁸ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “Champions,” <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/champions> (accessed July 8, 2026).
- ⁹ Robert Griffin, Charlie Lobeck, Mariana Botero, et al., *Field in Focus: The State of Pro-Democracy Institutional Philanthropy* (Democracy Fund, 2023), <https://democracyfund.org/idea/field-in-focus-the-state-of-pro-democracy-institutional-philanthropy>.
- ¹⁰ Stid, “A Playbook for Regaining Our Common Purpose.”
- ¹¹ Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, Kevin Crouch, and Cora Daniels, “Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders,” The Bridgespan Group, March 21, 2023, <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/field-catalyst-lessons-for-systems-change-leaders>.
- ¹² Daniel Stid, “Top Down Democratic Decline vs. Bottom Up Civic Renewal: Eight Working Hypotheses,” *The Art of Association*, January 13, 2025, <https://artofassociation.substack.com/p/top-down-democratic-decline-vs-bottom>. See the sixth working hypothesis: “More democratic and place-based forms of philanthropy are better positioned to support civic renewal than national mega-funders.”

From Common Purpose to Common Practice: National Service & the Rebuilding of Civic Infrastructure for the 21st Century

Kristen Bennett

This essay explores how renewed investment in national service can help restore the civic, social, and economic pathways that once made the American Dream attainable. It argues that a year of paid, full-time service offers a bridge between opportunity and belonging at a time when higher education and the workforce struggle to meet the needs of young Americans. In making service years a more common expectation and opportunity, we can move closer to attaining the vision laid out in Our Common Purpose of a citizenry emboldened to act with greater responsibility to one another and a commitment to our shared future.

The American Dream exists as an enduring symbol of prosperity. In *The Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams, the originator of this premise that Americans hold dear, defines it as something deeper and more demanding.¹ He explains a vision for a moral social order, describing a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”² With that, Adams set forth a vision for America that rewards hard work and contributions to society with the commensurate support needed to thrive.

That promise is vanishing. The pathways that once guided our civic and economic life toward that American Dream are not functioning as designed. As a result, over 70 percent of Americans feel the American Dream is out of reach or was never within reach.³

When the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences issued the *Our Common Purpose* report in 2020, it argued that “improvement of our civic culture and of our institutions must go hand in hand. Each is necessary; neither on its own is sufficient.”⁴ The Commission challenged us to achieve significant progress by our nation’s 250th anniversary. That moment is now upon us and on reflection, the strategies and recommendations in

Our Common Purpose remain valid and urgent, but they are not self-executing. What is missing is the connective tissue between aspiration and infrastructure. We lack a bridge between the vision the Commission articulated in its report and the civic culture capable of sustaining it. National service through programs like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps is that connective tissue, and new evidence demands we treat it as such.

Amid the fresh backdrop of our semiquincentennial, strains within key institutions are increasingly visible, threatening not just the financial future of the next generation, but also the civic foundations of American life. If allowed to persist, these *civic failures* risk America's 275th anniversary bearing the hallmarks of more entrenched polarization, disconnection, and distrust in our shared future.

Beginning in the classroom, the current model of K–12 education is struggling to prepare students for a rapidly shifting economy. The World Economic Forum estimates that two-thirds of today's students will work in jobs that do not yet exist.⁵ Higher education, meanwhile, risks alienating younger generations as both financially prohibitive and misaligned with workforce demands, contributing to declining public confidence. The Lumina-Gallup 2026 *State of Higher Education* study finds that the one-in-five Americans who express low confidence in higher education cite both the failure to teach job-relevant skills and the cost burden.⁶

Once beyond secondary and postsecondary education, young people encounter an evolving and increasingly diminished early-career landscape.⁷ Advances in artificial intelligence are fundamentally reshaping the employment landscape. According to labor research firm Revelio Labs, postings for U.S. entry-level jobs have declined 35 percent since January 2023, driven in large part by AI.⁸ A landmark Stanford study reinforces this picture: young workers aged twenty-two to twenty-five in the occupations most exposed to AI experienced a 6 percent decline in employment between late 2022 and September 2025, while older workers in the same fields saw 6 percent or greater growth.⁹

The human consequences of these failures are increasingly visible across multiple indicators of well-being. One of the most recent editions of the Harvard Youth Poll describes a generation marked by “deep economic insecurity, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and growing social fragmentation.”¹⁰ Eight-in-ten members of Generation Z reported feelings of loneliness in the past year, a crisis that the U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory linked to the 70 percent decline in in-person social interaction among young people aged fifteen to twenty-four.¹¹

While the ascent of technologies including smartphones and social media may contribute to these dynamics, they coincide with broader institutional shifts that shape how young people experience education, work, and community. What is lacking, even more so than when the strategies and recommendations from *Our*

Common Purpose were proposed six years ago, are shared experiences that foster a sense of collective purpose and mutual responsibility – experiences that reinforce our social fabric and, in return, equip an active citizenry with the skills, mindsets, and abilities to thrive.

National service is not a new or novel idea. It has been deployed in the United States at moments of great uncertainty and opportunity. The Civilian Conservation Corps put over three million men to work amid the Great Depression. The Peace Corps was established to extend the goodwill of American soft power abroad at the height of the Cold War. Since 1993, national service has most directly been implemented by AmeriCorps, deploying Americans to local communities across the country to confront our most entrenched challenges. Different from volunteerism, a year of national service is a paid, structured opportunity to build real-world skills through hands-on experience while contributing to community needs.

National service addresses what K–12 education, higher education, and our workforce have struggled to achieve independently: the integration of skill building, purpose finding, and community connection. It is happening every day in every state across the country. Young people are tutoring children in underresourced schools, responding to natural disasters, building affordable housing, and staffing community health clinics.

In 2025, Service Year Alliance, the organization I lead, surveyed more than two thousand alumni of national service programs for our *State of Alums* report. Our research reveals that 87 percent of national service alumni report gaining workforce-ready competencies including adaptability, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, credentials that prepared them for future employment.¹² In an economy that is rapidly automating the tasks that once necessitated entry-level hiring, these skills are not supplementary; they are a competitive advantage.

The results speak for themselves. In an era when entry-level jobs are increasingly hard to secure, nearly two-thirds of alumni found full-time employment within six months of completing their service year, surpassing the national average for recent college graduates.¹³ Nearly seven-in-ten national service alumni who entered service with only a high school diploma or GED went on to earn additional degrees upon completing service, 17 percentage points higher than the national average.¹⁴ For many young Americans, particularly those who enter without a college degree, it is a malleable and accessible on-ramp into higher education and professional life.

The economic case for national service is compelling, but for a generation defined by loneliness, the more urgent case is the ability of national service to give the next generation somewhere to belong. Embracing this form of service as a common expectation for this generation may be our most credible response to today's crisis of loneliness. It is also the most direct path to realizing the Commission's

vision of a civic culture grounded in mutual respect, willingness to compromise, and shared responsibility.

National service also has the power to rebuild what current polarization is eroding: the ability to connect across lines of difference. Nearly four out of every five service year alums reported being likely to engage in fruitful conversations with people they disagree with, compared to just 52 percent before their service began.¹⁵ Even during the fraught 2024 presidential election cycle, as national polarization was on the rise, our research found that individuals involved in service years were resilient to these external trends. Perhaps most telling: 91 percent of service year alums vote regularly, compared to 64 percent of the general population.¹⁶

What emerges from a year of service is civic infrastructure in the most literal sense: *people* who have learned, through shared experience, what it means to belong to something larger than themselves and show up to work together for it every day.

The question before us is not whether national service works; it is whether we have the will to scale what is already working and invest in a new era of service that is unique to this moment. An honest reckoning with where we stand in 2026 requires acknowledging what has *not* happened: the bold federal investment called for by the Commission has not materialized, and in spring 2025, unprecedented federal funding decisions resulted in interrupted service for tens of thousands of AmeriCorps members who were demobilized and sent home without warning.¹⁷

Progress requires a bipartisan effort to make national service a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans. As federal action in the near term remains unlikely to advance this movement, the work must happen at the state, local, and community levels – building proof points that a bold national expansion of service will require. The expansion of non–federally funded service corps since the publication of *Our Common Purpose* offers a roadmap to scale service years in concert with national service at the federal level.

The American Dream promises a country that meets effort with opportunity. The Commission called on us all to build a civic culture capable of sustaining it. National service, and the civic leaders it cultivates, is how we fulfill that promise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Bennett is CEO of Service Year Alliance and a leader in reimagining how young people transition into adulthood. With nearly twenty years at the forefront of national service, she has partnered with governments, nonprofits, and philanthropy to design national and state-level strategies that expand service year opportunities

and pioneer new models for funding and implementation. A sought-after voice on youth engagement and civic innovation, her insights on creating a new social contract for the twenty-first century emphasize that the systems we've relied on to guide young people into successful adulthood are broken, and that service years offer a proven solution. Her writing has been published in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, *The Fulcrum*, and the *New York Daily News*, and her work has been cited in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *NPR*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The Washington Post*. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of America's Service Commissions and the Commission on Opportunities After High School at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1931), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.262385>.
- ² *Ibid.*, 404.
- ³ Jared Sousa, "American Dream Far from Reality for Most People: Poll," ABC News, January 15, 2024, <https://abcnews.com/Politics/american-dream-reality-people-poll/story?id=106339566>.
- ⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 2, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report>.
- ⁵ Vijay Eswaran, "From Classroom to Career: Building a Future-Ready Global Workforce," World Economic Forum, December 16, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/12/from-classroom-to-career-building-a-future-ready-global-workforce>.
- ⁶ Lumina Foundation and Gallup, *The College Reality Check: What Students Experience vs. What America Believes* (Lumina Foundation, 2026), https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/The.College.Reality.Check_.pdf; and Lumina Foundation and Gallup, *Valued but Out of Reach: The Reality of Higher Education Today* (Gallup, Inc., 2026), <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>.
- ⁷ Sydney Ember, "Young Graduates Face the Grimmiest Job Market in Years," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/24/business/economy/college-graduates-job-market-hiring.html>.
- ⁸ Lisa K. Simon, "Is AI Responsible for the Rise in Entry-Level Unemployment?" Revelio Labs, August 4, 2025, <https://www.reveliolabs.com/news/macro/is-ai-responsible-for-the-rise-in-entry-level-unemployment>.
- ⁹ Erik Brynjolfsson, Bharat Chandar, and Ruyu Chen, "Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts About the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence," working paper (Stanford Digital Economy Lab, 2025), 3, https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/app/uploads/2025/11/CanariesintheCoalMine_Nov25.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Harvard Public Opinion Project, "51st Edition—Fall 2025," Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, December 4, 2025, <https://iop.harvard.edu/youth-poll/51st-edition-fall-2025>.
- ¹¹ Jenna Kamal, "Understanding Gen Z's Loneliness Epidemic," GWI blog, <https://www.gwi.com/blog/gen-z-loneliness> (accessed August 4, 2026); and Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, 2023), 13, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

¹² Service Year Alliance, *State of Alums: Service Year Alliance Alums Survey Report* (Service Year Alliance, 2025), 6, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/serviceyear/pages/7835/attachments/original/1756215404/2025_State_of_Alums_Report_-_Service_Year_Alliance.pdf?1756215404.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hannah Fingerhut, “AmeriCorps Must Restore Grant Funding and Members to States That Sued over Cuts, Federal Judge Rules,” AP News, June 5, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ameri-corps-trump-doge-lawsuit-f88fb92ffb93dbb5a942f8570412ba3f>.

Civic Information Architecture

Ethan Zuckerman

In the six years since the Our Common Purpose report was released, dramatic shifts to the information ecosystem have transformed the relationship between citizens and the media, providing serious challenges to an informed and participatory democracy. Journalism faces business model challenges aggravated by a shift away from search and toward AI, as well as governmental attacks on journalistic independence and on public media. Influential technology platforms have retreated from the difficult, controversial work of fact-checking, seeking to reduce their political exposure, while platforms like Truth Social and X are now explicitly associated with political actors. We believe even larger changes are brewing, from promising experiments in community ownership and management of social networks to the emerging idea of AI sovereignty, which may see governments around the world challenge American and Chinese companies over the ownership of powerful AI tools.

The six years since the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship offered analysis, strategies, and recommendations in its report, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, have been eventful ones for the civic information space.¹ Some developments are the outgrowth of long-term trends, most notably the weakening of accountability journalism through the shrinkage of advertising revenues. Others are more dramatic, including two abrupt shifts in how social media platforms see their responsibilities to their users and the broader public.

The resulting picture from these slow and fast shifts is not an encouraging one for democracy. Journalism, and particularly local journalism, continues to be in crisis, with difficulties exacerbated by the defunding of public media, leaving some of America's least resourced communities with even less visibility into local politics and civics. The promise of social media as a broadly accessible public sphere is challenged by the overt politicization of some online spaces (including a social media network owned by President Donald Trump and his family) and the increasing concentration of tech platform power.²

Yet within a complex landscape, there are glimmers of promise. Frustrations with the direction X (formerly Twitter) has taken under the leadership of Elon Musk has sparked a wave of interest in decentralized social media, drawing users to platforms like Bluesky and Mastodon and sparking a broad conversation about what would con-

stitute a decentralized social network. The donor community has focused intensely on the problem of supporting local journalism through rethinking ownership and business models. And some promising experiments are connecting online conversations and information resources, attempting to build new participatory public spaces controlled by local communities instead of multinational corporations.

Understanding these ongoing shifts requires an understanding of both historical events of the past years and significant changes to the technological landscape. The evolving nature of social media offers perhaps the best illustration of the intersections of history, technology, and politics.

Moderation is an uncomfortable necessity for social media platforms. Decisions to remove some types of content and permit others, or to give content higher or lower priority on users' feeds, are inevitably controversial. They also require resources: both machine-learning algorithms and human labor to train those algorithms and intervene to make close calls. Yet unmoderated social media is financially unsustainable – advertisers concerned with “brand safety” will flee platforms where the conversation turns obscene or hateful – and purely unmoderated spaces like 4chan tend to have sharply limited audiences.

Platforms like Meta's Facebook have long asserted an unwillingness to “censor” user content, while maintaining complex and widely debated rules about what content is allowed (see the #freethenipple campaign aimed at Meta's prohibitions on images of “female-appearing nipples”).³ As legal scholar Evelyn Douek has observed, developments in 2020 – the same year the Academy's Commission issued *Our Common Purpose* – fundamentally changed internet moderation.⁴ The public health emergency around the COVID-19 pandemic led platforms to take down claims about the infectious disease that were not consistent with advice from public health organizations, and to give more weight to information from trusted sources like the World Health Organization. This shift was generally welcomed, and technology companies were cheered for taking responsibility during a global health emergency.⁵

This increased willingness to block dangerous content shifted from public health to the political realm in May 2020 when, as Donald Trump began claiming that mail-in voting – a pandemic safety measure – would “rig” the 2020 presidential election, Twitter labeled Trump's tweet as “potentially misleading.”⁶ After initial statements by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg that the platform did not want to be arbiters of political speech, many of Trump's statements on his public Facebook page were also marked with warning labels.

Two dramatic steps at the end of 2020 marked the apex of the shift from reluctant to aggressive moderation of political content. Weeks before the 2020 election, Facebook and Twitter took steps to block a *New York Post* article about Hunter Biden's laptop, in part out of fear that the leaked information that led to the story might be foreign disinformation designed to sway the presidential election. Both

platforms changed course under public and political pressure, but many Republicans felt like a line had been crossed when a story that met the editorial standards of a major newspaper was blocked by social media platform moderators.⁷

After the riots at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, Donald Trump's accounts on most major social media platforms were temporarily or permanently removed, a practice called "deplatforming," which had previously been directed primarily at serial conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones, founder of the Infowars website.⁸ The logic behind Trump's deplatforming rested on concerns about public safety: platforms worried that his ambiguous statements about the Capitol attack, in which he told rioters "We love you, you're very special," might inflame further political violence.⁹

The deplatforming of a sitting president triggered a complex backlash and a second swing in social media policy. For some international leaders, including then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the removal of Trump from social media was "problematic," raising questions about freedom of opinion and expression.¹⁰ Trump has sued several of the platforms that removed his accounts, and several have settled. The decision to settle may be based less on the legal merits of specific cases than on an unwillingness to be in conflict with a sitting president.¹¹

For Republican leaders in the United States, the deplatforming was a *casus belli* to be addressed through state-level legislation. In 2021, Florida passed Senate Bill (S.B.) 7072, also known as the "Stop Social Media Censorship Act," and Texas passed House Bill (H.B.) 20, which sought to prohibit viewpoint discrimination on social media platforms. Both laws were challenged via lawsuits, leading to a circuit split in the U.S. Courts of Appeals – the Fifth Circuit upheld Texas's law while the Eleventh Circuit struck down Florida's.¹² The cases were jointly considered by the Supreme Court as *Moody v. Netchoice, LLC* and *Netchoice, LLC v. Paxton* and argued in February 2024. The Court remanded the cases to the lower courts in July 2024, instructing them to conduct a more thorough analysis of the conflicts between the laws and the First Amendment.¹³

While the judicial review process is lengthy and complicated, market forces react more quickly. In February 2022, the Trump Media and Technology Group launched Truth Social, a social network similar to Twitter. The president began posting exclusively on Truth Social, though automated accounts repost his messages to other social networks, increasing his reach. Similarweb, a company that uses AI to estimate web traffic and offer traffic and audience analytics, sees only 24 million monthly visitors to Truth Social, compared to 4.5 billion for X or 148 million for Bluesky.¹⁴

As Trump was launching Truth Social, Elon Musk – an increasingly vocal supporter of the president – began making significant investments in Twitter, before announcing on April 14, 2022, that he would buy the company for \$43 billion, a significant premium over its stock price.¹⁵ Over the next six months, Musk sought to undo the deal over concerns about automated accounts on the platform and Twitter

subsequently sued him in Delaware's Court of Chancery to force him to complete the sale. Shortly before the suit against Musk went to trial, he closed the deal on October 28 and promptly fired most of Twitter's executive team and roughly half its staff.¹⁶

The following spring, Musk renamed the platform "X," in a shift that paralleled significant changes in content moderation.¹⁷ X stopped moderating "false or misleading information that could bring harm to crisis-affected populations" and ended its "civic integrity policy," which prohibited misleading speech about election results.¹⁸ Musk also welcomed back controversial figures, including Kanye West, Andrew Tate, and President Trump, though Trump's account is relatively quiet today, largely just posting screenshots of his Truth Social account or reposting X content supportive of himself and his allies.¹⁹

In reaction to policy changes and the return of controversial figures, many left-leaning users fled Twitter during and following Musk's takeover. Another wave left after Trump won the 2024 presidential election and invited Musk to the White House as a "special government employee" heading the United States Digital Service (renamed the "United States DOGE Service" by executive order in 2025).²⁰ X alternative Bluesky briefly topped mobile application download charts in November 2024 as users sought Musk-free social networking, but X itself has maintained a steady presence near the top of app download charts while growth on Bluesky has recently slowed.²¹

The rise of decentralized social networking as a response to the Musk takeover of Twitter will be examined more fully when we consider signs of hope in the civic information environment. But the launch of Truth Social and the transformation of X are best understood as the next act in the ongoing saga of content moderation. Before 2020, platforms positioned themselves as politically neutral and generally avoided taking overt stances on free speech. During the COVID-19 crisis and the 2020 presidential election, they became increasingly willing to act, citing either public health or civic health as a motivation.

Between 2022 and Trump's 2024 reelection, some platforms swung back to a "free speech" position, but now without a pretense of political neutrality. In August 2024, Zuckerberg expressed regrets at caving to government pressure under President Joe Biden's administration: "I believe the government pressure was wrong, and I regret that we were not more outspoken about it."²² And in a powerful display of symbolism, the CEOs of Meta, X, TikTok, and Google (which owns YouTube) appeared as featured guests at Trump's 2025 inauguration, suggesting, if not explicit alignment with Trump's agenda, a realization that failing to cooperate with the White House could be bad for business.

Perhaps the most surprising development around social media and its political alignment has been the strange saga of TikTok, the social media platform based on short video posts launched internationally by the Chinese technology firm ByteDance in 2017. In August 2020, President Trump issued an executive order

that prohibited transactions between TikTok and U.S. citizens, an act designed to remove the app from the Google and Apple app stores and cut it off from U.S. advertising networks.²³ TikTok sued, and the service continued to operate during the remainder of Trump's first term. In April 2024, citing the danger of giving Chinese businesses and thereby the Chinese government access to Americans' user data, President Biden signed legislation requiring a ban of TikTok from U.S. app stores and hosting services unless the company sold its U.S. operations to American investors.²⁴

The Supreme Court unanimously upheld the ban on grounds of national security following Trump's second election in November 2024; for a year, his administration elected not to enforce the ban, instead seeking a deal with ByteDance to transfer control of the company to U.S. entities.²⁵

In September 2025, the Trump administration indicated a forthcoming deal involving conservative media leaders and the Oracle Corporation, which is controlled by Larry Ellison, who is reported to be a "close confidant" of Trump.²⁶ In January 2026, ByteDance announced that it had approved a sale that includes Oracle and an Emirati investment fund as buyers, as well as tech mogul – and Trump supporter – Michael Dell.²⁷ Since TikTok's U.S. division began operations under a U.S.-majority board and ownership in late January 2026, watchdogs have begun trying to determine whether TikTok's vaunted recommendation algorithms are shifting toward favoring right-leaning content. While TikTok is understood as an entertainment platform, it also delivers news and information to 43 percent of Americans under thirty.²⁸

By virtually every measure, the health of news media has declined sharply since the early 2000s: as print news circulation has shrunk, news audiences have moved online and technology companies like Google and Meta have captured huge percentages of the online advertising business. Newspaper employment dropped from over three hundred and sixty-five thousand jobs to under one hundred thousand between 2005 and 2023. During the same time period, over four hundred daily newspapers closed, leaving the nation with just over one thousand daily papers.²⁹

The closure of newspapers is civically important because, although broadcast and social media are more popular places for most Americans to seek news, newspapers provide almost 50 percent of originally reported stories and nearly 60 percent of local news stories, according to a 2019 Duke University study.³⁰ While online-only news outlets are beginning to fill some gaps in news coverage, the most successful in this space are national or international in scope, covering specific beats. Television executive Jeff Zucker observed that online ads yield "digital pennies" compared to "analog dollars," making it particularly difficult to support online-only local news outlets through conventional advertising.³¹

As news audiences move online, intermediaries like search engines and social networks have captured an increasing share of news ad revenue. A user sharing a story on local elections on their Facebook account might well drive views to the local newspaper's website. But it's also possible that their friends might read the headline and brief summary embedded within their Facebook feed and not explore further, yielding an ad view on Facebook but not on the newspaper website. In 2020, Australia passed the News Media Bargaining Code, which required platforms like Facebook and Google to negotiate a revenue share with news organizations whose content they post.³² Despite initial resistance, and a brief period during which Facebook blocked news content to Australian users, scholars now estimate that the code will transfer \$200 million AUD (about \$142 million USD) annually to funding public-interest journalism.³³ But when Canada passed the similar Online News Act in 2023, Meta simply blocked news from their platforms rather than agree to a mandated revenue sharing arrangement.³⁴ Traffic to Canadian news sites has dropped precipitously, and other nations have been reluctant to follow in Australia's footsteps for fear of facing similar blockages.

The integration of generative AI into search engines offers an even more significant threat to online news revenues. Search engines continue experimenting with AI-generated summaries that push links to news content down on the results page, making it increasingly likely that users will end their search at the search engine rather than visiting a news website.³⁵ One study suggests that a site previously ranked first by Google for a particular query might expect to lose 79 percent of its traffic when AI summaries are added to the page.³⁶ A 2025 study from the Pew Research Center examined web browsing data from nine hundred volunteers and discovered that only 8 percent of users who encountered an AI summary as a result of a search went on to click one of the links returned in the search, while three times as many ended their browsing session, likely because they found the answer they were seeking.³⁷ Search engines are aware that news publishers see automated summaries as affecting their traffic and have responded by making links to content hosted elsewhere more prominent in their AI summaries, though the Pew study found that only 1 percent of users clicked on those links.

In Ernest Hemingway's debut novel *The Sun Also Rises*, a character is asked how he went bankrupt and famously responds, "gradually, and then suddenly."³⁸ There are legitimate concerns that the replacement of search results with AI summaries will turn the gradual financial calamity American news organizations are facing into sudden collapse.

It is possible that some news organizations may benefit from AI licensing fees: *The New York Times* is licensing content to Amazon's AI projects for reportedly as much as \$25 million a year.³⁹ Simultaneously, the *Times* is suing both OpenAI and Microsoft for copyright infringement, claiming the chatbots released by the companies have been trained on millions of news stories without permission or compensation.⁴⁰

Courts may decide that the use of copyrighted material constitutes fair use because the training of an AI model is a transformative use of copyrighted material. This would damage the possibility of revenue through licensing, leading some lawyers to suggest that a compulsory license, in which AI providers would be required to pay a licensing fee to the news industry, might be necessary to save professional newsgathering.⁴¹

Without a solution like compulsory licensing, both news organizations and, eventually, AI companies face a looming crisis: if professional news organizations can no longer make money from online advertising because their traffic has been throttled by AI bots, the supply of reporting that AI systems rely on will dry up, eventually making it impossible to answer recent queries about what's happening in the world. (While it's possible to speculate that generative AI systems may eventually be able to produce original reporting, that is far beyond the capabilities of existing systems.)

Our Common Purpose suggests that the ongoing financial crisis in journalism would require consideration of public media models as part of the solution to ensure that quality reporting continues to be carried out.⁴² While the rise of AI makes the threats to journalistic business models more acute, the defunding of public media by the Trump administration indicates that the cavalry is not coming to the rescue.

In July 2025, the Trump administration rescinded over \$1 billion in funding to National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) via the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.⁴³ NPR and PBS will be able to continue operating through donor and sponsor support, but the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a nonprofit that provided funding for American public broadcasters from 1967 to 2025 using congressional appropriations, shut down in January 2026. In addition to raising complex constitutional questions about who has authority over federal spending, the withdrawal of funding for public media by the Trump administration suggests we will need to find other solutions to the financial shortfalls currently affecting commercial journalism, which will need to pick up the slack resulting from defunded public media.

The defunding of public media should be understood as a broader attack on independent journalism that is critical of political power. President Trump has used a variety of tactics to pressure broadcasters and newspapers that he sees as providing politically biased coverage. He sued CBS over their editing of an interview with then-presidential candidate Kamala Harris. While most legal experts believe the suit had no merit, CBS's parent company, Paramount Global, settled the case for \$16 million, possibly because Federal Communications Commission (FCC) consent was required to approve a merger between Paramount and Skydance Media, which closed in August 2025.⁴⁴ When comedian and host of CBS's *Late Show* franchise Stephen Colbert referred to the settlement as "a big fat bribe," Paramount announced that his show would be canceled at the end of its season in May 2026.

due to financial reasons, leading to speculation that programming decisions were coming under political pressure.⁴⁵

Humor in particular has been a site of conflict between broadcasters and the Trump administration. When comedian and television host Jimmy Kimmel complained that Trump supporters were rushing to pin blame for the 2025 assassination of Charlie Kirk on their political rivals, FCC Chairman Brendan Carr used a podcast appearance to insinuate that ABC stations should stop carrying Kimmel's late night show or risk losing their broadcast licenses, noting, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way."⁴⁶ Carr's threat was strengthened by the fact that several broadcast networks are already being investigated by the FCC for possible political bias. Hundreds of protesters marched on Disney's headquarters (ABC's parent company) in Burbank, California, and more canceled or threatened to cancel their streaming services unless Kimmel's show was reinstated.⁴⁷ ABC changed policy and Kimmel returned to the air less than a week later.

While the United States has rigorous freedom of expression protections under the First Amendment, there are no constitutional guarantees regarding the fiscal viability of any particular media outlets. While U.S. courts would likely prevent the White House from ordering a newspaper to suppress coverage of a particular story, Trump's \$15 billion defamation suit against *The New York Times* could bankrupt the newspaper should a court decide to hear it and find in the president's favor.⁴⁸

When Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022, millions of users concerned about his proposed directions for the platform began to seriously consider the question of "platform power," many for the first time. Platform power is the idea that the owner of a social media platform, search engine, or AI chatbot has significant control over the information a user sees or shares. Faced with the possibility that Twitter under Musk might be more tolerant of extreme speech, many users left the platform for alternatives like Bluesky or Mastodon.⁴⁹

The move from Twitter/X to Bluesky and Mastodon is not just a move from one set of platform rules to another. These new social platforms are designed around the principle of decentralization. Different instances of Mastodon – independently run servers using the Mastodon software – have different rules on what content is allowable and different financial models to pay for the service. Some nodes (social .coop, for example) are governed and fiscally supported by communities, while others are commercial or personal projects controlled by a single person or team. While rules for what content is allowable can differ from one server to another, users of one server can still view content posted on other servers, if their rulesets are compatible.

Decentralization is appealing in theory but has proven confusing for some users in practice. Defederation – in which the owner of a server decides not to forward content from another specific server – is essential to the governance of social networks but can be hard for users to understand. When Gab, a white nationalist

social network, began using Mastodon, many servers defederated, making it so that their users could not see posts on the Gab server and Gab users could not see their posts.⁵⁰ Other defederations have involved sexually suggestive anime and controversy over reporting of trans issues.⁵¹ Defederation gives users vastly more control over what ruleset social media operates under – you can choose the ruleset you want and move to another server or open your own if you change your mind. Federated social networks require more thought and expertise than joining a centralized network like Instagram or X.

Users of Bluesky have faced another issue with federation: Is a network actually decentralized if there's only one viable server? Bluesky has become a popular destination for refugees from X because the user experience is very similar to pre-Musk Twitter and because the service gives users a great deal of control over what content appears in their feeds. But some users have complained that so long as Bluesky primarily has a single set of servers run by the company that has written the software, it remains only theoretically decentralized. A grassroots effort called Free Our Feeds has proposed raising \$30 million to build meaningful parallel infrastructure, allowing users concerned with governance of Bluesky to move to an alternative server. While they have fallen short of their original fundraising goals, there is widespread enthusiasm for the idea, including from the Bluesky team.⁵² In the meantime, Blacksky, a community on Bluesky focused on communities of color, has developed its own implementation of the protocol that Bluesky uses – the Authenticated Transfer (AT) Protocol – which may make it possible for knowledgeable users to run their own Bluesky compatible servers, much like users who start Mastodon servers.

While there has been more conversation about decentralized social networks than actual widespread adoption of these technologies, an increased awareness of how social networks operate and who has power and control over them is a step toward reshaping the information environment in more civically inclusive directions. In addition to conversations about the “fediverse” – a set of decentralized services that operate on the protocol used by Mastodon, and a parallel environment based around Bluesky's AT protocol – real estate magnate Frank McCourt has launched Project Liberty, an effort to build decentralized social networks around a blockchain-based protocol that he believes will empower a landscape of competitive social networks.⁵³

Our recommendation in *Our Common Purpose* to consider interoperable protocols as the basis for new, pro-civic social networks is where reality has steered closest to our aspirations, though the growth of alternative social networks parallels our suggestion for public-supported social networks that follow the logic of public broadcast media. And while we did not explicitly address AI in our 2020 recommendations, the rise of powerful AI chatbots is leading to the idea of sovereign AI, in which countries build their own AI systems on servers and data they control.

It is possible that sovereign AI may open a discussion of technology in the public interest that might expand to include social media, search engines, and other key technologies.⁵⁴

Encouragingly, we've seen creative experimentation at the intersection of local news and participatory media, suggesting that what might work is a blend of existing social networks and local media, cooperating to bring more local voices into conversations about local events. Vermont Public – the state's public broadcaster – partnered with Front Porch Forum, an email-based hyperlocal social network that links citizens in each Vermont town, to shape their 2024 election coverage. Vermont Public and Front Porch Forum collected several hundred comments from each county in Vermont and launched a Citizens Agenda initiative, steering their campaign coverage to focus on issues the public identified as most important.⁵⁵

It's difficult to build explicitly civic-focused social networks – most people's lives do not center on local or national politics. Front Porch Forum, which is largely used to help neighbors advertise tag sales and lost pets, has shown that it can be activated as a powerful civic tool at moments of political importance or natural disaster like the 2023 riverine flooding that devastated many Vermont communities.⁵⁶

These “latent civic networks” may present an opportunity for local news organizations to build local audiences around interests and “activate” them at moments of civic need. The *Arizona Daily Star* is building a discussion platform – Wildcaster LIVE – around University of Arizona sports, connecting readers with sports reporters in real-time chats.⁵⁷ These two-way relationships between news consumers and reporters are already shaping sports coverage and hold the potential to reshape coverage of civic issues, through a model like Vermont Public's Citizens Agenda, or be activated in moments of crisis. And despite the challenges of developing local networks, New_Public, one of the most respected research organizations focused on online communities, has launched Roundabout, a locally focused community product likely to test theories about the power of latent civic capacity.⁵⁸

Digital efforts to make local news coverage more participatory won't be enough to address the core financial challenges local newspapers are facing. The National Trust for Local News is a foundation-financed effort to acquire, combine, and operate local newspapers, creating efficiencies of scale while operating within an explicit public-interest framework designed to prevent the creation of news deserts. The Colorado News Conservancy, for example, was established by the National Trust to bring together the online news outlet *The Colorado Sun* with Colorado Community Media (CCM), an independent, family-owned chain of twenty-four newspapers and websites that serve Denver and its suburbs.⁵⁹ The Conservancy recently bought a press from a failing Gannett operation and now uses it to publish its Colorado papers.⁶⁰

The National Trust has followed similar approaches in Maine and Georgia and has established a promising model, but it has not been without controversy. As

leadership of the nonprofit has moved beyond its founding team, it has sold several of its Colorado papers to a for-profit news company in Arizona, raising questions about whether these divestitures are consistent with its mission. Defenders of the National Trust argue that a combination of nonprofit and for-profit solutions will be essential to provide local journalism over the long haul.⁶¹

Perhaps the greatest surprise in the information landscape since issuing *Our Common Purpose* has been the rise of artificial intelligence as a central feature of the information environment. The introduction of ChatGPT as a web application in late 2022 demonstrated the power and promise of large language models – systems that create convincing text by extrapolating from patterns in huge corpora of existing texts – to answer questions and deliver information. ChatGPT effectively created a new, fast-growing category of web applications: chatbots that seem likely to supplant existing search engines.

The visibility of chat services like ChatGPT and Claude, as well as other “generative AI” systems that can produce images and video from natural-language prompts, is provoking society-wide conversation about the social impacts of AI systems. Amid promises and warnings that AI will end work as we know it, lead to waves of political misinformation and propaganda, entrench existing discrimination and biases into code, and possibly threaten all human life – institutions of all sorts are holding dialogues about AI ethics and governance. Given the massive investment in both AI companies and the data center and computer hardware companies that enable them, it’s unclear whether any institutions have the power to halt a societal adoption of powerful AI systems, but it does seem likely that we will have a more thorough and engaged conversation about the promise and problems of AI.

It is helpful to contrast this approach to the shift from broadcast to participatory civic information architectures, where conversation only moved from expert dialogue into the mainstream a decade into a social media revolution. Social media had a long honeymoon, with enthusiasm over a “Facebook revolution” in Egypt counterbalancing emerging concerns about pervasive surveillance, political polarization, and harms to individual users. As legislators consider bills like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), and Australia and France restrict social media to users over sixteen years old, there is a sense that the horse has already left the barn.⁶² Facebook is more than two decades old. An entire generation has grown up in an information environment shaped by social media. There may still be time for a debate about whether we want an information environment in which tools like OpenAI’s recently shuttered Sora – a text-to-video model and social media app based on AI-generated video – are an acceptable part of the civic information ecosystem.⁶³

We can see the early signs of civic-participation efforts to ensure that AI adoption considers social impacts. For instance, the State of New Jersey employed the online platform All Our Ideas to collect residents’ concerns and hopes about AI systems

in the workplace.⁶⁴ The output was a rank-ordered list of concerns that citizens wanted to see addressed as the state set AI policy.

There is also the intriguing possibility that AI may open new channels for participatory politics. Media scholar Eric Gordon has pointed out that governments collect an enormous amount of data from citizens about their views and preferences, but that this input is rarely central in shaping policy decisions. Gordon believes AIs may help governments through “generative listening,” turning huge datasets and submissions in multiple languages into insights that could make government more responsive to public input.⁶⁵

For AI to have a positive role to play in a civic information environment, it needs to be trusted. So far, with AI chatbots that have been trained on pirated materials, that are prone to hallucinations, and that often harvest user data, trust has been hard to find. Building conversations around AI and the information environment proactively, not reactively, will be critical in realizing an ecosystem in which AI features important human voices, rather than drowning them out.

In writing *Our Common Purpose*, we knew we were addressing America at a moment of profound political upheaval. We took advantage of that moment to introduce a range of interventions, many of which had already been discussed and debated by academics and policymakers over the course of years or decades. Most of the proposals we offered for the information environment had a much shorter lifespan, in part because problems like the politicization of the Supreme Court have been understood for much longer than we’ve understood how the rise of social networks would damage the advertising business of local news organizations.

As a result, our strategies and recommendations may have been less forceful than the times demanded. It is not clear that we could have successfully advocated for a media bargaining code, as in Canada or Australia, nor could we have known that funding for local social networks that operated like public media would have been cut under the second Trump administration. But the ambition of proposals may signal the seriousness of the problems we face, and those problems are profound.

We are fortunate that the rise of AI, with both real economic implications and overheated hype, is spurring public dialogue about how we, as a society, should govern our technologies. Alongside conversations about existential risk or universal basic income to compensate those who lose their jobs to chatbots, we need a robust conversation about the future of our information environment. The transformation a company like Google has had over our understanding of the world, through controlling what we can discover via search and by damaging local journalism by claiming its primary revenue stream, may well be exceeded by the transformations OpenAI or Anthropic bring about.

The idea of sovereign AI, in which nations assert the need for AI as a government-funded public good, offers a suggestion. Democracies need a robust information

environment, and AI threatens to concentrate that power in the hands of a small number of venture-backed for-profit companies. Before AI transforms news reporting, information gathering, and political debate, we need to take seriously the idea that we must either ensure these new companies act in the interests of a robust and competitive democracy, or we must aggressively find ways to create our own citizen-led information infrastructures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ethan Zuckerman is Associate Professor of Public Policy, Communication, and Information and the Founder and Director of the Initiative for Digital Public Infrastructure (IDPI) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is the Co-Founder of the Global Voices blogging community and the author of *Mistrust: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them* (2021) and *Digital Cosmopolitans: Why We Think the Internet Connects Us, Why It Doesn't, and How to Rewire It* (2013).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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>.
- ² Jeffrey Clark, "Trump Transfers Almost \$4 Billion of His Truth Social Parent Company Shares to a Trust in Surprise Move," *FOXBusiness*, December 21, 2024, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/media/trump-transfers-almost-4-billion-his-truth-social-parent-company-shares-trust-surprise-move>.
- ³ Alaina Demopoulos, "Free the Nipple: Facebook and Instagram Told to Overhaul Ban on Bare Breasts," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jan/17/free-the-nipple-meta-facebook-instagram>.
- ⁴ Evelyn Douek, "COVID-19 and Social Media Content Moderation," *Lawfare*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/covid-19-and-social-media-content-moderation>.
- ⁵ Ben Smith, "When Facebook Is More Trustworthy than the President," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/business/media/coronavirus-facebook-twitter-social-media.html>.
- ⁶ Evelyn Douek, "The Year That Changed the Internet," *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/how-2020-forced-facebook-and-twitter-step/617493>.
- ⁷ Kate Conger and Mike Isaac, "In Reversal, Twitter Is No Longer Blocking New York Post Article," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2020 (updated April 17, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/technology/twitter-new-york-post.html>.
- ⁸ Sara Fischer and Ashely Gold, "All the Platforms That Have Banned or Restricted Trump So Far," *Axios*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/01/09/platforms-social>

- media-ban-restrict-trump ; and Meta Newsroom, “Enforcing Our Community Standards,” August 6, 2018, <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/enforcing-our-community-standards>.
- ⁹ Travis Caldwell, “Trump’s ‘We Love You’ to Capitol Rioters Is More of the Same,” CNN, January 7, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/07/politics/trump-history-comments-trnd>.
- ¹⁰ Ryan Browne, “Germany’s Merkel Hits Out at Twitter over ‘Problematic’ Trump Ban,” CNBC, January 11, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/11/germanys-merkel-hits-out-at-twitter-over-problematic-trump-ban.html>.
- ¹¹ Katie Fallow, “Paramount’s Trump Lawsuit Settlement: Curtain Call for the First Amendment?” Knight First Amendment Institute blog, July 9, 2025, <https://knightcolumbia.org/blog/paramounts-trump-lawsuit-settlement-curtain-call-for-the-first-amendment>.
- ¹² Scott Bomboy, “The Supreme Court Considers State Laws Regulating Social Media Giants,” Constitution Daily Blog, February 21, 2024, <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-supreme-court-considers-state-laws-regulating-social-media-giants>.
- ¹³ Amy Howe, “Justices Take Major Florida and Texas Social Media Cases,” SCOTUSblog, September 29, 2023, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2023/09/justices-take-major-florida-and-texas-social-media-cases>; and Amy Howe, “Court Sends Social Media Moderation Cases Back to Lower Courts,” SCOTUSblog, July 1, 2024, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2024/07/court-sends-social-media-moderation-cases-back-to-lower-courts>.
- ¹⁴ Similarweb, “Top Social Media Networks Websites Ranking,” <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/computers-electronics-and-technology/social-networks-and-online-communities> (accessed March 2026).
- ¹⁵ Greg Roumeliotis, Uday Sampath Kumar, and Chavi Mehta, “Musk Makes \$43 Billion Offer for Twitter to Build ‘Arena for Free Speech,’” Reuters, April 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/elon-musk-offers-buy-twitter-5420-per-share-2022-04-14>.
- ¹⁶ Max Zahn, “A Timeline of Elon Musk’s Tumultuous Twitter Acquisition,” ABC News, November 11, 2022, <https://abcnews.com/Business/timeline-elon-musks-tumultuous-twitter-acquisition-attempt/story?id=86611191>.
- ¹⁷ Ryan Mac and Tiffany Hsu, “From Twitter to X: Elon Musk Begins Erasing an Iconic Internet Brand,” *The New York Times*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/24/technology/twitter-x-elon-musk.html>.
- ¹⁸ Adrian Kopps, “Two Years After the Takeover: Four Key Policy Changes of X Under Musk,” Digital Society blog, October 28, 2024, <https://www.hiig.de/en/policy-changes-of-x-under-musk>.
- ¹⁹ Irina Ivanova, “These Formerly Banned Twitter Accounts Have Been Reinstated Since Elon Musk Took Over,” CBS News, November 21, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/twitter-accounts-reinstated-elon-musk-donald-trump-kanye-ye-jordan-peterson-kathy-griffin-andrew-tate>.
- ²⁰ An acronym for Department of Government Efficiency, DOGE is foremost a reference to the Shiba Inu “doge” meme and cryptocurrency “meme coin” that followed. Kat Tenbarge and Kevin Collier, “X Sees Largest User Exodus Since Elon Musk Takeover,” NBC News, November 13, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/x-sees-largest-user-exodus-musk-takeover-rcna179793>.
- ²¹ Matt Binder, “Bluesky Hits #1 on the App Store as Users Continue to Flee Elon Musk’s X,” Mashable, November 13, 2024, <https://mashable.com/article/bluesky-top-ios-app-apple-app-store>; and Andrew Hutchinson, “Bluesky Reaches 38M Users, Though Post

- Volume Is Declining,” *SocialMediaToday*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/bluesky-reaches-38-million-users-slowing-growth/757025>.
- ²² Lara Korte, “Zuckerberg Says He Regrets Caving to White House Pressure on Content,” *Politico*, August 26, 2024 (updated August 27, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/26/zuckerberg-meta-white-house-pressure-00176399>.
- ²³ Bobby Allyn, “Trump Signs Executive Order That Will Effectively Ban Use of TikTok in the U.S.,” *NPR*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/06/900019185/trump-signs-executive-order-that-will-effectively-ban-use-of-tiktok-in-the-u-s>.
- ²⁴ Bobby Allyn, “President Biden Signs Law to Ban TikTok Nationwide Unless It Is Sold,” *NPR*, last updated April 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/04/24/1246663779/biden-ban-tiktok-us>.
- ²⁵ Amy Howe, “Supreme Court Upholds TikTok Ban,” *SCOTUSblog*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.scotusblog.com/2025/01/supreme-court-upholds-tiktok-ban>.
- ²⁶ Clare Duffy, “TikTok’s Algorithm Will Be Overseen by Oracle in the U.S. After the Sale Is Completed,” *CNN Business*, September 22, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/22/tech/tiktok-sale-oracle-algorithm>; and Bobby Allyn and David Folkenflik, “Trump’s TikTok Deal Payment Criticized as ‘Shakedown Scheme’ by Experts,” *NPR*, September 26, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/26/g-s1-90598/tiktok-deal-trump-oracle>.
- ²⁷ David McCabe and Emmett Lindner, “TikTok Strikes Deal for New U.S. Entity, Ending Long Legal Saga,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2026 (updated January 23, 2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/22/technology/tiktok-deal-oracle-bytedance-china-us.html>.
- ²⁸ Emily Tomasik and Katerina Eva Matsa, “1 in 5 Americans Now Regularly Get News on TikTok, up Sharply from 2020,” *Pew Research Center*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/25/1-in-5-americans-now-regularly-get-news-on-tiktok-up-sharply-from-2020>.
- ²⁹ Zach Metzger, 2025 *State of Local News Report: Two Decades of Data, Deserts and Dynamic Change* (Local News Initiative, 2025), <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/newspapers>.
- ³⁰ Jessica Mahone, Qun Wang, Philip Napoli, et al., *Who’s Producing Local Journalism? Assessing Journalistic Output Across Different Outlet Types* (News Measures Research Project, 2019), <https://dewitt.sanford.duke.edu/research-hubs/news-measures-research-project>.
- ³¹ Ashkan Karbasfrooshan, “How Digital Pennies vs Analog Dollars Became Digital Trillions vs Analog Billions,” *Context Is King* blog, December 1, 2020, <https://contextisking.com/2020/12/01/how-digital-pennies-vs-analog-dollars-became-digital-trillions-vs-analog-billions>.
- ³² Australian Communications and Media Authority, “News Media Bargaining Code,” last updated November 13, 2024, <https://www.acma.gov.au/news-media-bargaining-code#our-role>.
- ³³ Terry Flew, “Australia’s News Media Bargaining Code: A New Institutional Perspective,” *American Affairs*, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2023/03/australias-news-media-bargaining-code-a-new-institutional-perspective> (accessed May 26, 2026).
- ³⁴ Jessica Patterson, “How Meta’s News Ban Reshaped Canadian Media,” *Digital Content Next*, September 12, 2024, <https://digitalcontentnext.org/blog/2024/09/12/how-metas-news-ban-reshaped-canadian-media>.

- ³⁵ Danny Goodwin, “Google AI Overviews Visibility Drops, Only Shows for 15% of Queries,” Search Engine Land, June 4, 2024, <https://searchengineland.com/google-ai-overviews-visibility-drops-15-percent-queries-442850>.
- ³⁶ Michael Savage, “AI Summaries Cause ‘Devastating’ Drop in Audiences, Online News Media Told,” *The Guardian*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jul/24/ai-summaries-causing-devastating-drop-in-online-news-audiences-study-finds>.
- ³⁷ Athena Chapekis and Anna Lieb, “Google Users Are Less Likely to Click on Links When an AI Summary Appears in the Results,” Pew Research Center, July 22, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/22/google-users-are-less-likely-to-click-on-links-when-an-ai-summary-appears-in-the-results>.
- ³⁸ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 136, https://archive.org/details/sunalsoarises0000erne_j2n9.
- ³⁹ Michael M. Grynbaum and Cade Metz, “The Times and Amazon Announce an AI Licensing Deal,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/29/business/media/new-york-times-amazon-ai-licensing.html>; and Esther Shein, “AI Deal Between Amazon, New York Times Worth Up to \$25M Annually,” *eWeek*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.eweek.com/news/amazon-new-york-times-licensing-deal-ai-training>.
- ⁴⁰ Michael M. Grynbaum and Ryan Mac, “The Times Sues OpenAI and Microsoft Over AI Use of Copyrighted Work,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/27/business/media/new-york-times-open-ai-microsoft-lawsuit.html>.
- ⁴¹ Michael E. Kientzle, “Copyright Office Seeks Comments on Compulsory Copyright License for Generative AI,” *Arnold & Porter*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.arnoldporter.com/en/perspectives/advisories/2024/01/compulsory-copyright-license-for-generative-ai>.
- ⁴² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*.
- ⁴³ Caitlin Yilek, “Trump Signs Rescissions Bill Clawing Back Foreign Aid, NPR and PBS Funding,” *CBS News*, July 24, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-signs-rescissions-package-foreign-aid-npr-pbs-funding>.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Glynn, “Paramount to Pay Trump \$16M to Settle 60 Minutes Lawsuit,” *BBC*, July 2, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3w4n8778q2o>.
- ⁴⁵ Guardian Staff, “Stephen Colbert on Paramount’s \$16M Settlement with Trump: ‘Big Fat Bribe,’” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/jul/15/late-night-roundup-colbert-stewart-meyers-trump-paramount-epstein>.
- ⁴⁶ David Folkenflik, “Jimmy Kimmel’s Suspension Shows Power of FCC’s Brendan Carr,” *NPR*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/19/nx-s1-5546764/fcc-brendan-carr-kimmel-trump-free-speech>.
- ⁴⁷ Lynette Rice, “Hundreds of Union Writers & Actors March Outside of Disney to Protest ABC’s Decision to Yank ‘Jimmy Kimmel Live,’” *Deadline*, September 18, 2025, <https://deadline.com/2025/09/disney-protest-burbank-abc-suspending-jimmy-kimmel-live-1236548509>.
- ⁴⁸ David Folkenflik, “Trump Files \$15 Billion Defamation Lawsuit Against ‘New York Times,’” *NPR*, September 16, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/09/16/nx-s1-5543030/donald-trump-nytimes-lawsuit>.
- ⁴⁹ Raphael Boyd, “From X to Bluesky: Why Are People Fleeing Elon Musk’s ‘Digital Town Square’?” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/dec/11/from-x-to-bluesky-why-are-people-abandoning-twitter-digital-town-square>.

- ⁵⁰ Samantha Lai, Yoel Roth, Renée DiResta, et al., “New Paradigms in Trust and Safety: Navigating Defederation on Decentralized Social Media Platforms,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/fediverse-social-media-internet-defederation>.
- ⁵¹ Ethan Zuckerman, “Mastodon Is Big in Japan. The Reason Why Is . . . Uncomfortable,” personal blog, August 18, 2017, <https://ethanzuckerman.com/2017/08/18/mastodon-is-big-in-japan-the-reason-why-is-uncomfortable>; and Jerry Bell, “An Update on Journa .host,” Infosec Exchange Blog, November 20, 2022, <https://blog.infosec.exchange/2022/11/20/an-update-on-journa-host>.
- ⁵² Emma Roth, “Free Our Feeds Wants to Build a Social Media Ecosystem ‘Resistant to Billionaire Influence,’” *The Verge*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.theverge.com/2025/1/13/24342799/free-our-feeds-social-media-ecosystem-at-protocol-bluesky>.
- ⁵³ McCourt Global, “Project Liberty,” <https://www.mccourt.com/project-liberty> (accessed May 26, 2026).
- ⁵⁴ Raffaele Ciriello, Anne-Marie Thow, and Angelina Chen, “Policymakers Need Sovereign AI, Not Commercial Gadgets: How We Built It and What We Learned,” *The Policymaker*, February 16, 2026, <https://thepolicymaker.appi.org.au/policymakers-need-sovereign-ai-not-commercial-gadgets-how-we-built-it-and-what-we-learned>.
- ⁵⁵ Michelle Owens, “Vermont Public Partners with Front Porch Forum on Citizens Agenda Initiative During 2024 Election Season,” Vermont Public, June 12, 2024, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/about-us/2024-06-12/vermont-public-partners-with-front-porch-forum-on-citizens-agenda-initiative-during-2024-election-season>.
- ⁵⁶ Paige Fisher, “Front Porch Forum Launches Regional Disaster Response Boards,” *VT Digger*, July 23, 2023, <https://vtdigger.org/2023/07/23/front-porch-forum-launches-regional-disaster-response-boards>.
- ⁵⁷ Brett Fera, “How the *Arizona Daily Star* Is Building Strong Connections with College Sports Fans,” Better News, July 2024, <https://betternews.org/arizona-daily-star-wildcater-live>.
- ⁵⁸ Hays Witt and Josh Kramer, “👋 Introducing Roundabout: Built for Neighbors, with Neighbors,” New_ Public, November 30, 2025, <https://newpublic.substack.com/p/introducing-roundabout-built-for>.
- ⁵⁹ The National Trust for Local News, “Colorado,” <https://www.nationaltrustforlocalnews.org/colorado> (accessed May 26, 2026); and Colorado News Collaborative (COLab), “Colorado News Conservancy,” <https://colabnews.co/projects/colorado-news-conservancy> (accessed May 26, 2026).
- ⁶⁰ Rick Edmonds, “A Leading News Nonprofit Makes a Sharp Turn After Just Two Years,” Poynter Institute for Media Studies, July 9, 2024, <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/analysis/2024/national-trust-local-news-investments-macon-melody>.
- ⁶¹ Dan Kennedy, “At Colorado Community Media, the Optimism of 2021 Has Given Way to Bitter Reality,” What Works, May 19, 2025, <https://whatworks.news/2025/05/19/5320>; and Sarah Scire and Sophie Culpepper, “‘Some Hard and Important Lessons’: One of the Most Promising Local News Nonprofits Looks Back—and Ahead,” Nieman Journalism Lab, March 26, 2025, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2025/03/national-trust-for-local-news>.
- ⁶² Kids Online Safety Act, S.1748, 119th Congress (2025–2026), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/senate-bill/1748/text>; and Samuel Petrequin, “French Lawmakers Pass Sweeping Social Media Ban for Children Under 15,” PBS News, July 21,

2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/french-lawmakers-pass-sweeping-social-media-ban-for-children-under-15>.

- ⁶³ Matt O'Brien, "OpenAI's Sora Joins Meta in Pushing AI-Generated Videos. Some Are Worried About a Flood of 'AI Slop,'" AP News, September 30, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/sora-ai-video-generator-slop-openai-meta-ea4e4444bf90ca43c20a41b64b6716bf>; and OpenAI, "What to Know About the Sora Discontinuation," <https://help.openai.com/en/articles/20001152-what-to-know-about-the-sora-discontinuation> (accessed May 26, 2026).
- ⁶⁴ Dane Gambrell, "AI and You: How New Jersey Is Using Collective Intelligence to Get Smarter on AI," The Reboot Blog, July 30, 2024, <https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/ai-and-you-all-our-ideas-new-jersey>.
- ⁶⁵ Eric Gordon, "Towards Deep Listening: Rethinking Public Engagement Through Generative AI," InnovateUS virtual workshop, May 14, 2024, <https://innovate-us.org/towards-deep-listening-rethinking-public-engagement-through-generative-ai>.

The Hardest Part Is Always People

Sandra González-Bailón

Technological innovation has a dual nature: it is propelled by visionary inventors but its ultimate trajectory is shaped by human behavior, which is messy, unpredictable, and resistant to neat explanations. Information infrastructures reflect this same tension: their design alone cannot guarantee purpose or alignment with collective goals. Only by asserting authority over how priorities are defined can we ensure that information architectures serve the social infrastructures they are meant to support.

Technological change is perhaps most aptly described with two aphorisms: “the best way to predict the future is to invent it” and “the hardest part of predicting technology is predicting people.” The first conveys the hubris with which technological elites (tech founders, investors, high-ranking engineers) try to shape our shared trajectories. It is also a call for action: the future needs to be actively shaped by creating the conditions that will allow preferred scenarios to flourish. The second aphorism highlights the difficulty of anticipating what those conditions are. Hubris or the inclination to act does not make it easier to manage people. Ultimately, only people can manage themselves. And so it is that you may deploy new technology thinking it will do *this* and it ends up doing *that* because of how people decide to use it.

The past twenty years of digital innovation offer many examples of the hubris that has shaped the world we live in and its many blind spots because, well, social behavior is difficult to fully envision.

The web was created to put the world’s information at our fingertips, only to then allow us to open the garden gates to platforms personalized for us. There we remain, unable to leave. Internet networks spanned continents to bridge time and space, but most users decided to stay parochial, committed to narrow views. Social media once promised to liberate the world, but we got stuck to their feeds like flies to a glue strip. Liberation, it turned out, was never the point.

Yes, there are structural factors that do not leave much space to maneuver. As users, there is only so much we can do to counter the network effects of technology: its value increases with the people who use it and resisting the pull is like resisting a powerful wave. There is also little we can do to resist economic pressures to get on board with the latest tool promising to transform society (exhibit A: AI chatbots). Nobody wants to miss the gold rush. But what we pay attention to is still in the realm

of the things we control. We may feel forced to use a technology, but we decide to what end we put it.

Information infrastructures like the internet exist to enable communication and disseminate knowledge, support coordination, and facilitate innovation. The press is one of the key pillars of modern society because it created that type of infrastructure. The newswire allowed information to move faster than traditional mail, and it enabled newspapers (national and local) to create a shared public understanding of events as they unfolded. The muscle of the Fourth Estate owes much of its strength to the old cousin of the internet: the telegraph.

Journalism as an institution holds society together by helping establish what is shared reality. Journalism as practice faces many difficulties, and the internet has proven to be a much more challenging medium for the press than the telegraph was in its day. Drowned in screens full of competing content, we – the common people – seem to be paying less attention to the news. Our feeds offer unlimited material to look at, and although we choose what we pay attention to, we still do not always choose wisely.

The *Our Common Purpose* report, published in 2020, asked what we can do today that will strengthen American political and civic life in the world to come.¹ It presented six strategies and thirty-one recommendations for reinventing American constitutional democracy. The fifth strategy focuses on how to build civic information architecture that supports common purpose and sets 2026 as the time horizon for achieving “significant progress toward its recommendations.”²

Writing these lines in 2026, it is difficult not to read the report with the same retrospective smugness with which we read old diary entries, that dubious pleasure of knowing how the story turned out. The report’s recommendations indeed resemble the aspirations of an ambitious younger self. You wake up one day contemplating where those ambitions actually landed.

In his contribution to this volume of *Daedalus*, Ethan Zuckerman describes the reality of the past six years with well-chosen pearls: tech elites and political elites are today more intertwined than ever; platforms’ increasing secrecy is eroding attempts to hold them accountable; public media are being defunded, tightening the lid on society’s Fourth Estate; and the AI beast is pulling at its chain, threatening to devour everything that makes us human.³ How is all this compatible with the lofty goal of rebuilding the information architecture to strengthen a shared civic mission?

The “common purpose” that gave title to the report seems even more elusive today than six years ago. (Not that the report offered an explicit definition of *purpose*, other than coming up with “creative and innovative solutions to democracy’s greatest challenges.”)⁴ Who decides on shared priorities as we look for those solutions? This question, alas, defies agreement.

Those who believe in the invisible hand of the market will argue that it is all of us self-interested people who ultimately determine how value is ranked. As if we didn't contain multitudes.

Yes, we may want to have more control over privacy, but no, we don't invest the time or energy to customize the privacy settings on the apps that crowd our days. Yes, we may want to be informed citizens, but no, we are not willing to pay the subscriptions that fund journalists nor spend time reading their reporting. Yes, we may want to build engaged civic communities, but no, we do not want to deal with the inevitable fatigue and friction required to keep them cohesive. We may want to be better versions of ourselves, but we do not always have it within us to change: life is demanding. Technological markets cannot resolve these paradoxes, so they often misread what we want, our actual priorities, and the values we hope to see elevated.

Those who believe in the power of corporations to manufacture demand (who, again, asked for ChatGPT?) will argue that our needs are engineered. As if the need to connect and communicate did not define the core of our existence. We may not have asked for ChatGPT, but there was no difficulty coming up with uses once it was available to us. AI breakthroughs are already indispensable. As Zuckerman writes, "It's unclear whether any institutions have the power to halt a societal adoption of powerful AI systems."⁵ Look at how universities – from professors to students to administrative leadership – are all embracing the AI age.⁶

Building on the observations of legal scholar Evelyn Douek, Zuckerman singles out 2020 as the year that changed the internet.⁷ It was the year of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many false claims that were being made about the virus, so platforms turned up the dial on content moderation, with cascading consequences, including the deplatforming of political figures that came back with more power. I see other turning points. Most prominent for me are 2013 and 2016. It is in 2013 that we saw the start of the #BlackLivesMatter movement but also Edward Snowden's revelations on mass, global surveillance programs; the launch of the Internet Research Agency, a Russian company engaged in online propaganda and influence operations; and the purchase of *The Washington Post* by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. In 2016, we saw Brexit, Donald Trump's first electoral success, and AlphaGo (created by DeepMind, an AI research lab acquired by Google in 2014) winning against the Go master Lee Sedol. The latter victory was one of the breakthroughs that allowed AI to become the reality it is today, a reality we praise and fear. The AlphaGo episode is not mentioned in Zuckerman's essay, but it created the conditions (the capital, the public expectation) for what he calls "the next big shift": the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022.

All these events – and many others over the course of the last twenty-five years – changed the nature and possibilities of the information architectures we have today. What happened in 2020 was just another turn. There are many such turning points. There are also many forking paths, moments when the outcome was decided rather

than delivered. Breakthroughs and discoveries happen unpredictably, information architectures are designed. The question is by whom and with what incentives.

In the end, what the *Our Common Purpose* report and Zuckerman's essay advocate for is something everybody agrees on: information infrastructures can support and erode common purpose; in other words, we need to keep the good stuff and hold off the bad stuff. How can we maximize the benefits of information infrastructures while protecting the resilience and integrity of the underlying social fabric? Achieving this balance requires designing systems that enhance connection and trust rather than fray them.

In his recent book *How to Save the Internet*, Nick Clegg (former president of global affairs at Meta) opens with what he calls the Power Paradox: "On the one hand, digital technologies, from the internet and social media to generative AI, have greatly democratized power, and promise to continue to do so, loosening the control of political and media gatekeepers...; on the other, they have centralized economic and political power in the hands of a small number of vast internet platforms."⁸

We can easily agree that these two realities coexist. Diagnosing what went wrong in two decades of platform disruption is far more difficult.

Clegg's account of what he learned during his time at Meta is very different from that of Sarah Wynn-Williams – a senior public policy executive at Meta prior to Clegg's arrival – in her memoir *Careless People*.⁹ Clegg talks about platform power: that is, the influence these technologies have over public life. Wynn-Williams talks about the power of people: specifically, the people choosing which fork in the path to take. Both cherry-pick their recollections to create a different narrative of the power dynamics keeping platforms afloat, but the data points they decide to focus on are indicative of the nature of the problem: technologies without people are like words without air. Just silence. Technologies only become consequential when animated by purpose and social meaning. The question again is whose purpose and meaning these infrastructures are built to serve.

(On the topic of cherry-picking evidence or, rather, how to prevent it: one of the *Our Common Purpose* recommendations was to require, through federal legislation, data openness to allow researchers to measure what happens in digital contexts. Not only is such legislation nonexistent in the United States but the U.S. government is currently actively opposing European attempts to make tech firms more accountable. As said: the aspirations of a younger self.)

Yet there is a deeper read on technology's ability to support or destroy, not different from how we look at science and the rationality that drives it. Sometimes ideas run away from their creators (like algorithms running amok). Sometimes technological breakthroughs carry moral ambiguity: they are neither good nor evil but can be both. In *The MANIAC*, a fictionalized biography of polymath John von Neumann, Chilean writer Benjamín Labatut recounts the birth of artificial

intelligence through the lives of those who brought it into existence.¹⁰ He writes: “Technology . . . is a part of us, just like the web is part of the spider. . . . It is not the particularly perverse destructiveness of one specific invention that creates danger. The danger is intrinsic. For progress there is no cure.” (This last sentence is borrowed verbatim from von Neumann’s essay “Can We Survive Technology?” published in 1955.)¹¹ The point is: there is no cure for human inventiveness, which is good because that is also our hope.

To return to the aphorisms that began this response: the future we want needs to be actively shaped by creating the conditions that will allow it to flourish. That future starts with claiming authority over how we define priorities. Zuckerman closes his essay with an example of how this can be accomplished through “civic-participation efforts to ensure that AI adoption considers social impacts.”¹²

The state of New Jersey has been using All Our Ideas, a crowdsourcing platform, to collect information on the hopes and concerns workers have about the impact of generative AI on work.¹³ This platform was originally created by sociologist Matthew J. Salganik at Princeton University to scale up survey research and combine it with voting and ranking mechanisms so that different ideas can not only be considered but also prioritized. This tool is now hosted by the nonprofit Citizens Foundation, whose stated mission is to connect governments and citizens.¹⁴

That is a great example of how technology can serve the shaping of civic information architectures. The power of technology lies not just in building the future but in helping us stay focused on what matters most.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra González-Bailón is the Carolyn Marvin Professor of Communication and Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication. She is also Co-Director of the Center for Information Networks and Democracy (CIND) and has a secondary appointment as Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Penn. Her research has been published in journals like *Science*, *Nature*, *PNAS*, *Political Communication*, and *Social Networks*. She is also the author of *El Vuelco: Historia personal y política de cómo las redes han cambiado el mundo para siempre* (with *El País* tech journalist Jordi Pérez Colomé, 2026) and *Decoding the Social World: Data Science and the Unintended Consequences of Communication* (2017). She is also the coeditor of *The Oxford Handbook of Networked Communication* (with Brooke Foucault Welles, 2020).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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>.
- ² *Ibid.*, iv.
- ³ Ethan Zuckerman, “Civic Information Architecture,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 134–151, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/civic-information-architecture>.
- ⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 51.
- ⁵ Zuckerman, “Civic Information Architecture,” 144.
- ⁶ Keigo Kusumegi, Xinyu Yang, Paul Ginsparg, et al., “Scientific Production in the Era of Large Language Models,” *Science* 390 (6779) (2025): 1240–1243, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adw3000>; and Helen Pearson, “Universities Are Embracing AI: Will Students Get Smarter or Stop Thinking?” *Nature*, October 21, 2025, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-03340-w>.
- ⁷ Evelyn Douek, “COVID-19 and Social Media Content Moderation,” *Lawfare*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/covid-19-and-social-media-content-moderation>; and Evelyn Douek, “The Year That Changed the Internet,” *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/how-2020-forced-facebook-and-twitter-step/617493>.
- ⁸ Nick Clegg, *How to Save the Internet: The Threat to Global Connection in the Age of AI and Political Conflict* (Vintage, 2025).
- ⁹ Sarah Wynn-Williams, *Careless People: A Cautionary Tale of Power, Greed, and Lost Idealism* (Flatiron Books, 2025).
- ¹⁰ Benjamín Labatut, *The MANIAC* (Penguin Press, 2023).
- ¹¹ John von Neumann, “Can We Survive Technology?” in *Volume VI: Theory of Games, Astrophysics, Hydrodynamics and Meteorology of John von Neumann: Collected Works*, ed. A. H. Taub (Pergamon Press, 1963), 504–519, https://sseh.uchicago.edu/doc/von_Neumann_1955.pdf.
- ¹² Zuckerman, “Civic Information Architecture,” 144.
- ¹³ Dane Gambrell, “AI and You: How New Jersey Is Using Collective Intelligence to Get Smarter on AI,” *The Reboot Blog*, July 30, 2024, <https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/ai-and-you-all-our-ideas-new-jersey>.
- ¹⁴ All Our Ideas, “About This Project,” <https://allourideas.org/about> (accessed June 3, 2026). In 2024, it was announced that the project would move from Princeton University to be housed within the Citizens Foundation. See Matthew Salganik, “allourideas.org Is Being Reborn,” All Our Ideas blog post, April 15, 2024, <https://blog.allourideas.org/post/747830324389691392/allourideasorg-is-being-reborn-as>.

Community News Is the Key

Steven Waldman

The collapse of local newspapers and the decline in the number of local journalists is associated with a variety of democratic ills, including more corruption, fewer candidates running for office, less knowledgeable voters, less participation in civic associations, and increased polarization. In addition, the vacuum left by local news has been filled by national media institutions and social media, concentrating the control of information in a few powerful hands and deepening public mistrust of the media. It will take a combination of creative public policy, philanthropic support, social entrepreneurship, and business model innovation to counter these trends. But perhaps above all else, we need a sufficient number of local reporters on the ground in communities.

The shifts in the civic information environment have been seismic. We've gone from a time when almost no one could broadly disseminate their views to one in which almost anyone can. From a time when misinformation could sometimes spread despite resistance from the big media systems to one in which it spreads at warp speed with the assistance of media systems. From a time when capturing moving images was the province of specialists to one when it's easier than reading or writing. From a time when the main costs were printing and distribution to one in which the main cost is labor. And from a time when technology did computations for us to one in which it writes, designs, ideates, codes, conjures, creates, and thinks on our behalf.

In the face of this collection of such mind-bending transformations, it may seem odd to say that one of the most important things for us to do is reverse the collapse of local news. Countering once-in-a-millennia technological shifts by requesting more people cover school board meetings may seem like a solution not quite up to the challenge. But Ethan Zuckerman is dead right in highlighting that as a key area of scrutiny: reviving community news is one of the best ways to counter the negative effects of the revolution in how people get information.¹ It's why, before the 2020 presidential election, historian Timothy Snyder said the collapse of local news was "the essential problem of our republic."²

First, let's understand the scale of the collapse. We have seen about a 75 percent drop in the number of local journalists since 2002, according to a 2025 study by Muck Rack and Rebuild Local News.³ This jibes with a different study from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and with data from the Bureau

of Labor Statistics.⁴ That means that in 2002, there were roughly forty journalists per one hundred thousand residents. Now there are about eight.

Thousands of newspapers have closed and those that remain are unlikely to provide local coverage of depth. Between 1999 and 2017, coverage of local politics dropped by 56 percent, according to a 2021 study of 121 newspapers by political scientists Danny Hayes and Jennifer Lawless.⁵ It's gotten worse since then. The collapse of newspapers has debilitated the entire local news system as television and radio have tended to rely on newspaper reporters for much original reporting, especially when it comes to turning over rocks or explaining things that institutional leaders would rather leave unsaid.

Research indicates that the collapse is associated with or causes more corruption, more voter ignorance, fewer candidates running for office, less volunteering with local associations like the PTA, and less split-ticket voting. One landmark study showed that the loss of local news correlated with lower bond ratings and higher tax rates.⁶

Just as important, there is impressive evidence that less local information exacerbates polarization.⁷ The reason: the contraction of local news leaves an information vacuum that is filled by social media (which is polarizing and more likely to include falsehoods) and national news (which is more likely to be partisan). People are focused on national topics (or view local controversies through a national lens) and are less likely to build strange-bedfellow alliances on local issues.

After looking at a variety of civic measures, Hayes and Lawless concluded that “the most dramatic change in the civic life U.S. communities have experienced in the last 20 years [is] the decimation of the local news media.”⁸

More recently, we have seen the neutering and co-opting of key national media institutions. A few decades ago, “corporate news media” could be fairly described as a mixed bag. It inserted subtle biases of a certain class of people, but it provided journalists with a sense of clout with which to challenge power. Now, corporate media is more fragile than small media because officials can threaten company executives through other nonmedia business interests. Donald Trump got to Jeff Bezos not by threatening *The Washington Post* but by endangering his technology companies Blue Origin and Amazon.

Just as important, the new media establishment – TikTok, X, Facebook, YouTube – concentrates power in just a few hands, increasingly aligned with one political party. When the digital revolution began last century, it seemed like a one-way trip toward more dispersed information. Now, in many ways, control is more concentrated than ever.

Local news – at least when it's in local hands – needs to grow to counter the concentration of national media. Thousands of flowers, not a few mighty tree trunks. There are three parts of the drive to revive local news: business model innovation, philanthropy, and public policy.

We have seen a flowering of social entrepreneurship on the community level: at least five hundred new local startups in the last fifteen years.⁹ Many are trying new approaches, including distribution by text message, holding in-person events, and forging grand collaborations among media outlets. They are still too small, but if more capital came into the system, many of these could scale and substantially improve conditions on the ground.

There has also been a surge of philanthropic support in recent years. Led initially by the Knight Foundation and then by a consortium called Press Forward (instigated partly by the MacArthur Foundation), such organizations have added something like \$100 million–\$200 million per year into the system.¹⁰ (The newspaper industry has lost more than \$40 billion in annual ad revenue since 2000, so we have a ways to go, but technological improvements – especially not needing to print newspapers and deliver them to houses – mean we need \$3 billion annually in new money to cover the loss.)¹¹

Finally, public policy has become more creative and successful. When we think about media policy, our minds may gravitate toward NPR or PBS, but we should think as much about two other models: the postal subsidy that was enacted in 1792 and lasted for about one hundred and fifty years after that, and the tax deduction for charitable contributions enacted in 1917.¹² The postal subsidy gave newspapers cheaper mailing rates; in modern dollars, the value would be about \$50 billion a year offset by the revenue from standard mailing rates. By contrast, the budget for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) that funded NPR and PBS hovered around \$500 million, with a sliver of that going toward local news.¹³ The provision of the U.S. tax code allowing individuals to deduct donations to charity massively strengthened America's nonprofit sector, involving \$55 billion–\$82 billion in support at its peak.¹⁴

What these developments have in common is that they do not involve wise men and women sitting around a table making discretionary judgments about worthiness – and, in First Amendment terms, they don't involve government officials making decisions about content. They are entitlements, value-laden incentives embedded deep in the tax code, distributing funds according to relatively objective criteria, on a massive scale.

With those principles in mind, a new generation of public policy ideas has been born, several of which Zuckerman mentions in his *Dædalus* essay. And there has been some progress.

- *Employment subsidies.* Illinois and New York have passed laws to provide refundable tax credits (that is, grants) to newsrooms for the hiring of staff.¹⁵ Illinois's law is targeted specifically at hiring local reporters; New York's at media in general. These subsidies are based on a bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives that would have provided \$1.7 billion over five

years.¹⁶ This approach aligns behavior incentives in the right direction – toward the hiring of reporters.

- *Support for businesses that advertise in local news.* Lawmakers in Kansas introduced legislation that would create a tax credit for small businesses that advertise in community news. This is based on some experiments on the county level in which governments provided grants to businesses that advertise.¹⁷
- *The Report for America model.* California, New Mexico, and Washington State have launched “fellowship” programs that place scores of reporters into local newsrooms and subsidize their salaries.¹⁸
- *Government advertising shift.* In 2021, New York City passed a law requiring half of its government advertising spending to go to community news. Over five years, this shifted a stunning \$72 million toward local outlets.¹⁹
- *Consumer subsidies.* There have been several approaches to subsidize consumers who want to support local news. Multiple federal bills have proposed providing a tax credit to those who buy subscriptions or donate to nonprofit news. A pending bill in the District of Columbia would provide a voucher.²⁰
- *Community News Investment Funds.* The newest of the ideas, several philanthropic groups are looking at setting loan funds or matching funds.²¹

Six states have enacted laws at the state or local level that will generate \$246 million over five years and about \$80 million in 2026 alone.²² If this movement grows, we could see this generating north of \$1 billion a year in support.

Not surprisingly, the impact of artificial intelligence cuts in multiple directions here. On the positive side, it should enable those remaining journalists to do far more with less, including devising ways of reaching residents who have been missed before. On the other hand, as Zuckerman notes, its first effect will be to further undermine the revenue model of local news by eliminating the need to click through from a search result to an underlying story. Once again, local news outlets will invest in the labor to create new information while someone else – previously a search engine or social media company, now an AI company – will capture most of the monetary value.

We need to decide quickly whether we want a vicious or virtuous circle. Without a critical mass of local reporters, AI will be inaccurate and less useful – and more likely to spread misinformation. Zuckerman writes, “For AI to have a positive role to play in a civic information environment, it needs to be trusted. So far, with AI chatbots that have been trained on pirated materials, that are prone to hallucinations, and that often harvest user data, trust has been hard to find.”²³ With sufficient local reporting, it could be quite effective at informing communities. This is why AI has a deep financial interest in paying for the revival of local news.

So it keeps coming back to there being a sufficient number of living, breathing local reporters. Democracy, communities, and artificial intelligence all need these people. And it is most likely to be humans, not bots – even good ones – that will restore trust in media, which is a goal of democracy in itself.

Obviously having more scruffy reporters sitting at school board meetings should not be the only response to historic, mind-bending shifts in information. But we shouldn't think that all technological revolutions need to be modulated by only technological solutions. In the case of local news, we need about twenty-five thousand new humans on the ground in communities, using new technologies but also old-fashioned techniques (calling people, attending meetings and events, and so on).

On the scale of what's being spent on new technology, this is a cheap date, and it would help strengthen democracy and make life in communities better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Waldman is Founder and President of Rebuild Local News and Co-Founder and President of Report for America. He is the author of *Sacred Liberty: America's Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom* (2019), *Founding Faith: How Our Founding Fathers Forged a Radical New Approach to Religious Liberty* (2009), and *The Bill: How Legislation Really Becomes Law: A Case Study of the National Service Bill* (1996).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ethan Zuckerman, "Civic Information Architecture," *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 134–151, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/civic-information-architecture>.
- ² Timothy Snyder quoted in promotional material for Margaret Sullivan, *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* (Columbia Global Reports, 2020).
- ³ Rebuild Local News Team, "New Report Reveals Alarming and Widespread Shortage of Local Journalists Across the U.S.," Rebuild Local News, July 10, 2025, <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/new-report-reveals-alarming-and-widespread-shortage-of-local-journalists-across-the-u-s>; and Muck Rack, "Local Journalist Index 2025," <https://muckrack.com/resources/research/local-journalist-index> (accessed June 5, 2026).
- ⁴ Zach Metzger, 2025 *State of Local News Report: Two Decades of Data, Deserts and Dynamic Change* (Local News Initiative, 2025), <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/explore/#/newspapers>; and Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, "The Economics Daily: Special Edition of BLS Data for Newspaper Week," <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/special-edition-of-bls-data-for-newspaper-week.htm>.
- ⁵ Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

- ⁶ Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee, and Dermot Murphy, “Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance,” Hutchins Center Working Paper 44 (The Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy, 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/financing-dies-in-darkness-the-impact-of-newspaper-closures-on-public-finance>.
- ⁷ Fabio Ellger, Hanno Hilbig, Sascha Riaz, and Philipp Tillmann, “Local Newspaper Decline and Political Polarization—Evidence from a Multi-Party Setting,” *British Journal of Political Science* 54 (4) (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000243>.
- ⁸ Hayes and Lawless, *News Hole*.
- ⁹ See the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, <https://www.schwabfound.org/home>.
- ¹⁰ Mike Scutari, “How Press Forward Is Reshaping the Nonprofit Local News Ecosystem,” Inside Philanthropy, October 21, 2025, <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/how-press-forward-is-reshaping-the-nonprofit-local-news-ecosystem>.
- ¹¹ Robert G. Kaiser, “Bad News about the News,” The Brookings Institution, October 16, 2014, <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2014/bad-news.html>.
- ¹² United States Congress, *Postal Service Act*, ch. 7, 1 Stat. 232 (1792); Library of Congress, “... An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads Within the United States,” <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/rbc/rbpe/rbpe21/rbpe218/2180050a/2180050a.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2026); and Margot L. Crandall-Hollick, *The Charitable Deduction for Individuals: A Brief Legislative History* (Library of Congress, 2020), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R46178>.
- ¹³ Corporation for Public Broadcasting, “CPB Financial Information,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20250802110215/https://cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials> (accessed June 5, 2026).
- ¹⁴ Geoffrey Cowan and David Westphal, “Public Policy and Funding the News” (USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 2010), <https://bpb-us-w1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/2/672/files/2015/07/Funding-the-News.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Jessica Mahone, “NY, IL Latest to Pass Legislation to Support Local News,” Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media blog post, <https://www.cislm.org/ny-il-latest-to-pass-legislation-to-support-local-news> (accessed June 5, 2026).
- ¹⁶ Sarah Scire, “Some Questions (and Answers) About the Local Journalism Sustainability Act,” Nieman Journalism Lab, September 14, 2021, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2021/09/some-questions-and-answers-about-the-local-journalism-sustainability-act>.
- ¹⁷ Kansas House of Representatives, HB 2276 (2025), https://www.kslegislature.gov/b2025_26/bills/HB2276; and Rebuild Local News Team, “Advertising Subsidies for Small Businesses Give Small Cities Powerful Tools,” Rebuild Local News, February 4, 2025, <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/advertising-subsidies-for-small-businesses-give-small-cities-powerful-tools>.
- ¹⁸ Report for America, “About Us,” <https://www.reportforamerica.org/about-us> (accessed June 9, 2026).
- ¹⁹ The New York City Council, “A Local Law to Amend the New York City Charter, in Relation to the Establishment of an Office of Ethnic and Community Media and Requirements Regarding Agency Spending on Advertising,” <https://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4950999&GUID=AE41EF6B-7E97-44EE-B3BB-5A9431A54F2B&Options=ID%7cText%7c&Search=Int+2313-A>; and The Center for Community Media, *Advertising*

Boost Initiative: Five-Year Impact Report (2020–2024) (The Center for Community Media, 2025), <https://abi.journalism.cuny.edu/five-year-impact>.

- ²⁰ Scire, “Some Questions (and Answers) About the Local Journalism Sustainability Act” ; Office of Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, “Introducing Legislation to Create First-in-the-Nation Program to Fund Local News in DC,” October 23, 2023, <https://janeeseward4.com/introducing-legislation-to-create-first-in-the-nation-program-to-fund-local-news-in-dc> ; and Council of the District of Columbia, Local News Funding Act of 2025, DC B26-0314, 26th Council (2025), <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0314>.
- ²¹ Caroline Ross, “Catalytic Capital for Local News : Unlocking New Capital to Strengthen Civic Infrastructure” (Press Forward, 2026), <https://www.pressforward.news/catalytic-capital/white-paper>.
- ²² These states are New York, Illinois, California, New Mexico, Washington, and New Jersey. Other states, including Utah and Connecticut, have passed laws, though they haven’t had an impact yet.
- ²³ Zuckerman, “Civic Information Architecture,” 145.

Civic Media in the Second Gilded Age

Darryl Holliday

Platform monopolies have concentrated wealth and power over civic discourse at levels not seen since the first Gilded Age – and the public media system built to counter that concentration has never been adequately funded or broadly enough defined. But a new generation of civic media practitioners, relational technologists, and information stewards isn’t waiting for that system to be rescued. It’s building locally governed, human-scaled infrastructure for the information people need to participate in civic life – and in doing so, redefining what public media can be. Surviving the second Gilded Age requires recognizing and resourcing the full range of people already doing that work.

Modern tech CEOs have accumulated personal fortunes that match or exceed those of historical industrialists like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, but in a much shorter timeframe and within a vastly larger global economy. Elon Musk’s personal wealth now represents a percentage of the U.S. economy comparable to Rockefeller’s wealth at its peak thanks to companies like SpaceX, Tesla, and X (formerly Twitter), his social media business.¹ In June 2026 he became the world’s first trillionaire (though he dipped below and over the trillionaire line throughout the month as his fortune fluctuated). Mark Zuckerberg’s Meta generated \$196.1 billion in revenue from its advertising operations in 2025, up from \$163.6 billion in 2024, and has been projected to surpass Google in global digital ad revenue by the end of 2026.² Microsoft claimed over \$17.8 billion in revenue from LinkedIn for 2025, with a reported increase of 12 percent at the close of the fourth quarter in June 2026; while social media platforms like Snapchat announced \$5.9 billion in 2025 revenue and earnings of \$1.6 billion at the close of the second quarter in August 2026.³ Social media advertising revenue is expected to reach almost \$500 billion globally by 2027.⁴

This concentration of wealth and power matters because these platforms are not – as is often claimed – “merely technologies that we have designed.”⁵ They are the products of multinational corporations led by individuals whose personal fortunes rival the economic output of entire nations (Meta’s 2025 revenue approached Ukraine’s entire 2025 GDP of \$212.9 billion).⁶ And one of the primary casualties of

this concentration has been the civic information infrastructure that democratic societies depend on.

I've watched this unfold as a local reporter covering communities for whom such statistics become harsh realities – where the closure of a newspaper doesn't just mean fewer local news providers, but fewer people attending city council meetings, fewer investigations into local corruption, and less coverage of high school sports and community events. The friends and colleagues I know working in local newsrooms aren't fighting an abstract battle; they're trying to sustain organizations that serve as civic utilities in an environment increasingly hostile to their survival.

The financial pressures are well documented. Accountability journalism is often the most visible benefit of local news, but there's also emergency reporting during crises, coverage of municipal proceedings, documentation of community life, and many other forms of local reporting. As a result, communities with strong local news and information ecosystems have higher voter turnout, better-informed citizens, less government corruption, and stronger social cohesion.⁷ Yet unlike comparable public utilities (water systems, emergency services, internet infrastructure in some jurisdictions), this critical service has never been adequately financed by public investment in the United States. The numbers are stark: in 2021, at just 0.002 percent of GDP, U.S. allocation to public media ranked twenty-fifth out of twenty-seven representative countries in the definitive comparative study conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania. Following the closure of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in January 2026, that percentage is now zero.⁸ These aren't recent developments; they reflect a long-standing policy choice that has left service-oriented, civic-minded news media in the United States chronically underfunded relative to peer democracies.

The result has been a local news industry with a structurally tense relationship between its mission-oriented mandate and the economic realities of production. News organizations have always struggled to reconcile the public-good nature of civic information with rising costs: physical printing and digital hosting, an increasingly educated (and indebted) workforce, real estate in downtown locations chosen for proximity to civic centers, legal expenses both offensive and defensive. The list goes on.

This tension created vulnerabilities that the companies controlling social media platforms would eventually exploit – though “exploit” may be too intentional a word for what was often mutual capitulation.

Anyone in the news business over the last twenty years has witnessed multiple waves of what might charitably be called strategic misjudgments. The “pivot to video” era (roughly 2015–2017) saw news organizations dramatically shift resources away from written content toward video production, often laying off writers and editors in the process, based on platform metrics that later

proved unreliable.⁹ This wasn't the first capitulation: the "distributed content" era of the 2010s, years of Facebook news feed dependence (2012–2018), and adoption of Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages framework each represented news organizations giving up control over distribution, audience relationships, and sometimes content format itself in exchange for promised reach or revenue that often failed to materialize or disappeared when platforms changed strategies.

The common thread: platforms held all the leverage and could change terms unilaterally. News organizations, especially commercial organizations desperate for audience and revenue, had little choice but to accept whatever terms were offered.

Meanwhile, journalists and journalism-support organizations largely abstained from policy battles that affected their core interests. Unlike the platform companies – which engaged heavily in policy advocacy to their own benefit – the news industry declined to participate in movements aligned with their sustainability. Municipal broadband initiatives that would ensure universal internet access (and therefore access to digital news) proceeded without significant journalism industry involvement. These broadband networks – from Chattanooga's EPB Fiber system to the more than nine hundred community-owned networks documented by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance – have expanded digital access for residents across the country, built entirely through utility and municipal advocacy without the news lobby showing up as a stakeholder.¹⁰ Policy frameworks that might have supported civic media have also received limited advocacy. The chilling effect was visible in episodes like Facebook's temporary news blockade in Australia and Canada in response to legislation requiring Meta to pay local news companies for publishing links to their work.¹¹

This wasn't entirely a hit job from external forces; it was enabled by a profit-first orientation within much of the news industry itself, which brings us back to the nature of these digital platforms.

In Mark Zuckerberg's 2012 IPO letter to prospective shareholders, he wrote that "Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected."¹² Whatever the sincerity of that initial vision, the incentive structures of publicly traded companies ultimately prevailed. Social media platforms are not neutral technologies or public utilities. They are advertising businesses whose products are designed to maximize user engagement – which in practice means capturing and monetizing attention.

I think about the attention economy differently now that I'm raising a two-year-old. Evidence of social media's harm to children, particularly teenage girls, keeps mounting.¹³ As someone who uses AI tools like Claude to stress test and reformat ideas rooted in decades of work in local news and information, I'm watching the next evolution of these attention-capture technologies with the same concern. The devices we buy are no longer optimized primarily for our benefit. They're optimized to extract behavioral data and capture attention that converts to advertising revenue.

When FCC Chairman Brendan Carr began his campaign to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in 2025, he cited concerns that public media stations had violated their charter by airing advertisements.¹⁴ Anyone who's watched or listened to NPR or PBS knows that "underwriting" – the euphemism for those brief sponsor messages – is functionally advertising, albeit heavily restricted.¹⁵ Underwriting from companies like Google, Viking Cruises, Charles Schwab, AT&T, and ExxonMobil are common on local stations, making Carr's targeting of this vulnerability strategic. He went for the Achilles heel: public media's compromise with commercial imperatives in an already underfunded system.

The Trump administration's unilateral defunding of the CPB in 2025 (which provided 1–2 percent of NPR funding and around 15 percent of funding for PBS) represented not just an attack on specific institutions but a broader assault on the principle of publicly financed civic information.¹⁶ If 0 percent public funding is the current administration's goal for public media, it's worth considering what other merit goods – public services that individuals in a society should have access to based on benefit rather than ability and willingness to pay – might also end up on the chopping block: vaccination programs, public education, emergency services, subsidized housing, public transportation.¹⁷ Advocates in these sectors might find common cause in advancing a public media system that informs, engages, and equips Americans to protect these pillars of civic life.

The last several years have revived age-old fissures in the business of news, over commercial versus nonprofit, public versus private, top-down versus bottom-up. The next several years could end the argument, not through reasoned analysis but through the elimination of one side of the equation. Big tech platforms, increasingly aligned with an administration hostile to public institutions, appear positioned to complete what market forces began: the marginalization of public, noncommercial civic media – and independent media more broadly – in favor of attention-economy platforms optimized for engagement and advertising revenue.

This trajectory is not inevitable. What's emerging instead is a recognition that the problems created by platform scale might require solutions at a fundamentally different scale: the local. By "local," I don't mean only physical geography, though that's part of it. Local can also refer to a thing that is intentionally limited in its scale or scope, like an affinity group or a cultural identity. Local is the opposite of what makes social media platforms ungovernable.

Consider content moderation, the governance challenge that has defined social media's limitations. At the current level of social media's aggregate scale, there is no amount of moderation that will suffice to account for the 5.6 billion people using these platforms (or the harm that it does to the people unfortunate enough to be employed as moderators), nor will a marginal move toward decentralization (for

example, Mastodon) solve such a critical failing. The core mathematical problem is this: even a 1 percent error rate at a billions-of-posts scale means millions of mistakes. Perfection is impossible; acceptable performance may be impossible too. More critically, you cannot scale human moderation without creating a traumatized underclass of workers doing fundamentally harmful work. And even if you could hire infinite moderators without causing harm, you couldn't hire enough to make the math work.

But moderation that's unworkable at platform scale becomes manageable at local scale, where stewards can sustain it within the bounds of human capacity. This is the true lesson from decentralization efforts like Mastodon: the answer isn't just technical decentralization, it's relocating governance and stewardship to "local" communities that can exercise it.

What does stewardship mean in practice? Drawing from both civic media and digital-space building, local stewards are people who actively cultivate healthy community environments by setting norms, managing interactions, and supporting members much as librarians guide patrons or journalists serve information needs. In the digital context, as organizations like New_Public define it, stewards are volunteers and community leaders working to make online spaces inclusive and public-spirited, setting guidelines, navigating conflict, and deepening social trust.¹⁸ In the civic media context, information stewards are the documenters at public meetings, the community correspondents gathering neighborhood news, the information organizers who help residents access what they need to participate in local decision-making.¹⁹

The common principle is that stewardship operates at a scale where relationships matter more than metrics, where governance emerges from community participation rather than corporate policy, and where the goal is enabling civic action rather than maximizing engagement. Local stewardship isn't about building audiences of millions, it's about equipping specific communities with the information and connection they need to thrive. It's sustainable precisely because it doesn't attempt infinite scale.

This principle of local stewardship is now animating work in two separate but increasingly aligned fields: civic media and relational technology.

In technology, a small but growing community of practitioners is building what they call "relational tech": digital tools designed around mutual benefit and collective thriving rather than engagement metrics and advertising revenue. But this isn't simply about creating public versions of existing platforms. As Josh Nesbit, cofounder of the Relational Tech Project, put it, "We've been robbed of plurality and diversity" by big tech training us to show up online in standardized ways.²⁰ "We don't know all the forms" that digital community could take when ideas about how we relate "run into a place and people and geography and cultures."

What makes relational tech different starts with what Nesbit calls the "3PM" framework: purpose, process, path, and math. The purpose is explicitly "to serve us, to reconnect" – not world domination or data extraction. This repositions

technology as “pure assistive tech,” a tool for communities rather than a product communities serve. The process inverts typical tech development: instead of spending most resources on fundraising and implementation with minimal community engagement, relational tech aims to “spend a luxurious amount of time in community” with execution happening rapidly through AI assistance for technical tasks. The people with the most at stake are not just consulted but become central to design.

Paths emphasize “scaling by spreading”: tools that can be remixed and adapted place to place rather than deployed identically everywhere.²¹ The math is perhaps most radical: instead of the typical tech ratio of one builder creating for millions of users (which “flattens the world and experiences – gentrification in tech form”), relational tech operates at 1-10-100 scale. One builder works with ten co-creators who care deeply about a specific place or community, who then serve their one hundred community members. “That can be a good place for something to live,” Nesbit explains.

In practice, the relational tech model looks radically different from the infinite scroll on platforms like Facebook. In San Francisco’s Outer Sunset neighborhood, the online dashboard outersunset.today aggregates information from twenty different local sources such as the neighborhood pizza place, community event organizers, and local services providers. On a single block, [neighbor hub cozycorner.place](http://neighborhub.cozycorner.place) allows residents to coordinate block parties and sign up for roles. A third tool, communitysupplies.org, emerged when someone bought too many supplies for a kid’s birthday party – now it’s a way for the block to share resources. These three tools communicate with each other through an open application programming interface (API), creating what Nesbit calls “compostable tech”: things that are “not wasteful but thoughtfully go away and get composted into new ideas.”

The result becomes “part of local culture. In the same way people might take you to a local bookstore or coffee shop.” Except right now, Nesbit notes, “everyone’s taking you to the McDonald’s” of platform monopolies. Relational tech asks: What if digital tools were fit for specific purposes, specific times, specific people, rather than optimized for universal scale?

In the news and information ecosystem, a similar rethinking is underway. Through my work with News Futures – a network of more than eight hundred local news providers, philanthropic funders, and journalism support leaders – I’ve watched a community of practice coalesce around principles that challenge traditional industry assumptions.²² These organizations have signed on to a shared charter advocating for news as service-oriented, participatory, and reparative, treating it as a community asset and essential public utility rather than a commercial product. The charter’s principles include requiring that people excluded from and harmed by traditional news media have a reparative role in shaping its future, that collaboration across community stewards replaces competitive gatekeeping, and that the goal is vibrant civic life rather than newsroom profit centers.

The individuals in this network have founded and operate organizations like CivicLex, which covers local government in Lexington, Kentucky, while also convening civic infrastructure. In March 2026, it hosted Lexington's first-ever Civic Assembly, bringing together thirty randomly selected residents across seven sessions to deliberate on changes to the city's Urban County Charter. Other organizations include Documented, which covers immigration policy and provides immigrants in New York City with curated information on local social services through WhatsApp and other channels; and the Department of Public Transformation, whose Amplify Rural program is building a cross-sector coalition of civic media organizations committed to rural storytelling.²³ These aren't theoretical models. They're operational organizations demonstrating what civic media can look like when it's not constrained by commercial imperatives or platform dependencies.

The *Roadmap for Local News*, a report I coauthored in 2023 with Civic News Company founder and CEO Elizabeth Green and Free Press's senior director of journalism and civic information Mike Rispoli, proposed reframing the challenge around expanding "civic information" – information that equips people to improve their communities – rather than saving the news business.²⁴ Its four core strategies include direct investment in civic information production, building shared services to sustain emerging networks, cultivating supportive public policies while maintaining editorial independence, and coordinating work across what the report termed "civic media" practitioners: not just traditional newsrooms but also grassroots community groups, libraries, schools, and public media institutions. What's significant is that many of these recommendations are now being implemented by organizations that didn't exist when we wrote them.

Consider the Documenters Network, a program I cofounded in 2016 and scaled nationally through the civic media lab City Bureau beginning in 2019.²⁵ The problem it addressed was straightforward but pervasive: as local newsrooms declined, coverage of public meetings – where city councils, police boards, school boards, and advisory committees make decisions affecting communities – was among the first reporting to be cut. As this coverage disappeared, so did public attendance. Today it's not uncommon for consequential public meetings to proceed with no journalists or residents present.

The solution was to train and pay community members to attend and document these meetings in collaboration with journalists. Over nearly a decade, the program has trained thousands of people across two dozen sites nationwide to report on tens of thousands of public meetings, paying out more than \$1.15 million to those most impacted by the decisions being made. But the measurable outcomes go beyond attendance numbers. Documenters created a new public record where none existed through meeting notes, transcripts, and coverage of governmental processes that otherwise wouldn't leave the halls of power. More significantly, it demonstrated a different relationship between journalists and communities: not journalists as

sole watchdogs serving passive readers, but journalists facilitating civic participation by equipping people with information-gathering skills they didn't know they could exercise.

What civic media and relational technology share is more than timing or rhetoric. Both recognize that local stewardship – community-scale governance of information and connection – is the corrective to platform excess. Both understand that the problems created by optimizing for infinite scale require solutions designed for finite communities. And both are betting that sustainable alternatives can be built without replicating the wealth concentration and power asymmetries that define platform dominance.

But this raises an unavoidable question: How do these approaches survive economically? The answer draws from a far wider range of possibilities than subscription and membership models alone, and it's more nuanced than a simple commercial versus noncommercial binary. It includes philanthropic funding like the national effort organized by Press Forward, public investment at local and state levels (rather than federal) as advocated by groups like the Media Power Collaborative and Rebuild Local News, and collective ownership models like *The 51st* and *Defector*. Crucially, these aren't just theoretical proposals – the infrastructure is being built now. As the *Our Common Purpose* report projected, by the end of 2026, a tax structure in the news and information space may well be established, with funds allocated to support local news providers, public-platform experiments, and growth in the civic media field.²⁶ If so, it will be thanks to coalitions organizing journalists and members of the public who care about healthy civic information systems.

The platform companies solved the revenue problem by building advertising machines optimized for attention capture. That generated extraordinary wealth for founders and shareholders while creating the harms documented in the first half of this essay. The civic media and relational tech movements are explicitly rejecting that model, and in doing so, they're demonstrating that economic sustainability doesn't require replicating platform-scale extraction. What remains to be seen is whether the emerging funding infrastructure can scale quickly enough to meet the need.

There's another challenge these movements must navigate: the sheer power asymmetry. As mentioned, the largest platforms boast revenues exceeding many nations' GDP. The platform companies have effectively unlimited resources for user acquisition, feature development, and – crucially – policy advocacy. Local civic media organizations and relational tech start-ups are operating at a fundamentally different scale of resources.

But this isn't the first time concentrated private power has threatened public goods. The policy victories that created America's civic information infrastructure – media mail rates that made magazine subscriptions affordable nationwide, the public library system, low power FM radio, the Corporation for Public Broad-

casting, universal postal service – were all won against similar odds. These weren't technological solutions or market innovations; they were political achievements that established certain functions as too essential to leave entirely to commercial interests. They recognized that informed citizenship and community connection were prerequisites for democracy, not luxury goods for those who could afford them.

The local news field has largely forgotten how to win these fights for robust and service-oriented civic information. While platform companies have spent the last two decades building sophisticated policy advocacy operations (visible in everything from Facebook's news blockade in Australia to the defeat of privacy legislation in the United States), journalism advocates have mostly stayed out of policy battles. This is partly understandable; most are focused on survival, on serving their communities with inadequate resources. But it's also strategic misdirection. No amount of innovation in news production will matter if the economic infrastructure remains hostile to public-good media models.

The good news is that policy infrastructure is beginning to re-emerge. California's Civic Media Program (a \$20 million local news fund), New Jersey's Civic Information Bill (and the resulting Civic Information Consortium), various state-level news voucher proposals, and municipal broadband initiatives that treat internet access as public infrastructure represent a renewed understanding that civic information requires public investment and democratic governance, not just entrepreneurial hustle.²⁷ The coalitions forming around these efforts (Media Power Collaborative, Rebuild Local News, Common Cause California, the League of Women Voters, the Press Forward network) are relearning what earlier generations understood: that the choice isn't between market solutions and government control, but between organized advocacy for public interest and platform companies writing the rules themselves.

What would it take for local civic media to become more than boutique alternatives? The same thing it took for public libraries, public broadcasting, and universal mail service: a political consensus that access to civic information is a public good that requires public investment, a reimagining of "public media" accordingly. The infrastructure is being built in the forms of civic media organizations, relational tech prototypes, and new funding mechanisms. But without policy victories that establish sustainable public financing, editorial independence from commercial pressure, and protection from platform monopolization, these efforts will remain perpetually under-resourced experiments rather than the civic utilities they need to become.

During the Gilded Age, the concentration of wealth and power in industrial monopolies eventually prompted regulatory responses: antitrust action, labor protections, public utilities frameworks. Those reforms didn't eliminate private enterprise but established that certain functions like education,

infrastructure, and basic services required public investment and democratic governance rather than pure market logic.

We're now arguably in a Second Gilded Age, with comparable wealth concentration in platform companies whose products shape civic discourse, community connection, and information access. The question is whether we'll develop comparable correctives, or whether the alliance between platform power and hostile political administration will eliminate the possibility.

The honest assessment is that social media's effects appear highly dependent on context, user characteristics, and platform design, creating both genuine benefits and genuine harms distributed unevenly across populations and use cases. But the current design paradigm consistently prioritizes engagement over well-being, advertising revenue over civic benefit, and platform control over user agency.

Civic media and relational technology don't offer a complete solution but a proof of concept: that civic information technologies can be designed for local stewardship rather than attention extraction, for community benefit rather than shareholder value, for sustainable scale rather than infinite growth. Whether these models can survive and spread depends partly on their own sustainability but mostly on whether we treat civic information infrastructure as we treat other essential utilities – as something that requires public investment rather than being left entirely to market forces and platform monopolies.

The stakes are clear – concentration of wealth, power, and prestige at levels rarely seen in human history – and the window for change may be short. These emerging fields need support in the form of high-quality research that propels and challenges core assumptions and outcomes. The leaders of these fields need to be networked together in peer-led spaces that value intentional growth, development, and camaraderie as the ever-present forces of burnout, co-optation, and entropy inevitably arise. The publics that benefit most from their work need new language and frameworks that enable them to name challenges and demand better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darryl Holliday is Cofounder and Partner of the Commoner Company, a consultancy making civic life more accessible and inspired, and Lead Steward at News Futures, a “do”-ocratic community of practice anchored on civic media values and practices. He cofounded City Bureau in 2015, a Pulitzer Prize-winning civic media lab, where, as Co-Executive Director of National Impact, he designed participatory programs, projects, and platforms such as the Documenters Network. He is the author of, most recently, *This Is Local News Now: Rethinking Who Creates, Shares, and Sustains It* (with Anika Anand, 2025) and the *Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent*

Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs (with Elizabeth Green and Mike Rispoli, 2023). He also coauthored and coedited the *Civic Media Magazine* (with Mike Rispoli, 2025).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Adrian Volenik, "'Rockefeller Rich' – Elon Musk's Wealth Hits 'Rockefeller Rich' Levels, Equivalent to a 1.6% Share of the U.S. GDP," Yahoo Finance, December 22, 2024, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/rockefeller-rich-elon-musks-wealth-180019563.html>.
- ² Thuy D., "Annual Revenue Generated by Meta Platforms from 2009 to 2025," Statista, February 3, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268604/annual-revenue-of-facebook>; Statista Research Department, "Global Revenue Generated by Meta from 4th Quarter 2020 to 1st Quarter 2026, by Segment (in Million U.S. Dollars)," last updated July 29, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1288912/meta-quarterly-global-revenue-by-segment>; and Suzanne Vranica, "Meta Expected to Unseat Google as World's Largest Digital-Ad Player," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/business/media/meta-expected-to-unseat-google-as-worlds-largest-digital-ad-player-83d3f522>.
- ³ Microsoft Corporation, *Annual Report 2025* (Microsoft Corporation, 2025), <https://www.microsoft.com/investor/reports/ar25/index.html>; Microsoft Corporation, "Earnings Release FY26 Q4," July 29, 2026, <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/investor/earnings/fy-2026-q4/press-release-webcast>; Snap Inc., "Snap Inc. Announces Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2025 Financial Results," February 4, 2026, <https://investor.snap.com/news/news-details/2026/Snap-Inc--Announces-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2025-Financial-Results/default.aspx>; and Matthew Hall, "Snap Inc. Reports 19% Revenue Growth, Narrower Loss in Second Quarter," *Santa Monica Daily Press*, August 4, 2026, <https://www.smdp.com/snap-inc-reports-19-revenue-growth-narrower-loss-in-second-quarter>.
- ⁴ Omdia, "Social Media Advertising to Command Nearly Half of Global Online Ad Revenue by 2030 as Market Reaches \$640 Billion," May 12, 2026, <https://omdia.tech.informa.com/pr/2026/may/social-media-advertising-to-command-nearly-half-of-global-online-ad-revenue-by-2030-as-market-reaches-640-billion-dollars>.
- ⁵ 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/section/10>.
- ⁶ Statista Research Department, "Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Current Prices in Ukraine from 1991 to 2031," Statista, May 21, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/296140/ukraine-gross-domestic-product>.
- ⁷ Josh Stearns and Christine Schmidt, "How We Know Journalism Is Good for Democracy," Democracy Fund blog, September 15, 2022, <https://democracyfund.org/idea/how-we-know-journalism-is-good-for-democracy>.
- ⁸ Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, "Funding Democracy: Public Media and Democratic Health in 33 Countries," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 29 (3) (2024): 601–627, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211060255>; Victor Pickard and Timothy Neff, "Op-Ed: Strengthen Our Democracy by Funding Public Media," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.cjr.org/opinion/public-funding-media-democracy.php>; Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard, *Raising the Bar for Journalism* (Media, Inequality & Change Center, 2021), <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/2021-06/MIC>

- _Infographic_Authors.pdf; and David Bauder, "Corporation for Public Broadcasting Votes Itself out of Existence," AP News, January 5, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/public-broadcasting-pbs-npr-b68f441c227ec7e076c038821b4a5931>.
- ⁹ Wikipedia Contributors, "Pivot to Video," Wikipedia, last updated May 15, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pivot_to_video&oldid=1354217262.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Gruber and Andy Berke, "The Infrastructure Success Story in Chattanooga," *The American Prospect*, June 17, 2021, <https://prospect.org/2021/06/17/infrastructure-success-story-in-chattanooga>; and Sean Gonsalves, "New Municipal Broadband Networks Skyrocket in Post-Pandemic America as Alternative to Private Monopoly Model," Institute for Local Self-Reliance, January 18, 2024, <https://ilsr.org/article/community-broadband-networks/municipal-broadband-skyrocket-as-alternative-to-private-models>.
- ¹¹ Byron Kaye, "When Facebook Blocks News, Studies Show the Political Risks That Follow," Reuters, April 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/when-facebook-blocks-news-studies-show-political-risks-that-follow-2024-04-14>.
- ¹² Reuters, "Zuckerberg's Letter to Investors," February 1, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/zuckerbergs-letter-to-investors-idUSTRE8102MT>.
- ¹³ Michelle Faverio, Monica Anderson, and Eugenie Park, *Teens, Social Media and Mental Health* (Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health>.
- ¹⁴ Brendan Carr, "RE: Federal License Obligations of NPR and PBS Member Stations," letter to Katharine Maher and Paula A. Kerger, January 29, 2025, <https://www.capradio.org/media/12276790/chairman-carr-letter-to-npr-and-pbs.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Richard J. Tofel, "Public Media Advertising: Fears of the Past, Hope for the Future," Second Rough Draft newsletter, December 4, 2025, <https://dicktofel.substack.com/p/public-media-advertising-fears-of>.
- ¹⁶ Carmen Russell-Sluchansky, "The CPB, the Agency That Spawned NPR, PBS and Modern Public Media, Begins Winding Down," WHYY News, August 1, 2025, <https://whyy.org/articles/corporation-public-broadcast-shuts-down-federal-funding-cuts>.
- ¹⁷ Economic Futures Hub, "Merit Goods and Public Goods," <https://hub.economicfutures.ac.uk/merit-goods-and-public-goods> (accessed June 10, 2026).
- ¹⁸ Centre for Social Innovation, "The Social Innovator's Guide to Activating Digital Public Spaces: Cultivating Digital Stewards," June 12, 2025, <https://socialinnovation.org/news/2025/06/12/the-social-innovators-guide-to-activating-digital-public-spaces-cultivating-digital-stewards>.
- ¹⁹ Anika Anand and Darryl Holliday, *This Is Local News Now: Rethinking Who Creates, Shares, and Sustains It* (Commoner Company, 2025), https://www.pressforward.news/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/ThisIsLocalNewsNow_Web_2025.pdf.
- ²⁰ Josh Nesbit in an interview with the author for this essay. See also Relational Technology Project, "Build What We Need," <https://relationaltechproject.org> (accessed June 10, 2026).
- ²¹ Relational Technology Project, *Neighboring Recipes*, GitHub, last updated May 14, 2026, <https://github.com/The-Relational-Technology-Project/neighboring-recipes>. "Every recipe in this book is built from the labor of practitioners who did the work first. Where the original source is known, it is named in the recipe. Where individual organizers, neighbors, and community leaders did the inventing, their names are kept in the text."

This compilation draws primarily on the Neighboring Commons knowledge base, a curated set of 198 entries assembled by the Neighboring Commons project. It is supplemented by stories and tools surfaced through the Relational Tech Studio, a living library maintained by the Relational Technology Project.”

- ²² News Futures, “News Futures,” <https://www.newsutures.org/charter> (accessed June 10, 2026).
- ²³ CivicLex, “Civic Assembly,” <https://civiclex.org/civic-assembly> (accessed July 7, 2026); Documented, “Join Documented on WhatsApp,” September 12, 2025, <https://documentedny.com/2025/09/12/semanal-spanish-newsletter-whatsapp>; and Department of Public Transformation, “Amplify Rural,” <https://www.publictransformation.org/amplify-rural> (accessed July 7, 2026).
- ²⁴ Elizabeth Green, Darryl Holliday, and Mike Rispoli, *The Roadmap for Local News: An Emergent Approach to Meeting Civic Information Needs* (Civic News Company, 2023), <https://localnewsroadmap.org>.
- ²⁵ City Bureau, “City Bureau’s Documenters Network: People-Powered News and Information,” <https://www.documenters.org> (accessed June 16, 2026).
- ²⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 53–54.
- ²⁷ Kevin Davis, Amy Kroin, and Mike Rispoli, *New Jersey’s Civic Information Bill: The Story of the Campaign to Transform Local Media* (Free Press Action, 2022), https://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/2022-09/nj_civic_info_bill_case_study_september_2022.pdf.

Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture

David E. Campbell

Strengthening American democracy will take more than reforming political institutions. Equally important is refreshing our civic culture. Specifically, the nation needs a reawakening of civic education, broadly defined. Priority one for a renewed education in civics is for Americans to learn how to disagree with one another. This is harder than it sounds, as most people are predisposed to avoid conflict. Research shows that the most effective form of civic education in K–12 classrooms entails the open discussion of controversial topics. Tragically but understandably, the current political environment makes teachers reluctant to engage in this type of instruction. But teachers should be encouraged to lead such discussions and model for our young people how to disagree agreeably. Civic education, however, should not be limited to the classroom. Civic organizations of all types – clubs, congregations, groups, and guilds – are also settings in which we learn to interact with our fellow citizens, including and especially people with different political views than our own. While the nation’s organizational life has been in decline, the 250th anniversary of America’s independence is a unique opportunity for Americans to once again come together in local groups to find common ground in spite of political disagreement.

When considering ways to strengthen democracy, reformers – perhaps especially political scientists – often turn to institutional change. *Our Common Purpose*, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, is no exception, as the report features a number of recommendations that involve reforming how elections are run and government bodies work.¹ I fully endorse both the spirit and specifics of those institutional reforms. I also endorse the theory of action motivating *Our Common Purpose*, which is that institutional reform is not enough. Reviving American democracy requires more than tweaking or even overhauling the nation’s institutions. Equally important is a refresh of the nation’s civic culture. To see why, we need only turn to the voluminous literature on transitions to, and retreats from, democracy. While scholars of the state of democracy hardly ignore the importance of institutions, many also point to the

need for strong, widely held democratic norms.² What are norms but one expression of culture? For example, the report *Habits of Heart and Mind*, published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences to deepen the recommendations of *Our Common Purpose*, defines civic culture as “the set of *norms*, values, narratives, habits, and rituals that shape how we live together and govern ourselves in our diverse democratic society.”³ When democracy reformers decry the deterioration of democratic norms, they are talking about culture.

It is striking that, way back in 1960, *The Civic Culture* (the book that popularized the term) raised the alarm about the survival of democracy in societies that seem a lot like the contemporary United States.

If there is no consensus within society, there can be little potentiality for the peaceful resolution of political differences that is associated with the democratic process. If, for instance, the incumbent elite considered the opposition elite too threatening, it is unlikely that the incumbents would allow a peaceful competition for elite position.⁴

Writing over sixty years ago, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba pinpointed the need for a healthy civic culture as a necessary condition for democracy.

The key question for democratic reform is not whether norms – that is to say, culture – matter. Rather, it is whether culture can change and, if so, how. While institutional change is not easy to implement, it is at least straightforward to describe: add more seats to the House of Representatives, employ a ranked-choice ballot in elections, set term limits for Supreme Court justices. Cultural change is admittedly difficult to describe and even more difficult to envision implementing. Without confidence that culture is changeable, then the whole exercise of creating a new culture is merely a theoretical exercise.

As evidence that culture can indeed change, I point to the recent (2020) book by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*.⁵ In it, Putnam and Romney Garrett assemble a wide array of data demonstrating that over the previous century and a half, American society – that is to say, American culture – has experienced what they call the “I-We-I curve.” During the Gilded Age of the late 1800s/early 1900s, the United States had a highly individualistic, even selfish, culture – the “I” era. This was manifested in the tax code, the lack of a social safety net, and even the prevalence of the pronoun *I* in books published in this era. Then came a “We” era, spanning from the Progressive Era through the first decade or so following World War II. The tax system was more egalitarian, the social safety net expanded, and more and more authors wrote in terms of *we* instead of *I*. This is also the period Putnam earlier documented as the high-water mark for civic associations and thus social capital. This communitarian era was then followed – as is well known – by the current historical period in which social capital has declined. In many ways, American culture, society, and public policy have returned to the individualism of the

Gilded Age. *I* has replaced *we* – not just metaphorically, but also in the written word. I suggest an addendum to the I-We-I curve, as the current era is not just characterized by individualism but also political antagonism. Ours is a time of *I-versus-You*.

My objective here is not to parse the specifics of the Putnam – Romney Garrett metrics but instead to make the general point that culture, including aspects of culture directly relevant to the health of a democratic society, can change – for the worse and the better. And if change is possible, what should a reimagined civic culture look like?

Strategy 6 of *Our Common Purpose* makes a number of recommendations to foster “a culture of commitment to constitutional democracy and one another.”⁶ While at first glance these recommendations may seem like disparate species – an expectation of national service, an initiative to have conversations around the country about the American story, civic gatherings and rituals – they share enough common DNA to be grouped under a single genus. I argue that they can all be considered a form of civic education (the reform of which is also a recommendation within Strategy 6). Here I adopt the spirit of *Our Common Purpose* in calling for a renewal of civic education in America but broaden its scope to cover the renewal of civic culture more generally.

If the term *civic education* conjures up images of schoolchildren dutifully learning how a bill becomes a law, that barely scratches the surface of what I mean. By civic education, I am referring to the myriad ways in which we all learn to deal with each other: that is, how to be citizens. The meaning of *citizen* here is not the narrow, legal sense of which government issues you a passport, but in the broad, cultural sense of being a member of a community, whether it is defined in global, national, state, or local terms. Certainly, K–12 schooling is one important venue for learning citizenship. But so is higher education of all types, from community colleges to trade schools to universities. Yet even a list of the institutions of formal schooling hardly exhausts where civic education takes place, as it includes families, adult education courses, religious congregations, clubs, unions, workplaces, and even online activities.

What would a reimagined civic culture look like? What should a renewal of civic education focus on? Fundamentally, *we need to learn how to disagree with each other* and, where possible, to compromise for the common good. When I was an undergraduate, a professor of mine used to say that just as economics results from scarcity of resources, politics results from scarcity of consensus. I suspect that one reason many people profess to dislike politics is because of that lack of consensus; what they actually dislike is disagreement. This is because we are hardwired to seek commonality and avoid conflict. In her 2006 book *Hearing the Other Side*, political scientist Diana Mutz puts it well:

Conversation is about the search for similarity between people. Anyone who has ever sat on an airplane beside a garrulous stranger recognizes the truth of this statement. “So,

are you on business in Philly?” No, I live here. “Are you in sales?” Not exactly; I work for the University of Pennsylvania. “That must be a huge state school. I went to a big state school too.” No, it’s small and private. “Oh really. What kinds of things do you teach?” Political science. The passenger responds with relief: “Political science! I took a course in political science in college once.” Yes, indeed, I reply: we must be first cousins.⁷

In other words, we cannot assume that people will naturally gravitate toward people, places, and environments that cause them to experience disagreement. Mutz further observes that people tend to assume that others around them are in agreement (whether they actually are or not), an assumption that typically goes unchallenged because of the reluctance to discuss politics. As a consequence, we not only have to learn to disagree with one another in theory, but actually put what we learn into practice, despite most people’s natural inclination to sidestep conflict.

Research into K–12 civic education demonstrates the value of learning how to disagree with one another. Within this literature, one pedagogical technique that is consistently found to be effective for a variety of democratically positive outcomes is an open classroom climate.⁸ While the stereotypical and, sadly, all-too-common form of civic education is passively listening to lectures, watching movies, and filling out worksheets, the best civic educators bring the classroom alive by leading their students in discussions of meaningful issues. They foster dialogue and debate. In so doing, they ensure that their students have the opportunity not only to speak and have their views respected but to learn to listen to others. Creating an open classroom climate requires skill; teachers have to strike a balance between allowing students to speak their minds while maintaining civil discourse that acknowledges the dignity of everyone. It is not for the faint of heart, and we should applaud those unsung teachers who do it well. Ironically – even tragically – the current political climate has made many teachers wary of fostering discussions around contentious issues.⁹ The very pedagogical method that can help young people navigate our polarized politics is often thwarted by that very same polarization.

What about higher education? Given all the attention paid to battles over free speech on campus, cancel culture, and “deplatforming” campus speakers, one might get the impression that college students are rarely exposed to disagreement. I am less sure that is truly the case. While I have no doubt that many institutions could do more to ensure that students are exposed to – and feel safe to express – a wide range of perspectives, my sense is that campuses are actually one of the few places where young people engage with difficult issues. At my own institution of Notre Dame, I recently conducted a representative survey of the undergraduate student body and found that roughly one-third report holding conversations with someone who holds a different view at least weekly. Is that high or low? Compared with the general population of all American adults, it is relatively high. Specifically, it is nearly twice the rate of people asked the same question in the nationally representa-

tive Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.¹⁰ Eighteen percent of all Americans report holding conversations across lines of difference. Unfortunately, I am unable to say whether Notre Dame students' experience is typical of all undergraduates, as we do not have systematic data on this question across campuses. Until and unless such data are collected, we should not assume that campuses fail to foster their own civic culture and that students fail to learn how to disagree. Some no doubt do it well, others less so. In the case of Notre Dame, it should be sobering for faculty colleagues to hear that when we asked students with whom they discussed matters of disagreement, the most common response was their fellow students, while the least common was their professors. At least at Notre Dame, faculty have work to do. I suspect the same is true on other campuses.

While formal education, whether K–12 or postsecondary, can offer a structured environment for exposure to disagreement, it is even less common “in the wild.” The collapse of civic organizations of the sort documented by Putnam in *Bowling Alone* has meant that Americans are less and less likely to overcome their predisposition to avoid disagreement and gain experience dealing with it in face-to-face settings. While the social capital literature has long drawn a distinction between social ties that bond (connections among people who share a common trait) versus bridge (connections among those who differ), the fact is that any group, no matter how seemingly homogeneous, entails some degree of disagreement.¹¹ Consider a religious congregation. By definition, members of that congregation form religious bonds. But having religion in common hardly exhausts the ways in which those same congregants can bridge across difference – in age, economic background, even politics. Congregations are only one type of civic organization, but are an important one. When the alarm was first raised about the decline in associational life, religious congregations were the seeming exception. Secular civil society was waning while religious groups held steady. In the years since *Bowling Alone* was published, however, places of worship ceased to be the bulwark against the general decline in social capital, as there has been a precipitous drop in religious identification and attendance.¹² The decline in religion has had a partisan inflection: liberals have been far more likely to leave religion than conservatives. As a result, congregations are less and less likely to be sites of partisan bridge-building. This political sorting is exacerbated by partisan-motivated switching among congregations, such that even people who maintain their religious identity seek out congregations in which they are surrounded by people with similar political beliefs.¹³ In short, Americans are less likely to forge ties in associations, whether religious or secular, today than in the past, and when they do, those ties are less likely to be among people of different political persuasions.

The prevalence of social media has made it even easier to avoid exposure to political disagreement. While social scientists differ on the extent to which people actually experience political segregation online, no one can dispute that what happens online is qualitatively different than collective action – not to mention

deliberation – “in real life.”¹⁴ That is, even if the typical social media user is not completely cut off from differing points of view, online engagement does not entail the same reciprocity that arises from face-to-face relationships.

Is engagement across lines of difference civically efficacious or simply an empty platitude? Here again, research from K–12 civic education is informative. When young people are in an open classroom climate, they not only learn more about politics, they also become more politically engaged.¹⁵ Other research with the general population likewise finds that exposure to cross-cutting political talk – that is, engaging with people with opposing political views – is correlated with greater political tolerance.¹⁶

Knowledge, engagement, and tolerance are all democratic virtues that have occupied political scientists for many years. More recently, however, the concern has been less about these measures and more the emergence of affective polarization: dislike, even hatred, of people who identify with the opposing party. Here, again, there is good reason to think that exposure to disagreement lessens negative feelings toward cross-partisans. Underpinning the rise of affective polarization is the fact that Democrats and Republicans alike tend to assume the worst of the other party.¹⁷ Specifically, they mistakenly think that far more supporters of the other party hold radical positions, and even support political violence, than actually do.¹⁸ It is easy to see how misimpressions develop in the absence of actual contact and conversation with cross-partisans.¹⁹

In calling for a civic culture in which exposure to political disagreement is normalized and even encouraged, there is another lesson to be taken from the literature on K–12 civic education. A number of civic education studies find evidence of the *compensation effect*, in which a civics curriculum has the greatest effect on the young people who have the lowest baseline levels of civic engagement or knowledge because they have the most room to grow.²⁰ This was true for African American high school students in the pre–Civil Rights Movement era, who because of de jure and de facto segregation were excluded from the political system, as it is true in our current era for immigrant students, students with low socioeconomic status, and students of all backgrounds who are not exposed to politics in the home.²¹ The logic of the compensation effect is that we would expect exposure to political cross-talk – the most effective form of civic education – to be the most likely to depolarize people who have only known, or have always assumed, that the United States is a highly polarized nation. Will this hypothesis hold up under empirical scrutiny? It is a research question well worth asking.

My call for more attention to disagreement may seem at odds with the general spirit of *Our Common Purpose*. Doesn't highlighting disagreement cut against fostering a sense of common purpose? It need not. Remember that the key to a healthy civic culture is learning *how* to disagree with one another, which rests on also recognizing

what we have in common with each other. Some of the most interesting research on strategies for depolarization finds that getting Americans to recognize that they share passions, such as fandom for a sports team or patriotism for the nation, with people of the other party ameliorates affective polarization.²² When I lead undergraduates in discussions of potentially fraught topics, I frequently remind them that we are all members of a campus community in which what we share far exceeds how we differ.

If you agree, or at least are willing to consider, that a renewed culture around American democracy requires a new emphasis on civic education – both in formal schooling and beyond – that leads to the much more difficult task of considering realistic, feasible ways to bring about cultural change. As Putnam and Romney Garrett demonstrate, the shift from *I* to *we* back to *I* only happened because of conscious choices made by decisionmakers in government and civil society. We should not be complacent and assume that an ailing civic culture will heal itself.

The recommendations in *Our Common Purpose* directed toward rebooting our civic culture are a step toward a new emphasis on civic education generally and exposure to disagreement specifically. Take, for example, the recommendation “to establish a universal expectation of a year of national service.” Service in a community presents an ideal setting for balancing *unum* with *pluribus*. Service programs – whether public or private, secular or religious – unite their participants in a common cause. Ideally, they also bring together people with different backgrounds and give them space to discover where they may disagree. Similarly, *Our Common Purpose* calls for civic gatherings and rituals, a context in which people can come together to celebrate what they share while also recognizing how they differ.

Which brings me to the final recommendation to improve our civic culture: bolstering civic education in a formal sense, whether in K–12, higher education, or adult education (which could be offered by educational institutions or elsewhere). As difficult as implementing the other reforms might be, this one might be the hardest of all. I recognize the irony that an essay framed around civic education broadly defined would worry about the feasibility of reforming civic education in its more conventional meaning. In particular, K–12 teachers often feel under siege, especially in our current political climate of heightened scrutiny of what teachers say and do. Nonetheless, there are glimmers of hope that it is possible for bipartisan action in the field of civic education. A leading example is the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) project, which was developed by an ideologically diverse group of civic educators. EAD is not a curriculum per se but instead provides teachers with guides, lesson plans, and other forms of curricula support as they teach history and civics. The philosophy of EAD is to pose age-appropriate questions about key themes in civic education.²³ These questions do not have predetermined answers for students to memorize and regurgitate. Rather, they require students to think through their own responses, which are often grounded in research and

refined through discussion with classmates and teachers alike, providing young people with the opportunity to consider different perspectives on the questions posed. EAD has been adopted in red, blue, and purple states, suggesting that civic education need not be hopelessly partisan.

As for higher education, here again there is reason for hope. As one key example, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars has assembled a coalition of College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, all of whom are concerned about the civic culture of their campuses. The Institute for Citizens and Scholars has led the way in developing measures of the extent to which college students have learned to engage with others across lines of disagreement. Collecting such data is an important first step toward ensuring that civics – particularly learning how to disagree – is a priority in higher education. Are the critics of higher education correct to portray college as a place for indoctrination? Or are defenders right to argue that college is a rare example of an institution in which young adults encounter a spectrum of ideas? Without reliable data, there is no way to know.

As important as both K–12 and higher education are to the project of renewing the nation’s civic culture, they are not enough. A true renaissance of civic education must go beyond the classroom and meet Americans where they are. While there are myriad possibilities, the 250th anniversary of America’s independence is a civic education opportunity *par excellence*. *Our Common Purpose* calls for marking the nation’s semiquincentennial with conversations among Americans of all perspectives to “explore both their feelings about and hopes for this country.”²⁴ As noted in *Habits of Hearts and Minds*, it is a myth that conservatives are blind to the shortcomings of the United States, just as it is a myth that liberals ignore the nation’s successes.²⁵ Both need to hear those on the other side express their thoughts on what America has done right *and* wrong. These conversations will be most productive if done in a spirit of charity, recognizing that while reasonable people can disagree on the state of our union, they can find common ground in celebrating the ideals on which the nation was founded. Likewise, imagine a public service campaign – through multiple media channels – that encourages Americans to learn to disagree with one another. Such a campaign could even be bolstered by social gatherings, perhaps even with civic rituals, designed to foster a spirit of finding *unum* without ignoring the *pluribus*.²⁶ No doubt there are many other ways that creative people can promote the idea that, as a nation, we must learn to disagree agreeably.

None of this will be easy. Is it all quixotic? Perhaps, but a cure starts with a diagnosis. Hopefully, I have at least taken the first steps of identifying that the nation has a culture problem and suggesting that the solution lies in a new era of civic education for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David E. Campbell, elected a Member of the American Academy in 2026, is the Packey J. Dee Professor of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame and the Director of the Notre Dame Democracy Initiative. He is the author of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (with Robert D. Putnam, 2010), *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (with J. Quin Monson and John Green, 2014), *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics* (with Geoffrey C. Layman and John C. Green, 2021), and *See Jane Run: How Women Politicians Matter for Young People* (with Christina Wolbrecht, 2025).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), 57, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report/section/11>.
- ² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018).
- ³ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024), 4, <https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/publication/how-to-fortify-civic-culture-america/section/3>; emphasis added.
- ⁴ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963), 358.
- ⁵ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Swift Press, 2021).
- ⁶ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 57.
- ⁷ Diana Carole Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 144.
- ⁸ Mikael Persson, "Classroom Climate and Political Learning: Findings from a Swedish Panel Study and Comparative Data," *Political Psychology* 36 (5) (2015): 587–601; Lies Maurissen, Carolyn Barber, and Ellen Claes, "Classroom Discussions and Political Tolerance Towards Immigrants: The Importance of Mutual Respect and Responsiveness," *Acta Politica* 55 (2020): 242–266, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0114-0>; Ryan T. Knowles and Jennice McCafferty-Wright, "Connecting an Open Classroom Climate to Social Movement Citizenship: A Study of 8th Graders in Europe Using IEA ICCS Data," *The Journal of Social Studies Research* 39 (2015): 255–269; Carolyn Barber, Sachiko Ogata Sweetwood, and Makini King, "Creating Classroom-Level Measures of Citizenship Education Climate," *Learning Environments Research* 18 (2) (2015): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-015-9180-7>; David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement Among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30 (4) (2008): 437–454; Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Routledge, 2015); and Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (Routledge, 2009).
- ⁹ John Rogers and Joseph Kahne, *Educating for a Diverse Democracy: The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in Blue, Purple, and Red Communities* (UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2022), <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy>.

- ¹⁰ Matthew E. K. Hall and David E. Campbell, Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey (Rooney Democracy Institute, University of Notre Dame, various years), <https://rooneyinstitute.nd.edu/research/health-of-democracy-survey>.
- ¹¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- ¹² David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, and John Clifford Green, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- ¹³ Shay R. Hafner and Andre P. Audette, "The Politics of Church Shopping," *Politics and Religion* 16 (1) (2023): 73–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048322000384>; and Paul A. Djupe, Jacob R. Neiheisel, and Anand E. Sokhey, "Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation," *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (1) (2018): 161–165, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12308>.
- ¹⁴ Andrew M. Guess, "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets," *American Journal of Political Science* 65 (4) (2021): 1007–1022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12589>; and Sandra González-Bailón, David Lazer, Pablo Barberá, et al., "Asymmetric Ideological Segregation in Exposure to Political News on Facebook," *Science* 381 (6656) (2023): 392–398, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ade7138>.
- ¹⁵ Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom."
- ¹⁶ Diana C. Mutz, "Cross-Cutting Social Networks: Testing Democratic Theory in Practice," *American Political Science Review* 96 (1) (2002): 111–126, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004264>.
- ¹⁷ Douglas J. Ahler and Gaurav Sood, "The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions about Party Composition and Their Consequences," *The Journal of Politics* 80 (3) (2018): 964–981, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697253>; and Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (1) (2019): 129–146, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.
- ¹⁸ Michael H. Pasek, Lee-Or Ankori-Karlinsky, Alex Levy-Vene, and Samantha L. Moore-Berg, "Misperceptions About Out-Partisans' Democratic Values May Erode Democracy," *Scientific Reports* 12 (1) (2022): 16284, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-19616-4>.
- ¹⁹ Erin L. Rossiter and Taylor N. Carlson, "Cross-Partisan Conversation Reduced Affective Polarization for Republicans and Democrats Even after the Contentious 2020 Election," *The Journal of Politics* 86 (4) (2024): 1608–1612, <https://doi.org/10.1086/729931>.
- ²⁰ David E. Campbell, "What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature," *Peabody Journal of Education* 94 (1) (2019): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601>.
- ²¹ Kenneth P. Langton and M. Kent Jennings, "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 62 (3) (1968): 852–867; David E. Campbell and Richard G. Niemi, "Testing Civics: State-Level Civic Education Requirements and Political Knowledge," *American Political Science Review* 110 (3) (2016): 495–511; Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom"; and Anja Neundorff and Kaat Smets, "Political Socialization and the Making of Citizens," in *Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics*, ed. Oxford Handbooks Editorial Board (Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935307.013.98>.

²² Matthew Levendusky, *Our Common Bonds: Using What Americans Share to Help Bridge the Partisan Divide* (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

²³ See Educating for American Democracy, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.

²⁴ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 9.

²⁵ American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind*, 12.

²⁶ For examples, see Citizen University, <https://citizenuniversity.us>.

Disagreeing to Build: Civic Renewal in an Age of Polarization

Rajiv Vinnakota

Responding to David Campbell's call to "learn to disagree," this essay argues that disagreement alone is insufficient for revitalizing American democracy – it must be paired with collaborative problem-solving. As polarization and AI disrupt trust and discourse, civic culture should shift from "winning" arguments to building solutions together, benefiting both democracy and the economy, since employers increasingly value the same skills of dialogue and teamwork on which democracy relies. Colleges, K–12 schools, workplaces, and communities all have roles to play in making this solution-oriented civic engagement universal rather than optional. Ultimately, the essay calls for a cultural shift toward "disagreeing to build, not to win."

David Campbell, in his contribution to this volume, rightly states that institutions alone cannot save democracy; we also need a strong civic culture cultivated among citizens themselves.¹ Learning how to disagree – constructively, respectfully, and productively – is central to that culture. In this context, Campbell defines civic education broadly to include not just the teaching of civic knowledge but also the development of the skills and dispositions of effective citizenship. His call to "learn to disagree" is timely and essential because a healthy democracy requires the ability to navigate conflict productively.

At the same time, we must refresh our civic norms to meet today's challenges. Political polarization, amplified by social media algorithms, has eroded Americans' baseline trust in institutions and in one another.² The rise of artificial intelligence is further disrupting how we work, learn, and discern truth, potentially deepening the divides in our society. In such a fractured environment, our uniquely human advantages are our abilities to build trust, exercise judgment, and collaborate across differences. These capacities undergird both a healthy democracy and a thriving economy.

Indeed, across the higher education, business, and community sectors, leaders are now calling for three essential civic skills as critical competencies for the future: having productive conversations, using credible information, and collaborating to solve problems. Strengthening civic culture is therefore not only a democratic imperative but also an economic one (a point to which I will return).

This essay advances a related but distinct claim: learning to disagree, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. In an age of intense polarization, disagreement must be paired with the ability to work together, to translate difference into shared problem-solving. Without working collaboratively toward solutions, disagreement risks exacerbating division rather than strengthening the country.

Campbell emphasizes “learning to disagree well,” and I fully agree with his characterization of the challenge: it’s difficult to get people to disagree openly because people don’t naturally seek differences among each other. To this challenge, I would add a second: people don’t naturally seek to work together with those with whom they disagree. Yet we must teach our citizens to do both. Disagreement by itself is not enough; it must be paired with the capacity for collaborative problem-solving.

Public life today is dominated by a debate culture that rewards scoring points, asserting certainty, and “winning” arguments, while devaluing dialogue and problem-solving. The goal of civic discourse should not be victory but progress. The central question must shift from “Who’s right?” to “What can we build together, given our differences?”

Such a shift would transform the purpose of disagreement. No longer a zero-sum duel, disagreement becomes raw material for creativity and joint action. A healthy civic culture would not avoid conflict; it would channel conflict toward shared solutions. Imagine if in classrooms, workplaces, and town halls, disagreements were approached with curiosity and a spirit of cocreation. Participants would ask, “Given that we see things differently, how might we work together on this issue?”

This ethos – *disagreeing to build* rather than *to win* – can turn conflict into an opportunity. It forces us to move beyond rhetoric and toward designing real solutions that draw on diverse perspectives. In the process, we also empower young people to exercise agency: they see that by engaging adversaries as partners in problem-solving they can make tangible improvements in their communities.

The skills needed for this collaborative civic culture are also increasingly prized in the modern workforce. Surveys show that over 80 percent of employers prioritize graduates’ abilities in teamwork, communication, and critical thinking.³ Business leaders understand that technical proficiency is not enough; they seek employees who can communicate effectively, think critically, work through disagreement, and collaborate in diverse teams.⁴ In other words, the civic virtues of open dialogue and cooperation have become “durable skills” for economic success.

This convergence does not mean that civic learning derives its value from employer demand. Rather, employer demand reveals that the skills democracy requires – like judgment, cooperation, and trust-building – are also indispensable to business.

As a result, civic education is no longer a niche concern for democracy advocates. Teaching students to engage civilly across differences and evaluate information critically makes them not only better citizens but more-effective employees. Conversely, companies that foster a respectful, trust-rich culture – in which colleagues can debate ideas without fear – benefit from greater innovation and organizational health.⁵ Civic development and workforce development are two sides of the same coin.

In the age of automation and AI, human judgment, empathy, and collaboration are high-value assets that education can cultivate. By investing in these civic skills, we are simultaneously future-proofing our democracy and our economy.

Colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to develop these skills at scale. Campuses bring together young people from many backgrounds and give them space to engage with unfamiliar ideas. And, as Campbell points out, students seem more likely than the general population to have a conversation with someone who holds a different view from their own. However, up to now, meaningful exposure to disagreement on campus often happens only for those who *opt in* – for example, by joining debate clubs or taking certain courses. If learning to disagree is essential to democratic life, then engagement across difference must be a universal feature of the college experience, not an elective.

Encouragingly, many campus leaders are leaning into this role. Over one hundred college presidents have joined a coalition called College Presidents for Civic Preparedness to advance civil discourse and civic engagement campuswide. In a recent survey of these presidents, 85 percent reported increasing their investment in civic learning initiatives over the past year, and those that invested more saw measurable improvements in campus climate for free expression and dialogue.⁶

What would it look like if colleges truly embraced “learning to disagree” as a core educational outcome? We would see more first-year seminars in which students practice respectful debate on contentious issues. We would see faculty in all disciplines – from engineering to literature to biology – embedding discussions of ethical or societal dilemmas into their classes, routinely prompting students to exercise civil discourse skills alongside academic inquiry. Some institutions are even considering a civic capstone or portfolio, wherein students must demonstrate their ability to engage across differences and solve problems collaboratively before graduating.

By making such experiences universal, colleges would not only produce civically skilled graduates but also help restore public trust in higher education. They could answer the ROI (return on investment) question by showing that a college education yields both career-ready and civically responsible individuals. In short, treating civic learning as fundamental to the college mission benefits democracy and bolsters higher education’s value proposition.

A refreshed civic culture must also elevate the agency of young people. Rather than viewing youth merely as students to be taught, we should engage them as cocreators of civic life. Across the country, there are inspiring examples of Generation Z stepping up to lead on issues they care about. For instance, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars recently supported a cohort of five hundred Carnegie Young Leaders: teams of teenagers and young adults who are designing and implementing local solutions to community challenges.⁷ These young civic entrepreneurs are tackling problems from misinformation and mental health to climate resilience and neighborhood safety. They are not waiting passively for civic knowledge to be handed down to them; they are actively building civic muscle through practice.

One key insight from these youth initiatives is that disagreement is easier when paired with action. Many of these Gen Z leaders create projects that bring together peers of different viewpoints to work on a tangible goal. For example, by focusing on improving a local park or starting a dialogue program at their school, they provide a common purpose that helps participants navigate ideological differences. One youth team in Alabama converted a vacant lot into a community garden, bringing together diverse neighbors to address a local need. In the process, participants from different backgrounds inevitably had to debate ideas and make joint decisions, but because they were working toward a shared goal, those disagreements could stay constructive.

The lesson for civic educators is clear: treat young people not just as civics pupils but as problem-solvers with real responsibilities. When youth are given the tools, trust, and opportunities to lead, they often prove adept at inviting disagreement and collaboration in service of their goals. We should invest more in youth-led civic programs, school based or community based, that let young people practice democracy by *doing*.

Schools and colleges alone cannot transform civic culture, as Campbell would agree. We need an ecosystem approach in which workplaces, community organizations, and public institutions all reinforce the norms of civil discourse and common purpose. Consider the workplace: employers could train and encourage staff to engage in constructive debate, give and receive feedback, and collaborate across teams.

Similarly, local communities can create more venues for people to connect across divides. Public libraries, for instance, have hosted community dialogues on issues like public health and policing, giving residents a chance to hear different perspectives in a neutral setting. City governments and nonprofits can partner on deliberative forums or volunteer projects that unite people from different walks of life around local problems.

Such efforts can be linked and amplified. If a young person practices civil discourse in a college seminar and then encounters similar norms in their job onboarding and again at a town hall meeting, the norms are reinforced.

Over time, this ecosystem can shift expectations of behavior. Being a good teammate at work, an active listener in community meetings, and a constructive participant in online discussions are all manifestations of the same underlying civic competence. Fostering that competence – everywhere people live and interact – is how we refresh our civic culture at scale.

Despite today’s polarized climate, we should reject the cynical narrative that Americans are hopelessly divided. Yes, there are deep challenges, but as a society we are capable of learning and renewal. Campbell rightly centers Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett’s 2020 book *The Upswing*, which documents how the United States moved from an era of extreme individualism to one of broad social solidarity in the early twentieth century – an “I” to “We” upswing.⁸ It provides hope that the arc can bend back toward “We” in our time.

To get there, we must reframe civic education and civic life around trust and collaboration. In an era of AI and rampant mistrust, building trust is the supreme civic skill, and it is built by practicing disagreement and cooperation time and again. This is the human advantage that can never be automated or outsourced: our ability to form bonds of understanding and reciprocity across differences.⁹

A broad call to action is in order.

- *To K–12 educators*: Bring this more comprehensive conception of civic training into your classrooms and build skills and dispositions no matter the subject that you teach.
- *To higher education leaders and faculty*: Make civic learning and discourse a campus-wide priority, on par with job preparation, so every student graduates having engaged seriously with those who think differently.
- *To policymakers and philanthropists*: Support the expansion of civic-learning opportunities – such as debate-across-difference programs, service year initiatives, and community dialogue forums – to reach all youth, not just a select few.
- *To all of us as citizens*: Model “disagreeing to build, not to win” in our daily lives. The examples we set in our classrooms, workplaces, and Facebook feeds teach the next generation how to handle disagreement.

Cultural change does not happen by accident. It happens when people and institutions prioritize and reward trust-building and collaborative problem-solving. If we center these skills across civic life, the next chapter of America’s story could well be a new, more durable “We.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rajiv Vinnakota is President of the Institute for Citizens & Scholars, leading its mission to strengthen civic life in America by sparking young people to create fresh solutions to civic problems. Previously, he served as Executive Vice-President of the Aspen Institute and Co-founder and CEO of the SEED Foundation, the nation's first network of public, college-preparatory boarding schools for underserved children. He is the author of *From Civic Education to a Civic Learning Ecosystem* (2019) and has written for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Philanthropy News Digest*, *Forbes*, and *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, "Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture," *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 178–188, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² Laura Silver, Scott Keeter, Stephanie Kramer, et al., "Americans' Trust in One Another," Pew Research Center, May 8, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2025/05/08/americans-trust-in-one-another>.
- ³ National Association of Colleges and Employers, *Job Outlook 2023* (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2022).
- ⁴ David J. Bobb, "Young Employees Need Durable Skills: Civics May Be the Answer," *Illinois Business Journal*, August 14, 2025, <https://www.ibjonline.com/2025/08/14/op-ed-young-employees-need-durable-skills-civics-may-be-the-answer>.
- ⁵ Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (John Wiley & Sons, 2019).
- ⁶ Institute for Citizens & Scholars, "College Presidents Sound Off: Civic Development Is Taking Center Stage on Campus," December 3, 2025, <https://collegepresidents.org/insight/college-presidents-sound-off-civic-development-is-taking-center-stage-on-campus>.
- ⁷ Institute for Citizens & Scholars, "500 Gen Zers Named 2025 Carnegie Young Leaders," August 13, 2025, <https://cands.org/500-gen-zers-named-2025-carnegie-young-leaders>.
- ⁸ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster, 2020).
- ⁹ Silver, Keeter, Kramer, et al., "Americans' Trust in One Another."

Every Student, Every Degree: Bold Higher Ed Action to Renew U.S. Democracy

Carol Geary Schneider

Support for college civic learning is growing, but what are advocates' goals for student learning? This essay describes four distinct but potentially complementary college civics movements. It then shows why and how the CLDE Coalition approach draws from each movement to build students' democracy knowledge, dialogue and problem-solving skills, and practical preparation to tackle public-good questions both in civil society and in students' careers. The essay outlines an "across-the-curriculum" approach that provides multiple touchpoints for civic and democracy learning: in general education, in all departmental majors and programs of study, and in students' experiential learning.

David Campbell's thoughtful essay on renewing civic culture argues for higher education's role in fostering Americans' facility in the arts of productive disagreement.¹ I fully endorse Campbell's call.

In this essay, however, I want to widen our vision of what higher education should bring to U.S. democracy in this turbulent era of deep polarization, political dysfunction, and heart-breaking violence. Teaching the arts of productive disagreement is certainly part of the solution. But there is much more that we can do.

Specifically, I invite readers to commit to two actions. First, take the time to explore the *several* fast-growing civic and democratic learning movements – described below – that are both anchored in higher education and designed to bring new vision, new voices, and new creativity to a democracy plainly in need of renewal.² Second, encourage at least one college, university, or community college – one where you teach, are an alum, or serve as an advisor – to make a 250th American anniversary commitment to embed civic and democracy education within the *required* college curriculum, both in general education and major programs of study. And this commitment should include bringing K–12 educators into new dialogue about the complementary roles of primary/secondary schools and colleges in building the capacities that our fractured democracy urgently needs.

Whether as citizens or international visitors, all U.S. students are earning their degrees in a constitutional democracy that rests authority in “We the People.” And all students should therefore devote time and talent to exploring constitutional democracy and practicing “small-d” democratic capacities, those habits of mind and heart that prepare them to make thoughtful, examined, and consequential choices about their potential roles in the future of democracy.³ That work begins in K–12 schools. But it should go higher and deeper as students pursue postsecondary degrees. Higher education’s cultural reach is enormous. Two-thirds of all Americans now enroll in postsecondary education at some point in their lifetime, while most who teach in K–12 schools prepare for that work in higher education. Imagine if we put that potential reach in service to democracy.

This essay draws from my work as the founding director of the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition (CLDE Coalition), a national alliance now based at American University, and, from 1998 to 2016, as the president of the democracy-committed American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). I provide a brief portrait of the multiple civic and democracy learning movements now rapidly gaining ground across the postsecondary sector. Taken together, these movements provide a compelling outline of what contemporary college education for democracy should include. I then turn to seizing the opportunity of this 2026 anniversary year to move college civic learning from its current standing as widely available but typically elective to an expected component – just like communication and quantitative reasoning – in a high-quality college education.

Campbell is right to find reasons for hope in initiatives like the Institute for Citizens & Scholars’ important effort to bring higher education presidents together both to foster constructive dialogue and to measure reductions in what Citizens & Scholars calls “affective polarization.” But that work is best understood as one component in a suite of fast-growing postsecondary movements to revitalize civic and democratic learning in college.

These major civic learning movements and their intended learning outcomes include:

1. the constitutional literacy movement (sometimes called “civics”),
2. the civil dialogue movement,
3. the community engagement movement, and
4. the movement to include civic and ethical inquiry in career and technical fields.

Constitutional literacy proponents are acting on the sobering evidence that 30 percent of Americans cannot name even the three branches of government, and the majority cannot name more than one of the five freedoms included in the

First Amendment.⁴ Thoughtful scholars throughout the academy are bringing new intellectual leadership for engaging democracy in higher education.⁵ There is active political support for this constitutional literacy movement, and at least fourteen states now require study of American institutions and ideals in order to earn a degree. Some state laws specify reading core texts and/or Supreme Court cases relevant to democracy's contested development over time. *The intended outcomes for this constitutional literacy movement include deepened knowledge and informed citizenship.*

Civil dialogue leaders promote respectful engagement with differing views, including progressive, centrist, and conservative views. They advocate for campus programs in which faculty, staff, students, and senior administrators *all* practice the skills needed for productive dialogue. They also urge new training for faculty to guide such dialogues in their courses. The State University of New York (SUNY) has made "civic discourse" a required general education outcome for *all* students in its mega system of sixty-four two-year and four-year institutions, including technical schools. Dozens of nonprofits now assist such efforts, both at the state level and in individual institutions.⁶ *The intended learning outcomes include humility, active listening, and constructive engagement across differences of many kinds.*

Community engagement is the civic learning movement with by far the most extensive reach and impact across all sectors in postsecondary education. For more than four decades, Campus Compact and a host of sister organizations have led the movement to make community-facing courses, often called service learning, widely available throughout U.S. higher education. The National Study of Student Engagement has found that 59 percent of those who graduate from four-year higher education institutions report taking at least one course that included a community-based project.⁷ The community engagement movement emphasizes reciprocal relationships with communities and meaningful benefits to community organizations that participate in this engagement. *The intended learning outcomes include civic motivation, practical problem-solving skills, and the demonstrated capacity to collaborate with people whose views and experiences are different from one's own.*

Civic and ethical inquiry in career and technical fields is perhaps best described as a set of emergent movements rather than a discrete national campaign. The growing attention to ethical inquiry reflects the effort, led by AAC&U since 2002, to recognize and strengthen ethical reasoning as integral to liberal learning, an essential learning outcome, and a valued career skill.⁸

In addition, many professional fields now emphasize either teaching the ethics of a specific profession or embedding civic inquiry in majors, or both. For example, the influential business program accreditor AACSB has established "societal impact" standards that require business programs to explore ways that business decisions can help "better" U.S. communities.⁹ The artificial intelligence revolution has raised the ethical learning stakes to new heights for every college major, since all fields confront core questions about fairness, transparency, trustworthy

information, and social responsibility. *The intended learning outcomes include examined choices concerning public-good issues important in specific fields and practice in applying ethical reasoning to real-world professional and workplace issues.*

Taken together, the four contemporary college civics movements just described provide new clarity about what a twenty-first-century college education for informed citizenship should include. And so, following a nearly two-year dialogue across higher education, the CLDE Coalition has drawn these several purposes together into the CLDE Framework for College Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement, a unifying framework that includes 1) democracy knowledge and levers for change, 2) bridge-building and problem-solving, 3) practical experience and projects, and 4) career-related civic and ethical learning. (“Bridge-building” is the CLDE Coalition’s term for “civil discourse.”)¹⁰

The overarching goal for college civic and democratic learning, the CLDE Coalition contends, is each student’s development of civic purpose, agency, voice, and judgment. Some people speak of students developing “civic faith.” We recommend that each student *make examined choices* both about the value and values of living in a free society and about the roles they want to play in securing the future of free democracies.

How can higher education help graduates develop these capacities? The CLDE Coalition recommends what we call CLDE *pathways*, which begin in the initial year of college, most likely in general education courses and/or in required courses like communications.¹¹ Curricula can include reading, writing, dialogue, and assignments related to constitutional democracy’s premises and development in the United States and other societies.

In this pathways conception, such early college civic inquiry is foundational, not terminal. Civic and ethical questions should be further explored in students’ program of study, reinforcing the notion that small-d democratic principles such as fairness and concern for the greater good need to be practiced in the workplace as well as the public square. Similarly, civil discourse and “bridge-building” should be practiced as part of students’ major programs, including in projects that students may work on to complete their degree requirements.

And, finally, the CLDE Coalition recommends that postsecondary education should provide some kind of integrative experience that also includes civic inquiry and ethical reflection. The integrative experience might be part of a required practicum, such as student teaching, a public health clinical assignment, or a capstone project in business or engineering. It might include an undergraduate research project, a senior thesis, or a creative portfolio showing students’ accomplishments over time. It might include final year assignments in which students document their gains in civic learning and purpose and show how small-d democratic capacities were gained at multiple touchpoints in their course of study.

If well-designed, CLDE pathways create an integrative civic and democratic through line, from first to final year of instruction, in which students engage challenging problems and issues, practice dialogue with others about the best approaches to those problems, learn to bring evidence-based reasoning and a sharp eye for disinformation to the table, and apply these capacities to significant questions both in the wider world and in their own lives.

The actual pathways will vary, depending on students' interests and choice of fields and projects. But purposeful CLDE pathways will prepare every student to deal with complex questions whose answers are either unknown or actively contested as a core component of their college studies. And by addressing problems through *multiple* disciplinary and experiential lenses, educators can provide a new and pragmatic answer to college students' perennial question: "Why do I have to take all these liberal arts courses outside my major?"

Most institutions already have all the potential pieces of public-spirited CLDE pathways in place. Across U.S. higher education, virtually every institution requires specific general education courses, insists that students must complete writing or communications courses, and points students toward majors that have their own requirements. Further, countless institutions are now promising students that their education will include "real-world experience," whether through internships, required practicums, or service learning. These are the recommended components in a public-spirited CLDE pathway.

The missing piece is an explicit focus on education for democracy as an integrative through line that *connects* general and specialized studies with students' own questions about problems they believe society needs to tackle. Educators have put the needed pieces of civic and democratic inquiry pathways in place. But, to date, only a few higher education institutions identify civic learning as a priority for all their students.

The next step is for educators to *integrate and illuminate* the stepping stones in these CLDE pathways, helping students discover both that education for democracy will be a core component of their degree and that, while they prepare for careers, they also need to explore the ethical and social responsibilities that their intended profession includes.

This brings us to the second recommendation: a concerted effort, by everyone connected to higher education, to confront and revise the dominant narrative about the educational purposes of both primary/secondary school and college. Overwhelmingly, educators, policy leaders, and the media have joined forces over the last four decades to insist that the main point of college is to gain access to economic opportunity.

It is time to forcefully advance an expansive counternarrative: namely, that education in a democracy hones the capacities we need to ensure that democracy thrives.

Higher education's distinctive role is preparing graduates to solve problems together, in the economy, in civil society, *and* in the myriad connections between them.

Changing a dominant narrative takes time, but the 2026 anniversary of the nation's founding provides a rare high-visibility opportunity. Many Americans know Benjamin Franklin's laconic description of the 1787 Constitution: "A republic, if you can keep it." But as Richard Haass, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, points out in his recent book *The Bill of Obligations*, Americans lack any vocabulary or conceptual framing to describe their own "responsibilities" to democracy and its future.

So in this season of historical commemoration, I encourage readers to join the national movement to make education for democracy – across school and college – both a national priority and a catalyst for that civic renewal every American knows is needed. Set a timeframe: say, the period from 2026 to 2037, the years when the United States will commemorate both its founding and the writing of the U.S. Constitution.

Where might you begin? Most *Dædalus* readers either work in higher education or hold degrees from a U.S. collegiate institution. Start with the institution you know best.

Does your institution's mission offer some version of preparing graduates for their roles in a democracy? Are civic learning courses and experiences available but entirely optional? Or, worse, are they required but taught in large lectures that allow no opportunity for practicing productive dialogue? Do your departments emphasize their field's role in preparing students to make examined choices about public-good and public policy issues they will encounter in their careers? If most students do practicums or internships, does your institution provide opportunities for them to reflect on and discuss the ethical and public-good issues they encountered in those settings?

And, casting the net wider, is your institution part of a state or national group that is itself reclaiming higher education's public-good mission? If so, connect your institution's civic and democratic learning initiatives with a collective call to broaden Americans' conception of the essential civic and democratic purposes of both school and college education.

I was reminded, in watching the PBS series *The American Revolution*, that citizen-led "committees of correspondence" played a key role in connecting potential leaders across all thirteen colonies. And that in an era of stagecoach and horse-carried mail!

Making civic and democracy learning a national priority will require our own contemporary version of the founding colonies' committees of correspondence. What role can each of us play in creating them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Geary Schneider is President Emerita of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and Founding Director of the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition. She is the author of *Making Liberal Education Inclusive: The Roots and Reach of the LEAP Framework for College Learning* (2021).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, “Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 178–188, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² This essay is informed by two major reports from the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition: *Every Student, Every Degree: College Civic Learning for Today’s Students and Tomorrow’s Democracy* (Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, 2024), <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/every-student-every-degree>; and *For All College Students: The CLDE Guide for Generative Curriculum Planning* (Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, 2026), <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/clde-guide>. The CLDE Coalition was founded in 2021 by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Campus Compact, College Promise, Complete College America, and State Higher Education Executive Officers. The Coalition became part of the Democracy Innovation Lab at American University in 2025. For more, see <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org>.
- ³ Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 8. The CLDE Coalition uses the term “small-d” to refer to the principles of democracy rather than to the political party. Notably, Americans currently are divided over whether the United States is best described as a “republic” or a “democracy.”
- ⁴ The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania annually surveys Americans’ knowledge of basic constitutional information. The 2025 findings are available through Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, “Americans’ Knowledge of Civics Increases, Annenberg Survey Finds,” September 11, 2025, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-civics-increases-annenberg-survey-finds>.
- ⁵ Much of the constitutional democracy literature has focused on K–12 education, but a federally commissioned national report highlighted higher education’s essential role. See Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, 2012). See also Ronald J. Daniels with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2021); and Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens* (Penguin Press, 2021). American University now intends to provide both intellectual and educational leadership to engage all students with their responsibilities to constitutional democracy.
- ⁶ Campus Compact is helping higher education leaders select among the fast-growing number of civil discourse training providers. See Campus Compact, “Better Discourse: A Guide for Bridging Campus Divides in Challenging Times,” July 25, 2024, <https://compact.org/resources/better-discourse-a-guide-for-bridging-campus-divides-in-challenging-times>.
- ⁷ For NSSE evidence, see Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 17. The literature on engaged college learning is voluminous. AAC&U

published a meta-analysis of what the research shows in Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, *The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain* (AAC&U, 2022), <https://www.aacu.org/research/the-effects-of-community-based-engagement-in-higher-education>. The study includes an informative annotated bibliography of fifty-three high-quality research studies.

- ⁸ Greater Expectations National Panel, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U, 2002), https://dgm81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Publications/Archives/Selected/GreatExpectationsRpt_2002.pdf; and National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2002), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495004.pdf>. AAC&U has tracked higher education's embrace of "ethical reasoning" as both an educator and employer goal since 2007. The most recent study is Ashley P. Finley, *The Agility Imperative: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future* (AAC&U, 2025), 9, 19–21, <https://dgm81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AgilityImperative2025.pdf>. The report documents employer views on multiple liberal education learning outcomes, including ethical judgment and decision-making.
- ⁹ AACSB, *AACSB and Societal Impact: Aligning with the AACSB Business Accreditation Standards* (AACSB, 2023; rev. 2025), <https://www.aacsb.edu/-/media/documents/accreditation/aacsb-and-societal-impact.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ You can find a printable version of the CLDE Framework at College Civic Learning, "What Should Students Gain from Civic and Democracy Engagement in College?" <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/learning-framework> (accessed July 15, 2026).
- ¹¹ Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 33–36, provides sample CLDE pathways for both two-year and four-year collegiate institutions. *For All College Students* explores the recommendation in detail.

Building Institutions to Improve Civic Culture

Peter Levine

Americans must disagree better to sustain a healthier civic culture. This is not only a matter of individual behavior and values but also a question of institutional design. An example of an institution that generally supported disagreement, conversation, and collaboration in the twentieth century was the metropolitan daily newspaper, but its business model has collapsed. To recover civic culture, we need business models (defined broadly) for new institutions that can enable discussion and self-governance.

In “Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture,” David Campbell argues that a “healthy civic culture” is a “necessary condition for democracy.”¹ The good news, Campbell says, is that civic culture can change for the better. He finds that the main aspect of our civic culture that requires attention today is *conversation*: speaking and listening to people with whom we disagree. Conversations across differences have become too rare in an era of polarization and often go badly when they occur. However, we can teach people to disagree better in schools, colleges, and voluntary associations, including religious congregations.

I agree with all of this and recommend it as a departure point. And I would add a second dimension of civic culture that also requires attention: creating and preserving common-pool resources; that is, things of value that are fragile and consumable and that benefit everyone in their community while they last.² Such resources range from the safety of a public street to the vitality of a marsh, from the educational environment of a school to a community’s historical memory.

Disagreeing well can be helpful when managing common-pool resources because participants may not agree about values, goals, or approaches, and conversation can help them resolve their differences constructively. Also, when people are responsible for a common good – whether a church building or a public website – the task of managing their resource can prompt worthy conversations about values.

However, managing the commons is not only about good conversations. Sometimes everyone agrees about a problem such as crime or litter, yet individuals don’t do their part to address it. Along with the deliberative skills that Campbell emphasizes, we also need organizational acumen, leadership, and a widespread willingness

to contribute. These are components of the “art of association” that Alexis de Tocqueville identified as the basis of American democracy.³

Many of the important organizational principles are counterintuitive. For example, people with little associational experience sometimes assume that when members of a group fail to contribute their fair share, any penalties should be flexible, personalized, and subject to discussion. In fact, groups usually work better when penalties are automatic and immediate, yet mild for first offenders.⁴ When civic culture is strong, many people learn such principles from experience; but when effective organizations are scarce, we may have to teach the art of association in schools.⁵

I think the main challenge of our moment is to develop civic organizations that can flourish and grow, teach civic skills and values, and serve as venues for constructive disagreement. The “upswing” that furnishes the title of the book by Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, which Campbell cites, was an impressive period of innovation and expansion in U.S. civil society from 1900 to 1960.⁶ If we saw a similar civic renaissance today, not only would more people participate in familiar groups that discuss issues and manage common-pool resources (such as congregations and other traditional associations) but new forms would emerge to meet the needs of our time.

For example, during the period that Putnam and Romney Garrett label “the upswing,” reliable daily newspapers became prevalent in the United States. By 1972, 69 percent of Americans told the General Social Survey (GSS) that they read a newspaper “every day.”⁷ It is easy enough to envision a daily publication about serious matters, written by professionals to inform a whole community. The hard part is the business model. Why would many people *pay* for such a product? The recipe that sustained metropolitan daily newspapers during the 1900s included hard news plus human-interest stories, comics, sports, gossip, and other features aimed at various members of each household, all funded by a combination of revenue from subscribers and occasional readers and advertisers. Once the internet captured advertising revenue, this model disintegrated. By 2014, just one-quarter of respondents told the GSS that they read a newspaper daily; the GSS subsequently retired the question, as it ceased to be a useful measure of news consumption.

Also during the upswing, many colleges and universities offered some measure of civic education while contributing knowledge and culture to their communities and serving as significant venues for public debate. Universities collected state subsidies, tuition, philanthropy, and clinical fees, and they offered economic mobility, access to licensed professions, ambitious research prized by industry and the military, vigorous social life, and quasi-professional sports, along with civic benefits. This model is now under considerable stress, though it has not fully collapsed, as with the daily newspaper.⁸

Similarly, Putnam and Romney Garrett show that after 1910, high schools rapidly spread across the United States and became another pillar of civic culture, not

only preparing students to be more capable citizens but also serving as foci for adult community life.⁹ No national policy made this happen. Instead, most communities found that they needed at least one high school to be economically competitive, and they taxed themselves to build and maintain their own schools. This model worked in many localities, although spending was never adequate in poor communities or for students of color. This model survives, notwithstanding consolidations that have removed high schools from some smaller towns and growing state subsidies for private schools.

Today, it is not hard to envision a social media platform that serves as an excellent venue for disagreeing well. Any platform must use an algorithm to decide what material each user sees, and a good algorithm would favor substantive content from a deliberately diverse range of views. The question is how to capitalize such a platform so it can expand to rival the huge for-profit social media outlets of the present, which do the opposite for billions of users, favoring material that induces outrage and reinforces users' prior assumptions. In other words, the problem is the same as the one that confronted proponents of professional journalism circa 1900, but we haven't yet found a workable business model for our time.

Likewise, we know – in part thanks to Campbell's work – how to teach deliberative skills and values in classrooms.¹⁰ The question is why parents or taxpayers and policymakers would pay for such education for most students. The economic rationale for building and maintaining high schools has not convinced many voters to demand adequate *civic* education.

Civic education advocates have suggested persuading the public about the importance of civic culture before asking them to pay for it through taxes. I am all for that! But the strategy that produced the twentieth-century upswing was more diversified and therefore more realistic. Government paid for some aspects of civic culture. A strong example is the massive expansion of higher education that followed the *Truman Report*, whose rationale was explicitly to strengthen democracy.¹¹ Even so, colleges have always looked beyond the state and federal governments for revenue. Another inspiring example is public broadcasting, a complex and variegated system that certainly got a boost from the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act but started by linking preexisting nonprofit broadcasters (including college radio and TV stations) and has always obtained private revenue.

Civic culture needs "business models," defined broadly to include public-sector innovations that can disseminate widely, like public high schools after 1910. Designing good experiences and venues is relatively easy; bringing them to scale is the hard part. Civic organizations should aspire to deliberation, collaboration, and inclusiveness. But the pillars of civic life in America have been sturdier when they have also offered other benefits, from personal salvation to economic mobility,

from comic strips to Friday night football games. Even today, many of the examples cited in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' report *Habits of Heart and Mind* use ingenious business models. For example, Atlanta's Pollinator Network coordinates volunteer hours, financial contributions, and organizations' behavior to support the common-pool resource of adequate pollination across a major metropolitan area.¹² A new upswing will require much more of this kind of entrepreneurship and innovation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Levine is the Associate Dean for Faculty and the Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship and Public Affairs at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University. He is the author of eight books, including, most recently, *What Should We Do? A Theory of Civic Life* (Oxford University Press, 2022), *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens* (2015), and *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: The Promise of Civic Renewal in America* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, "Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture," *Daedalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 179, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *American Economic Review* 100 (3) (2010): 641–672.
- ³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique, Volume 3*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Liberty Fund, 2010).
- ⁴ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.
- ⁵ Elinor Ostrom, "The Need for Civic Education: A Collective Action Perspective," Working Paper W98-26 (Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, 1998), <https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/items/7be8e448-bc47-4669-96e1-40cb634d1e93/full>.
- ⁶ Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).
- ⁷ NORC at the University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 1972–2014 [machine-readable data file]. Tabulation by the author.
- ⁸ Ronald J. Daniels with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).
- ⁹ Putnam and Romney Garrett, *The Upswing*, 29–30.

- ¹⁰ David E. Campbell, "Voice in the Classroom : How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement among Adolescents," *Political Behavior* 30 (4) (2008): 437–454; and David E. Campbell, "What Social Scientists Have Learned about Civic Education: A Review of the Literature," *Peabody Journal of Education* 94 (1) (2019): 32–47.
- ¹¹ President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (Harper & Brothers, 1947).
- ¹² American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Habits of Heart and Mind: How to Fortify Civic Culture* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2024), 34, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2025_civic-culture.pdf.

AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

Board of Directors

Goodwin Liu, *Chair*
Stephen B. Heintz, *Vice Chair*
Earl Lewis, *Secretary*
Deborah Loewenberg Ball, *Vice Chair*
Laurie L. Patton, *President*
Kenneth L. Wallach, *Treasurer*
Philip N. Bredesen
Katherine J. Cramer
Margaret A. Hamburg
John Mark Hansen
Louis J. Muglia
Gilbert S. Omenn
David M. Rubenstein
Deborah F. Rutter
Mariko Silver
Anna Deavere Smith
Shirley M. Tilghman
Jeannette M. Wing
Judy Woodruff

Council

Deborah Loewenberg Ball, *Chair*
Katherine J. Cramer
Philip J. Deloria
Juan J. de Pablo
Johanna Ruth Drucker
Joseph S. Francisco
Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot
Paula D. McClain
Louis J. Muglia
John G. Palfrey
Deborah F. Rutter
Scott D. Sagan
Cristián T. Samper
Anna Deavere Smith
Shirley M. Tilghman
Jeannette M. Wing
Susan Wolf
Stephen B. Heintz (*ex officio*)
Earl Lewis (*ex officio*)
Goodwin Liu (*ex officio*)
Shirley Mahaley Malcom (*ex officio*)
Laurie L. Patton (*ex officio*)
Kenneth L. Wallach (*ex officio*)

ON THE HORIZON

AI & Creativity: What Is the Future of Storytelling?

edited by Daniela Rus & Joanna Scott

with Gish Jen, Maja Matarić, Laura van den Berg, Joseph Tanke,
Gregory Mone, Alexa Alice Joubin, Adam Braver, Elisabeth Reynolds,
Rick Moody, Holly Case, Stephen Schottenfeld, Songye Yoon,
Claire Luchette, Ken Goldberg & David Leavitt

Tomorrow's Africa: A Continent on the Rise?

edited by Robert I. Rotberg

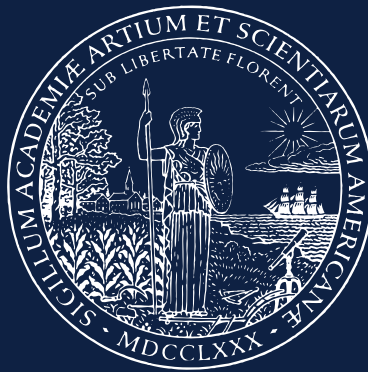
Whose Memory Counts?

Forgetting, Belonging & the Contest for the Past

edited by Michael Hanchard

What Role Should Religion Play in a Democratic Education?

edited by John Witte, Jr., Whitney Barth & John Bernau



amacad.org/daedalus