

Renewing Democratic Participation: Planning Meeting

Summary Report from the Parties and Civic Culture Convening, November 8, 2024

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Summary

On November 8, 2024 – three days after the presidential election – Columbia World Projects and the Harvard Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation convened a planning meeting to shape the arc of their joint initiative on renewing democratic participation. The gathering brought together political scientists, sociologists, historians, legal scholars, and civic practitioners to work through the intellectual core of the project and identify the questions most worth pursuing. The timing gave the conversation unusual weight: participants were processing an election whose results, and field campaign failures, were still coming into focus. What follows is a summary of the main intellectual threads and directions that emerged.

Peoplehood as the Organizing Concept

The convening opened with a framing that held throughout the day. The project's substantive core, participants proposed, is *peoplehood* — a collective identity capable of holding adversarial politics without collapsing into division. Drawing on Jane Mansbridge's distinction between adversarial and friendship democracy, the discussion centered on a view of democracy as a system where factions compete vigorously over policy and values, but where that competition rests on a prior sense of shared belonging. The challenge is both normative and empirical: how do you build a peoplehood defined not by exclusion but by its capacity to contain and channel political conflict? The project's distinctive contribution explores how institutions translate personal experience into shared political identity. Healthy institutions recognize the system's legitimacy and mediate intense disagreement while conditioning people to accept losing — within coalitions, within parties, and across elections. Unhealthy ones foster a politics that treats the other side as illegitimate and also nurture policies that bridge factions with divergent interests.

A historical note added useful texture. Inclusive peoplehood has been the exception rather than the rule in the United States, largely concentrated in the post-civil rights era. It has since unraveled under polarization, deindustrialization, and institutional decay.

The Supply Side of Democracy

A provocation that gained traction across the conversation reframed the standard diagnosis of democratic erosion. Too much analysis, it was argued, focuses on the “demand side” — asking why

citizens are insufficiently committed to democracy, insufficiently tolerant, insufficiently engaged. This framing misses the basic truth that democratic capacities are not innate. They must be constructed, cultivated, and nurtured in actual institutions and relationships. The more productive frame is supply-side and asks what kinds of opportunities for participation, deliberation, and civic formation are people actually encountering? Do those opportunities build genuine agency or treat citizens as data points in someone else's machine?

Civil society is the obvious candidate for doing this work, but the relationship between civil society and democracy is not automatic. History shows that civic organizations can be carriers of authoritarianism as readily as of democracy. What is not yet well understood are the conditions under which a given form of collective action pushes people toward democratic self-governance rather than away from it. Too much scholarship has treated the fact of collective action as the accomplishment without examining different formations and their respective downstream consequences. Studying those differences – opening the black box of civil society – was identified as a core research task. So was a related Tocquevillian question, asking how does the political project relate to the civic project? Tocqueville argued that the need to build governing majorities created incentives for coalition-building across differences. That link between civic and political has been largely severed in the twenty-first century.

A Crisis of Mass Politics

Multiple participants pointed to a widespread failure of parties and civic institutions to do the patient, year-round work of embedding themselves in communities and building durable relationships with constituents. The 2024 Harris campaign was offered as a case study of a field operation that appears to have missed the demobilization of millions of Biden 2020 voters. This outcome, participants argued, reflects a deeper institutional assumption that relational and civic work does not scale to electoral gains. The political-industrial complex has systematically undervalued the kind of slow, presence-based organizing that builds genuine connection between parties and people.

The structural context makes this harder. Social movements and civil society organizations have been weakened over the past several years. Civic education has been reduced in schools. The background conditions for participation – material security, time, civic formation – are in short supply for broad swaths of the population. Regional variation complicates any national prescription. Civic architectures operate differently across suburban sunbelt communities compared to the Northeast or Midwest, and immigrants are navigating citizenship in contexts where the traditional intermediary institutions function differently or barely exist at all. The challenge is not to rebuild a single national civic culture from the top down but to understand and strengthen the varied local forms through which peoplehood is – or could be – constructed.

One participant offered a note of institutional humility that sharpened this diagnosis. The 2024 result, she argued, is in part downstream of institutional failures, including the COVID response, where the empirical record on non-pharmaceutical interventions is weaker than official narratives acknowledged. If the project aims to rebuild institutional trust, it must engage honestly with cases where institutions fell short, rather than treating public distrust as simply a product of misinformation.

Research Directions and Questions

Several lines of inquiry crystallized across the discussion. First, the study of outliers and proof of the possible is essential. Scholars used the term “positive deviance” to describe such outcomes. Rather than only analyzing why democracy is failing, the project should systematically identify places where peoplehood is actually being constructed. These sites would include unions that built inclusive solidarity across difference, localities that maintained civic cohesion under stress, and organizations that successfully channel collective action into democratic self-governance. Social science's orientation toward probable outcomes needs to be supplemented by attention to the range of the possible. Second, the project should examine which organizational forms cultivate democratic agency, and which do not? What is the balance between organizations built to bridge differences and those built to exercise power toward collective goals? Several participants argued the latter are more durable and effective. People need to work together to accomplish something, not merely to understand one another, though other participants welcomed focus on spaces that bridge divides without determining political ends in advance. Third, this project might study the legal and structural architecture of campaign finance rules, electoral law, party regulations, and ballot access requirements that shape democratic outcomes. Reform agendas that ignore these structures will underperform, suggested multiple participants, who suggested that the project should map concrete legal and policy levers alongside organizational strategies.

Toward a Multi-Year Project

The convening was explicit that the project should be more than an academic seminar. Participants emphasized connecting scholars and practitioners while attending to what communities outside elite institutional networks are already getting right. Local libraries, faith institutions, YMCAs, and neighborhood organizations were mentioned as sites where healthy forms of civic engagement persist. These are too often invisible to academic and philanthropic networks. Finding and learning from those outliers, rather than only diagnosing failure from above, was treated as both a methodological and an ethical commitment.

On outputs, participants favored a series of engagements rather than a single rollout. The goal should be to build bonds among participants and communities through an ongoing process, not just a report. The convening itself was described as an opportunity to contribute to 'a deeper understanding of the repertoire of possibilities' with the goal of generating interest in multiple sites of civic renewal, and making a practical contribution to the people and organizations doing the work. The goal articulated at the close: to strengthen the institutions and associations that connect citizens to government, and to help build a civic culture that is inclusive, pluralistic, and responsive to people's needs.

Participants

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