

# Civic Renewal and Associational Life

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Summary Report from the Civic Renewal and Associational Life Convening, March 28, 2025

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## Summary

On March 28, 2025, the Columbia World Projects initiative on Renewing Democratic Participation brought together scholars and practitioners in a one-day working meeting to probe the foundations of civic renewal at a moment of acute democratic stress. The conveners organized discussion around three interlocking dimensions: the competence and orientations of citizens; the responsibilities of leaders in government and civil society; and what Daniel Stid calls the "art of association," which suggests that civic renewal is primarily a bottom-up, community-rooted process.

Underlying the agenda was a productive tension between two influential critiques of democratic representation. The first focused on the nationalization of politics, polarization, and the hollowing out of political parties. The second centered on local, place-based efforts to rebuild associational life outside the formal party system. The group did not presume to resolve that tension but sought to probe and map it.

## Key Themes

### **Place, infrastructure, and civic entrepreneurs require sustained investment**

A recurring theme was the need for long-term cultivation of civic infrastructure. Where too often funders focus on singular reforms or deliverables, the group sought to examine sites exhibiting the steady building of civic muscle. Carnegie libraries were cited as an example of investments building associational life that still pays dividends a century later. Participants noted the loss of civic capacity through the decline of unions, local newspapers, and religious congregations (100,000 churches are projected to close over the next five years), and called for greater recognition of civic entrepreneurs who build and sustain community institutions. Community colleges were identified as underutilized civic hubs.

### **Yet civic life and associational life are not the same thing**

Participants drew a consistent distinction between associational life — voluntary organizations, clubs, religious congregations, sports leagues — and civic life, understood as meaningful engagement with democratic institutions and processes. Alcoholics Anonymous was invoked as one of the most impressive associational forms in American history yet largely disconnected from civic life. Meanwhile, much of what passes for civic engagement today was characterized as too thin, too partisan, or too disconnected

from the places where people actually live. The richest and most durable associations, participants suggested, are often those adjacent to political identity rather than organized around it.

### **The crisis of democratic representation runs deep**

Several participants highlighted a deepening sense that many voters now experience a system of participation without meaningful representation. The bases of both major parties were described as pulling in directions that complicate constructive civic engagement — one testing the boundaries of constitutional norms, the other channeling energy into social movements and ideological opposition rather than the party structure itself. A key question was left unresolved: how do we move from democratic expression — including anger at institutions — to democratic form?

### **Elites, parties, and institutions bear distinctive responsibilities**

Drawing on V.O. Key's observation that "the masses do not corrupt themselves," participants debated the obligations of political and civic elites. The party system was recognized as simultaneously essential — possessing organizational reach few other institutions can match — and deeply distrusted. Whether civic renewal can and should proceed on a nonpartisan basis was contested. Some participants argued for working with parties to make them more pro-social and internally democratic. Others — particularly from the very groups building local connective capacities — worried that connecting local civic work to national parties risks co-optation from above.

### **Structural obstacles are real and must be named**

Participants also identified constraints that local civic energy alone cannot overcome. These include gerrymandering that may prevent shifts in political culture from translating into shifts in power, systematic efforts to raise the cost of civic organizing, and a philanthropic and political economy that rewards extreme positions and directs resources away from civil society. The risk that associational life can itself entrench power rather than democratize it was raised, with a caution against romanticizing civil society as inherently pluralistic.

## **Open Questions**

The discussion surfaced several questions the project will need to grapple with going forward:

- How do we reconcile the goals of building civic culture at the local level with the demand for visible partisan combat? Is the project in tension with where large portions of the electorate actually are?
- Can civic renewal efforts be effectively nonpartisan given that one party's base is currently testing the boundaries of the constitutional order?
- What concatenation of institutions — civic organizations, mediating bodies, parties, professional associations — can build a vibrant and collectively inclusive civic and political life, and what is the right sequencing?
- How, under conditions of institutional duress and active efforts to dismantle civic infrastructure, can a society protect its democratic polity while also reforming it?

## Participants

- Thomas Asher, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Delia Baldassarri, New York University
- David Blankenhorn, Braver Angels
- Pete Davis, Democracy Policy Network
- Archon Fung, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University
- Jamal Greene, Columbia Law School, Columbia University
- Shamichael Hallman, Urban Libraries Council
- Fred Harris, Columbia University
- Ira Katznelson, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Priya Karup, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Jeremy Kessler, Columbia Law School, Columbia University
- Madhav Khosla, Columbia Law School, Columbia University
- Kate Krimmel, Barnard College
- Peter Levine, Tufts University
- Andrew Perrin, Johns Hopkins University
- Kim Phillips-Fine, Columbia University
- Hollie Russon Gilman, New America/Trust for Civic Life
- Mark Schmitt, New America
- Daniel Stid, American Enterprise Institute
- Betsy Super, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- Nadia Urbanati, Columbia University
- Richard Young, CivicLex
- Jillian Youngblood, Civic Genius