

Parties and Civic Culture: A Zero-Party System and the Crisis in Peoplehood

Summary Report from the Parties and Civic Culture Convening, May 16, 2025

By Thomas Asher and Priya Kurup

Summary

On May 16, 2025, the Columbia World Projects initiative on Renewing Democratic Participation convened a one-day working meeting on the relationship between American political parties and civic culture. The bipartisan conversation was anchored by a constellation of recent books – Katherine Krimmel’s *Divergent Democracy*, Didi Kuo’s *The Great Retreat*, and Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld’s *The Hollow Parties* – and by the long shadow of the 1950 American Political Science Association report, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System.” Three sessions explored, in turn, what kind of party system the United States has at present, how party affiliation and social identity interact in shaping or eroding an inclusive sense of civic culture, and institutional reforms. This report synthesizes the discussion that took place under the Chatham House rule and organizes the material thematically, lifting threads that recurred throughout the day.

The meeting took as its starting point the stark fact that the United States is living through intense partisan polarization atop unusually weak political parties and democratic institutions. Parties remain the indispensable intermediaries between civil society and the state, but they have become brands and vehicles rather than membership organizations. They can be captured easily by an individual or by a movement, and they sit on a social landscape from which the older intermediary institutions have largely receded, including private-sector unions, mainline congregations, and local civic associations. Identity has flowed into the vacuum, sorting voters into increasingly homogeneous camps in ways that neither stabilize the system nor capture what is actually happening at the margins, where coalitions are visibly shifting. The result is a politics in which civic culture is harder to construct in a shared sense, easier to weaponize in a divided sense, and unusually dependent on whoever happens to articulate it from the top.

A Zero-Party System, Not a Two-Party Doom Loop

Several speakers pressed the group to reconsider the framing it had inherited. The familiar diagnosis of a “two-party doom loop,” in which two strong, polarized parties grind against each other, may misread the moment. What the United States actually has, one participant suggested, is closer to a zero-party system: strong partisan polarization within the electorate sitting atop party organizations that are unusually weak, easily captured, and unable to discipline their own standard-bearers. In this view, polarization itself is not the problem and moderation is not the magic solution. Conflict between

organized interests is a normal feature of democratic life and even helps voters differentiate policy platforms offered by competing parties.

Today the institutions that are supposed to channel that conflict and translate voter priorities into governing programs have been hollowed out. Robust parties, familiar from a different era, hold together diverse coalitions with divergent interests. The coalitional nature of a strong party, moreover, means that under ideal circumstances there should be internal factions to put checks and balances on any one element that attempts to set an agenda and direction in a manner that diverges from the priorities of a plurality of those who make up the coalition.

Parties no longer effectively translate between expressed interests of their sprawling coalitions and policy outputs, and are widely perceived as listening more to donors, super-PAC-funded grantees, and highly credentialed staff than to the constituencies they claim to represent. This is especially true of the left, according to many of the participants we gathered. The diagnosis was sharpened by a recurring example. When a canvasser knocks on a door and the voter says they are worried about the price of eggs, the answer they too often hear is, in effect, that this issue should not be on the agenda. Parties, again arguably especially on the left, fail to address the needs of voters, which increasingly go unmet in our current system.

On the right, the dynamic is meaningfully different. The right won 2024 by creating a new coalition that included mobilizing first time voters, Latinos, Black men, working class voters, and making inroads across groups compared to the 2016 campaign. At the same time, by building an overwhelming movement that saw such gains, the remainder of the party effectively fell in line. The party itself did not push back against any demands issued by the new administration, even as the administration demanded that Congress cede enormous power to the Executive Branch.

From Capture to Brand

American parties, the discussion emphasized, have always been thin compared with their European counterparts: light on members, light on ideological discipline, and historically easy to capture. What is different now is the combination of capture and polarization. When the parties were internally diverse, capture at the top was constrained by the need to bargain with factions one disliked. With internal diversity gone, capture has become consequential in a way it was not before. One speaker put the point starkly: the party is no longer a bulwark against the concentration of power; it is a handmaiden and facilitator.

The discussion drew a useful distinction between two kinds of capture. Individual capture – a candidate or president who assembles a personal following inside the shell of a party – was visible in earlier episodes from Andrew Jackson and Van Buren to William Jennings Bryan to Jimmy Carter and, on this reading, to the first Trump administration. Movement capture – where an organized social formation takes the party as its instrument – was visible in the populist wing’s adoption of Bryan and, several speakers argued, is what distinguishes Trump’s second presidency from his first. The distinction matters because movement capture is more durable than individual capture. It survives the individual.

If capture supplies the subsurface mechanism at work, brand supplies the legible surface. Multiple speakers described the contemporary parties as primarily brands and noted that much of the work of defining a party is now done by the opposition. The Democratic Party becomes the party of free and unfettered immigration, of DEI, of “wokeness,” whether or not a particular candidate favors any of that, because the other side has the political and media tools to fix the brand. On this account, the Republican Party has been winning that game.

Sitting beneath both observations is an asymmetry that several participants insisted should not be glossed over. The crisis of the Democratic Party is the more legible one in standard political-science terms, featuring hallmarks of consultant capture, demographic mismatch, listlessness, and neoliberal drift. The crisis of the Republican Party is of a different kind, assuming a rhetorical and increasingly practical position that political opposition is illegitimate and that elections lost are elections rigged. Party competition cannot function on that footing. A system in which one side will not concede the legitimacy of the other has lost a structural precondition for working as a democracy, and reform proposals that ignore the asymmetry will misfire.

Identity, Peoplehood, and a Multi-Racial Coalition

The meeting pushed the question of how partisan identity now interacts with social identity. The conventional account is familiar: most Americans do not think about politics ideologically, but in terms of the social groups they associate with each party. As the parties have sorted along racial, religious, educational, and geographic lines, party identification has itself become an unusually powerful social identity, magnifying perceived distance from the other side well beyond what underlying disagreements would predict.

On this account, today’s Republican Party is largely white, rural, Christian, and conservative, and has trafficked in what one speaker called the wages of whiteness: psychological and status benefits offered to a base in lieu of tangible material gains. Today’s Democratic Party offers a more inclusive vision but struggles to convey what it stands for to its own coalition. Two parties with divergent visions of peoplehood, neither of them delivering reliably for the average American, is a precarious place for democracy to sit.

Yet several speakers pressed back on the neatness of this picture. The social sorting story is increasingly in tension with the actual movement of voters since 2012. In 2024 Latino voters shifted toward the Republican coalition. Black men shifted by some estimates twelve or thirteen points. Suburban professional women, particularly college-educated, moved the other way. Republican-style politics won meaningful support from voters one might have assumed were locked in elsewhere, and wealthy suburban professionals are arguably the fastest-growing piece of the Democratic coalition. Two empirical claims followed this observation. First, much of the Latino shift was not Democrats becoming Republicans but previously disengaged voters with conservative-leaning preferences entering the electorate on the Republican side. Second, the parties’ social composition is more fluid than the polarization literature, at least in its standard 2010s form, allows. In the current moment, social sorting and ideological commitments along identity lines appear less fixed and less durable than presumed by most scholarship.

The most trenchant observation in the discussion arose from holding those two stories together. A multi-racial Republican coalition can be expanding at the same time that an exclusionary project remains at the center of the party's governing program. The distinction drawn was precise: the party has shown a willingness to incorporate individuals across racial lines but has been consistent in its opposition to the collective project of Black history and redress. This dynamic is evident in the assault on DEI efforts, on the teaching of American racial history, and on group-based claims to justice even as the right has grown its multiracial coalition. Inclusion of persons is being decoupled from inclusion of the communal project. Whatever else one makes of the coalitional shifts, this is not straightforward racial liberalization.

A related thread asked what the scholarly idea of "peoplehood" itself now attaches to. One vision treats peoplehood as a shared commitment to democratic institutions, including separation of powers, the Constitution, competitive parties, and the peaceful alternation of power. Another treats it as a way of life, including families, religions, and demographic patterns. The first kind of peoplehood, though additive and inclusive in perspective, loses its grip when the institutions themselves are widely distrusted. A restoration politics that asks voters to defend the FBI or the Department of Justice has had visible difficulty landing. At the same time, institutions may turn out to be more valued than people thought once they begin to be dismantled. In short, the politics of 2024 are still in motion.

The Structural Undertow

Behind these dynamics, the discussion identified a set of structural changes that no purely electoral or messaging response has the capacity to sufficiently address. First is the near-disappearance of the private-sector labor union as a political force. Roughly thirty-five percent of American workers belonged to unions in the mid-1950s. The figure is now under six percent in the private sector, and in key Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic states union density in the private wage labor force has fallen from over seventy percent to trivial levels. The point was not nostalgia. Auto and steel plants were among the most ethnically and racially integrated sites in American life apart from the military. Their loss took with it a daily experience of cross-group common purpose and a regular political education on inequality. The second dynamic is the transformation of American religion, specifically the decline of mainline Protestant churches and, as one speaker described it, the capture of the Republican party through evangelical mobilization. Third is the end of legalized white supremacy in the South and the partisan realignment that followed. The 120 electoral votes that once belonged to the Democratic Party by default now overwhelmingly belong to the Republican Party, and a competitive party system survives in only a handful of states. What was upended by the end of the Southern Strategy, following the civil rights movement, has now been hardened through gerrymandering.

Together these changes have produced what one speaker called *the civic atrophy of rooted organizations of all kinds*. Where parties once had machines and labor unions with organic connections to neighborhoods, they now have polling, and elected officials have become "the last men and women standing," trying to read a public that no longer talks to itself through institutions they can hear. Social media in this landscape is less a reflection of opinion than an algorithmically shaped space that drives behavior more than records it.

Recommendations

Five recommendations follow from the discussion.

- **Rebuild local, year-round associational party life.** The most concrete prescription that surfaced more than once was the call to set up “clubhouses,” durable, locally rooted party presences where staff and volunteers live among the people they claim to represent. The observation that the Republican Party did this better than the Democratic Party in 2024, particularly in Latino and working-class neighborhoods, was offered as a diagnosis with clear operational implications. Both parties and the funders who support them should be investing in durable local organizations rather than late-cycle media spend. Parties played this function in the 19th century and reinvestment in local community civic life is necessary to rebuilding linkages between local communities and democratic representation.
- **Restore the canvasser-to-policy translation.** The “price of eggs” exchange recurred as shorthand for a deeper failure. Parties no longer reliably translate expressed voter concerns into policy work, and too often respond by telling voters their concerns do not belong on the agenda. Party renewal should treat this translation function as primary, and should reckon honestly with how donors, super-PAC-funded grantees, and credentialed staff have crowded out direct constituency listening.
- **Reframe the research agenda and refine the categories.** Several speakers pressed the point that the standard social-sorting literature flattens power asymmetries and may be coding the wrong identities. The fluidity at the margins – Latino voters, Black men, suburban professional women – suggests the categories researchers use no longer capture the social groupings that actually condition behavior. A serious next phase of scholarly work should redesign survey instruments and theoretical frames to track power, group projects as distinct from individual identities, and the on-ramps by which previously disengaged voters enter the electorate.
- **Take the asymmetry of legitimacy seriously in reform design.** Reform proposals built on the assumption of two ordinary competitors will misfire when one party rejects the premise of legitimate opposition; reform agendas that treat that party only as a threat will fail to address the genuine representational failings of the other. Subsequent work should hold both truths at once: name the asymmetry honestly, while still attending to the listlessness, demographic mismatch, and consultant capture on the other side.
- **Map and invest in candidate intermediary institutions.** The disappearance of private-sector unions, the recession of mainline congregations, and the loss of ethnically and racially integrated worksites have left a vacuum that polling and digital tools cannot fill. No one in the room could name the institutions that might take their place. A specific next step: convene a working group to identify candidate sites of cross-group civic life – workplaces, community colleges, mutual-aid networks, faith-rooted organizing, sectoral labor formations – and to study, empirically, where rebuilding is already happening, its current regional distribution, and what is required to scale it.

Open Questions

The convening surfaced a set of questions that any subsequent work will need to take up. These include whether a vibrant, inclusive civic culture can be reconstructed without parties playing an interstitial role,

and if something else can do that work, what it is. How to respond to the asymmetry of legitimacy without either treating both parties as ordinary competitors or treating one only as a threat. Whether the social identities political scientists code are the ones that actually condition behavior, given the fluidity at the margins. And what institutions can take the place of the unions, congregations, and civic associations that once supplied parties with their relational infrastructure. Several speakers returned to that last question; none answered it. The absence of an answer was itself one of the convening's clearest findings.

Participants

- Ashraf Ahmed, Columbia School of Law, Columbia University
- Saladin Ambar, Rutgers University
- Thomas Asher, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Julia Azari, Marquette University
- Ruch Bloch Rubin, University of Chicago
- John Ferejohn, New York University
- Bernard Fraga, Emory University
- Archon Fung, Harvard University
- Keesha Gaskins-Nathan, Rockefeller Brothers Fund
- Fred Harris, Columbia University
- Geoffrey Kabaservice, Niskanen Center
- Ira Katznelson, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Kate Krimmel, Barnard College
- Priya Kurup, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Sam Rosenfeld, Colgate University
- LaFleur Stephens-Dougan, Princeton University
- Greg Wawro, Columbia University
- Laura Wood, Local Policy Lab