

Social Movements and Civic Culture: Toward A Politics of Practice

Summary Report from the Social Movements and Civic Culture Convening, October 24, 2025

By Thomas Asher and Priya Kurup

Summary

On October 24, 2025, the initiative on Renewing Democratic Representation convened a one-day working meeting on the role of social movements in American democratic life. The conversation drew academics, organizers, practitioners, and faith leaders into a single room and moved across three sessions: moments when social movements strengthen civic culture; the tensions between movements and political parties; and the relationship between power and strategy. This report synthesizes the discussion under the Chatham House rule and organizes the material thematically, presenting a throughline that knitted together the sessions.

American politics has come to be organized around a flawed paradigm in which people are invited to participate as consumers of choices that others produce, rather than as agents who articulate their own interests and build their own strategies. That paradigm has hollowed out parties, movements, and the relationships between them. Consequently, this trend has left the field open to right-wing movements and institutions that meet the human need for belonging, meaning, and collective practice. Renewal will require rebuilding the infrastructure that lets people experience politics as something they *do* rather than something they consume. That, in turn, requires hard reckoning with the political marketplace, with co-optation, with the asymmetries between left and right, and with the difference between mobilizing the already converted and building durable power by drawing in new members of an expanding coalition.

Politics of Practice: From Consumers to Producers

A central frame offered at the outset of the convening was the distinction between two ways of organizing political life. The dominant paradigm – in academic study and in everyday practice – treats politics as a spectacle. The unit of analysis is the individual; information is poured into people’s heads; and collective action is whatever emerges when individual choices are aggregated. Participation, in this paradigm, is essentially expressive in that people are invited to assent or dissent but little else. People are invited to register preferences that have been shaped elsewhere. The producers and the consumers of politics are separated, and most ordinary citizens find themselves on the consumer side.

Several participants drew on Cory Doctorow’s term “enshittification” to describe what happens to a political system, and to the people inside it, when interests and incentives diverge: attention is mistaken

for power, interaction for relationship, and scale for excellence. Even people doing good work are eventually enshittified by the structures they operate inside, participants cautioned.

The alternative, articulated repeatedly across the day, is a politics of practice. Its unit is the relationship rather than the individual. People are invited to participate as agents, to articulate their own interests, to develop their own strategies, and to create solutions rather than outsource their outrage to professionals. The forms of participation that emerge are not merely expressive but negotiated.

The failure to recognize this alternative paradigm has scholarly roots. Foundational work in political science explicitly placed the study of social movements outside the discipline, treating institutional access points as the proper terrain of politics and leaving movement activity to sociologists. The discipline charged with studying power has therefore been weakly equipped to think about how power is built outside formal institutions.

Belonging and Meaning

A recurring observation was that people are hungry for belonging, and the political right is meeting that hunger more effectively than the left. Participants familiar with right-wing spaces described a striking pattern: organizations like Turning Point USA and gatherings like Moms for Liberty are not primarily vehicles for legislative agendas. There is “nothing to sign, no legislative agenda.” What there is is connection. Around that connection, the right has built a substantial infrastructure of legal groups, foundations, and movement vehicles that recognize “parental rights” or similar nodal points as platforms worth investing in.

The asymmetry was named bluntly. Progressive groups are in a base-building crisis. The right is meeting deeply cynical people with an inversion of the usual political ask: rather than telling them to believe in a cause, it tells them, in effect, that the movement believes in them. “What I believe in is *you*,” is the message of groups such as Turning Point USA. The left, by contrast, seemingly can offer little more than a policy bill. Several participants returned to the question of meaning-making. One described studying an evangelical megachurch where members were organizing around racial justice and noted that the invitations people received there differed sharply from those typical in left-leaning organizations. Organizers offered invitations that were collective rather than individualistic, asking participants to develop their own shared analysis and strategy rather than execute scripts designed by professionals. People were drawn into communities of belonging and commitment, asked to take responsibility for their own judgments, and given the vulnerability of real relationships in which mistakes could be metabolized.

A related point concerned the relationship between belief and practice. Conventional models assume that beliefs precede action. People hold views and then act on them. Several participants argued the opposite: that engagement in shared practices and encounters shapes belief in ways top-down ideological work cannot. The current decline of mediating institutions – congregations, unions, civic associations – has hollowed out the spaces where private pain has historically been translated into public understanding. The work of value formation, of becoming the kind of person one wants to be in relation

to others, has fewer durable containers than it once did. Renewal, several participants suggested, depends on rebuilding such containers rather than expecting parties and policy alone to do that work.

The Political Marketplace and the Suppression of Agency

A particularly intense thread of discussion concerned what one participant called the marketplace at the center of the Democratic Party. Campaign finance, consulting, and nonprofit incentive structures together have turned the production of politics into the purchase of services. When a campaign spends ten million dollars on an election, the dollars flow to vendors who produce door-knocks, ads, and consulting. The politics happens in their shop, not in the lives of the people the campaign claims to represent.

Several speakers traced concrete consequences. A national survey of union members during the 2024 election found that about half of union members were not contacted by their local union about the election, and that fewer than a third had received any information about federal public policy. These findings cut against decades of assumption that the labor movement is one of the most politically active and tightly party-connected institutions in American life. Another participant described an effort to convince a large state union to redirect a larger share of its political budget toward its own members. The union ultimately committed about eight percent, and the engagement results increased substantially when more dollars were spent on members rather than on outside vendors.

A second consequence is the logic of cost-per-vote. One participant suggested that consultants and donors treat voters with sub-eighty-percent vote propensity scores as “lighting money on fire,” which directs investment away from the very communities where new participation might be cultivated. A science of measurement evaluates tactics by short-term efficiency rather than by long-term power-building. The result is the systematic suppression of agency at almost every layer of infrastructure shaped by the left. The right, in contrast, has made generational investments in power building at the level of community.

A third consequence concerns the internal life of organizations themselves. Boards and consultants tend to incentivize organizations to be accountable upward – to donors, to results frameworks, to logic models – rather than downward to a real base. The result is what one participant called a performance of politics rather than the doing of politics. Protecting the space for genuine member agency in this environment, the same participant noted, requires “ruthless leadership.”

Co-optation

Co-optation surfaced repeatedly, and the discussion sharpened around the recognition that it does not operate the same way on the left and the right. The morning included an extended account from a participant who had spent many years inside a major conservative social movement and later moved out of it. The movement, by the speaker’s own account, had been remarkably effective at policy. Many of its objectives had been written into federal and state law. The price was its capture, first by political actors and then by fundraisers. The participant described being told explicitly by operatives that fear and anger

were the engine of fundraising. The more of both fear and anger the movement generated, the more money it raised. Contracts were signed. The movement's stated values became increasingly difficult to distinguish from the professional goals of those inside it.

A pivotal moment in the speaker's account came when party strategists offered the movement a permanent plank on its signature issue in exchange for political loyalty, with the explicit logic that once that bargain was struck, the movement would have nowhere else to go. Several participants used this as a paradigm case of what happens when a single-issue movement is folded into a party's competitive strategy. The movement secures its policy gains, but the party gains permanent leverage over the movement. The broader political culture is then shaped by the affective register the bargain requires.

Other participants pointed out that co-optation looks different in other cases. The 2020 iteration of Black Lives Matter was distorted not primarily by corporate or political-class money infusion but by a flood of public donations to organizations that had no prior capacity to handle that volume of resources. In the welfare rights movement of an earlier generation, what some scholars described as co-optation, organizers from inside the movement described something else: poor women trying to build power, and academic and movement allies retreating when the demands became too challenging. Co-optation is real, but lessons drawn from one case may not be universal, and the direction of capture is contested. Several participants observed that they are more used to thinking about parties capturing movements than the reverse.

The discussion also distinguished different kinds of movements. One useful framing held that rights-based or moral movements operate on an either/or logic that resists compromise, while justice-oriented movements can negotiate at the margins. Another framing offered by a participant distinguished movements organized around rights (necessarily oppositional to those who deny the rights at stake), movements organized around belonging (organized around social identity), and movements organized around transactional questions like unionization (the most pluralistic in form but often the least morally compelling). These distinctions matter because the conditions under which a movement contributes to a thriving civic culture depend in part on which kind of movement it is.

The Asymmetry between Movements and Parties

A second cluster of observations concerned the asymmetric ways in which movements relate to the two major parties. Quantitative work documented the concrete effects of local protest on local political outcomes: each protest on the left was associated with roughly a 2.6 percentage-point increase in mobilization in the relevant congressional district and with about seventy-six dollars in additional contributions to a Democratic campaign or committee. When a protest takes place in a district whose representative does not share its ideology, that representative is more likely to be turned out at the next election. Protests were described as not merely canaries in coal mines but "seeds of the future government." The Tea Party, Black Lives Matter, and the No Kings protests were each cited as foreshadowings of subsequent political alignments.

Yet these alignments are unstable. Research suggesting that peaceful protest moves votes toward protesters while violent protest moves votes away largely dissolves once race and ethnicity are taken

into account. What looks like a question about protester behavior informing an emerging political alignment might turn out to be a question about how protesters are perceived, and perception is shaped by stereotype and racial framing more than by what protesters actually do.

Several participants argued that the right and the left differ structurally in how they manage the movement-party relationship. The Republican Party has cohered around a single figure to whom internal factions are deferential, suppressing internal conflicts in service of consolidated political power. The Democratic Party, by contrast, was described as deeply divided among constituencies that find it difficult to negotiate or compromise with each other and, as a result, less able to convert movement influence into material gain. A common formulation in the room – deliberately provocative – was that the Republican Party loves its base and the Democratic Party hates its own. The phrase was used to name a real asymmetry in how each party relates to organized civic energy.

The labor case offered a more granular illustration. Roughly forty-four percent of union members now identify as Republican, while union leadership remains predominantly to the left. This internal divergence creates pressures on leaders to suppress political messaging that might cost conservative members. Research presented at the convening found that union members to the left of their union are about as likely to stay as those aligned with the union's politics, while members to the right are more likely to exit. This asymmetry quietly but powerfully shapes the political voice unions can sustain. The notable exception was unions with a strong social identity that overcomes partisan pressure. One important correlate of that strength is the number of social activities a union hosts for its members. Yet nearly half of conservative-leaning union members reported having never attended such an activity, or not having attended one in the past year.

A longer historical puzzle threaded through the discussion. In Britain and other European democracies, class-based identity moved with workers from workplace to political life. In the United States, the gap between work and home was wider. The scholar Martin Shefter's argument that mass franchise preceded the union movement in the U.S. was cited to explain why workers' political identities were not formed primarily through class but through other identities. Moments when that gap appeared to close – the rise of the CIO between the mid-1930s and mid-1950s, the 1978 Progressive Alliance – were brought to a halt by external shocks (Taft-Hartley) and internal redirection (the UAW shifting resources into a presidential campaign). The work-home gap continues to bedevil the American labor movement and its relationship to the Democratic Party, creating a conundrum about whether to speak to identity or class.

Power, Participation, and Organizing

The third session reframed many of these threads under a single provocation: the broad coalition that builds its messaging around the protection of democratic institutions has become a political failure, having lost the ability to win elections at the moments that matter. Mass mobilization without political power was the recurring image. Crowds in the streets are not, by themselves, evidence that power is being built. Several democracies have seen mass mobilizations in the past fifteen years that did not coincide with – and in some cases preceded – democratic backsliding.

To distinguish democratic civic engagement from its imitators, one participant offered a three-step decision tree. The first question is about values. A movement organized around the exclusion or dehumanization of others cannot be democratic, regardless of how much it mobilizes. The second question is about practice. Whose agency is being built in the collective setting? A civic activity that confers popular legitimacy on an external actor – a candidate, a consultant, a donor – without building self-governance among the participants is not democratic in the relevant sense. The third question is whether power is actually being built. Participation that is producer-shaped but powerless does not move democratic outcomes.

A central distinction in this discussion was between mobilizing and organizing. Mobilizing is the work of activating the already-converted; organizing is the harder work of talking to the not-yet-converted. Several participants argued that the Democratic ecosystem has largely abandoned organizing in favor of micro-targeted mobilization, while at least some Republican operations have adopted organizing practices that progressives helped develop. One useful triad named in the discussion was aggregation (assembling enough people), association (the connective tissue of belonging), and articulation (the disciplined call-and-response between a constituency and the political vehicles that represent it).

A related caution was offered about leadership. The discussion noted that bottom-up movements without leadership tend to dissipate, and that the absence of recognizable mass leaders on the broader pro-democratic side is a symptom of a deeper organizing deficit. Movements that succeed are both social contracts and elite pacts. The leaders who appear in retrospect to have been morally singular were also political animals.

A further set of false binaries was identified as an obstacle to clear thinking: micro versus macro, practice versus meaning, individual versus collective, and scale versus depth. Multiple participants argued that the work ahead is to design structures – distributed strategies, “honeycombs” (an elegant term offered by one participant) of small-scale agency that can scaffold to relevant scale – that refuse these binaries.

Amid a challenge to false binaries, some widely recognized equivalences should be regarded as distinct. Power and participation are not the same thing. The question is how to channel participation into power. A framing introduced near the end of the day captured the cultural dimensions of this work: a thriving civic culture counters othering with belonging, fatalism with hope, individualism with collectivism, and the sense of a rigged system with a purpose-based politics that works for all.

Recommendations for Civic Renewal

A clear set of recommendations emerged from the discussions:

- **Invest in members, not vendors.** The findings on dues, contact rates, and engagement point in one direction: organizations claiming to speak for a base must spend significantly more on the political life of that base, and significantly less on outsourced production. The eight-percent benchmark cited above offers one concrete reference point for thinking about how far that shift would have to go.
- **Build mediating institutions where meaning can form.** The decline of unions, congregations, and civic associations has not been compensated by formal pro-democracy infrastructure. The containers

in which private pain becomes public understanding – house meetings, community assemblies, faith spaces, social gatherings inside member organizations – need to be rebuilt and resourced.

- **Champion organizations that promote voice.** Movement organizations that suppress dissent and treat members as ratifiers should be distinguished from voice organizations capable of genuine internal negotiation. The latter are where claims about dignity at the macro level can be reconciled with the nuance required to govern at the micro level.
- **Take the producer–consumer critique seriously in organizational design.** This implies hard choices about consultants, metrics, and the campaign-finance regime. The cost-per-vote logic encodes a theory of politics that excludes the very people new participation would need to come from.
- **Organize, do not only mobilize.** Talking to the converted is necessary but insufficient. The harder work of organizing the unconverted is what produces durable power. Several participants noted that this work is also where leadership is built.

The renewal of American democratic life requires a shift from politics-as-consumption to politics-as-practice. That shift is not merely cultural but structural. It depends on changes in how money flows, how organizations measure success, how dissent is held inside institutions, and how the people who would be the producers of politics are actually invited to do that work.

Participants

- Thomas Asher, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Marcus Board, Howard University
- Ruth Braunstein, Johns Hopkins University
- Julie Fernandez, Rockefeller Family Fund
- Daniel Gillion, University of Pennsylvania
- Keneshia Grant, Howard University
- Hahrie Han, Johns Hopkins University
- Fred Harris, Columbia University
- Alex Hertel Fernandez, SIPA, Columbia University
- Jennifer Hochschild, Harvard University
- Daniel HoSang, Yale University
- Ira Katznelson, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Madhav Khosla, Columbia Law School, Columbia University
- Kate Krimmel, Barnard College
- Priya Kurup, Columbia World Projects, Columbia University
- Robert Lieberman, Johns Hopkins University
- Liz McKenna, Harvard Kennedy School
- Sanjiv Rao, Democracy Fund
- Scott Reed, Faith in Action
- Lissy Romanow, IfNotNow
- Rob Schenck, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute
- Doran Schrantz, Organizing and Power Lab
- Dara Strolovitch, Yale University
- Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor, Princeton University
- Liz Theoharis, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice
- Nadia Urbanati, Columbia University

