

Deliberation and Competition: Renewing Democratic Participation and the Party System

Summary Report from the Ash Center / Columbia World Projects Convening, April 16–17, 2026
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Summary

On April 16-17, 2026, Columbia World Projects and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University convened thirty-five academics, democracy advocates, party practitioners, and organizers, for a two-day working meeting on how to make political parties more representative, responsive to the public, and trusted. The conversation moved across seven topics – class and representation, social movements, race, youth, democratic innovations inside parties, multi-party democracy, and political history – to arrive at a coherent argument. American political parties are essential to democratic life and yet are hollowed out, distrusted, and disconnected from the people they are supposed to represent. Their renewal will require more than procedural reform; it will require rebuilding the social and political infrastructure that once made parties feel useful, alive, and worth belonging to. Institutional renewal is urgently required.

The Diagnosis: A Hollowed Party System

Meeting participants converged on a diagnostic frame. Both major parties, but particularly the Democratic Party, have been “McKinseyfied.” They are consultant-driven, data-heavy, optimized around a small group of likely voters, organized around short campaign cycles, and absent from local life for most of the year. The campaign-finance regime reinforces this shape, pushing money toward late-cycle television and digital ads rather than year-round organizing. Roughly 90 percent of vote choice is driven by party identification, yet there is almost no associational party life. That is, there is no meaningful expectation of membership, regular participation, or community attached to that identification.

The result is a vicious cycle, especially in low-turnout communities. Analytics-heavy strategies prioritize “likely voters” and write off geographies where win probabilities look weak. Fewer candidates and campaigns emerge in those places. Communities see fewer reasons to engage, and the traditionally disengaged voters remain unengaged. The pattern is especially pronounced in rural areas, deep-red or deep-blue regions, and among disengaged working-class voters.

Donor Incentives as the Meta-Problem

A theme that surfaced in nearly every session is that donor and funder incentives shape almost everything else. The current graph of electoral money flow looks like a hockey stick with most funds arriving in the final three months of a cycle to be spent on television and digital ads. There is little

incentive to fund year-round base-building. Democratic donors more often favor short-term, media-visible investments; Republican donors often make five-to-twenty-year bets on grassroots infrastructure like Turning Point USA long before any clear return.

When the Republican National Committee hollowed out, a parallel infrastructure moved in and developed long-term grassroots presence, making long term bets on local capacity, and translating that presence into electoral returns. Participants observed that this willingness to fund durable outside organizations with real autonomy represents a significant strategic asymmetry between the left and right. Left donors, by contrast, tend toward shorter ROI timelines, tighter project specifications, and a preference for campaign spending over infrastructure investment. The result is an ecosystem in which right-leaning organizations have accumulated organizational depth that left-aligned counterparts largely lack.

Two donor worlds were distinguished. Foundation and 501(c)(3) donors have begun to shift somewhat away from strict ROI toward agency and democracy, but the dollars are relatively small. Hard-politics and Super PAC donors hold far more money and remain heavily focused on short-term electoral returns. The convening surfaced interest both in identifying positive-deviant funders who already support long-run, local party and movement infrastructure and in cultivating donors who will fund local organizing, mobilization of nontraditional voters, and experimentation.

Several participants noted that a generational shift may be underway. Younger donors may be more interested in persistent local infrastructure and direct community benefits than in six-to-twenty-four-month, media-heavy campaign cycles. The implication is that party renewal cannot be funded the way campaign cycles are funded. New donor metrics will be needed focused on local presence, leadership pipelines, and durable relationships. Donor expectations will need to shift toward power-building and trust-based, flexible support for organizations on the ground.

Underrepresentation across three axes: class, race, and youth

The hollowing of the party system is also a hollowing of representation. Across the convening, three lines of underrepresentation drew particular attention.

Class. Working-class people make up roughly half the population but only a tiny share of state and federal legislators. The former blue-collar caucus in Congress has nearly disappeared. One participant documented a place-based partisan divide in which the rural–urban presidential gap has grown from two to twenty points since the 1990s, and where rural overrepresentation in the Electoral College and Senate is now consolidated within the Republican coalition, while rural people of color remain underrepresented.

Presenters argued that the near-disappearance of working-class people from legislative office undermines democratic legitimacy and weakens government’s capacity to understand and respond to working-class needs, because internal party deliberation is skewed toward professionals. Standard reforms – higher legislative pay, public financing, and proportional representation – have not by themselves significantly changed class composition. The recommendations point instead to a combination of civil-society work (party–union partnerships in recruitment; training, seed funding,

fellowships, and leadership slots reserved for working-class people) and concrete policy change (cost-of-living stipends, the right to use campaign funds for genuine living expenses, right-to-return-to-work protections, and shorter campaigns). One participant extended this argument to the safety net itself: unemployment insurance and related programs can be designed to give unions structured roles in administering benefits, creating repeated contact points where workers are organized and educated. Indicators of the current crisis include three dismal key stats: 10 percent union density (6 percent in the private sector); 56 percent of union members not contacted by their local in the last national election; and 2 percent of state legislators from working-class backgrounds.

Race. Participants rejected monolithic framings of “racial minorities,” arguing that different racialized groups and subgroups have distinct histories, interests, and political trajectories, and that strategy must reflect that diversity. Particular attention was paid to protecting durable organizations—groups like the New Georgia Project and Fair Fight that have moved from protest into sustained political power—which are often targeted and need resilient legal and financial structures. The discussion also flagged the importance of interrogating how white identity is constructed and activated on both the left and right, and how it interacts with class, region, and culture. Black churches were identified as a major Democratic-aligned but under-organized infrastructure that many donor-funded efforts have avoided because of ideological discomfort and the perceived additional costs of mobilizing nontraditional voters.

Youth. Participants in the youth session emphasized real listening mechanisms that lead to action rather than consultation rituals - youth quotas and reserved roles with genuine authority; and local pathways into office through school boards, city councils, and county commissions. Specific recommendations included succession and dignified exit paths for older incumbents; staff and production capacity for young officials to deliver and tell their stories; campaign-finance changes that recognize childcare and caregiving; support for renters running for office; and better, non-exploitative campaign workplaces. Early polling cited in the discussion suggests roughly 36 percent of Gen Z bases Democratic, 21 percent Republican, and 43 percent independent or leaning—evidence of substantial youth appetite for options beyond the current two-party alignment. Several participants noted a generational split inside Gen Z, between those who came of age before and during Covid, with many of the younger cohort drawn to issues or figures beyond party label and likely to build infrastructure adjacent to parties rather than inside them.

Why Reform Cycles Often Disappoint

The political history session provided a sobering frame. Internal party reforms —more primaries, more open rules, more inclusion— in the United States tend to follow electoral defeats or clashes between party establishments and new constituencies. They are framed as “democratizing” as they can change who participates, but they rarely produce clear electoral gains and are often partially rolled back. Long primary ballots and wide-open processes are not always more democratic. Voters face information limits, and such reforms can entrench the status quo if there is no space for genuine deliberation or agenda-setting.

Moreover, more participation is not automatically democratic. Energetic, socially rooted parties can also empower anti-system and anti-democratic movements. As one participant observed, participation inside

parties is normatively ambiguous unless channeled by democratic rules and restraint. Reform efforts that simply extend enfranchisement within parties without building structured deliberation may not produce the renewal they promise.

Para-Parties and the Challenge of Structured Integration

Para-parties – Voto Latino, Faith in Minnesota, Jolt, Turning Point USA – function as organized constituencies with their own recruiting pipelines, issue agendas, and bases of trust. Yet the formal party largely treats them as external actors rather than as legitimate claimants to a seat at the table. One participant put the diagnosis plainly when asserting the Democratic Party is a coalition pretending to be a single party. When para-party voices are managed rather than empowered, conflicts get suppressed or driven into exit rather than actively negotiated in the course of bargaining. Organized constituencies outside the formal party system have no structural lever to push back against analytics-driven targeting that writes off neglected geographies and groups.

Historical examples suggest that para-party integration can work, though not automatically. Fusion voting in New York provided a structural mechanism through which the American Labor Party backed Franklin Roosevelt while maintaining a distinct ballot line. That is, they built a minor-party presence without risking giving the election to the opposition party. Minnesota offers a more recent model in which the DFL actively engaged a coalition of civic organizations, offering evidence that deep integration can take place (at least under certain conditions) inside the current party system. So, too, does the example of Turning Point USA. The political history session also noted the risk: para-party coalitions can reproduce old factionalisms under new labels. And fusion arrangements are now heavily restricted by state law across most of the country, making structural access harder to achieve through ballot mechanics alone.

The proposals that emerged were specific. Formalize para-party roles with real decision-making by providing a seat in conventions, in candidate recruitment, and in resource allocation so that disagreements are bargained rather than suppressed. Build a structured network of party-plus-para-party actors designed to perform the cohesive, year-round social functions that unions once provided. Create explicit entry points through which trusted movement organizations channel people into party-building roles rather than remaining permanently outside. The legal architecture matters. Campaign finance law, party registration rules, and ballot access requirements mean formal party institutions cannot be bypassed, but they can be made porous enough to respond to outside pressure. One line of argument held that the formal party could stay relatively lean so long as the para-party ecosystem is thick and vibrant. Others pushed back with a governance question, citing the observation that organizations that win with para-party energy still need to govern effectively after election day, and that requires a degree of collective discipline that only a formally accountable party institution can provide.

The Solution: Socially Thick and Politically Thick Parties

A useful framework that emerged from the political history session is to think of party renewal along two axes. A *socially thick* party is embedded in everyday life. It has a permanent local presence, helps people

navigate practical needs, sponsors shared spaces and communal events, and generates a sense of belonging. A *politically thick* party has robust internal contestation. It contains organized factions, formalized para-parties, multiple ballot lines where law permits, and structured deliberation in which constituencies can shape agendas, not just ratify them. Most reform conversations focus on procedural openness – more primaries, more direct votes – but more votes are not automatically more democratic. Healthy party renewal likely requires movement on both axes.

Participants also offered a more affirmative historical observation: parties used to provide spaces of communal joy, including festivals, rallies, social events. The European socialist fêtes and, in a very different register, contemporary Trump rallies belong to this lineage. The American left has largely lost this dimension even as the right has rediscovered its importance in recent election cycles. Renewal will likely require attention to culture and festivity, not only to rules and policy.

Several participants framed this in terms of a three-ring ecosystem. Formal parties (DNC/RNC, state and local committees) operate at the center of this framework. Para-parties or proto-parties operate at a second ring (the Working Families Party, ISAIAH in Minnesota, the Democratic Socialists of America, and on the right, organizations like Turning Point USA, to give a few examples). A third, outer ring of meaning-making spaces – churches, social clubs, wellness and alternative communities, local food scenes, online subcultures, and neighborhood organizations – informs the ecosystem but is not recognized as meaningfully attached to the party stem. The right has been faster to notice and absorb energy from the outer ring. Other democracy actors, too, need to map where meaning-making is already happening and connect parties and para-parties to those spaces, rather than assuming formal party infrastructure alone can generate belonging.

Concrete examples animated the discussion. Chloe Maxmin’s “dirt road” organizing in Maine – knocking doors that party professionals had written off – was cited as a model of place-based organizing. Minnesota’s ICE-Out mobilizations showed how strike-capable unions like SEIU Local 26 can leverage organizing capacity in defense of democracy. The Movement Voter Project was cited as a model for funding local groups with proven delivery capacity. Several speakers urged that state and local parties become actively involved in the provision of local public goods – helping people register for SNAP, coordinating hurricane response, building shared spaces like indoor playgrounds – so that residents experience the party as materially useful, not just as a campaign brand.

Reorienting from Washington to the States and Localities

A conviction running through nearly every session was that party renewal will be won in states and cities, not in Washington. The Democratic Party, in particular, has tied its brand too closely to a Congress perceived as gridlocked and ineffective. This attachment comes at the expense of executives like governors and mayors whose results in housing, public safety, and crisis response are visible to constituents. Participants pointed to Michelle Wu, Zohran Mamdani, and Andy Beshear as proof points that local and state elected officials can deliver, and urged that those stories be told as “party stories” rather than personal brands. The political history session placed this in a longer frame: presidentialism and nationalization across the twentieth century pushed power and attention toward the executive, hollowing parties as collective organizations and making sustained party-building harder.

The local orientation surfaced in nearly every concrete recommendation. School boards, city councils, and county commissions are the entry points where new working-class, young, and diverse candidates can plausibly run—yet the national committees typically give those races little institutional attention. State and county party chair races are often winnable by organized outsiders. Moreover, electoral reforms – fusion, ranked-choice, proportional representation – are most likely to advance city-by-city and state-by-state, with different mixes appropriate to different places. And the next-steps tracks are explicitly pitched at two or three willing states or metro areas, with engagement with party leaders intended to happen “not just in DC but in one or two strategically chosen states.”

Electoral Reform and the Multi-Party Question

The convening took up a set of structural reforms that would change how competition operates.

- **Fusion voting**, in which candidates appear on multiple party lines and votes are aggregated, was discussed as a way to build minor-party power without spoilers and to make officeholders accountable to multiple constituencies. Fusion has historically helped incorporate new constituencies – the American Labor Party backing FDR is the canonical example – but is heavily restricted today. Litigation to overturn fusion bans was identified as a plausible first step in some jurisdictions.
- **Proportional representation and ranked-choice voting** were discussed as complementary reforms, with several participants urging that no single reform suffices. The right approach is a bundled toolbox—different mixes for different places, starting at the city and state level, with norms and coalitions built before scaling.
- **Universal voting** on the Australian model—voting as a civic duty, with turnout approaching 90 percent—was raised as a more transformative option that would fundamentally change who parties must court.

The discussion surfaced a consistent caveat: reforms gain real traction only when they unlock voter demand (reducing “wasted vote” fears, allowing authentic preference expression) and when they make the structural problem visible to existing parties (showing both Democrats and Republicans how they currently lose races to spoilers). Moreover, no electoral reform will, by itself, fix party weakness or democratic decay. Each must be complemented by party and para-party organizing.

Tracks for Further Work

The convening identified six concrete tracks of work to pursue for groups that seek to enhance deliberation and competition inside the party structure.

- **Policy and legal reform.** Map concrete reform targets in a few states and localities – campaign-finance rules, fusion bans, and party law – to identify targets, draft model language, and coordinate litigation and legislative strategy. Priority changes include allowing campaign and party funds to support childcare, modest stipends, and some organizing salaries, and loosening constraints that lock in moneyball campaign models based on likely voter models.

- **Content ecosystem and narrative.** Convene a subgroup of campaign practitioners, digital organizers, and independent creators to design structures for identifying and gathering creators aligned with pro-democracy values; pilot one or two state- or issue-based content ecosystems; and document what works.
- **Associational party life and local infrastructure pilots.** Pilot models that create regular open local convenings (monthly assemblies, mini-conventions, festivals) and experiment with membership elements (dues, responsibilities, rights). Pair pilots with rigorous evaluation of attendance, activity, and effects on candidacies, turnout, and trust.
- **Youth and race pathways taskforce.** Form a small, time-bound taskforce to translate the race and youth discussions into shared design principles for pipelines—succession planning, fellowships, childcare support, renters running for office—and identify two or three existing partner organizations for joint pilots.
- **Synthesis memo and engagement with party leaders.** Over the next year, expand the written submissions from the convening into a coherent synthesis memo organized around party innovations and para-party ecosystems, multi-party and electoral reforms, class/race/youth representation, and funding and incentive reforms. Use the synthesis to workshop recommendations with party leaders, donors, and para-party actors in Washington and in one or two strategically chosen states.
- **Mapping and knowledge agenda.** Launch a lightweight research and mapping effort to identify meaning-making spaces and emerging civic formations in several regions and to track positive-deviant donors, states, and local party organizations already building this kind of infrastructure.

Taken together, these tracks share a common premise that democratic renewal in the United States runs through the slow, year-round, place-based work of rebuilding parties as institutions where people belong, contest, and govern. This work will require changes in law, in funding, in organizational practice, and in the imaginative range of what a party can be and how it should engage its members.

Participants

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