

The Crisis of Democratic Participation and How to Fix It

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What Two Years of Conversations about Democracy Revealed

Something is wrong with American democracy and most people know it. Trust in institutions is falling, as evidenced by a record low 10 percent approval rating of Congress among Americans polled in April 2026. Millions of Americans feel like politics happens to them, not with them. Participation has narrowed to a handful of one-off acts, whether casting a ballot, donating to a campaign, or scrolling past a political ad.

This project, supported by a generous grant from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, and conducted by Columbia World Projects in partnership with the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University, asks a simple but hard question: how do we fix our democratic system? Over twenty-four months and across five convenings, we brought together nearly one hundred researchers, organizers, civic leaders, foundation representatives, and political practitioners. We did not start with predetermined answers. We started by asking what is actually happening in a deeper sense than most political analysts recognize, why it is happening, and what a different path might look like.

The Problem is Structural, Not One of Messaging or Messengers

We are accustomed to bemoaning our candidates and elected officials even as the problem runs deeper than who represents us. The problem is how we are invited into the process of representation at the heart of our political system. American politics has come to treat citizens as targets, not participants. Political parties spend enormous sums of money. Most of this money runs through the system in the final weeks before an election in the form of ads and a surge of door knockers to identify and reach a narrow slice of “persuadable voters” in a small number of swing states, while the rest of the country is more or less ignored. The result is a vicious cycle: individuals and entire communities that are unlikely to vote for one party’s candidate get little or no campaign attention, which gives them fewer reasons to engage, which gives them fewer reasons to reconsider their support for one party over another – or decide to participate at all. This pattern repeats itself and deepens over time.

But this is a symptom, not the root cause. The deeper problem is that the institutions that once connected ordinary people to democratic life have hollowed out. Private-sector unions that once anchored working-class communities and provided year-round civic education, social life, and political connection have nearly disappeared. Local party organizations that once operated in neighborhoods, helped people with everyday problems, and gave citizens a real stake in politics have been replaced by national data operations that go quiet between election cycles. Civic education in schools has been cut. Religious congregations that have operated as sites of meaning making and anchored civic life are disappearing, with 100,000 churches projected to close over the next five years. The basic conditions that make democratic participation possible are in short supply for millions of Americans.

What has moved into this gap? On the right: evangelical networks, conservative media, and organizations such as Turning Point USA that often meet people where they are, offer genuine community, and make members feel like they matter. On the left: not much. People too often are instead offered the opportunity to send money to national advocacy groups that take the lead on and frame issues for their supporters. That asymmetry, rather than any particular policy or candidate, is one of the most important structural facts in American politics right now.

A Throughline

Across all five meetings we have held as part of this initiative to date, participants kept returning to a single core insight. The problem with American democracy is not that citizens don't care. It is that they aren't being given real opportunities to participate. Too often, they are invited to consume politics, not to make it.

American democracy has a supply problem, as the political scientist Hahrie Han put it in our very first planning meeting that helped set the agenda for this initiative. The institutions that once supplied belonging, civic education, and genuine participation have shrunk or disappeared. What has replaced them, for most people, is a stream of political ads and fundraising emails.

Real renewal requires rebuilding from the bottom up. It requires organizations and parties that are physically present in communities year-round, which treat members as people with vision who develop their own ideas and strategies and articulate future goals, rather than as an audience for professionals. It requires funding structures and civic incentives that support this kind of slow, relational, place-based work. And it requires honesty to acknowledge that this is harder, and takes longer, than sending another round of targeted ads.

Five Conversations, Five Distinct Lenses

Each convening built on the ones before it, but each brought a different focus and drew out different questions.

The November 2024 planning meeting took place three days after the presidential election. The timing shaped everything. The room was processing the fact that millions of people who had voted for President Biden in 2020 stayed home in the most recent election. The conversation turned quickly to democratic foundations. What does it actually take to build a democratic culture in which everybody feels they have a stake and not just to win an election? Participants introduced the idea that a healthy democracy needs to foster a belief that everybody has a stake in outcomes, the capacities to realize this belief, and a shared sense of collective identity that can hold disagreement and conflict without tearing apart. The central question the project would carry forward emerged from this insight. Are people being offered opportunities to build democratic citizenship and a sense of belonging to a collective project, or are they being treated as data points to be activated by partisans and forgotten soon after?

The meeting on what we called associational and civic life assessed the need for long-term cultivation of civic infrastructure — not singular reforms or deliverables, but the steady building of civic muscle. 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. 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 that are adjacent to political identity rather than organized around it. We are starting to see green shoots in the form of mutual aid groups and organizations developing home-grown forms of civic infrastructure, evangelical groups that are working to build civic culture and span divides, scholars mapping the supply of civic organizations, and philanthropy pivoting to nourish these efforts, all of which require additional attention and support.

The meeting on political parties focused on a different diagnosis than what came before. Where a party ideally contains, bridges, and holds together a diverse coalition of leaders with different perspectives, the United States doesn't really have a functioning two-party system. It has something closer to a zero-party system, which includes intense partisan feeling in the electorate, sitting on top of party organizations that are weak, hollow, and easily taken over. If the hallmark of a vibrant, robust political party is that it houses multiple factions, and these factions constrain the behavior of leaders who would violate the interests of others within the coalition, we are far from such ideal conditions today. Meanwhile, parties are no longer sufficiently responsive to the preferences of most Americans. They have stopped translating what people actually care about into real policy. They listen more to donors and consultants than to the people they claim to represent.

The meeting on social movements asked why so much organizing effort on the pro-democracy side has failed to produce durable power to force more responsive political parties. The answer that emerged was that most of what gets called political organizing today is instead mobilizing, activating people who are already converted and asking them to execute strategies designed by professionals. [Real organizing involves talking to people who aren't already on your side, building genuine relationships, and giving members real agency over decisions.](#) This form of engagement has become vanishingly rare. Participants also traced the ways that funding structures reinforce this problem as donors reward short-term results that can be measured, not the slow work of building community and leadership. The right, several participants noted, has been more willing to make ten- or twenty-year bets on civic infrastructure.

The meeting on deliberation and competition was the most solution-focused. It moved across seven sessions — class, race, youth, electoral reform, party innovation, multi-party competition, and political history — and tried to connect each to concrete next steps. Three practical frameworks stood out. First, the idea of socially thick and politically thick parties: parties that are embedded in everyday community life and that have real internal debate, not just top-down message discipline. Second, the role of para-parties, which means organizations like Mom's for Liberty, Voto Latino or Faith in Minnesota that work alongside political parties and could play a larger role if given formal seats in decision-making. Third, the observation that electoral reforms like ranked-choice voting, fusion voting, and proportional representation are valuable but not sufficient on their own. They have to be paired with the harder work of rebuilding civic infrastructure.

Key Lessons

These are the ideas that came up, in some form, in every conversation.

People need to be makers of politics, not just consumers of it. The most powerful civic organizations treat members as agents who develop their own strategies, not as audiences for professionals. That principle applies to unions, parties, social movements, and neighborhood groups alike. When people are given real agency, they tend to stay, grow, and bring others in. When they are treated as targets for mobilization, they disengage.

Belonging matters more than most political strategists admit. People join and stay in civic and political organizations not primarily because of policy platforms, but because they feel connected, valued, and part of something larger than themselves. An organization that is good at policy but bad at community will struggle to hold its base. An organization that creates genuine belonging – whether participants initially agree with the ideas set by the organization or not – will hold its members more durably.

Local, year-round presence is not optional. Democracy cannot be rebuilt through a surge of last-minute ads every two years. It requires being physically present in communities, year-round, doing things that are useful: helping people access services, hosting events, supporting local candidates, showing up when it isn't election season. Parties that disappear between campaigns are not really parties. They are brands.

The money problem is structural. The way campaigns are currently funded pushes money toward television (and increasingly digital ads) and away from community organizing. Until that changes even organizations that understand the problem will struggle to act differently. New metrics are needed: not cost-per-vote, but measurements of leadership pipelines, local presence, and the durability of relationships.

Not all civic engagement builds democracy. History shows that civic organizations can be vehicles for authoritarianism just as easily as for democracy. What matters is not just whether people are organized, but how, including whether the organization builds people's capacity to make decisions together, or whether it uses collective energy in service of someone else's agenda. Additionally, civic engagement can result in a vision of “We the People” that is achieved by subtraction – by seeking to remove communities from the body politic – rather than through inclusion. The civic culture we desperately need at this moment will draw people together, bridge differences, and empower them to engage political representatives on the issues that affect them most.

Change must start locally. The clearest opportunities – in election rules, party practices, and civic infrastructure – are at the city and state level. The national parties are gridlocked in ways the local parties often are not. Several participants pointed to Minnesota as a place where parties, unions, and community organizations have built a more integrated civic infrastructure than almost anywhere else in the country, and suggested it offers a model worth studying and scaling.

The Road Ahead

The [Renewing Democratic Participation initiative](#) is continuing its work. The full report from each convening will follow this summary. Taken together, they represent a serious attempt to understand what is actually happening in American democracy and to identify what it would take to build something better.

The goal is not another study that sits on a shelf. It is to contribute to the work of the organizers, civic leaders, researchers, and communities that are already rebuilding democratic life from the ground up. We aim to give that work sharper ideas for institutional reform. We additionally will bring together a broader network of people committed to the same project. Democracy works best when people feel in community and genuinely connected to it, not as voters alone but as active participants in public life. That is who this initiative is for. And that goal of bringing individuals into a shared and active community is not just the ambition of this initiative but of any thriving democracy.