

What We Learned Over Five Meetings

Across the initial five meetings we have held as part of this initiative, 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. They are invited to consume politics, not to make it.

American democracy is in crisis because the institutions and organizations – civic associations, religious congregations, political parties, social movements, and labor unions – have been hollowed out. These entities once shaped a sense of belonging to a shared political community by bringing people together to learn and exercise democratic skills and connecting them to the project of political representation. Their role is considerably weakened today.

Over five convenings from 2024 to 2026, the group examined implications of the hollowing of political parties, the changing role of social movements, and the loss of civic organizations that once gave ordinary people real power in their communities.

We invite you to dive deeper into the key insights from each meeting:

Meeting 1: Planning Convening

November 8, 2024

- **The core challenge is fostering a shared sense of commitment and belonging to a common political project.** A healthy democracy depends on citizens sharing a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. The problem today is not just polarization and the process of partisan sorting. It's that political identity has become defined by who you're against rather than by a sense of inclusion in a broader democratic community in which people's fates are intertwined.
- **Civil society is not automatically good for democracy.** Clubs, churches, and unions can build democratic habits. But history shows they can also support illiberalism, exclusion, and division. Which kinds of organizations actually develop people's capacity for self-governance and a commitment to a single political project, even amidst strong political differences?
- **The problem is on the supply side, not the demand side.** Too much political analysis blames citizens for being disengaged. But democratic habits aren't innate. They have to be built through real institutions and relationships. The better question is: what opportunities for participation are people actually being offered?
- **Study what works, not just what's broken.** Identify places and processes where civic renewal is actually happening. What is possible matters as much as what is probable.

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Meeting 2: Civic Renewal and Associational Life

March 28, 2025

- **Associational life and civic life are not the same thing.** Americans belong to all kinds of groups, but most of that activity is disconnected from democratic self-governance. Much of what passes for civic engagement today is too thin, too partisan, or too detached to matter.

- **Civic infrastructure requires long-term investment.** The erosion of unions, local newspapers, and religious congregations is a genuine loss of civic capacity that no app or advocacy campaign can replace.
- **The party question is unavoidable and unresolved.** Political parties have an organizational reach that few institutions can match, but they are deeply distrusted. Whether civic renewal can or should happen on a nonpartisan basis outside the party system remained the day's most contested question.
- **Structural obstacles don't disappear through local effort alone.** Gerrymandering, organized efforts to raise the cost of civic organizing, and a philanthropic economy that rewards extreme positions all work against patient, community-rooted renewal.

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Meeting 3: Parties and Civic Culture

May 16, 2025

- **The U.S. has a “zero-party system,” not a two-party doom loop.** Our political system is characterized by intense partisan polarization in tandem with formal party organizations that are hollow and easily captured. The problem is not too much partisan conflict — it's that the institutions supposed to channel that conflict have been gutted.
- **Parties have become brands.** Much of what defines a party today is determined by the other side, and parties listen far more to donors and consultants than to voters. As a result, they spend more time signaling priorities than listening and arriving at a politics and policies that will hold together diverse coalitions.
- **The fix requires rebuilding year-round local presence.** Parties need permanent, locally rooted “clubhouses” where staff and volunteers live among the communities they represent — not late-cycle ad buys

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Meeting 4: Social Movements and Civic Culture

October 24, 2025

- **Politics has turned ordinary people into consumers instead of producers.** The dominant model treats people as an audience asked to register preferences shaped by professionals. A “politics of practice” treats people as agents who articulate their own interests and build their own power. We need far more of the latter, less of the former.
- **The right is meeting people's hunger for belonging more effectively than the left.** Organizations like Turning Point USA lead with connection, not policy. The message — “what I believe in is you” — is a direct inversion of the usual political ask, and it's working..
- **“Mobilizing” and “organizing” are not the same thing.** Mobilizing activates the already-converted. Organizing builds relationships with people who aren't yet on your side. The broad pro-democratic coalition has largely abandoned organizing — and the structural consequences are showing, offering mass mobilization without political power.

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Meeting 5: Deliberation and Competition

April 16–17, 2026

- **Both parties (but especially Democratic campaigns) have been “McKinseyfied.”** Consultant-driven, data-heavy, beholden to donor incentives and late-cycle funding, and absent from local life most of the year — this is the portrait of both major parties today. About 90% of vote choice is driven by party identification, yet there is almost no community life attached to that identification.
- **Party renewal requires being both “socially thick” and “politically thick.”** A socially thick party generates genuine belonging through local presence. A politically thick party has real internal debate and lets constituencies shape agendas rather than just ratify decisions. More primaries alone won’t get you there.
- **Para-parties are where much of the political energy actually lives.** Organizations like Faith in Minnesota, Voto Latino, Jolt, and Turning Point USA function as organized constituencies with real bases and agendas — but formal parties treat them as outsiders rather than partners.
- **Working-class people, young people, and communities of color are locked out of office.** Only 2% of state legislators come from working-class backgrounds; only 10 percent of Congress is represented by Gen Z or Millennials even as they make up 43 percent of the US population; and only 26 percent of the Senate are people of color even as 58 percent of the country identifies as Black, Hispanic, Asian American or Native America. Fixes require supporting pipelines to elected office: childcare support for candidates, cost-of-living stipends, youth quotas with real authority, and local entry points through school boards and city councils.

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