



AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

OUR COMMON PURPOSE

REINVENTING
AMERICAN
DEMOCRACY
FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY

COMMISSION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP



Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us in returning to our Constituents were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partizans in support of them, we might prevent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the salutary effects and great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign Nations as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity.

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
THE COMMISSION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

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CENTURY

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES
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A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Our *Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, a report of the American Academy's Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, comes at a pivotal moment in the history of the American experiment.

As this report goes to press, our nation, already challenged by shifting political, economic, and social forces, is also in the early days of a serious public health and economic crisis. While it is impossible to predict today how the COVID-19 epidemic will impact the fabric of the United States and the world, the work done by the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship does allow one confident prediction: Americans will respond to the current challenge and its aftereffects with creative acts of generosity and innovative solutions borne of the recognition that we are all in this together. In the pages that follow, you will find this spirit expressed in Americans' own words. Never before has the work of the Academy reflected the voices and experiences of such a broad and diverse group of Americans. In 2019, the Commission conducted forty-seven listening sessions in cities and towns around the country and solicited the stories and experiences with the democratic process of hundreds of Americans from different demographic and political backgrounds (for a full list, see Appendix B). Their wisdom and commitment not only inspired the Commission's final recommendations but also demonstrate the potential for what the United States can become when all of its citizens are actively engaged in the civic and political life of their communities and the nation.

Throughout our country's history, the American people have confronted moments of crisis with resilience and an openness to reinvention, enabling our nation to become a better version of itself. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the members of this Commission recognized that we found ourselves at a similar crossroads. The recommendations in this report touch all sectors of American life and offer a bold path that will require all of us to commit to reinventing aspects of our constitutional democracy. The realities of a disruptive media and information environment, outdated political institutions, economic and social inequality, and hyperpartisan political leadership have laid bare the urgency of this imperative. The Commission challenges us to achieve significant progress toward its recommendations by 2026, our nation's 250th anniversary.

The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship was established in the spring of 2018 at the initiative of then Academy President Jonathan Fanton and Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr., Chair of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation. Mr. Bechtel challenged the Academy to consider what it means to be a good citizen in the twenty-first century, and to ask how all of us might obtain the values, knowledge, and skills to become still better citizens. Since 1780, projects that work to bolster American citizens' understanding of and engagement with the institutions of their government have been a hallmark of the Academy's work. Our charter states that the Arts and Sciences "promote the honor and dignity of the government which patronizes them," and that the



“end and design” of the American Academy is to “cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.” Through its recommendations, the Commission has looked to increase citizens’ capacity to engage in their communities, counter rising threats to democratic self-government, and rebuild trust in political institutions. We are grateful for Mr. Bechtel’s vision and leadership and for the generous support of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation for the work of the Commission.

This work would not have been possible without the knowledgeable, dedicated, and distinguished leadership of the Commission’s cochairs, who convened weekly for two years in support of this project. The Academy would like to express deep gratitude to Danielle Allen, the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University and Director of Harvard’s Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics; Stephen Heintz, President and CEO of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund; and Eric Liu, Cofounder and CEO of Citizen University. The Academy is also grateful for the wise guidance and hard work of their fellow Commission members, who graciously shared their time and expertise and who ultimately put aside personal concerns with individual recommendations to offer their unanimous support for this report to better the common good (see Appendix D for a complete list of Commission members). In preparation for this final report, they published several occasional papers, including *The Internet and Engaged Citizenship* (2019), *The Data Driving Democracy* (2020), and *The Political and Civic Engagement of Immigrants* (2020). All Commission publications, detailed information about the recommendations, supporting data, and regular updates on the project are now available at www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose.

Thank you to the many Academy Fellows who have supported this project since its inception and especially to the members of the Board of Directors, Council, and Trust for their commitment to this Commission and to the ongoing work of the Academy on issues related to American institutions, society, and the public good. We are grateful, too, to Alan and Lauren Dachs and to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for supporting the ongoing outreach and implementation of the Commission’s work.

Thanks as well to the members of the Academy staff who ably served this Commission, preparing this report and planning its release: Darshan Goux, Paul Erickson, Gabriela Farrell, Katherine Gagen, Alison Franklin, Peter Robinson, Phyllis Bendell, Peter Walton, Heather Struntz, and Scott Raymond.

The Fellows of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences have contributed to advancing the interests of this nation and its people for almost 250 years. As we approach that auspicious anniversary, we face new challenges that will once again require leadership and expertise. Many of you will be at the forefront of that work. I hope that as you do so, you will join me in supporting and advancing the vital work of this Commission, so that our country may emerge reinvented and made stronger by the engagement of all Americans to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Sincerely,

David W. Oxtoby

President, American Academy of Arts and Sciences





INTRODUCTION

Founded nearly 250 years ago, the United States of America is the world's oldest constitutional democracy. Its infancy, under the Articles of Confederation, was turbulent. Its early prospects, at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, were very much uncertain. At the Convention, Benjamin Franklin—catalyst of the Revolution, leading citizen of the republic, enslaver turned abolitionist—wondered as he observed the conflicts, compromises, and contradictions of the process: was the young nation's sun rising or setting? With the signing of the Constitution, he concluded, the sun was rising.

Today, the question of rise or fall is more pertinent than ever. In this age of globalization, centralized power, economic inequality, deep demographic shifts, political polarization, pandemics and climate change, and radical disruption in the media and information environments, we face these converging trends in a constitutional democracy that feels to many increasingly unresponsive, nonadaptive, and even antiquated.

Consider the data. The public's approval rate for Congress—our national legislature and the first branch of government established in the Constitution, charged with articulating the will of the people—hit a historic low of 9 percent in 2013.¹ Now rates hover around a still-meager 25 percent. Income and wealth inequality levels have exceeded those on the eve of the Great Depression. Social mobility has stagnated. Inequities continue to track lines of race, gender, and ethnicity, revealing deep

structural unfairness in our society. A surge in white nationalism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant vitriol has flooded our politics with sentiments corrosive to the ethic of a democratic society, while people of color continue to confront barriers to opportunity and participation. At all levels of our system, voter turnout remains low in comparison to other advanced democracies. Trust in institutions has collapsed while an online culture of gleeful, nihilistic cynicism thrives. Fewer than one-third of Millennials consider it essential to live in a democracy.² Partisan rancor has not reached the intensity of Civil War-era America—but it is nonetheless very high. When Americans are asked what unites us across our differences, the increasingly common answer is *nothing*.

Yet this is not the whole story. It is not even the decisive chapter. As we have traveled the United States in recent months and listened to Americans from many walks of life, we have heard disappointment and frustration, but even more, we heard a yearning to believe again in the American story, to feel connected to one another. We heard stories of surging participation and innovation, of communities working to build new connections across long-standing divides, and of individual citizens suddenly awakening to the potential of their democratic responsibilities. Even as we survey the impact of COVID-19, we see incredible individual and collective efforts to sustain civic resilience. That is why we have come to believe a reinvention of our constitutional democracy remains entirely within reach—and urgently needed. After all, a superlative benefit of constitutional democracy, as articulated in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, is that it is adaptable to new circumstances and unanticipated challenges. This report, *Our Common Purpose*:

Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century, lays out a case for renewed civic faith. It offers a set of recommendations for building a fresh collective commitment to democratic citizenship, to American constitutional democracy, and to one another. Our theory of action is the idea that improvement of our civic culture and of our institutions must go hand in hand. Each is necessary; neither on its own is sufficient.

A superlative benefit of constitutional democracy, as articulated in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, is that it is adaptable to new circumstances and unanticipated challenges.

Our conversations about democratic civic life are now so polarized that we must pause to define our central terms. In the twenty-first century, *democracy* refers to a political system in which legislative and chief executive decision-makers are elected by majority or plurality rule by eligible voters, with a presumption that the franchise approaches universal adult suffrage among legal citizens and that mechanisms are in place to protect ideological, religious, ethnic, and other demographic minorities. This definition refers to representative rather than direct democracy, reflecting that all existing democratic societies are

representative. While we use both *constitutional democracy* and *democracy* in this report, we recognize these as synonyms to other terms in common usage in the United States, including “republic” and “democratic republic” (see Appendix A for more key terms). In traditions of American political thought, all these terms capture forms of rights-based representative government in which 1) elected government leadership is constrained by constitutionalism, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the free expression of the people, and the legal protection and moral affirmation of the rights of individuals; and 2) groups and parties that are not part of electoral majorities cannot easily be disenfranchised or suffer loss of rights. We do not naively claim that more democracy simply in the form of more participation will solve our problems. We seek instead to achieve healthy connections between robust participation and political institutions worthy of participation. The beauty of constitutional democracy is that winners of an election are confined by the Constitution, a separation of powers, and a genuine institutionalized distrust of power, all democratically established.

Consequently, a healthy constitutional democracy depends on a virtuous cycle in which responsive political institutions foster a healthy civic culture of participation and responsibility, while a healthy civic culture—a combination of values, norms, and narratives—keeps our political institutions responsive and inclusive. Institutions and culture intersect in the realm of civil society: the ecosystem of associations and groups in which people practice habits of participation and self-rule and reinforce norms of mutual obligation. Throughout our proceedings and in this report, we use a meaning of *citizenship* that extends beyond legal status to express a broader ethical

conception of engagement in community and contribution to the greater good.

Several scholars have argued that constitutional democracy in the United States experienced a “second founding” in the years immediately following the Civil War with the adoption of the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution that abolished slavery, guaranteed equal protection of the laws, and made black male citizens eligible to vote. The civil rights movement is, in turn, sometimes described as a “third founding.” We on this Commission believe that the profoundly challenging conditions of the twenty-first century pose an urgent threat to the future of our democratic way of life and thus require a “fourth founding”: rooted not only in the language of our Constitution and laws, but also in our expanded national creed of liberty and justice for all; not only in the actions of government, but also in the commitments of citizens; not only in the reinvention of federal structures, but also in devolution of power to local governance; not only in research and analysis, but also in love of country and one another.

We have identified six imperatives at the heart of this fourth founding: 1) to achieve **equality of voice and representation** through our political institutions; 2) to **empower voters** in a lasting way; 3) to **ensure the responsiveness** of our political institutions; 4) to dramatically expand the capacity of civil society organizations that foster “**bridging**” across lines of difference; 5) to build **civic information architecture that supports common purpose**; and 6) to inspire a **culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another**.

These imperatives produce strategies for action. Below we detail those strategies and the specific recommendations to implement

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them. Together, they reflect the interplay between civic culture and institutions. They also reflect the interplay between national leadership and locally driven reform and between individual liberty and collective action. Finally, these strategies provide a framework for ensuring the resilience of our constitutional democracy, even in the face of crisis.

The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship is a two-year project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Its membership comprises thirty-five dynamic and thoughtful members: scholars, practitioners, business leaders, and civic catalysts who cross geographic, demographic, and ideological boundaries. Danielle Allen of Harvard University, Stephen Heintz of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Eric Liu of Citizen University serve as cochairs of the Commission. Over the last two years, the Commission has focused on the interaction in the United States specifically of political institutions and civic culture, on their nourishment by civil society, and on the individual practice of democratic citizenship. We consistently sought to activate the adaptability of our institutions and culture to equip ourselves to meet the hard challenges of our day, but we did not, as we worked,

anticipate a near-term challenge as difficult as that presented by the novel infectious disease COVID-19. In the final stage of writing this report, we paused to reflect on its meaning for our work and came to the conclusion that it left our fundamental principles and recommendations unchanged. A constitutional democracy can meet challenges, even on this scale, provided that it maintains the health that gives it flexibility and agility. The form of health needed by a constitutional democracy, even in times of crisis, flows from exactly the areas of focus in this report: equality of voice and representation, empowerment of voters, responsiveness of political institutions, bridging ties across lines of difference, civic information architecture that supports common purpose, and a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another.

Through our work, we explored the factors that encourage and discourage people from becoming engaged in their communities; we shed light on the mechanisms that help people connect across demographic and ideological boundaries, and identified spaces that promote such interaction; and we examined how the changes in our media environment have altered what civic engagement and free

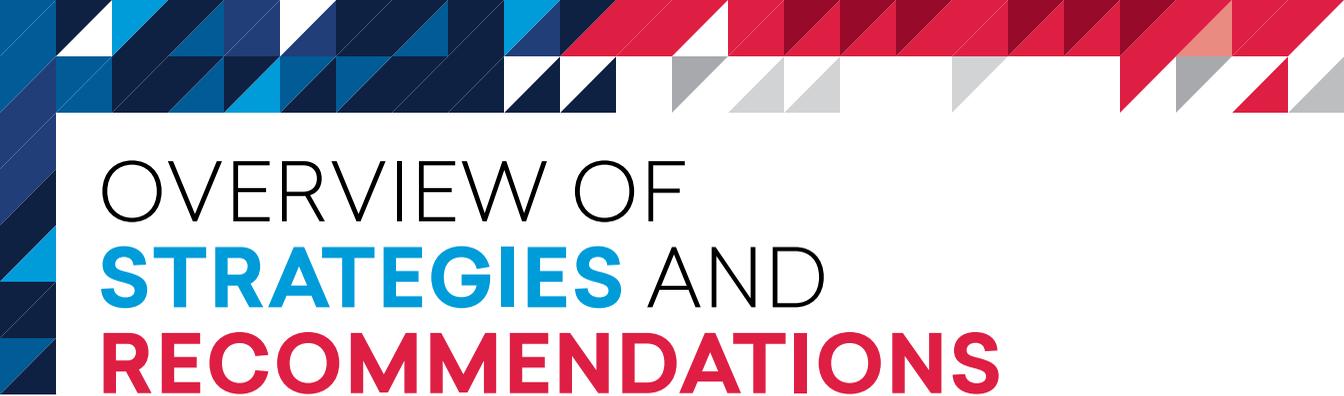
expression look like in many communities. In order to develop recommendations and reflect the diversity of conditions and concerns in our nation, we conducted a comprehensive review of previous reform recommendations, we brought together and interviewed thought leaders, and, perhaps most formatively, we held nearly fifty deep listening sessions with Americans in diverse communities around the country: among them, first-year students of a military academy, self-identified conservatives and progressives, faith leaders, rural civic leaders, urban activists, and immigrants and refugees from around the world. (Appendix B lists these sessions.) Through this multipronged engagement process, we identified common barriers to civic participation as well as success stories of democratic engagement, and illuminated a possible path of reinvention. Many of our recommendations will be familiar, and the work of this Commission has benefited greatly from the hard work and hard-earned expertise of others who generously shared their experience, insights, and suggestions. Our innovation, we hope, lies in how we have combined these ideas and insights into a coherent vision for democratic reinvention.

This report contains four sections: First, we summarize the six strategies and thirty-one recommendations proposed by the Commission. Second, we step back to assess the crisis of democratic citizenship today. Third, we offer a case for reinvention, explain the theory of action behind each of our strategies, and offer more detail on our recommendations. Finally, we conclude with a call to action for Americans in multiple sectors and describe how every one of us can take on the task of fulfilling the promise of our constitutional democracy. Throughout, we weave in the voices of Americans who participated in our nationwide listening sessions.

Reaching consensus on this *package* of recommendations was not without challenges. Several members of the Commission do not personally support one or another of the *individual* recommendations, yet they were willing to relinquish those reservations in support of the potential benefits of the package taken as a whole. In short, we compromised; we sought to restore that faded art. The members of the Commission were ultimately inspired by the model set by Benjamin Franklin at the Constitutional Convention. As he cast his vote in favor of that imperfect instrument, Franklin reminded his colleagues of their lasting obligation:

Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good. I have never whispered a syllable of them abroad. Within these walls they were born, and here they shall die. If every one of us in returning to our Constituents were to report the objections he has had to it, and endeavor to gain partizans in support of them, we might prevent its being generally received, and thereby lose all the salutary effects and great advantages resulting naturally in our favor among foreign Nations as well as among ourselves, from our real or apparent unanimity.

We on this Commission offer our report in the same spirit: a spirit of humility and higher responsibility for an American constitutional democracy fully worthy of our mutual commitment to it and to one another. We hope to inspire significant progress on all our recommendations by 2026, the 250th anniversary of the nation's birth, and in our small way, to help speed and secure the fourth founding of the United States of America.



OVERVIEW OF **STRATEGIES** AND **RECOMMENDATIONS**

STRATEGY 1: **Achieve Equality of Voice and Representation**

RECOMMENDATION 1.1

Substantially enlarge the House of Representatives through federal legislation to make it and the Electoral College more representative of the nation's population.

RECOMMENDATION 1.2

Introduce ranked-choice voting in presidential, congressional, and state elections.

RECOMMENDATION 1.3

Amend or repeal and replace the 1967 law that mandates single-member districts for the House, so that states have the option to use multi-member districts on the condition that they adopt a non-winner-take-all election model.

RECOMMENDATION 1.4

Support adoption, through state legislation, of independent citizen-redistricting commissions in all fifty states. Complete nationwide adoption, through federal legislation, that requires fair congressional districts to be determined by state-established independent citizen-redistricting commissions; allows these commissions to meet criteria with non-winner-take-all models; and provides federal funding for these state processes, with the goal of establishing national consistency in procedures.

RECOMMENDATION 1.5

Amend the Constitution to authorize the regulation of election contributions and spending to eliminate undue influence of money in our political system, and to protect the rights of all Americans to free speech, political participation, and meaningful representation in government.

RECOMMENDATION 1.6

Pass strong campaign-finance disclosure laws in all fifty states that require full transparency for campaign donations, including from 501(c)(4) organizations and LLCs.

RECOMMENDATION 1.7

Pass “clean election laws” for federal, state, and local elections through mechanisms such as public matching donation systems and democracy vouchers, which amplify the power of small donors.

RECOMMENDATION 1.8

Establish, through federal legislation, eighteen-year terms for Supreme Court justices with appointments staggered such that one nomination comes up during each term of Congress. At the end of their term, justices will transition to an appeals court or, if they choose, to senior status for the remainder of their life tenure, which would allow them to determine how much time they spend hearing cases on an appeals court.

STRATEGY 2: Empower Voters

RECOMMENDATION 2.1

Give people more choices about where and when they vote, with state-level legislation in all states that supports the implementation of vote centers and early voting. During an emergency like COVID-19, officials must be prepared to act swiftly and adopt extraordinary measures to preserve ballot access and protect the fundamental right to vote.

RECOMMENDATION 2.2

Change federal election day to Veterans Day to honor the service of veterans and the sacrifices they have made in defense of our constitutional democracy, and to ensure that voting can occur on a day that many people have off from work. Align state election calendars with this new federal election day.

RECOMMENDATION 2.3

Establish, through state and federal legislation, same-day registration and universal automatic voter registration, with sufficient funding and training to ensure that all government agencies that have contact with citizens include such registration as part of their processes.

RECOMMENDATION 2.4

Establish, through state legislation, the preregistration of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds and provide educational opportunities for

them to practice voting as part of the preregistration process.

RECOMMENDATION 2.5

Establish, through congressional legislation, that voting in federal elections be a requirement of citizenship, just as jury service is in the states. All eligible voters would have to participate, in person or by mail, or submit a valid reason for nonparticipation. Eligible voters who do not do so would receive a citation and small fine. (Participation could, of course, include voting for “none of the above.”)

RECOMMENDATION 2.6

Establish, through state legislatures and/or offices of secretaries of state, paid voter orientation for voters participating in their first federal election, analogous to a combination of jury orientation and jury pay. Most states use short videos produced by the state judicial system to provide jurors with a nonpolitical orientation to their duty; first-time voters should receive a similar orientation to their duty.

RECOMMENDATION 2.7

Restore federal and state voting rights to citizens with felony convictions immediately and automatically upon their release from prison, and ensure that those rights are also restored to those already living in the community.

STRATEGY 3: Ensure the Responsiveness of Government Institutions

RECOMMENDATION 3.1

Adopt formats, processes, and technologies that are designed to encourage widespread participation by residents in official public hearings and meetings at local and state levels.

RECOMMENDATION 3.2

Design structured and engaging mechanisms for every member of Congress to interact directly and regularly with a random sample of their constituents in an informed and substantive conversation about policy areas under consideration.

RECOMMENDATION 3.3

Promote experimentation with citizens' assemblies to enable the public to interact directly with Congress as an institution on issues of Congress's choosing.

RECOMMENDATION 3.4

Expand the breadth of participatory opportunities at municipal and state levels for citizens to shape decision-making, budgeting, and other policy-making processes.

STRATEGY 4: Dramatically Expand Civic Bridging Capacity

RECOMMENDATION 4.1

Establish a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure to scale up social, civic, and democratic infrastructure. Fund the Trust with a major nationwide investment campaign that bridges private enterprise and philanthropic seed funding. This might later be sustained through annual appropriations from Congress on the model of the National Endowment for Democracy.

RECOMMENDATION 4.2

Activate a range of funders to invest in the leadership capacity of the so-called civic one million: the catalytic leaders who drive civic renewal in communities around the country. Use this funding to encourage these leaders to support innovations in bridge-building and participatory constitutional democracy.

STRATEGY 5: Build Civic Information Architecture that Supports Common Purpose

RECOMMENDATION 5.1

Form a high-level working group to articulate and measure social media's civic obligations and incorporate those defined metrics in the Democratic Engagement Project, described in Recommendation 5.5.

RECOMMENDATION 5.2

Through state and/or federal legislation, subsidize innovation to reinvent the public functions that social media have displaced: for instance, with a tax on digital advertising that could be deployed in a public media fund that would support experimental approaches to public social media platforms as well as local and regional investigative journalism.

RECOMMENDATION 5.3

To supplement experiments with public media platforms (Recommendation 5.2), establish a public-interest mandate for for-profit social media platforms. Analogous to zoning requirements, this mandate would require such for-profit digital platform companies to support the development of designated public-friendly digital spaces on their own platforms.

RECOMMENDATION 5.4

Through federal legislation and regulation, require of digital platform companies: interoperability (like railroad-track gauges), data portability, and data openness sufficient to equip

researchers to measure and evaluate democratic engagement in digital contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 5.5

Establish and fund the Democratic Engagement Project: a new data source and clearinghouse for research that supports social and civic infrastructure. The Project would conduct a focused, large-scale, systematic, and longitudinal study of individual and organizational democratic engagement, including the full integration of measurement and the evaluation of democratic engagement in digital contexts.

STRATEGY 6: Inspire a Culture of Commitment to American Constitutional Democracy and One Another

RECOMMENDATION 6.1

Establish a universal expectation of a year of national service and dramatically expand funding for service programs or fellowships that would offer young people paid service opportunities. Such opportunities should be made available not only in AmeriCorps or the military but also in local programs offered by municipal governments, local news outlets, and nonprofit organizations.

RECOMMENDATION 6.2

To coincide with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, create a Telling Our Nation's Story initiative to engage communities throughout the country in direct, open-ended, and inclusive conversations about the complex and always evolving American story. Led by civil society organizations, these conversations will allow participants at all points along the political spectrum to explore both their feelings about and hopes for this country.

RECOMMENDATION 6.3

Launch a philanthropic initiative to support the growing civil society ecosystem of civic gatherings and rituals focused on the ethical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of our civic values.

RECOMMENDATION 6.4

Increase public and private funding for media campaigns and grassroots narratives about how to revitalize constitutional democracy and encourage a commitment to our constitutional democracy and one another.

RECOMMENDATION 6.5

Invest in civic educators and civic education for all ages and in all communities through curricula, ongoing program evaluations, professional development for teachers, and a federal award program that recognizes civic-learning achievements. These measures should encompass lifelong (K–12 and adult) civic-learning experiences with the full community in mind.

THE CHALLENGES

A PREVAILING SENSE OF CRISIS

Few problems have only one cause. The challenges facing the nation's constitutional democracy are not the result of single events, specific elections, or one set of decisions. Data about the state of political and civic life in the United States, along with the nearly fifty conversations that the Commission held with Americans across the country, reveal that there is a multitude of factors that impact how people interact with their neighbors, their civic institutions, and their government. These factors are the result of many forces, some of them entirely local in nature, while others are global and systemic. The major stressors of the twenty-first century—a fragmented media environment, profound demographic shifts, artificial intelligence and other technological advances, economic inequality, centralized power, and climate change—require a fundamental reassessment of U.S. political institutions, civil society ecosystems, and civic norms. If this was not already clear before COVID-19 revealed the strains on the body politic, it is painfully evident now.

No narrow set of recommendations can address all of these challenges, and no single institution has the reach to make an impact across all of these domains. Improving, building, and sustaining the practice of democratic citizenship requires that we recognize how these challenges overlap and identify the intersections of our political institutions, civic culture, and civil society where reform can have the widest impact. It requires too that we find our way back to love of country and one another. We emphasize the word *love*. What we need is as much about our motivations as about mechanisms of change.

The Commission did its fact-finding in three main ways. It reviewed the existing quantitative data and literature on political and civic engagement, demographic change, media

shifts, and socioeconomic conditions; it consulted with numerous scholars and experts; and it held nearly fifty listening sessions with diverse groups of Americans around the country, in small towns, suburban areas, and some of the nation's largest cities. This research, at both the quantitative and qualitative levels, allowed the Commission to identify a broad set of concerns in communities all over the country. But it also allowed the Commission to identify a set of common challenges that we face as a nation if we want to restore the functioning of America's political institutions, civil society, and civic culture.

Throughout this Commission's two years of work, new surveys, reports, projects, and working groups have seemed to appear almost weekly, each presenting a different explanation



“Truth and trust. And there’s so much wrong with that right now in our so-called democratic society. . . . The basis of a democratic society is you have to be able to believe the people who are leading you. You have to believe that you have the opportunity to elect people who are the people you need speaking for you. And you have to trust them, and they have to trust you. And I think that’s really broken in our world right now.”

—LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

for current conditions in the political, media, and cultural environment. Some key points are consistent across virtually all of these data sources. One such point is that public trust in the federal government is stuck at historic lows. Overall distrust of the federal government has become a persistent marker of American politics across presidential administrations and congressional terms. According to the Pew Research Center, only 17 percent of Americans in 2019 said they can trust the federal government to do what is right “just about always” (3 percent) or “most of the time” (14 percent).³ Twenty years ago, more than twice as many Americans trusted the American government always or most of the time (40 percent). The federal government is not the only institution that has seen its level of trust drop over the past thirty years. Americans also trust business, the news media, and religious institutions less than they used to (although they still place a fair amount of trust in the military).⁴

More recently, our trust in one another has also begun to show signs of decline. While a significant majority of Americans trust their

neighbors to report serious problems to the authorities (75 percent), to obey the law (73 percent), and to help those who are in need (69 percent), we have far less trust in one another when issues of politics come into play.⁵ As recently as 2007, a majority of Americans trusted in the political wisdom of their fellow Americans. But, since at least 2015, that confidence has turned to skepticism, and today, 59 percent of Americans have little or no confidence in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions.⁶ Levels of personal trust in both institutions and neighbors increase with age, education, and income and are also higher with white than with Hispanic or African Americans.⁷

Yet the data also show that Americans do not accept this state of affairs. Survey respondents say that while low levels of trust in government and one another make it more difficult to solve problems, it is both possible and important to try to improve trust. Eighty-four percent of Americans think that the level of confidence that we have in the government

can be improved, and 86 percent think that we can improve the level of trust we have in one another, particularly if we can reduce political partisanship, make the news more factual and less sensational, spend more time with people instead of on social media, and practice empathy.⁸ On the one hand, even before the COVID-19 pandemic there was a sense of crisis, a fear that we cannot count on one another or on our shared civic and political institutions to function in pursuit of our common interests. On the other hand, there is a sense of hopefulness that this situation can be changed, that our problems are not intractable, and that by working together in communities we can rebuild the shared trust and trustworthiness that are necessary to the healthy functioning of a constitutional democracy.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many of the challenges we examine below into clear focus: social and economic inequality, distortions in representation, weak and poorly functioning institutions, and the disruptive information environment all limited our society's capacity to respond to the crisis quickly and effectively. At the same time, even as government faltered, citizens across the country responded with selfless generosity, a spirit of mutual aid, a willingness to sacrifice for the common good, as well as unbounded bottom-up creativity and initiative. This experience underscores the need for an essential reinvention of American democracy—as well as the civic wealth that exists in a populace that is able to organize for action and willing to nurture bonds of community and love of country.

The recommendations we present here have been developed to address the urgent priorities we identified during nearly two years of inquiry.

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: A CENTRAL CONTEXTUAL FACTOR

Economic conditions powerfully shape the context for conversations about civic participation, government, media, and trust. Historically high inequality in the United States not only gives some people a far louder voice than others in our political conversation, it also keeps some people from participating in democratic processes at all. In many of the listening sessions that the Commission held, participants talked about the impossibility of taking the time to attend city council meetings or vote in primary or general elections when they work multiple jobs while also caring for children and other family members. Family incomes of most Americans have been relatively stagnant for the past twenty-five years. From 1993 to 2017, the average real family incomes of the bottom 99 percent of the U.S. population grew by only 15.5 percent, while the incomes of the top 1 percent of American families grew by 95.5 percent.⁹ Prior to the economic crash sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. economic inequality was more extreme than at any time since 1929. This historic upward concentration of income and wealth in the United States has been both a cause and effect of political disengagement. Congressional priorities, studies have shown, now align with the preferences of the most affluent.¹⁰ Lower- and middle-income Americans correctly sense that the wishes of the wealthy are likely to prevail and they disengage in response. Their cynicism becomes self-fulfilling, empowering the affluent in a vicious circle.

The real and perceived influence of large donors on political campaigns is another issue that frequently arose in the listening sessions. The combined cost of the 2016 presidential and congressional elections in the United States has been estimated at \$6.3 billion (this



Academy President David Oxtoby with Commission Cochairs Stephen Heintz, Danielle Allen, and Eric Liu (left to right).

does not include any spending on local or state-level campaigns).¹¹ Many Americans feel that in equating money with speech, we have diminished the equality of representation that is central to how our country should work. As one civic leader in Phoenix, Arizona, said, “It just seems like the money always speaks louder than the voices.” The listening sessions revealed clearly that many Americans believe that a shift has taken place in how our political system functions, and that as a result of this shift, many voices have been systematically drowned out in our political conversation. While the realities of the influence of money on politics are hard to untangle, Americans commonly articulate the view that political outcomes have been distorted by income and wealth inequality. This indicates an erosion of the legitimacy of our institutions. This report offers recommendations for policies that will change our political system in ways that would reduce the influence of money in our politics,

give weight to a wider range of voices, and increase the legitimacy of our institutions in the eyes of citizens.

Democratic reform need not wait until economic remedies are implemented. Indeed, an underlying premise of this report is that achieving fuller and more equal political participation for all is necessary to achieve greater economic fairness in the United States. Feedback between economic and political inequality flows in both directions. So must the solutions.

OBSTACLES TO VOTING

In our most recent nationwide elections, the United States ranked twenty-sixth in voter turnout among the thirty-two OECD nations for which data are available.¹² Voter turnout tends to be higher in the United States in presidential elections than in midterm elections. About 60 percent of eligible voters participated

in the last four presidential elections, compared with the 40 percent who participated in most midterm elections from 1918 to 2014.¹³ At 50.3 percent, 2018 was an exceptional year for voter participation in a midterm election, though that turnout still did not reach presidential-year levels. We know much less about turnout in local elections, except that it is typically much lower, especially when those elections do not coincide with federal-level elections. In one study, turnout averaged less than 15 percent in elections for mayor and city council in the nation's ten largest cities.¹⁴

In conversations around the country, Americans agreed that the dynamics of federal-level politics today diminish the power of ordinary people to influence election outcomes. From the influence of large donors in political campaigns to gerrymandering to the Electoral College to the role of the media, Americans across the United States said that political processes often seem designed to disenfranchise them. Those on the left and right placed different emphases on the causes of a sense of disfranchisement, but the concern was widely shared. Americans also broadly agreed that local government had much more of an impact on their everyday lives. We are faced with the paradox of more people choosing to participate in national elections, whose outcomes

they feel only inconsistently represent their voices, while choosing *not* to participate in local elections, which are seen as more representative and more responsive.

Many of the people the Commission spoke to attributed low levels of turnout to numerous factors—some long-standing, some more recent—that make it difficult for eligible voters to register, to understand how to vote, and to cast their ballot. As one listening session participant in Farmville, Virginia, put it, the goal of all of our voting processes should be to “make it insanely easy to vote.” A local leader in Lowell, Massachusetts, observed that voting is the only “transactional place in the United States” where you have to “sign up way ahead of time, before the thing you’re actually going to do. . . . So then it’s really a barrier to first-time voters, which tend to be young people or new citizens or folks who just were never engaged in the system.” The Commission proposes several recommendations to make it easier for Americans to vote, and to elevate the importance of voting in everyone’s mind as central to life in a constitutional democracy.

DISTORTED REPRESENTATION

As we have seen, policy outcomes track the preferences of the better-off. Historically high economic inequality distorts political repre-

“You have two jobs and children. . . . Time is an issue. Then you need money to go to the [polling] place, to get a babysitter or childcare if you have children. So there are many barriers and costs associated with participation. It’s a long list.”

—PHOENIX, ARIZONA

“The elections themselves in many ways are a foregone conclusion because of the way the districts have been drawn up.”

—FARMVILLE, VIRGINIA

sentation by overweighting the voices of a subset of citizens. This is not the only way some citizens’ voices receive unequal weight. Some of today’s distortions are built into the rules of representation. The framers of the Constitution designed the Senate and other institutions so that they would check the power of simple numerical majorities. As the size, diversity, and distribution of the population have changed in ways that would have been unimaginable in 1787, the Senate’s power has grown disproportionately. This tension plays out in the growing urban-rural representation gap, which is also a nonwhite-white representation gap. In 2020, the twenty-six states with the smallest populations control the majority of votes in the Senate while representing only 18 percent of the U.S. population.

Other rules of representation—from single-member districts to winner-take-all election systems—are not required by the Constitution. But they are so ingrained in the voting systems of all the states of the Union that it often seems that they are the natural order of things. As we detail below, civic activists around the country are now reminding citizens that this order can be changed.

Some structural distortions are created and reinforced by self-dealing incumbents. Within states, gerrymandering for partisan advantage gives voters in some legislative districts a greater voice in their politics than their neighbors,

and contributes to an atmosphere of polarization, even at the local level. A man in rural Virginia noted, “I don’t think we have a representative government reflective of the people. And one reason is because I think we live in a gerrymandered society. . . . You’ve got folks that are able to create boundaries that allow them to win elections.” Citizens are now organizing to enact ways to end gerrymandering. Inspired by such efforts, this report offers recommendations to help equalize representation and even out the weighting of citizen voice.

DYSFUNCTIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Giving more voice to voters is one thing, but making sure that somebody is listening to them is another. Many participants in the Commission’s listening sessions felt that the institutions of government do not respond to input from constituents at any time other than during election season. The data support this. Last year, only one in ten Americans attended a public meeting, such as a zoning or school board meeting in the last year.¹⁵ Regardless of racial background, fewer than 15 percent of Americans attended a local political meeting in 2018; fewer than 10 percent attended a political protest, march, or demonstration; and fewer than 5 percent worked for a candidate or campaign. White Americans were twice as likely as members of any other racial group to have contacted a public official, but even in that group, fewer than 30 percent had done so.¹⁶

From the inconvenient scheduling of local hearings and city council meetings to the alienating nature of many public spaces to the difficulty of contacting elected officials at higher levels, many factors work to discourage Americans from being actively engaged with their institutions of government. As one man in Bangor, Maine, told us about attending public hearings at the state level, “I have gone to so many public hearings and looked at the panel and [thought], ‘You don’t really care what I have to say.’ I just wasted two hours driving to Augusta in a snowstorm, and you have already made up your mind on what you’re going to do.”

Americans recognize the potential for better engagement between local officials and their constituents, especially in comparison with state or federal officials. A young philanthropic leader in Lexington, Kentucky, noted, “The national level is less tangible. You see less . . . tangible effects. But it’s the local candidates who don’t get as much of the spotlight who are actually changing your life on a day-to-day basis.” Local officials described the impact of social media on how local government functions, escalating levels of conversation around certain hot-button issues, but felt that it fails to drive meaningful interaction with constituents. A municipal official in Ventura County, California, noted, “People organize themselves on social media for a lot of issues, but then don’t take that action to the council chambers, don’t take that action to emailing their electeds. The conversation is happening, and they’re very organized, but virtually. . . . How [do you] engage those people to come forward?”

These frustrations, the Commission found, are widespread and discourage participation at multiple levels. This report offers suggestions for how to make political institutions at the

local, state, and federal levels more responsive to citizens’ voices.

FRAGMENTED CIVIL SOCIETY

Making changes to our political processes and institutions is an insufficient response to our current predicament. The institutions of our civil society bind our communities together. Libraries, houses of worship, parks, businesses, sports teams, fan clubs, philanthropic organizations, colleges and universities, museums, and performance spaces: all these institutions and more offer people ways to be involved in the lives of their communities that do not involve voting or attending public hearings or watching debates. They provide shared spaces, lots of them, where Americans can encounter people different from themselves: there are more public libraries in the United States (16,568), for example, than there are Starbucks coffee locations (14,300),¹⁷ and the number of libraries is dwarfed by the number of houses of worship (of all faiths) in the United States (over 350,000).¹⁸ Institutions of civil society together create a social infrastructure that supports vibrant and resilient communities.¹⁹ Often, they are the places where Americans first develop the practical skills and “habits of the heart” that are fundamental to democratic citizenship.²⁰ They are where citizens from all walks of life come together to attend meetings, make budget decisions, and vote, and they are where these citizens can develop respect for diverse opinions and commit themselves to a common good.

Leaders of civil society institutions are aware of their important role in maintaining a healthy civic culture. As one faith leader in New York City told us, “The faith community has to help us all understand that if we don’t create opportunities for everybody to participate in this thing, then these institutions simply lose their legitimacy.” But in our conversations,

“A democratic society is a set of shared ideals, right? It only works as a group. That’s sort of its definition. . . . And that, I think, can become a vicious circle. The worse the system’s working, the less effort people are going to put into the system; it’s a potential vicious circle we get into.”

—ELLSWORTH, MAINE

we heard that many of these institutions are struggling to bridge polarization within their own memberships and are seriously under-resourced in terms of infrastructure, funding, and leadership. These institutions need to connect better with one another, to integrate their programs more fully into their communities, and to serve more effectively as bridges for people who might not otherwise find common ground. Without a set of civil society institutions that work together and build bridges across divides, no level of government intervention will be sufficient to restore cohesion to communities that are fragmented by demography, ideology, income, and suspicion.

As the director of a library in Maine said, “We don’t have a lot of in-person conversations. There’s a lot of, you know, chatter on Facebook . . . but there’s not a lot of interaction between people who think differently about politics. . . . Libraries can be uniquely positioned to bring people together . . . who come from different backgrounds, different perspectives, and start a dialogue.”

DISRUPTED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

In 2019, 72 percent of Americans were active on social media. Over 70 percent of Facebook users and 80 percent of YouTube users visited those sites at least once a day.²¹ The advent

of social media has undoubtedly changed our civic culture, but because most of the data that would help us take stock of this situation is proprietary and not available for study, it is impossible to describe accurately how this has occurred and what the implications may be. Still, some change is plainly evident. Consider how the rise of social media has coincided with changing business models for news publications and a steady decline in the number of newspapers across the country: Since 2004, almost 1,800 newspapers, including more than 60 dailies and 1,700 weeklies, have ceased publication.²² Six percent of all U.S. counties have no paper; 46 percent have only one paper, usually a weekly; and 64 percent have no daily paper.²³

Many Americans who participated in Commission listening sessions talked about how the rise of social media has made it less likely that people will interact in person with members of their community. As one participant said, after describing how much time people now spend on social media, “If they would take some of that time and put it into action, and engagement with individuals, towards a common cause—that is actually a better use of people’s time.”

Some activists noted that social media can serve as a valuable tool for organizations to

reach out to people and get them engaged in community efforts, from marches to political campaigns to fundraising efforts at local schools. They also noted that social media can provide a space where some people feel more free to express themselves on important issues. But many more people experience social media as an environment that undermines trust and trustworthiness and helps create a world where different groups have their own sets of facts, making deliberative discussion impossible and consensus elusive. From the spread of disinformation on Facebook and Twitter to the amount of time people spend online, Americans had a wide range of concerns about the impact of social media on the quality of public debate. They agreed that social media has polarized political debate and made political participation feel more socially risky, and they said that it made them less likely to speak up at public meetings, put up a yard sign, or even consider running for office. One woman in Maine explained that social media “has wonderful applications, but it also contributes to the degradation of our civil discourse, because people will say things online that they would never say to someone face to face. . . . It was like opening Pandora’s box, I think, in terms of its impact.” Comments like this led us to ask whether private social media companies, whose first priority is profit, are capable of also serving a civic purpose.

This report offers several policy suggestions rooted in the idea that social media, like broadcast media, can and should serve the public interest, rather than undermine it. We need not social media, but civic media.

LACK OF A SHARED COMMITMENT TO CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

A 2017 international study by the Pew Research Center on people’s commitment to democracy revealed troubling news. Fifty-one

percent of U.S. respondents described themselves as “dissatisfied” with how American democracy is working, and 46 percent said they were open to forms of government other than representative democracy, including rule by a strong leader or by groups of experts. This tendency was more pronounced among people aged eighteen to twenty-nine than among those over age fifty.²⁴ In the context of fear and anxiety generated by COVID-19, it is all the more important that constitutional democracy rise to the challenges before us.

To commit ourselves to constitutional democracy, we must first commit ourselves to—and have faith in—our fellow citizens. To those citizens we heard from, this faith seems to flicker alive in moments of communal tragedy. In Calabasas, California, a region recovering from a tragic fire season, one municipal official described the impact of the fires on the feeling of shared purpose within the community: “I had a guy on my street who put houses out and stayed behind when there were no fire trucks, saved us all. And you had a lot of people stepping up to volunteer and people getting to know their neighbors for the first time. There was kind of a civic awakening. . . . That we are all, because of tragedy, responsible with each other. So I feel a new connectedness. I hope that stays. I don’t know.” Many expressed a worry that, beyond sporting events and communal responses to tragedies, Americans have no experiences that give them a sense of common purpose. They also noted—and lamented—how few opportunities Americans have today to work together to improve their communities and build trust across boundaries. Yet democracy depends on a more durable sense of connectedness, as well as opportunities to practice it. The arrival of the COVID-19 crisis made this exceedingly clear. The health and

Amanda Gorman, inaugural youth poet laureate of the United States, opened a Convening on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship at the House of the Academy on February 7, 2020, with her poem “Believer’s Hymn for the Republic.” The event brought together more than seventy participants from the listening sessions the Commission held across the country in 2019.



well-being of all of us depend on social solidarity that inspires commitment to the measures and investments necessary to beat back the pandemic.

Having faith in our fellow citizens also requires believing that they share some sense of common purpose, and that they seek to and are equipped to make ethical and informed decisions about our shared fate. Yet many people who participated in Commission listening sessions expressed the view that their fellow citizens are not well-informed: a belief that, naturally, weakens their commitment to the democratic system. Describing many of her fellow citizens, one independent voter in Greensboro, North Carolina, said, “They really just don’t even know what’s the first step to being civically engaged. . . . A lot of people talk now about civics and economics not really being taught in school, and I think that the first thing to having a healthy democracy is having the general population be educated about how to be engaged.”

Finally, many people with whom we spoke expressed the importance of a shared commitment to the “common good,” though when pressed, they struggled to articulate the common values that connect us. Relatedly, they underscored the absence of a genuinely shared narrative about who we are as Americans. A local leader in Lowell, Massachusetts, explained, “A shared story or a shared national narrative unites us, but I also think it’s dividing us. . . . You know, we were all longing for the days of Walter Cronkite . . . but if you were African American or gay or a woman, it probably wasn’t all that great. And so now as more groups that have been excluded from kind of the mainstream are included . . . it changes that shared narrative. And some of that unity that we felt, whether it was artificial or not, is kind of fractured a little bit.”

This report proposes a course of action that will help create these opportunities and thereby help people regain greater faith in their neighbors and themselves.



THE WAY FORWARD:

ESSENTIAL REINVENTION OF AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

We now turn to that course of action. The conditions described in this report—strained institutions, fragmented civil society, economic inequality, unequal representation, a changed media ecosystem, coarsening civic culture—affect everyone in America. To overcome these democratic deficits, we need to understand citizenship both as a matter of formal rights, such as voting and running for office, and also in broad, ethical terms that demand engagement from all who reside in the United States, whatever their legal citizenship status may be. A broad ethical definition of citizenship focuses on participation in common life, contributions to the common good, and efforts to serve common interests. When an individual makes such positive contributions to a self-governing society, that person is often regarded as “a good citizen.”

It used to be that only propertied white men enjoyed the entitlements of legal citizenship, but thanks to the progress of justice through our courts, to clashes in our town halls and legislatures, and to epic battles on our soil, those entitlements have been expanded, if still imperfectly, to women, to descendants of people once enslaved and members of indigenous communities once subject to destruction, and to immigrants once foreclosed from a path to legal status. Changes in formal citizenship have often resulted from ethical practices of citizenship from those without full access to formal political rights. This country’s active, contributory citizens have always included people without the formal status of “citizen.” Consequently, the Commission has focused on advancing both the formal and the ethical practice of citizenship.

Because these challenges are inherently intertwined, the Commission’s recommendations

seek to renew the practice of democratic citizenship through reforms to three fundamental spheres of democratic life: political institutions and processes, civic culture, and civil society organizations and activities. While the United States has seen various efforts at reform over the past decade, most have focused on only one component of this dynamic ecosystem, whether on reforms to political institutions or wholly on civil society. Few of these efforts have directly addressed culture or values. Moreover, many proposals have focused on boosting the supply of civic organizations and experiences without attending to the reasons why demand for such experiences and organizations has waned.

In our recommendations, we have identified a set of key reforms to political institutions and processes that we feel can do the most to achieve integrity of representation and equal-



Sagal Abdirahman (left) and Habon Abdulle (right) in Cambridge, MA, on February 7, 2020. They participated in a listening session with Somali refugee women in St. Louis Park, MN.

ity of citizen voice. We have also selected reforms that will help us invigorate our civic culture, build trust, and inspire a resilient civic faith for the twenty-first century. We see civil society as the vital bridge between political institutions and that civic faith, and so in several of our recommendations, we have focused on how it can better connect these two domains.

The virtuous cycle of culture, institutions, and civil society has by definition no start point and no end point. Yet, to understand the linkages among the Commission's six strategies for action, achieving equality of voice and representation (Strategy 1) is as good a place as any to begin. Equal voice and representation will help inspire commitment to American democracy and to one another (Strategy 6), since lack of representation is part of what is eroding our civic faith. The recommendations of this strategy, in turn, lean heavily on those of the next: as voters become effectively empowered (Strategy 2), more of them will vote, and representation will improve. Meanwhile, equal voice and representation will help ensure that institutions become more responsive

(Strategy 3) as politicians respond to what their constituents want. And responsive institutions will be more representative.

Already there are abundant signs of the virtuous cycle of constitutional democracy—the interplay of institutions, culture, and civil society—at the local level in communities across the country. In dozens of the Commission's grassroots conversations, citizens consistently pointed to local government as the locus of democracy that serves them best, and local communities as their preferred vehicles of civic attention and engagement. Across political ideologies, disparate geographies, and remarkably diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, citizens expressed commitment to the fundamental values that unite us, including equality, liberty, and justice. They also conveyed deep hope that Americans can learn to bridge the differences that now divide us. These attitudes represent the seeds of democratic reinvention, and they have already been planted. The question now is how to nourish them; how to spread them throughout the country; and how to grow

them to a scale commensurate to the challenges of this century.

The recommendations that follow constitute the Commission's response to this challenge. They reflect the experience and hard work of the many thought leaders, practitioners, and officials who shared their expertise with us. But perhaps more important, this set of recommendations is rooted in the shared stories, frustrations, and aspirations that emerged from the Commission's grassroots conversations and the path to reinvention they helped to illuminate.

The Commission aspires to achieve significant progress on all recommendations by 2026, the 250th anniversary of the nation's birth. Starting, as we do now, from the depths of a crisis, this is an expression of great ambition. Implementing the six strategies and thirty-one tactical recommendations will require support from policy-makers, private philanthropy, business,

educators, civil society leaders, and, of course, individual Americans. Many of the details will need to be debated and explicated in the months and years ahead. Progress will depend on the hard work of the many organizations, advocates, public officials, and civic leaders already working on similar solutions at the local, state, and national levels. Shining a light on that existing work will inspire others. While only some of these initiatives appear as examples in the following pages, a more comprehensive working list, as well as a map of progress milestones on the way to 2026, can be found on the Commission's website (www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose). Implementation will require a groundswell of new activity and commitment to reinventing American democracy. New leaders will have to step forward and many more of us will need to engage in advancing these ideas in our communities. Committed to one another, inspired by love of country, we can do it, and find joy in the process.



THE SIX STRATEGIES AND THIRTY-ONE RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGY 1: Achieve Equality of Voice and Representation

Expand both the House of Representatives and the ways that people can vote for their representatives. Change how districts are drawn: first to eliminate partisan gerrymandering and then to make them larger, allowing several representatives per district. Amend the Constitution to allow for congressional regulation of campaign expenditures. Empower small donors and make campaign donations more transparent. Move from life tenure to single eighteen-year terms for Supreme Court

justices. These are the eight recommendations of the Commission's first strategy.

1.1 Substantially enlarge the House of Representatives through federal legislation to make it and the Electoral College more representative of the nation's population.

When the framers of the Constitution designed the House of Representatives, they set

“Some folks feel the voices that count the most are those that have the power. And when I am my most negative, I feel the same way. . . . [But] democracy is about all voices counting. . . . How do we get those people to believe that we can make that change?”

—ELLSWORTH, MAINE

a constitutional cap of 30,000 constituents per representative. With population growth, the House grew from 65 to 435 members in 1929, when Congress capped its size. With further population growth, the average Congressperson now represents over 747,000 constituents. Repealing the 1929 Permanent Apportionment Act and expanding the House will tighten the link between representatives and their constituencies and make the House more representative of the nation.

To return the House to its original proportionality of 30,000 constituents per representative would require expanding it by over 10,000 members—an obviously impractical proposal. The House was designed for members who deliberate face-to-face. While the original proportions are no longer achievable, the goal of closer connections between members of Congress and constituents should not be.

This expansion will also have a salutary effect on the Electoral College. The framers designed the Electoral College to balance the influence of the population at large and of the states on presidential elections—and, among states, the influence of small and large. Demographic changes have shifted the delicate balance and increased the likelihood that a majority of the population and a majority of the states will make opposed choices. In the forty-four elections from 1824, when popular votes were first tabulated, through 1996, the winner of the presidency lost the popular vote in only two elections. In the five presidential elections since, it has happened twice, and demographic changes have only increased the likelihood of this outcome. An increasing frequency of such events would cast doubt on the legitimacy of presidential elections.

In 1790, the population of the largest state, Virginia, was twelve times that of the smallest

“[The] country keeps growing with its population and so it’s a lot harder to get the attention of your congressional representative now than it apparently used to be, way before any of us were born.”

—SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

state, Delaware. Now that ratio is sixty-nine to one (California to Wyoming). The vote of a Wyoming resident weights 3.6 times more heavily in the Electoral College than that of a Californian. Demographers project that the disparity between small states and large states will widen in the decades to come. By 2040, the population ratio between the largest state and smallest state is expected to be seventy-seven to one.²⁵

Expanding the House mitigates but does not wholly correct the increased imbalances of power between more and less populous states. Nonetheless, it is a worthy start. How many seats should be added? The current Capitol Building could easily accommodate an additional fifty members. This should be the starting bid. The precise number should be established through vigorous discussion and debate.

1.2 Introduce ranked-choice voting in presidential, congressional, and state elections.

Most election outcomes in the United States are determined by winner-take-all electoral systems. The candidate who receives the *plurality* of votes—that is, more than any other candidate, though not necessarily a majority—wins the election. In some cases, the winning candidate must receive a *majority* of votes. Both variations of winner-take-all voting are used in state and congressional elections in the United States. On the presidential level, the Electoral College determines the overall winner. Most states use a winner-take-all model to allocate all of their Electoral College votes to the state’s popular vote winner; only Maine and Nebraska use a proportional system to allocate their Electoral College votes.



Christopher Jones (left), who participated in a listening session with faith leaders in New York City, and Jai Winston (right), who participated in a listening session with community leaders in St. Paul, MN, converse at the House of the Academy.

The winner-take-all model of voting presents serious shortcomings. In the case of plurality outcomes, when votes are distributed among three or more candidates, the winner of the election may be a candidate who is *disliked by a majority of voters*. With a vocal minority able to impose its will over a more moderate majority, candidates are incentivized to appeal to the political fringes, and third-party candidates face pressure not to run lest they split the vote. Requiring a majority outcome through run-off elections seeks to avoid or mitigate these pressures, but run-off elections are costly and participation is generally low.

There is an alternative: ranked-choice voting (RCV). Instead of choosing only one candidate, voters choose their preferred candidate and then rank their second choice, their third choice, and so on. After votes are tallied, the least popular candidate is removed, and that candidate's supporters' votes are allocated to their second choices. The process continues until a single candidate receives a majority of support. The reallocation of votes is tantamount to a run-off election, without the need for voters to show up at the polls a second time.

- Ranked-choice voting became law in Maine through a ballot initiative in 2016. It was used in the 2018 election to determine a majority winner in one of Maine's two congressional districts. In 2020, Maine will become the first state to use ranked-choice voting in the presidential election.²⁶
- In 2019, New York City residents elected to revise the city's charter to establish ranked-choice voting for all primary and special elections. New York City is now among more than fifteen cities that use ranked-choice voting.²⁷

Because second and third choices matter in the ranked-choice model, candidates have an

incentive to speak to a broader group of voters. The result: more moderate candidates and campaigns, a more welcoming environment for third-party candidates, and greater confidence among voters that their votes are not being wasted or distorting the outcome.

1.3 Amend or repeal and replace the 1967 law that mandates single-member districts for the House, so that states have the option to use multi-member districts on the condition that they adopt a non-winner-take-all election model.

The number of congressional seats each state has is determined by the census. Yet states do have wide latitude to determine how the representatives allocated to them are elected, including how congressional districts are drawn. The Uniform Congressional District Act, passed in 1967, standardized the use of **single-member districts (SMDs)**, in which each district sends a single representative to Congress. Prior to this, states had the option of drawing **multi-member districts (MMDs)**, which were larger and sent more than one representative to Congress.

The 1967 law made sense at the time. The civil rights movement was in full swing, and there was concern that efforts might be made in the South to draw large multi-member districts with white majorities. In this version of gerrymandering, black residents in the South risked losing all or most representation in the House.

Many of the concerns that motivated the 1967 law are still valid today. Within the framework of winner-take-all voting, MMDs would mean a step backward for equal voice and representation. State legislatures could—as they sought to do decades ago—draw large gerrymandered districts that dilute minority votes,

both racial and ideological. States that use winner-take-all voting should not be permitted to draw MMDs.

Ranked-choice voting, however, changes the equation dramatically. If MMDs were coupled with ranked-choice voting in congressional elections, they would encourage the participation of a wider array of candidates, each of whom would have to appeal to a more heterogeneous bloc of voters. Instead of exacerbating the distortions of winner-take-all voting and drowning out minority votes, MMDs would amplify the representational benefits of ranked-choice voting and signal a victory for equal voice and representation.

- Though the 1967 law prohibits the use of MMDs in congressional elections, they are still permitted in state elections. Ten states today have at least one legislative chamber with MMDs.²⁸
- In Illinois, from 1870 until 1980, the state legislature used three-member districts. Voters were allocated three votes, which they could distribute among candidates however they chose: three for one candidate, two for one and one for another, or one each for three individual candidates. After it was abolished, a bipartisan task force led by Republican former Governor Jim Edgar

and Democratic former Representative Abner Mikva called for its reinstatement, saying it created a more representative and effective legislature. The system previously used in Illinois might serve as a model for multi-member congressional districts.

1.4 Support adoption, through state legislation, of independent citizen-redistricting commissions in all fifty states. Complete nationwide adoption, through federal legislation, that requires fair congressional districts to be determined by state-established independent citizen-redistricting commissions; allows these commissions to meet criteria with non-winner-take-all models; and provides federal funding for these state processes, with the goal of establishing national consistency in procedures.

In most states, the party in control of the legislature has an incentive to redraw districts in ways that benefit that party.²⁹ Through concentrating the opposing party's voters in one district ("packing"), or distributing them among multiple districts to dilute their votes ("cracking"), parties are able to load the electoral dice in their favor. Governor Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts pioneered this practice in 1812 by signing into legislation a district

"I think at the local and state level, the concern that I kind of have with Farmville is the way the maps are set up, right? . . . We're in a rural area, there's such a large district that Farmville tends to be grouped in with other localities that are larger and tend to have a larger pull."

—FARMVILLE, VIRGINIA



D. Bert Emerson (center) speaks during a listening session with fellow community members on March 14, 2019, at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA.

that resembled a salamander. His name has become immortalized as a synonym for political manipulation: gerrymandering.

Although gerrymandering has existed for more than two centuries and is an activity in which both major parties partake, it has in recent decades, with the advent of new scientific and mathematical tools, become more commonplace and brutally effective. Consider the case of North Carolina, which has egregiously gerrymandered districts. In the 2018 midterm elections, Republicans won the statewide popular vote by only 2 percent (50 to 48 percent), but nonetheless held onto ten of the state's thirteen congressional seats.³⁰

In response to the rise of partisan gerrymandering, some states have recently chosen to turn over the job of redistricting to independent commissions. Arizona was one of the first states to do so. The move met resistance

in the courts, but in 2015, in *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5–4 that independent redistricting commissions are constitutional. Similarly, in 2018, feeling encouraged by the popular reaction to a proposal she had posted on Facebook, a Michigan citizen launched a statewide ballot initiative to transfer responsibility for redistricting from the state legislature to an independent commission. The ballot initiative passed 61 to 39 percent.

Independent commissions are not the only way to make redistricting fair. Other approaches to the problem exist, and we don't intend to foreclose them.³¹ But our recommendations acknowledge that the most effective reforms to date have involved independent commissions, which now exist in California and Arizona and soon will be in effect in Ohio, Utah, and Michigan, among several other states.³²

1.5 Amend the Constitution to authorize the regulation of election contributions and spending to eliminate undue influence of money in our political system, and to protect the rights of all Americans to free speech, political participation, and meaningful representation in government.

Numerous factors contribute to the pervasive sense among Americans that their voices are not being heard: that “one dollar, one vote” has displaced “one person, one vote.” When asked to cite the factor that weighs most heavily in their indictment, participants in the Commission’s listening sessions achieved a clear consensus: big money in politics. Seventy-six

percent of Americans believe the government is run by “a few big interests looking out for themselves,” and 77 percent say there should be limits on the amount of money individuals and organizations can spend on campaigns.³³

Worries about the influence of money in our political system are not new, but the floodgates burst open and the concerns intensified in 2010 with the Supreme Court’s landmark 5–4 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. In this decision, the Court determined, on free-speech grounds, that corporate entities may give unlimited amounts of money to independent political committees. Big donors get a level of access to major policy-makers that rank-and-file constituents



Bradley Christian-Sallis (left) and Amanda Barker (right) discuss the work of their organization, Civic Nebraska, to increase civic participation and community engagement.

cannot, and now more than ever we see that access reflected in policy outcomes—to the detriment of ordinary citizens.

One of the greatest obstacles to restoring faith in politics and governance, big money is now a fact of life in American politics. The current jurisprudence around election spending, with its weighty emphasis on the rights of corporations, fails to protect the rights of all Americans. The current makeup of the Supreme Court makes it unlikely that the decision in *Citizens United* will be overturned, which leaves only one option: a constitutional amendment.

Support for such a move is growing. Twenty states have already passed preratification legislation in support of a constitutional amendment that would allow for congressional regulation of election spending. Though nonbinding, the legislation passed by these states sends a strong signal to Congress about the will of the American people. Organizations such as American Promise are coordinating efforts to have an amendment passed by 2026.

The framers designed constitutional amendment to be difficult: they intended it to be a solution of last resort for matters of only the highest national importance. Yet they also understood that the Constitution is not perfect. We have amended it twenty-seven times already, and now we must do so again.

1.6 Pass strong campaign-finance disclosure laws in all fifty states that require full transparency for campaign donations, including from 501(c)(4) organizations and LLCs.

The total cost of the presidential and congressional elections in 2016—that is, the combined expenditures of all campaigns, political

parties, and outside sources—has been estimated at \$6.3 billion. That is a staggering number, yet the price tag itself is not the only problem. Political money in the United States today is not only big but also dark. Big money's erosion of our institutions' legitimacy is exacerbated when voters do not know where the money is coming from or whose interests it serves.

As long as *Citizens United* defines the jurisprudence around election spending, big money will be here to stay. Yet in its decision, the Court did leave one avenue for reform open: the use of strong disclosure laws to make dark money less dark. While disclosure does not stanch the flow of money, there is evidence that it deters some funding and mitigates the impact of other special-interest spending. At bottom, voters have a right to know the identities of those running political ads and shaping campaigns.

In 2010, Congress came close to passing a major disclosure bill that would have helped voters understand who is paying for campaign ads. The bill, which would have become the DISCLOSE Act, passed the House and got fifty-nine votes in the Senate, but was killed on a filibuster.

More recently, states such as Colorado and New Jersey have acted effectively to adopt strong disclosure laws that require transparency around political expenditures, including those that pass through LLCs and 501(c)(4) organizations, which function as vehicles for much of the dark money that enters politics today. Some states have even required actual donors' identities to appear in campaign ads. In designing such legislation, however, states should also be sensitive to the legitimate privacy concerns of small donors.

1.7 Pass “clean election laws” for federal, state, and local elections through mechanisms such as public matching donation systems and democracy vouchers, which amplify the power of small donors.

Where voice and representation are concerned, the American political landscape today resembles a David-versus-Goliath struggle between the ordinary voter and well-funded special interests. Weakening Goliath by mitigating the power of big money is one way to tilt the playing field back in favor of the citizen. That’s what a constitutional amendment that authorizes congressional regulation of election spending would do. But another approach is to amplify the power of small donors: that is, to strengthen David.

When it comes to empowering small donors, policy-makers have a menu of options to choose from. One popular and road-tested vehicle for empowering small donors is a public matching donation system, in which small donations to political campaigns are matched by the municipality or government in question—sometimes even with a multiple of the original donation. New York City, for example, has a public-financing system that matches small donations to candidates by a factor of six. A \$10 donation from a NYC resident, therefore, is worth \$70 in the candidate’s hands. In January 2020, lawmakers in New York State passed into law a public financing system modeled on that of New York City.

Democracy vouchers are another, newer idea: citizens receive campaign-donation vouchers that they can then give to their preferred candidate to be redeemed as cash. Seattle has pioneered this approach. Residents of the city receive vouchers worth \$100 that they can give

to a candidate or candidates of their choice. So far, the results are promising: a 2017 report estimated that 84 percent of democracy-voucher donors in Seattle had never contributed to a political campaign before.³⁴

Yet another option is the public financing of campaigns. Today, fourteen states provide candidates with some form of some public financing, and some—Arizona and Maine among them—go so far as to offer full funding.³⁵ Typically, in order to receive public financing, a candidate must commit not to accept large amounts of money from single groups or individuals. One benefit of public-financing systems is that they tend to support greater diversity, both among donors and among candidates.³⁶

1.8 Establish, through federal legislation, eighteen-year terms for Supreme Court justices with appointments staggered such that one nomination comes up during each term of Congress. At the end of their term, justices will transition to an appeals court or, if they choose, to senior status for the remainder of their life tenure, which would allow them to determine how much time they spend hearing cases on an appeals court.

The Supreme Court holds tremendous power in American society. Although the justices are not directly elected by the people, they are connected to the people indirectly: they are nominated and confirmed by the president and senators the people have elected. The framers intended Supreme Court justices to serve life terms (“during good behavior”), yet with increased lifespans since the eighteenth century, a justice may serve for a generation or longer, often decades more than the framers are likely to have imagined. Add to the mix



The Commission held forty-seven listening sessions – like this one at Longwood University in Farmville, VA – in urban, rural, and suburban communities around the country.

the deepening polarization on the Court, in which most high-profile and high-impact decisions are 5–4 rulings, and the actuarial luck of the draw, with one president filling many Supreme Court vacancies and another president few or none, and it is no wonder the power to make Supreme Court appointments has become such a contentious part of the presidential election process.

The remedy: abolish life terms. The Constitution stipulates that Supreme Court justices serve during good behavior, but it does not explicitly establish the type of judicial work done during a life term nor prevent Congress from enacting terms. Federal legislators have the power to enact eighteen-year terms of work on behalf of the Supreme Court, with justices transitioning at the end of the term to the lower courts with undiminished salary for

the remainder of their careers. Justices would also have the option of transitioning to senior status. (In the current system, retired Supreme Court justices automatically transition to senior status.)

Enacting eighteen-year terms for Supreme Court justices would go a long way toward depoliticizing the appointment process, yet for this remedy to be truly effective it would need to be paired with *regular appointments*: one Supreme Court justice nominated during each term of Congress. With each president responsible for two nominations per term, the nomination process would become less partisan. More important, eighteen-year terms married to regular appointments would help move the Court toward a less partisan future, restoring its legitimacy as an independent arbiter of justice.

STRATEGY 2: Empower Voters

Two imperatives animate the Commission's second strategy.

The first is to make voting less burdensome, wherever and whenever possible. Structural impediments, historical anachronisms, and, in some cases, intentional disenfranchisement have contributed to low voting rates in the United States, but none of these barriers is set in stone. We can overcome them: Give voters more opportunity to vote. Protect the right to vote in times of emergency. Move federal elections to a national holiday. Automatically register eligible citizens to vote. "Preregister" and educate sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds before they are old enough to cast a ballot. Restore the franchise to citizens with felony convictions upon release. These are among the recommendations of the Commission's second strategy, all designed to empower voters.

The second imperative more directly puts the onus on voters. Voting is a privilege of citizenship but also a responsibility. We have fought hard domestically to expand our constitutional democracy, partly through the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments, which guarantee the franchise regardless of race or gender. The fight for voting rights is ongoing,

but when the barriers to voting are lowered, citizens must fulfill their responsibilities as voters. That is why the Commission also recommends making participation in the election process mandatory.

Citizens should feel eager to vote. As representation improves (Strategy 1) and institutions become more responsive (Strategy 3), fewer citizens will see voting as a pointless and purely symbolic exercise. Strengthening the capacity of civil society to build bridges among Americans (Strategy 4) and creating a healthy information architecture (Strategy 5) will give voters the experience and knowledge they need to participate. The goal is a culture (Strategy 6) in which *not* voting is taboo. Who would choose to forgo the powerful, profound, and joyful expression of political agency that voting will have become?

2.1 Give people more choices about where and when they vote, with state-level legislation in all states that supports the implementation of vote centers and early voting. During an emergency like COVID-19, officials must be prepared to act swiftly and adopt extraordinary measures to preserve ballot access and protect the fundamental right to vote.

"You get discouraged. You're like, they didn't do anything the last time. So, sometimes I do feel like your voice isn't heard or it doesn't—your vote don't count or matter."

—JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI



A listening session at the Moton Museum in Farmville, VA, in April 2019. Formerly R. R. Moton High School, the building is now a national historic landmark and community space, recognized for its role in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case. In the background is a portrait of student Barbara Rose Johns, who led a student strike for equal education in 1951, when she was sixteen years old.

Explicit legal barriers to participation are not the only hurdles that Americans seeking to exercise their right to vote must overcome. Transportation, long lines, and inconvenient polling locations and hours are also challenges. In 2020, a great pandemic emerged as another barrier, as primary and local elections are postponed and Americans practice social distancing and heed stay-at-home orders to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. States and local jurisdictions should take increased measures to make voting accessible, safe, and convenient for their citizens.

When given a choice during a normal election, voters will select a polling location based on what else they are doing that day (work, doctor's appointments, dropping kids off, and so on). To reduce obstacles to voting, some U.S. counties and cities, like Larimer County,

Colorado, have used vote centers—sites like Walmart and Costco that are conveniently located with ample parking and extended hours—instead of relying exclusively on neighborhood precinct polling places. At vote centers, eligible voters can cast a vote in their jurisdiction, regardless of their specific precinct.

While vote centers have received positive reviews from voters, and have been shown to increase turnout, they are not designed to replace precinct polling locations; rather, they provide an additional option for those who require a more flexible location. Sixteen states already allow vote centers on election day: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

States and local governments also need to make early voting more accessible. It is impossible for everyone to vote on one single day: even on holidays, many people work or travel. Currently, thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia allow voters to cast a ballot during a defined time period before election day.

Expanding early voting to at least two weeks before election day itself should also be a part of the solution, although going much beyond that is not advisable, since a longer period increases the chances that voters will make choices before critical events occur in a campaign. Neither vote centers nor early voting have been shown to favor one party over the other.

When emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic occur, state and local officials must be ready to act to protect the right to vote and ensure the legitimacy of election outcomes.³⁷ In the case of the 2020 pandemic, election officials must also protect public health. Universal vote-by-mail (VBM) options should be expanded across all states during this period of emergency, and in-person voting should be available consistent with public health guidelines. Assuring that any emergency measures are transparent, well-publicized, consistent with existing law, and done in a bipartisan manner is critical to protecting the legitimacy of an election outcome.

Julio Medina (left), who participated in a session about felon disenfranchisement in New York City, and Sovanna Pouy (right), who organized listening sessions with Cambodian refugees in Lowell, MA, discuss empowering voters at a meeting held at the House of the Academy.



For the eight states that are already all or mostly all vote-by-mail, the adjustments in 2020 will be minimal, but for the remaining forty-two states, this shift may require new legislation, emergency executive orders, or rulemaking to facilitate absentee voting.³⁸ The demands on the election infrastructure in these forty-two states will be extensive. A critical gating factor will be establishing ways to ensure the integrity of the voting rolls. Expanded VBM will require federal and state investment in new equipment to process ballots and verify signatures; training of election administrators and volunteers; and massive public education campaigns around voter registration, ballot requests, and deadlines. To maximize voter participation and ensure confidence in election results, states should expand the number of ballot drop-off locations, require prepaid postage for return envelopes, follow best practices around ballot design, adopt ballot tracking software, and conduct postelection audits. Even with expanded voting by mail, it will also be important not to reduce the number of polling places: during a health crisis, shorter lines and less crowded venues are beneficial. Americans should be prepared for election results to take days if not weeks to be processed. While these efforts will be costly, ensuring during this crisis the right of every eligible voter to participate in the general election and have their votes counted is fundamental to the well-being of our constitutional democracy.

2.2 Change federal election day to Veterans Day to honor the service of veterans and the sacrifices they have made in defense of our constitutional democracy, and to ensure that voting can occur on a day that many people have off from work. Align state election calendars with this new federal election day.

Veterans have fought for centuries to preserve American democracy and the right to vote. To honor their sacrifices, Congress should make Veterans Day our federal election day. Veterans Day honors the patriotism of generations of service members; casting a ballot on that day will remind Americans of their obligation to constitutional democracy and to one another. Moving election day to an existing federal holiday will also make voting easier for modern voters. Tuesday was initially chosen as election day, in 1845, because it allowed voters in an agrarian society to avoid interference with both the weekly market day, usually a Wednesday, and the Sabbath. Creating an election day that puts the needs of its voters first is a principle that is as applicable today as it was 175 years ago.

- The United States ranks twenty-sixth in voter turnout among the thirty-two OECD countries for which data are available, and it is one of only nine to use weekday voting.³⁹
- Sixty-five percent of Americans favor making election day a national holiday.⁴⁰

Elections in America occur more frequently than almost any other country. To reduce the number of times voters are called to the polls, state legislatures and municipalities should align their calendars with those of the federal government.⁴¹ This could significantly increase turnout, particularly in low-participation elections like local legislative bodies and school boards. While this alignment would lead to longer ballots and the potential for choice fatigue, municipalities are experimenting with innovative solutions, such as flipping the ballot order so that traditionally down-ballot items like school-board elections would appear at the top, and well-publicized items like presidential or gubernatorial races would appear at the bottom of the ballot.

Implementing these reforms will require coordination among secretaries of state, legislative authorities, and election officials at all levels. Civil society groups like veterans' organizations will be central to ensuring that the celebratory aspect of this holiday be raised up and that recognizing veterans' sacrifices be intrinsic to the act of voting.

2.3 Establish, through state and federal legislation, same-day registration and universal automatic voter registration, with sufficient funding and training to ensure that all government agencies that have contact with citizens include such registration as part of their processes.

In most parts of the United States, individuals bear the responsibility of registering to

vote. Decades of research show that easing the registration process significantly increases voter turnout, so policies that increase the opportunity and accessibility of voter registration are vitally important. Every state should adopt legislation to require all state social-service agencies to include automatic voter registration (AVR) as part of their services. AVR improves the accuracy and verification of voter eligibility and has significantly expanded voting rolls in early-adopting states like Oregon and Vermont. We recommend that Congress also create legislation to require federal agencies to expand this innovation in voter registration into a system of universal registration for the country. Sixty-five percent of Americans support automatically registering all eligible citizens to vote.⁴²



C. Seth Sumner, city manager of Athens, TN, speaks about community engagement in his town during the February 7 convening.

“Just bring a machine to every school. . . . That’s where we need to build more firsthand experience with the process, to have someone fully feel like they can be confident, and own that.”

—LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

- Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have or are implementing AVR, and AVR bills have been introduced in thirty-nine states.
- Voter registration rates have increased in every state that has adopted AVR, with increases in registrants ranging from 9 to 94 percent.⁴³

Because not all eligible citizens will encounter a state or federal agency before election day, same-day registration (SDR) should also be in place in all states. SDR has proven to enhance turnout by as much as 5–7 percent in many states. Some states adopted SDR policies as early as the 1970s. In the 2020 election, more than twenty states and the District of Columbia will offer SDR, which is supported by 64 percent of the American people.⁴⁴

The Commission is mindful of the lessons learned through the implementation of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (the “Motor Voter Act”) for the implementation of universal AVR. Agency heads and the executives to whom they report will be critical to the successful implementation of universal AVR, which requires that voter registration be integrated with the data systems of all these agencies: appropriate safeguards around issues of eligibility (such as citizenship) must be in place; agency employees who interact with

the public need training; and these reforms, of course, require funding.

2.4 Establish, through state legislation, the preregistration of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds and provide educational opportunities for them to practice voting as part of the preregistration process.

The nation’s youngest voters consistently turn out at lower rates than older voters. Research suggests that this is because younger voters move more often and so have weaker ties to their communities. In multiple listening sessions, young Americans offered another explanation: they often don’t turn out because they don’t want to “vote wrong” or “make a mistake.”

Inculcating voting as a habit early on can have a long-term impact on a voter’s likelihood to turn out. To encourage young voters to turn out more often and in greater numbers, state legislators should pass legislation that allows the preregistration of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. All of these young people who have preregistered should then be automatically placed on the rolls when they turn eighteen.

- Fourteen states and the District of Columbia allow preregistration of sixteen-year-olds, and four states allow preregistration of seventeen-year-olds.

- Studies show that preregistration increases turnout between two and eight percentage points among young voters, especially when it is accompanied by voting demonstrations in school.⁴⁵

Schools should make preregistration and practice voting essential components of their regular civic education, social studies, or history curriculum. Civic education requirements should include coordination with local election officials to provide sample ballots and exposure to voting machines. As with Recommendation 2.3, this initiative will involve meeting some technical requirements, notably the development of a database that can protect the information of preregistrants and automatically add them to the voter-registration file when they turn eighteen.

2.5 Establish, through congressional legislation, that voting in federal elections be a requirement of citizenship, just as jury service is in the states. All eligible voters would have to participate, in person or by mail, or submit a valid reason for nonparticipation. Eligible voters who do not do so would receive a citation and small fine. (Participation could, of course, include voting for “none of the above.”)

Voting is the core element of a democracy and should be officially recognized as such. The United States should adopt a version of the Australian system’s mandatory attendance

at the polls. In Australia, eligible voters do not have to cast a vote for an individual or a party: they can vote for “none of the above,” sometimes called a “donkey ballot.” However, voters who fail to file a ballot on or prior to election day are subject to a fine that, in U.S. dollars, falls roughly between \$15 and \$60. This system has been in effect since 1924. Before the country implemented universal voting, Australia’s turnout was like ours, averaging around 50 percent. Since the reform, turnout in every election has been over 90 percent of enrolled voters.⁴⁶ Australians now see voting as a civic duty, and as part of their civic culture. The government has to fine nonvoters relatively infrequently.

Many Americans may initially see this recommendation as “un-American” or “undemocratic.” This recommendation is *not* for compulsory voting for any candidate or party. Indeed, the option to cast a blank ballot or vote for “none of the above” is central to this recommendation. The requirement to participate at the polls is on par with the requirement to fulfill the call to jury service, and is equally American and democratic.

The preceding recommendations are directed at making voting easier. This is a necessary precursor to making it mandatory. Voting is a core obligation of the practice of democratic citizenship, and citizens cannot be expected to fulfill that duty unless voting is as easy and accessible as possible.

“But wouldn’t forcing somebody to go vote—wouldn’t that go directly against our democracy?”

—JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

“Voting is a lot of work. . . . It is. I dropped my two girls off to vote at their first voting. They had no clue what [to do]. They’re not taught. They don’t know about the ballots. . . . It scared them to go in. . . . And then when they came out they were like, ‘We didn’t know what to put on the ballot. We didn’t know . . . there’s so many questions.’”

—CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

Implementing such a system in the United States would be a major task, and certainly should not be done by fiat. Setting universal voting as a “North Star” for democratic citizenship will encourage reforms that help lead us in that direction. Congress should pass legislation to establish universal voting. States and municipalities should also begin to adopt mandatory attendance requirements for their own elections.

2.6 Establish, through state legislatures and/or offices of secretaries of state, paid voter orientation for voters participating in their first federal election, analogous to a combination of jury orientation and jury pay. Most states use short videos produced by the state judicial system to provide jurors with a nonpolitical orientation to their duty; first-time voters should receive a similar orientation to their duty.

Hanging chads, confusing ballot designs, undercounts, failing apps, verifiable ballots: every election cycle brings new stories about the challenges that Americans face in casting and counting votes. For first-time voters, the process can be confusing, intimidating, and

suspect. Jury duty is a legally required act of citizenship, but Americans are not asked to serve without some guidance or familiarization with the judicial system. Most states use short videos produced by their state judicial system to orient jurors to jury duty. First-time voters should similarly receive a nonpolitical orientation to voter duty. Many first-time voters today have either never received voter orientation—in school, for example—or they may simply be new to a jurisdiction and unfamiliar with its procedures. State jury-orientation videos provide a good model for what voter-orientation videos could be: offering a history of voting generally and of voting rights in the United States, a justification of the value of voting to our constitutional democracy, and specific information about the process a voter is about to experience. Additionally, just as states provide jurors with a small stipend, they should provide new voters with a small stipend for attending a brief voter-orientation session.

Paid first-time voter orientation is a new concept that should be vetted through pilot programs in association with secretaries of state and other election administrators. How voters would be paid would vary from state to state.

2.7 Restore federal and state voting rights to citizens with felony convictions immediately and automatically upon their release from prison, and ensure that those rights are also restored to those already living in the community.

Since the founding of the republic, some states have instituted laws that revoked the voting rights of those convicted of felonies. During the Jim Crow era, these laws disproportionately deprived African Americans of their right to vote. Today, millions of U.S. citizens—and still a disproportionate number of black citizens—are denied the right to vote because they have committed a felony, even after they are released from prison. Some states have proposed groundbreaking measures that would restore voting rights to many citizens who have served their time, like the initiative proposed on Amendment 4 of Florida’s 2018 ballot, which passed with nearly 65 percent of voters’ support. These efforts are being undermined, however, by attempts to impose fines and other penalties on individuals before their right to vote can be restored. The majority of Americans favor restoring voting rights to those convicted of felonies after they have served their sentences.⁴⁷

- Iowa is the only state that permanently disenfranchises anyone with a felony con-

viction, while ten other states permanently disenfranchise some people with felony convictions.

- Only seventeen states automatically restore voting rights to citizens after release from prison. Vermont and Maine never disenfranchise people with criminal convictions.⁴⁸
- Twenty states limit the voting rights of individuals on parole or probation even though they are living and working in the community.

If we want to build civic engagement and commitment to democratic principles, we need to recognize the value of *all* voices in a community, as well as the importance of offering citizens second chances. Allowing all voting-age citizens living in a community to register and vote would be a major expansion of the franchise. Congress and state legislatures should pass legislation that automatically and immediately restores state and federal voting rights to individuals upon their release from prison, without conditions, and extends those voting rights to any voting-age citizen convicted of a felony who is already living in the community (this would include those on parole or probation and those who were never required to serve time for their conviction).

“There are [millions of incarcerated people] across the country that don’t have the right to vote [and] do not feel part of this democratic process that we’re talking about. . . . I’m wondering how we can begin to reengage those voices.”

—NEW YORK, NEW YORK



“Most of the officials that we elect I don’t feel like come from where we are. . . . They have no understanding of killing their selves and working four jobs to support their kids and their athletics and their schooling, or whatever. I just feel like they don’t have an idea of what we go through in the middle-to-lower class.”

—JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

STRATEGY 3: Ensure the Responsiveness of Political Institutions

Democracy happens constantly. Participating in elections, the subject of Strategy 2, is an important practice of democratic citizenship, but part of the Commission’s work has been to encourage Americans to focus on and develop other forms of civic participation.

Apart from voting, what other formal mechanisms of participation are available to the American citizen in the twenty-first century? How can we improve the mechanisms that currently exist and what new ones might we invent? The recommendations of Strategy 3 answer these questions.

Official public meetings like town halls, city-council meetings, and congressional hearings are an abiding and familiar format for representatives to engage with their constituents in-between election cycles. We can begin by redesigning them to be more participatory: make them reach beyond the organized, loud, or well-resourced voices of the few, and make them more productive, so

that all interactions are well-informed, substantive, and direct. Elected officials should use new technologies to create meaningful interactions on a large scale, an essential task at the federal level, where the average member of Congress represents nearly three-quarters of a million people. The Commission recommends mechanisms for individual members of Congress to interact directly with representative samples of their constituents and for Congress, as a whole, to interact with the people as a whole. Finally, on all levels of government, policy-makers should create new participatory opportunities that bring new voices and perspectives into the policy-making process.

Collectively, the recommendations of Strategy 3 will make political institutions more responsive. With responsive institutions (Strategy 3) and voters empowered with equal voice and representation (Strategies 1 and 2), already the practice of democratic citizenship is beginning to look much brighter.

3.1 Adopt formats, processes, and technologies that are designed to encourage widespread participation by residents in official public hearings and meetings at local and state levels.

Americans may report higher levels of trust in their local rather than federal representatives, but citizens still face barriers to engagement at the local level. In a recent survey, 43 percent of California civic leaders said their members do not get more involved in local government because they lack the knowledge or opportunities to do so.⁴⁹ Among the troubling conditions Americans identified in the Commission’s listening sessions are: low attendance at town and city council meetings; public hearings scheduled at inopportune times, with little notice; a glut of open seats for local offices and a lack of candidates competing for them; low-information elections that result in voter

apathy and poor turnout; and increasing partisanship at the local level.

Public meetings and hearings are often structured in a way that impedes engagement between officials and their constituents. In California, local officials and leaders agree that traditional public hearings tend to lead to gripe sessions, fail to generate thoughtful discussion, and reflect the interests of a few well-organized groups rather than the full community.⁵⁰ In communities large and small, our listening-session participants told us, too many public meetings seem to be designed “for show,” with all of the important decisions having already been made behind the scenes. These realities discourage participation and corrode faith in the notion that local government is well-equipped to solve basic problems. Of course, policy-makers often do have to set priorities and put certain items on the agenda, or not. We

Commission members and listening session participants from around the country came together to discuss how to create an information environment that serves the public good for the twenty-first century.



“So, why do I show up? I’m going to speak and then you’re not going to respond and you’re going to proceed with the agenda.”

—ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

are not suggesting that all meetings be so open and open-ended that no business can occur. Yet public meetings can expand the role of the citizen to increase the legitimacy of the outcomes.

Community leaders around the United States are working to make public hearings and meetings more accessible to their constituents. They recognize that citizen engagement can improve if they help break down the barriers to participation.

- In 2019, four decades after thousands of Cambodian refugees relocated to Lowell, Massachusetts, the Lowell City Council Interpretation Project began to issue summaries of City Council meetings in Spanish and Khmer, the official language of Cambodia, on local cable channels and YouTube. The organizers’ goal for these translations is that more community members will be informed about decisions that affect them and will feel prepared to vote in local elections. As in other small cities that have worked to make translated materials available to the public, funding issues jeopardize the longevity of the program.

Local officials and governing bodies are drawing on a growing number of resources and mechanisms to make public meetings more inclusive and participatory. These innovations in engagement and design include: live-streaming meetings and allowing people

to participate online or by phone (innovations that have in fact already been rapidly advanced by the COVID-19 pandemic); adopting facilitated small-group breakout sessions within large meetings to encourage greater participation and connection; using a trained moderator to help ensure all voices are heard; and adopting times and locations that are friendlier to all parts of the public. Some municipalities have hired directors of civic engagement to build meaningful opportunities for civic voice and to foster government responsiveness. All local and state public officials should learn about and use civic-engagement principles and meeting designs that encourage and solicit input from a broad cross section of the community. Devolving power to local levels, where possible, will also further energize local engagement.

3.2 Design structured and engaging mechanisms for every member of Congress to interact directly and regularly with a random sample of their constituents in an informed and substantive conversation about policy areas under consideration.

The further up the ladder of government we climb, the more challenging it becomes to ensure the responsiveness of political institutions. It is easier to be responsive to 7,500 constituents than to 750,000. Ensuring that members of Congress are responsive to their constituents, therefore, calls for mechanisms

that go beyond traditional public hearings and meetings.

New meeting designs and technologies make it possible for members of Congress to engage in deliberations with broad and representative cross sections of their constituencies. Random sampling can help ensure that the citizen participants engaged are, indeed, representative of the district: that is the first challenge. Once the participants to deliberate on a specific policy issue have been found, two inputs are required: high-quality nonpartisan information and briefing materials on the issue, and platforms—both digital and in-person—that encourage substantive and civil discussion. Finally, for the project to be successful, participating citizens must be guaranteed direct interaction with their representative.

- Twenty years ago, the nonpartisan Americans Discuss Social Security initiative launched a series of forums that engaged more than fifty thousand Americans in all fifty states and created dialogue about Social Security reform with elected officials and policy experts. Policy-makers in both the U.S. Senate and House heard crucial input that culminated in the decision to raise the annual cap on payroll taxes.
- More recently, multiple projects have demonstrated the potential for digital platforms to connect elected officials directly with constituents for conversations that impact policy outcomes. Successful exam-

ples include digital town-hall meetings and representative citizens' panels, like Voice of the People, that combine digital deliberations with in-person discussions.⁵¹

Every member of Congress should commit to participating in such forums a minimum of four times per year. With trust in Congress at historic lows, the need for this new level of participation and communication is paramount. Ideally, elected officials at all levels of government would also regularly participate in forums such as these.

3.3 Promote experimentation with citizens' assemblies to enable the public to interact directly with Congress as an institution on issues of Congress's choosing.

For Congress to become a truly responsive institution, the House of Representatives must engage directly with the people. Just as constituents of individual districts should, through deliberation, inform the decision-making of their individual members, representative samples of America should come together collectively to deliberate about issues of national importance and submit their recommendations to Congress. These representative groups of citizens are known as "citizens' assemblies."⁵²

Citizens' assemblies rebuild and foster trust in the institution of Congress and get the public more engaged and vested in policy outcomes.⁵³

"I want to live in a democracy where I can trust and respect institutions, but at the same time, I want those institutions to trust and respect me."

—PHOENIX, ARIZONA



Antonnet Johnson (left), who participated in a listening session in Phoenix, AZ, and Commission member Wallace Jefferson (right) discuss how initiatives like participatory budgeting can foster more responsive political institutions.

The value of this work can be seen in other Western democracies working to engage more of their citizens and give them a better seat at the table in decision-making on critical policy issues. The British Parliament, for example, has authorized a national citizens' assembly on the issue of climate change that will take into account the outcomes of five regional citizens' assemblies. Ireland and Portugal, for their part, have both implemented national citizens' assemblies that led to tangible policy outcomes. In Ireland, recommendations from the citizens' assembly led the Irish Parliament to pass legislation to protect gay rights. An electronic version of a citizens' assembly is being implemented in Taiwan.

The United States lags many of its democratic peers with respect to citizens' assemblies, but we nonetheless have a proven track record that can inform future experimentation. In 2010, AmericaSpeaks organized a citizens' assembly on debt and the national deficit.

Three thousand five hundred Americans in fifty-seven locations, linked by video, were invited to deliberate on America's fiscal future. Their recommendations were submitted to the Senate and House budget committees and were critical to the work of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, a bipartisan presidential commission on deficit reduction led by Senator Alan Simpson and Erskine Bowles. More recently, Common-Sense American—an initiative of the National Institute for Civil Discourse—put a set of challenging policy issues before a representative sample of Americans whose recommendations will form part of the policy debate in Congress. Those issues included the funding of Pell Grants, the problem of surprise emergency-room billing, and possible reforms to the legislative calendar.

These examples demonstrate that the public is ready to grapple with policy issues and engage with Congress as an institution, and that we

have the methods and technology needed to do this productively. Members of Congress now need to exert the political will to make it happen, in part by harnessing the power of citizens' assemblies.

3.4 Expand the breadth of participatory opportunities at municipal and state levels for citizens to shape decision-making, budgeting, and other policy-making processes.

Direct and substantive interaction between members of the public and their congressional representatives on specific issues will increase the responsiveness of that institution and its members to the *will* of the people. But participatory opportunities should also extend to all other levels of government and into the processes of government decision-making. Knowing that a community supports the building of a new park is just the first step in the long process of seeing that park opened to the public. Where should the park be located? Who will the park be designed to serve? What other programs might need to be cut to pay for it?

Participatory budgeting, citizens' juries, deliberative polling, the Citizens' Initiative Review, and Dialogue to Change: all involve participatory processes that engage citizens in the give-and-take of government decision-making.⁵⁴ Applied with intent, these processes can help

strengthen the responsiveness of governments, energize state and local civic engagement, and bring new and underrepresented voices into the policy-making process. With participatory budgeting, for example, a portion of public spending is made directly by citizens. Although there is no universal template, participatory-budgeting processes typically include the following elements: citizens who represent the community and brainstorm ideas for possible funding projects; volunteers (either citizens or experts) who winnow the list of ideas to a set of feasible proposals; and citizens who vote on the best proposal, which the government or institution in question then funds.

- In the United States, nearly five hundred thousand participants have allocated \$280 million through participatory budgeting, and over three thousand cities around the world have allocated some portion of their budget through similar processes.⁵⁵
- After the 2012 school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, tens of thousands of citizens participated in community dialogues around mental health issues. These dialogues had many beneficial effects. They prompted the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, for example, to provide \$5 million in community grants in support of civic engagement and mental health first-aid training. They also prompted municipal governments, school systems, jails, and police departments around the

“It was all new to them. . . . They were just active volunteers who loved to be together, and they had to learn the political process to get this done.”

—VENTURA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

country to create policies that deployed resources in line with citizen-established priorities.⁵⁶

All of these processes contribute meaningfully to the deliberative practice of democracy. They impart long-term civic skills and habits;

they facilitate communication between elected officials and their constituents; and they help citizens better understand what goes into governing. Governments should provide support to participants by engaging experts to impart best practices, assess the feasibility of proposals, and monitor projects once underway.



“We don’t have enough spaces, enough civic spaces where people actually do learn how to be civic. . . . There’s very few places where everyone in the community is entitled to go and be working together.”

—LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

STRATEGY 4: Dramatically Expand Civic Bridging Capacity

Strategies 1–3 focus on the formal institutions and processes of our democracy. The remaining strategies will explore areas outside of the institutional architecture of democracy where Americans can practice and develop the habits of democracy. Strategy 4 begins that exploration with a discussion of civil society associations, which—no less than formal institutions—must occupy a central place in our understanding of American democracy. They offer Americans the opportunity to practice the habits of democracy by experiencing and demanding equal voice and representation (Strategy 1); voting (Strategy 2); and engaging in other formal mechanisms of participation (Strategy 3). In short, they are the soil in which our culture of commitment to one another (Strategy 6) has to take root.

With Strategy 4, we move beyond the ballot box, the halls of Congress, and national citizens’ assemblies and enter the hyper-local world of libraries, playgrounds, public parks, community gardens, churches, and cafes. The many sets of people who come together in these places—the book clubs, the Friends of the Parks associations, the bible-study groups—are practicing the art of association. As has been suggested by a line of writers that extends from Alexis de Tocqueville to contemporary scholars such as Robert Putnam and Cathy Cohen, this art lies at the center of Americans’ self-understanding. In the practice of this art, government is not the prime arena for action: family, faith organizations, and social groups are.

One of the most striking findings of the Commission's listening sessions was that, in this era of profound polarization, Americans are hungry for opportunities to assemble, deliberate, and converse with one another. Even when a pandemic forced Americans to maintain social distance and stay at home, they found new ways to connect with one another. The Commission's fourth strategy is designed to satisfy that hunger. The first recommendation prescribes massive investment in civic infrastructure, through the establishment of a National Trust; the second focuses on investing in the people who lead civic organizations.

4.1 Establish a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure to scale up social, civic, and democratic infrastructure. Fund the Trust with a major nationwide investment campaign that bridges private enterprise and philanthropic seed funding. This might later be sustained through annual appropriations from Congress on the model of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Physical infrastructure like highways, trains, and tunnels creates connections among places and often carries economic benefits. Civic infrastructure serves a similar bridging

Civic infrastructure, like the Summit Lake Loop Trail in Akron, OH, builds connections between neighborhoods and residents and creates more resilient communities.



function: think of all that parks, libraries, schools, churches, and museums do to bring people together in their communities. These gathering spaces promote social and civic interaction in ways that foster what sociologists call “social capital.” Although it is challenging to measure the health of our civic infrastructure with any precision, there is no question that our civic infrastructure today is poorly supported and too often underappreciated.

Civic infrastructure supports the activities and interactions through which people gain the motivational and practical capacities needed to develop a sense of common purpose. If ours is faring poorly, then it should come as no surprise that so many Americans have felt a decline in community engagement. Fostering common purpose in twenty-first-century America will require strengthening the civic infrastructure—the cross-sector spaces, programs, and events—that have the capacity to connect disparate segments of our society. People who engage with one another through common interests or experiences are obviously more likely to develop a shared sense of the collective good.

A National Trust for Civic Infrastructure would be the ideal vehicle for strengthening civic infrastructure on both national and local levels in the United States. The Trust’s application process would need to be welcoming to the kind of hyper-local organizations that often matter most when it comes to community engagement, but that rarely have the organizational capacity to navigate an onerous and bureaucratic application process: community boards, Friends of the Parks groups, places of worship, and youth civic organizations. Moreover, the Trust would need to be designed to make sure that funds are dispersed with a focus on communities and geographies that

have historically been marginalized and underserved. New civic infrastructure should not simply multiply opportunities for engagement among those who already have them in abundance.

Funding for a National Trust for Civic Infrastructure might begin with a nationwide investment campaign, carried out through private funding and philanthropy. Once the model has proven successful, however, Congress should fund the Trust through annual appropriations. Congress already provides funding to strengthen democracies abroad through the National Endowment for Democracy, founded in 1983. (The National Endowment for Democracy received a congressional appropriation of \$300 million for Fiscal Year 2020.)⁵⁷ Why not fund democracy at home?

4.2 Activate a range of funders to invest in the leadership capacity of the so-called civic one million: the catalytic leaders who drive civic renewal in communities around the country. Use this funding to encourage these leaders to support innovations in bridge-building and participatory democracy.

In building new civic infrastructure, we should focus on “civic bridge-building” to those who have previously been excluded from the world of civic participation. Yet we must also build bridges to those already deeply engaged: the “civic one million,” as citizenship scholar Peter Levine calls them, who are doing everything they can to make sure that others become engaged as well.⁵⁸ The civic one million are the people who will be at the helm of the civic infrastructure that the National Trust will help build. They lead the community organizations that are vital avenues for the practice of

democratic citizenship. They are the catalysts of bottom-up change and renewal. By supporting them, we support the communities they serve.

Scholars recognize the importance of leadership in rendering civic life effective. Organizations with highly engaged members create more durable bonds, foster home-grown leadership, and impact policy and long-term change.

One explanation for the decline of civic participation is that fewer people today are willing to work as leaders in civic spaces and organizations that make participation possible. Civic leadership requires understanding how to unite groups of people, navigate tensions, and develop a shared sense of something larger than oneself.

- Citizen University’s Civic Collaboratory includes the Youth Civic Collaboratory, where diverse young people practice civic-leadership skills, including the practice of mutual aid. They also share these skills intergenerationally.

- Another effort involves democracy entrepreneurs. Alan Khazei, who cofounded City Year and went on to launch other service organizations, describes democracy entrepreneurs as people who “use creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial techniques to make our civic life more participatory, inclusive, equitable, and just.”⁵⁹

To properly support the civic one million, American philanthropists—and philanthropic foundations, in particular—will need to change their habits. Currently, philanthropic foundations spend only 1.5 percent of their collective grantmaking dollars on efforts to improve and reform democracy, and they allocate only a sliver of that meager slice of their money to supporting civic leaders.⁶⁰ Foundations can and must do better to foster the civic one million and ensure that it is a cohort that captures the full breadth of American social diversity.

“We kind of grow our leadership organically. Eighty percent of our school board were former parent volunteers. . . . As you move through that system, and your kids get older, and you’re involved, you get a glimpse of the issues—what’s going on, how much this matters . . . why isn’t there more money. . . . By the time your kids have moved through the system, you’re fairly experienced in those education issues. And then you end up running for school board.”

—VENTURA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA



“You know, in the 2016 election, friendships were torn and churches were torn and never recovered as people found the political differences to be so insuperable that they could not be a community anymore. It’s like all we have left is politics. We don’t have any other form of civic community. All we have are our tribes.”

—NEW YORK, NEW YORK

STRATEGY 5: Build Civic Information Architecture that Supports Common Purpose

The recommendations of Strategy 5 lie at the intersection of digital platforms, academic research, policy-making, jurisprudence, and economics. These recommendations are among the most technical of the Commission’s report, but the overarching idea behind them all is simple: although how people use social media and other digital platforms has negatively affected the practice of democratic citizenship, we can redesign these platforms and their uses to support, rather than erode, our constitutional democracy and sense of common purpose.

Social media and other digital platforms touch almost every aspect of our public and private lives, and they have enormous ramifications for the practice of democratic citizenship. In the public consciousness, they have done more harm than good in the past decade: feeding polarization, spreading disinformation, and diminishing the quality of public debate. But they have also helped bring new social movements into being, facilitated civic

and political organizing, and given a voice to underrepresented groups. They have also led to an explosion of data about nearly every aspect of our individual lives, although it is far from sufficient when it comes to helping us understand how, when, and why Americans engage as democratic citizens outside of an election cycle. These are merely technologies that we have designed. There is no reason we cannot redesign them to support, rather than erode, constitutional democracy and common purpose.

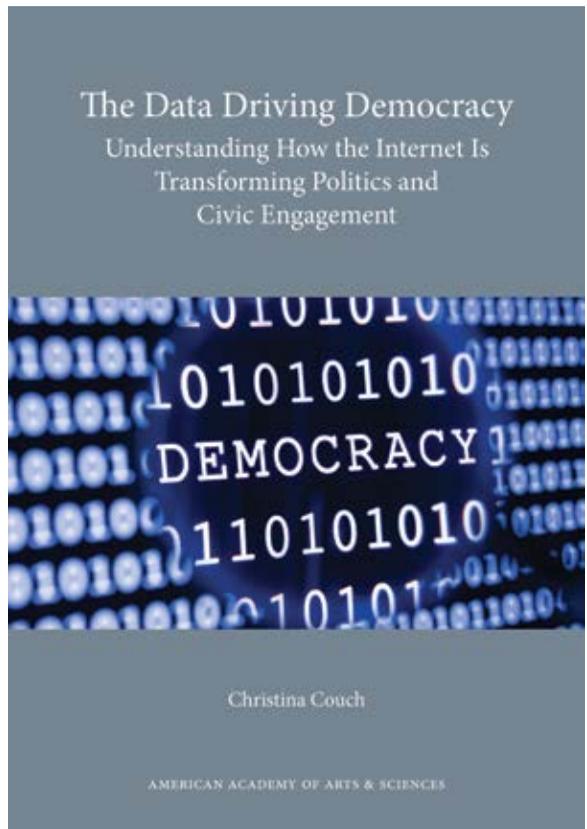
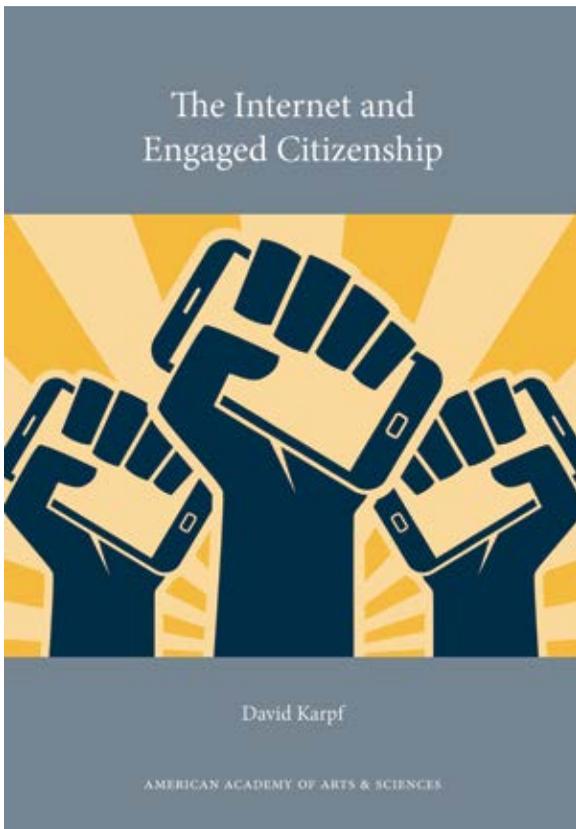
Strategy 5 focuses on two aspects of the nation’s information infrastructure: research-relevant data sources and digital platforms (like social media and search engines). Both recommendations build on the idea that better data married with intentional design can increase transparency and accountability and can help us come up with creative and innovative solutions to democracy’s greatest challenges.

With Strategy 5, we step further away from the formal institutions of democracy and move closer to culture. Strategy 4 focused on the civil society bridges that provide the physical and often hyper-local antidotes to polarization. Strategy 5 adds a civic information architecture that supports common purpose. With Strategies 4 and 5 in place, a culture of commitment (Strategy 6) starts to come into view.

5.1 Form a high-level working group to articulate and measure social media's civic obligations and incorporate those defined metrics in the Democratic Engagement Project, described in Recommendation 5.5.

Social media platforms are not inherently bad for democracy.

It is not hard, of course, to find examples of social media uses that weaken democratic society. Problematic practices on platforms like Facebook may impact elections, as foreign and domestic political actors sow disinformation and discord. Extremist videos on YouTube may be contributing to a wave of ethno-nationalist violence. The shooter behind the massacre at a Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque live-streamed the attack on social media and relied on it to spread his manifesto. These examples, among many others, demonstrate the undeniably negative influence of social media, and as



The Commission published two papers that examine what is known about the impact of the Internet and social media on democracy: *The Internet and Engaged Citizenship* (2019) and *The Data Driving Democracy* (2020).

“Most of the newspapers have gone out of business, you know? . . . Turning around and saying, ‘Oh, by the way, you know, why aren’t you an informed citizen?’ is unfair.”

—ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

such they have fueled reasonable calls for regulation and reform. But many other examples demonstrate how social media platforms are strengthening democratic society. In Tunisia, protesters bypassed censors and attracted international media attention by sharing footage on Facebook. The #MeToo movement has used social media to bring about change at a global level. And, of course, social media and videoconferencing technologies helped people around the world sustain a sense of connectedness during the COVID-19 crisis, helping to ensure that physical distancing did not result in utter civic isolation and atomization. There is a lesson in this: we need to work not only to prevent the detrimental impacts of social media on democracy but also to understand—and articulate a positive vision for—what social media can do for democracy.

Today’s platform developers and social media users should engage in an open and candid conversation to articulate what social media should do for us as citizens in a self-governing society. The Civic Signals project, a partnership between the National Conference on Citizenship and the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, is working to facilitate this dialogue by bringing together experts to reimagine the public goods that can be generated in digital spaces. This and similar projects can support the development of metrics for evaluating the benefits or harms to democracy of social media platforms.

Metrics must be developed to understand how well a platform fulfills different areas of civic purpose: for instance, user exposure to a diversity of viewpoints. By 2026, these metrics should be in use to capture changes flowing from the following recommendations. They will help us draw distinctions between social media, generically understood, and civic media, designed for practices that are themselves supportive of democracy.

5.2 Through state and/or federal legislation, subsidize innovation to reinvent the public functions that social media have displaced: for instance, with a tax on digital advertising that could be deployed in a public media fund that would support experimental approaches to public social media platforms as well as local and regional investigative journalism.

Today, only 27 percent of Americans get their news from a local print newspaper, while 64 percent of Americans get it online.⁶¹ About 21 percent of the nation’s local papers closed between 2004 and 2018.⁶² Newsrooms are not the only organizations struggling to rework their business models in response to digital platforms. The nation’s local public libraries, for example, are increasingly being asked to address digital literacy, to provide local digital content, and to provide free access to computers, the Internet, Wi-Fi, and technology

training.⁶³ Our civic information architecture has been disrupted by social media, and in the case of local journalism, an important public function has been displaced.

Commercial digital platforms support themselves with payments from advertisers who track our searches, our movements, even our conversations. The targeted advertising these companies engage in, and the sales they make as a result of it, should be taxed at the state and/or federal level, and the proceeds should be used to fund experiments that will teach us how to rebuild functions that support democracy.⁶⁴ Experiments might take the form of civic media platforms, such as CivicLex in Lexington, Kentucky, or experiments with journalism business models, like Pro Publica's nonprofit structure for supporting local investigative journalism in Chicago. By 2026, a tax structure in this space should be well-established, and funds should be allocated to support local journalism providers, other public-platform experiments, and growth in a new field of civic media.

5.3 To supplement experiments with public media platforms (Recommendation 5.2), establish a public-interest mandate for for-profit social media platforms. Analogous to zoning requirements, this mandate would require such for-profit digital platform companies to support the development of designated public-friendly digital spaces on their own platforms.

In Recommendation 5.2, we endorse experimenting with the creation of public media platforms and new modes for delivering local investigative journalism in order to build a field of civic media. Here, similarly, we endorse experimenting with how private social media and other online spaces might serve

the public interest. The FCC's public-interest standard was established to balance commercial interests with democratic interests, first with radio and then on television. The time has come to build on that model to establish a public-interest mandate for for-profit social media platforms.

A high-level working group should be formed to explore a public-interest mandate for private digital platforms, with the goal of passing legislation within a few years. By 2026, public-friendly spaces should be prevalent even on private social media platforms as a complement to experiments with public media platforms and civic media.

5.4 Through federal legislation and regulation, require of digital platform companies: interoperability (like railroad-track gauges), data portability, and data openness sufficient to equip researchers to measure and evaluate democratic engagement in digital contexts.

Taxes alone cannot counteract the negative impact of digital platforms on democratic engagement. Regulation will also be necessary: to require the platforms, for example, to make data available regularly, in consistent form, so that we can study how digital platforms are affecting democratic engagement. The General Data Protection Regulations passed in the EU require platforms to provide a portable copy of a user's social media data, and major platforms are working together on the Data Transfer Project to develop an interoperability standard so data can move between service providers. A similar standard of interoperability for the syndication of social media data should be developed in the United States, along with a commitment from platforms that they will allow full usage via third-party clients.



Vitalyst Health Foundation partnered with Living Streets Alliance in Tucson, AZ, to empower youth and their families to enhance community connections by redesigning public spaces in their neighborhoods. Policy-makers, scholars, and practitioners need a better data source to measure the effects of initiatives like this on democratic engagement.

Standards for interoperability, portability, and data openness should be established within the next few years, and public education about the importance of these topics should already be well underway.

5.5 Establish and fund the Democratic Engagement Project: a new data source and clearinghouse for research that supports social and civic infrastructure. The Project would conduct a focused, large-scale, systematic, and longitudinal study of individual and organizational democratic engagement, including the full integration of measurement and the evaluation of democratic engagement in digital contexts.

Existing data sources do not adequately capture the breadth of factors that impact democratic

engagement today, especially via digital platforms. As “legacy” sources, they often center on forms of engagement that were the most common among privileged groups in society decades ago. Most do not account for the impact of state- or community-level contextual variables, and they do not have the sample size to allow municipal-level analysis. Existing large panel data sets do not generally survey individuals below the age of eighteen, and the few panel data sets that do focus on adolescents generally do not follow them into adulthood. This limits how well we can study how experiences in school and community contexts affect current or future political engagement. No current studies are specifically designed to understand democratic engagement—including both political and civic engagement—over time and the attitudes that support it during election and nonelection years.⁶⁵

The Commission recommends the creation of a groundbreaking study of democratic engagement that would establish new understanding of how, when, and why people engage in democratic life. Such a study would need a collaborative source of data designed to answer big questions, which is why the Commission is recommending the creation of the Democratic Engagement Project.

In order to advance dramatically our understanding of democratic life in today's America, the Democratic Engagement Project should: include individual- and contextual-level data; be large in sample size to ensure attention to varied racial and ethnic categories and to state- and metropolitan-area analyses; be consistent and flexible to enable comparison over

time and adapt to change; be interdisciplinary by design; be open-source; be longitudinal, be repeated annually, and include a panel component; include digital and social media platform data, as described above; be accessible to local activists and civic leaders; and be attentive to adolescents.

Scholars and research experts from multiple institutions should begin project scoping and development immediately, with an eye to creating a permanent home for the Project, either at a single university or a consortium of institutions. By 2026, the Democratic Engagement Project should be providing regular data on democratic engagement at the national, state, and community levels, perhaps as a regularly released index.



Communities around the country are exploring ways to strengthen Americans' commitment to each other through service, education, gatherings, and storytelling. In Lexington, KY, creative storytelling walks brought together voices from diverse members of the community to share their histories through sidewalk art.



“Citizenship is also a collective responsibility. It’s not just individual and family, but also that we have a stake in each other’s future . . . especially in a time where it is so fractured.”

—LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

STRATEGY 6: Inspire a Culture of Commitment to American Constitutional Democracy and One Another

We conclude with our civic culture.

The recommendations of Strategy 6 aim to inspire a culture of commitment to American constitutional democracy and to one another. They imagine a future in which every American is expected to perform national service and is paid for doing so. They envision national conversations to reconcile the noble aspects of our history with our greatest sins; a vibrant ecosystem of gatherings, rituals, ceremonies, and public debates in which Americans discuss what it means to be a citizen; and public media efforts that support grassroots engagement. They demand that we invest in civic education and educators for all ages.

Strategy 6 was perhaps the most challenging for the Commission. Despite a long tradition that recognizes the importance of civic culture in American democracy, far fewer efforts have gone toward reforming culture than toward reforming institutions or civil society. In moments of crisis, we have seen what is possible as Americans are inspired to serve the nation and each other, but that potential has

too often faded with time. Culture is hard to measure: it cannot be fully captured with simple numbers like voter turnout. In 2020, “culture” is too often followed by “wars”—which we hope to avoid.

Culture does not exist in a vacuum. Our ailing civic culture reflects, in large part, the failures of our institutions. Reforming those institutions and strengthening civil society—the focus of Strategies 1–5—will do wonders for our civic culture. Indeed, there is no recommendation in the pages of this report that will *not* have a salutary effect on culture, since the best remedy for lack of commitment is creating a democracy that we can believe in.

Yet the importance of culture also demands that we treat it as its own starting point. That is what we have done with our Strategy 6 recommendations. We have designed each to foster a culture of commitment to constitutional democracy and one another, and we hope that together they will remind Americans of the value of our constitutional democracy and our bond to one another.

6.1 Establish a universal expectation of a year of national service and dramatically expand funding for service programs or fellowships that would offer young people paid service opportunities. Such opportunities should be made available not only in AmeriCorps or the military but also in local programs offered by municipal governments, local news outlets, and nonprofit organizations.

One way to inspire commitment to American constitutional democracy and to one another is through national service. Federal service programs, such as AmeriCorps, and numerous place-based programs administered by states and municipalities provide other opportunities for Americans of all ages to serve. These service programs carry benefits that

extend beyond their ostensible purpose. In addition to serving communities, they benefit the people who participate in them. They offer participants a pathway to mobility, in part by allowing them to develop skills and networks and to explore career options, and in part by helping them build relationships and dismantle barriers: racial, religious, ideological, geographic, and more. As service becomes widespread, cohorts of service corps alumni will be created who represent diverse views and backgrounds but share a common experience of service to the nation.

One way to fund national service opportunities would be through “baby bonds.” For every child born in the United States, the government would put \$10,000 into a tax-advantaged savings plan. Once children become



After the removal of two Confederate statues from the Cheapside town square in 2018, the Blue Grass Community Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and Take Back Cheapside organized (Re)Imagining Cheapside Public Storytelling walks to shed light on the full history of the community and promote discussion.

“So, to me, it’s about history. And I think that’s a dimension that’s critical here. We are not telling ourselves the truth about our history.”

—NEW YORK, NEW YORK

adults, they would complete a year of national service, after which they would receive the funds in their accounts. The funds of those who do not complete a year of service would be returned to the government.

The Commission does not endorse making national service mandatory. A better approach, the Commission believes, is to establish a universal *expectation* of national service. A new culture of national service, based on the universal expectation that young people serve, would not only inspire young adults to take advantage of existing service opportunities but would also lead to a proliferation of new opportunities. Ensuring that employers and colleges value the service experience in their students and employees will help establish this culture of national service.

There are many ways to serve, from college gap year programs to community-based programs. Young people should not need to leave their communities to serve. With the exodus of baby boomers from the workforce, municipal governments will need new capacity and local expertise. Young people can help.

Whatever form service takes, it must be universally accessible. Service opportunities must be paid, otherwise they will become what too many service programs today already are: privileged opportunities limited to those

who can afford them. Through dramatically expanding funding for service opportunities, Congress, community foundations, and municipal governments can ensure that these opportunities are accessible to everyone.

6.2 To coincide with the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, create a Telling Our Nation’s Story initiative to engage communities throughout the country in direct, open-ended, and inclusive conversations about the complex and always evolving American story. Led by civil society organizations, these conversations will allow participants at all points along the political spectrum to explore both their feelings about and hopes for this country.

Polarized depictions of American history—the triumphal and the genocidal—continue to divide us and impede productive civic collaboration. One of the great challenges facing the country is how to meld the good and the bad of U.S. history into shared narratives that a diverse population can broadly endorse. These narratives must do justice both to core democratic values and to our often egregious failures to live up to them. Enslavement and Native American genocide are part of American history. So, too, is the invention of modern rights-based constitutionalism. We must acknowledge all these stories.

The 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States, in 2026, represents a unique opportunity to engage Americans throughout the country in conversations designed to help tell and understand our nation's evolving story. At a time when we worry that only national tragedies bring us together, uncovering the stories and narratives that unite us—and reckoning with those that divide us—is integral to the practice of democratic citizenship. Let us build a new foundation to break through polarization, create space for collaboration, and seed the development of new narratives of American history.

To allow new narratives to develop, the Commission recommends the launch of a series of community conversations focused on a set of questions that would enable participants to explore their feelings about and hopes for the country, while surfacing and addressing the full range of stories that make up our complex history. These conversations should be conducted in partnership with organizations like the Federation of State Humanities Councils so they take place across all fifty states and various territories.

- Since 2015, the Federation of State Humanities Councils has led three major national initiatives that engaged communities across the states and territories in conversations about issues of pressing concern, such as the role that journalism and the humanities play in a democracy.

Whatever new narratives emerge from these conversations, they should be honest about the past without falling into cynicism, and should demonstrate appreciation of the country's founding and transformative leaders without tipping into deification. They should acknowledge our faults and take pride in the progress

we have made. They should grapple with the reasons we have routinely needed to reinvent our constitutional democracy and how we have done it. They should articulate aspirations for the elevation of our democracy to new heights in the twenty-first century. Working through how we tell ourselves stories about ourselves is a necessary part of renewing our capacity to work together for constitutional democracy.

6.3 Launch a philanthropic initiative to support the growing civil society ecosystem of civic gatherings, ceremonies, and rituals focused on ethical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of our civic values.

A certain spirit—what John Dewey called “democratic faith”—is essential to our system of self-rule. To put it simply: democracy works only if enough of us believe democracy works. When the democratic system is working for the many, that belief is both widely present and little noticed. When the system is faltering, mutual faith evaporates and we realize just how fragile and evanescent it truly is.

Democratic faith requires cultivation. It requires *culture*: shared rituals or ceremonies and intentional forms of play, work, reckoning, storytelling, conversation, and gathering that allow everyday citizens to make moral sense of our times in the company of others, and to try to close the gap between our high ideals as Americans and our persistently unjust realities.

In this time of declining trust and common purpose in the United States, groups and gatherings are emerging to cultivate anew the ethical beliefs and practices that animate inclusive self-government. This is a dynamic field, with new examples appearing frequently. (An updated list is available on the Commission's website



Commission Cochair Eric Liu delivers a sermon during Civic Saturday at Impact Hall in Seattle on October 5, 2019.

at www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose.) Just a few of the dozens of examples include:

- The #ListenFirst Coalition is bringing together dozens of initiatives around the country that teach habits of compassionate listening in civic life.
- Living Room Conversations has seeded hundreds of cross-ideological meetings in people's homes that build empathy across difference. These conversations center on values and the origin stories of people's values before getting to policy issues.
- The American Project at Pepperdine University has fostered new public conversations about what they call "a conservatism of connection" that are meant to counter the atomizing, morally corrosive power of both markets and the state.
- Weave, an initiative of the Aspen Institute founded by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, a member of this Commission, is building a movement of "weavers of the social fabric" that invites people to

work together across ideological, racial, and regional differences.

- Citizen University, a nonprofit led by Commission Cochair Eric Liu, organizes a regular gathering called Civic Saturday that is a civic analogue to a faith gathering. Citizen University also runs a Civic Seminary to train catalytic leaders from communities around the country to lead such gatherings. Now in more than seventy-five cities and towns throughout the country, Civic Saturdays are part of a spreading civic revival.

We believe these fledgling efforts require an infusion of coordinated support so they can develop together into a thriving ecosystem, support that comes not only from established organizations in the field of civic work, but also institutions and associations of every kind, at every scale, and in every sector. This initiative would activate funders and others with convening and storytelling power to help foster a culture of greater civic spirit.

6.4 Increase public and private funding for media campaigns and grassroots narratives about how to revitalize democracy and encourage commitment to our constitutional democracy and one another.

During every election cycle, billions of dollars are poured by candidates, political parties, political action committees, and others into advertising and advocacy efforts. This is done with precision: households and individual voters are targeted with finely tailored messages meant to turn them out or keep them home. Cable news devotes hours of airtime to the horse race. By comparison, almost no resources are directed at turning out Americans to engage in all the *other* practices that constitute democratic citizenship, especially at the local level. Not only that, but in the current media ecosystem, vast amounts of ink and airtime are devoted to polarizing issues. What if even a small portion of these efforts was devoted to encouraging grassroots conversations, and to reminding us why the practice of democratic citizenship is important? There are several good examples that we can build on:

- The Purple Project for Democracy launched a campaign in November 2019 to rebuild awareness of democracy, build community,

and drive civic engagement. It seeks to disseminate nonpartisan messages about the importance of democracy through podcasts, social media, and influencer campaigns.

- The “I am a voter” public-awareness campaign, organized by the Creative Artists Agency, received over two billion social media impressions between June and November of 2018. This initiative and others sponsored by the Creative Artists Agency provide an example of how culture and brands can play a role in supporting the work of nonprofits focused on democracy.

Private and public capital can fund advocacy efforts that breathe new life into our democracy and inspire commitment to American constitutional democracy and one another. These efforts should offer more questions than answers; their messages should be ubiquitous; they should promote sustained participation and constructive deliberation; and they should seek to bridge partisan divides.

6.5 Invest in civic educators and civic education for all ages and in all communities through curricula, ongoing program evaluations, professional development for teachers, and a federal award program that recognizes

“What is our responsibility living in a democracy? I think it’s a great question, and I don’t know that I’ve ever been asked that question ever, you know? . . . I just wonder, you know, to what extent we all . . . understand what a democracy is.”

—BANGOR, MAINE

“We’re not really educated in our school systems, and in other community aspects about what it is to be engaged in democracy, and what democracy even means in more than just theory.”

—CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

civic-learning achievements. These measures should encompass lifelong (K–12 and adult) civic-learning experiences with the full community in mind.

For our final recommendation, we turn to the most basic element of all: education. In a 1787 letter to James Madison, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.”⁶⁶ A constitutional democracy requires its citizens not just to be committed to its success and to one another, but also to develop the knowledge, skills, and habits that allow them to participate fully in the democratic process.

Recent legislation in Florida, Massachusetts, Colorado, Illinois, and Arizona is reinvigorating civic education in K–12 spaces and among young adults. The most promising new civics curricula do more than teach how a bill becomes a law; they integrate core civic knowledge with hands-on experience in democracy itself through programs that include civic projects, service learning, student government, debate training, and participatory budgeting. The most promising efforts should be funded and scaled by investing in civic education programs and professional development opportunities for educators in all our communities. Consistent evaluation programs—adopted as

state standards across the United States—will help us establish best practices, and state and federal award programs will recognize and motivate civic-learning achievements for students and schools.

Yet the Commission recognizes the need to extend educational opportunities beyond the K–12 classroom. Whether they are new to the country, new to a state, or simply need refreshing, American adults would also benefit from improved access to civic education. Hosted in spaces such as public libraries, community colleges, universities, and community foundations, civic education programs can help American adults navigate the political system; evaluate different media sources and evidence; learn to debate and discuss contentious issues; and nurture the spiritual, moral, and intellectual foundations of democracy.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of our nation’s founding, civic education must do more than teach names and dates, or even impart hands-on experience. The American citizen today must be prepared to acknowledge our nation’s mistakes, to recognize that we have grappled over time to improve our imperfect union, to find pride in those struggles, and to recognize that at our best, everyone is included. We suggest that citizens today must be able to deal with ongoing debate and argument, be able to engage in that debate, find compromise, and from it all find their own love of country.

CONCLUSION

The opportunity to participate fully in our constitutional democracy is, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., the chance to complete ourselves. Our best hope for human fulfillment lies in supporting and nurturing the political system that has been bequeathed to us: our constitutional democracy.

Yet our ties to one another are fragile. The very institutions that should be the instrument of our freedom and the source of our protection appear to fail us. We do not trust them; we do not trust one another. In fear for and anxiety about our own prospects, we turn on one another. We starve our constitutional democracy of the nourishment it needs, closing our hearts to our fellow citizens.

Why should we give our energies to one another again? Not to rebuild the republic as we knew it. Not to restore a golden age. Our public sphere is full of disagreement, in great measure because voices formerly excluded are now in the debate. The clamor and clash of our contests are in this sense a victory. We have made ourselves a bigger people, a more capacious and sometimes contradictory people, and therefore also a more resourceful people. The question now is whether we can find our way to accommodations with one another so that we can birth for ourselves a sense of shared fate.

To develop accommodations with one another, we need functional institutions for our joint decision-making. We can pick up this piece of work now—together. But at the same time, we must also kindle a spirit of mutual responsibility in civic life, a humility that rehumanizes us. Our institutions and our norms will thrive only if we remember that democracy, when it works, is not a battle whose purpose is annihilation of the enemy; it is, if it works, a game of infinite repeat play that includes ever more participants. We must therefore remember how to work together—even with those we might want to demonize or ignore—if we are to achieve the reinvention called for here.

We have no time to waste. Our constitutional democracy is only as strong and resilient as our belief in it. For love of freedom and equality, for love of country, for love of one another, and out of hope for a better future, we need to reclaim our bond. If we turn back toward one another, we can transform our institutions. We can renovate our Constitution. We can elevate our culture. We can at last achieve a true democracy.

APPENDIX A: KEY TERMS

To guide the work of the Commission, we have agreed to the following definitions of key terms:

DEMOCRACY

In the twenty-first century, *democracy* refers to a political system in which legislative and chief executive decision-makers are elected by majority or plurality rule by eligible voters, with a presumption that the franchise approaches universal adult suffrage among legal citizens and that minority-protecting mechanisms are also in place. This definition refers to representative rather than direct democracy, reflecting that all existing democratic societies are representative. While we use both *constitutional democracy* and *democracy* in this report, we recognize these as synonyms to other terms in common usage in the United States, including “republic” and “democratic republic.” In traditions of American political thought, all these terms capture forms of rights-based representative government in which 1) elected government leadership is constrained by constitutionalism, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the free expression of the people, and the legal protection and moral affirmation of the rights of individuals; and 2) groups and parties that are not part of electoral majorities cannot easily be disenfranchised or suffer loss of rights of association, voice, and legal protection by the electorally determined leadership.

CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship can be understood broadly in two ways. One is a formal status within a state that affords political participation, including the vote, and implies certain obligations of engagement or participation in state activities. Over the course of U.S. history, the formal status of

citizen has sometimes attached to membership in particular cities, sometimes to states, and sometimes to the nation as a whole; the different categories of formal membership have not always aligned. The second, broader conception of citizenship is an ethical notion of being a prosocial contributor to a self-governing community. This notion pertains regardless of legal documentation status. It centers on participation in common life, contribution to the common good, and a spirit of obligation to interests greater than one’s own. The colloquialism “a good citizen” captures this meaning. The work of the Commission is intended to include the first way of thinking about citizenship and extend to the second. This is contested territory. Not everyone thinks that the ethical category of citizenship should apply to those who do not have the formal status of citizens. In our work, however, we take the fact that anyone *can* contribute positively to their community as foundational to the development of all formal institutions of citizenship. We protect the idea of self-government for free and equal citizens by cultivating the values and practices of self-government in all members of a community.

PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

We believe there is a spectrum of citizen participation and engagement that stretches from social to civic to political, in any order. First, we offer the following definitions:

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION: Any activity that is mainly driven by the desire to **work or**

socialize with members of an affinity group (whether defined by geography, identity, faith, club membership, Facebook group participation, and so on) or a more loosely knit community in common enjoyment of shared interests (such as a gardening or book club).

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: Any activity that involves or is intended to affect not only the interests or work of a particular group of faith or affinity but those of a broader community (whether defined locally, nationally, or globally). Take as examples a gardening club that is working through civil society partnerships to eliminate food deserts, a book club that encourages members to do volunteer work on an issue they are reading about, a place of worship whose members collaborate to serve meals to the homeless, or a Facebook group that decides to advocate for the sale of fair trade chocolate in movie theaters.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: Any activity or set of activities driven by a desire to influence government, policy-making, and/or elections, such as participating in a protest, joining a party, volunteering in a campaign, running for office, testifying at public hearings, or advocating on public issues through social media. More specific examples include a gardening club that lobbies its city council for new rules to promote community gardens; a book club that organizes neighbors to support a public library levy; a place of worship whose members join in local organizing to change housing ordinances or policies around abortion provision; or a Facebook group that coordinates to call and write to legislators on behalf of a specific policy outcome.

Second, while civic and political engagement can be undertaken by an individual acting alone, all forms of engagement ultimately have a collective aspect: success requires getting others to join in the activity, or participating alongside others yourself. Even the hermit who goes to vote without speaking to anyone else has her votes counted alongside those of many others.

Third, and crucially, we note that it is often difficult to assess whether a given form of collective action is purely social or civic or political. Democratic practice is never this neat. Moreover, any participant can cycle through these activity types in any particular order: they form a variegated continuum of experience, not a ladder. Nor is the mere fact of participation in social life a guarantee that the engagement will be prosocial: the history of the Ku Klux Klan shows the power of associationalism deployed toward unacceptable goals. Nonetheless, this conceptual framework sharpens our thinking so that we can more clearly articulate to the public our theory of action and recommendations.

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT: A broad term that encompasses both the activities associated with civic engagement and political participation and the attitudes and beliefs individuals express about the actors, institutions, organizations, and policies active within those two spheres.

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION OF LISTENING SESSIONS

In order to develop its recommendations, the Commission conducted nearly fifty listening sessions around the United States. The intent of this strategy was not to collect a statistically representative sample, but to cast a wide net and surface the personal experiences, frustrations, and acts of engagement of a diverse array of Americans. Through the listening sessions, the Commission generated valuable insights into what factors either discourage or promote democratic engagement.

Most of the listening sessions were held from January to June 2019. In organizing these listening sessions, the Commission relied on the generosity and support of many individuals and their organizations. We are grateful to the hundreds of Americans who participated in the listening sessions and to the local leaders who graciously helped the Commission organize these meetings. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the assistance of Habon Abdulle, Lisa Adkins, Omar H. Ali, Amanda Barker, Josh Blakeley, Caroline Brettell, David Carey, Brendan Doherty, Jackie Doherty, D. Berton Emerson, Victoria Fahlberg, Amber Genet, Sam Gill, Trey Grayson, Hala Harik Hayes, Antonia Hernández, Mark Hews, Serene Jones, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Christian Ko, Lauren Litton, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, David Martinez, Martha McCoy, Julio Medina, Felix Moran, Alberto Reyes-Olivas, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Pete Peterson, Souvanna Pouy,

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Among the individuals who attended the listening sessions were: municipal staff and elected officials; conservative and liberal activists; independent voters; community leaders and organizers; scholars; teachers and administrators (K–12, college and university); college students; retirees; small business owners; underprivileged youth; nonvoters; rural, urban, and suburban residents; faith leaders and seminary students; African Americans, whites, Latinx, and Asian Americans; immigrants; refugees from Somalia, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan; philanthropists; formerly incarcerated citizens and justice reform activists; and members of the military.

LISTENING SESSIONS WERE HELD IN:

Phoenix, Arizona
Calabasas, California
Los Angeles, California
Paoli, Indiana
Lexington, Kentucky
Bangor, Maine
Dover-Foxcroft, Maine
Ellsworth, Maine

Annapolis, Maryland
Lowell, Massachusetts
St. Louis Park, Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota
Jackson, Mississippi
Lincoln, Nebraska
New York, New York
Charlotte, North Carolina

Greensboro, North Carolina
Akron, Ohio
Cleveland, Ohio
Dallas, Texas
Farmville, Virginia
Spokane, Washington

APPENDIX C:

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THE COMMISSION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The American Academy’s initiative on The Practice of Democratic Citizenship launched in spring 2018 with the generous support of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation. The Commission includes scholars, thought leaders, former and current officials, practitioners, journalists and media experts, and philanthropists and aims to enable more Americans to obtain the values, knowledge, and skills needed to participate as effective citizens in a diverse twenty-first-century democracy.

The generous support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, and Alan and Lauren Dachs will support the rollout and implementation of the Commission’s recommendations and final report.

CHAIRS OF THE COMMISSION ON THE PRACTICE OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP



Danielle Allen



Stephen Heintz



Eric Liu

Inside back cover: Photographs from around the country of the communities and individuals whose experiences and stories contributed to this report.

First row: Farmville, VA; Cambridge, MA; Phoenix, AZ

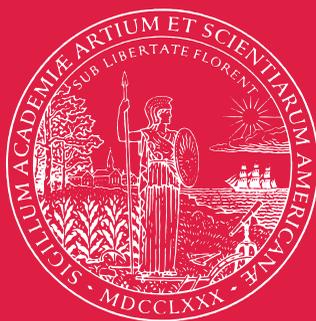
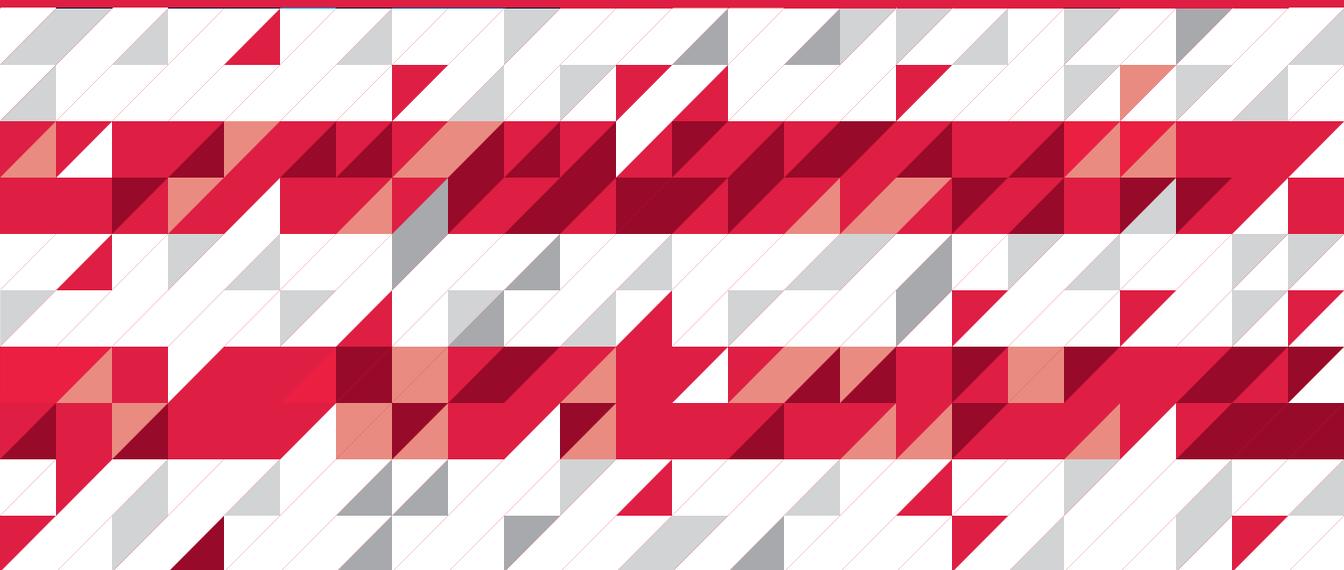
Second row: Phoenix, AZ; Calabasas, CA; Lowell, MA

Third row: St. Louis Park, MN; Jackson, MS; New York City, NY

Fourth Row: Lowell, MA; Lexington, KY; Thousand Oaks, CA

Fifth Row: Cambridge, MA; Spokane, WA; Lowell, MA





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