Achieving Multiracial, Multiparty Democracy

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July 2022

https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/achieving-multiracial-multiparty-democracy
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Executive Summary

This report reflects the effort of a unique group of activists, organizers, and scholars dedicated to laying out a positive vision and pathway toward achieving truly multiracial, multiparty democracy in the United States. Our recommendations focus on supporting community organizations, including local private, nonprofit, and public agencies, and strengthening their capacity to build and leverage the social networks that are crucial to achieving multiracial, multiparty democracy. We identify six objectives to strengthen local organizations, diversify the electorate, and expand opportunities for political association and deliberation.

Secure the Integrity of Elections

To prevent the direct subversion of elections, local election agencies need to partner with community organizations and experts to produce and share electoral data for transparency, training, and verification. Strengthening organizational capacity can improve election assistance for administrative agencies, as well as relational organizing efforts for community service groups. At the federal level, legislators should prioritize implementing laws that minimize opportunities for subversive partisan tactics, clarify state procedures for election certification, and punish disinformation and coercion.

Counter Voter Suppression by Supporting Voter Participation

Large-scale, community-centered political organization is necessary to build a coalition to pass federal voting rights protections—a coalition which has yet to materialize. Supporting local communities in long-term, relational organizing efforts is the most effective way to lift up underrepresented voices and build participatory networks through the organizations and agencies that regularly serve target populations. Coalitions should pursue institutional reforms to reduce the cost of voting and expanding the electorate—including language access, same-day registration, early voting, universal vote-by-mail, and running local elections concurrently with higher-turnout general elections—in parallel to community organizing, where state passage of such legislation is politically viable.

Reduce Barriers to Political Association

Cultivating effective participation requires more than increasing political demand. Expanding electoral supply, by making it easier for candidates and parties to qualify for elections and be named on ballots, will diversify candidate and party choice, increasing the probability that voters have something to vote for.

Expand Representation by Increasing Assembly Sizes

Expanding the size of legislative assemblies, from city councils to the House of Representatives, may be the most direct and effective way to increase the supply of electoral competition. Especially at the local level, the small size of municipal councils in the US limits the number of parties that can effectively compete for office, limiting political association and
the ability of like-minded voters to organize politically. Assemblies with more seats increase the likelihood that parties seat women and candidates of color.

**Design Electoral Districts to Represent All Voters**

District magnitude (the number of seats per district) can constrain representation similar to assembly size. Lowering the threshold of representation—whether through smaller single-seat districts, or larger multiseat districts that allow coalitions to win seats with smaller vote shares—is another crucial component of electoral reform. Ensuring that voters have an equal voice in determining representative outcomes requires basic proportionality in representation.

**Foster More Deliberative Policymaking**

Deliberative forums enable greater communication between leaders and constituents, and they can better amplify otherwise marginalized community voices. We need greater opportunities for marginalized people to find value in political association if we hope to build a prodemocracy coalition that can defend broader reforms.

**Recommendations for Stakeholders**

Finally, we have specific recommendations for democracy movement stakeholders: community organizations, election administration agencies, reform and voting rights groups, and funding organizations. Collaboration between these stakeholders is essential if multiracial, multiparty democracy in the US is ever to be realized. As organizational hubs, community organizations need far greater support and recognition of their role in reconnecting civic capacity to political organization. Greater partnerships to facilitate data sharing and person-to-person organizing, across a variety of neighborhood service providers, are needed to build out inclusive, robust local electoral ecosystems. Reform organizations, voting rights groups, and funding organizations all need to do a better job of listening to local leaders, supporting their needs, and strengthening the links between public service and political association.
The Task Force

In September 2021, the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists cosponsored a day-long course, “Achieving Multiracial, Multiparty Democracy,” at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA). Our cosponsors included the Electoral Integrity Project and the following APSA sections: Elections, Public Opinion and Voting Behavior; Race, Ethnicity and Politics; Representation and Electoral Systems; and Law and Courts. Our task was to consider the primary challenges facing US democracy, work through the implications of potential reform coalitions, and propose how to strengthen a prodemocracy movement that can achieve effective reforms.

Course participants made invaluable contributions to this report:

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The report broadly reflects the concerns and strategies voiced during the course and in ongoing work with the Center’s education and outreach strategies. The Center bears sole responsibility for the content and contributors are absolved from responsibility for any errors or infelicities.
The Peril of US Democracy and the Failure of Current Reform Efforts

A growing body of evidence suggests that democracy in the United States is in peril, from direct attempts to subvert our elections, to the targeted expansion of restrictive election laws, our dysfunctional party system, the dismantling of federal voting rights protections, and a resurgence of antidemocratic populism (Hasen 2022; Brennan Center for Justice 2022; Fuentes-Rohwer and Charles 2021; Drutman 2021; Norris 2020; Przybyla 2022). These phenomena are linked: US voter participation has long been anemic compared with other democracies (DeSilver 2017). Eighty million potential voters stayed home during the record-high turnout 2020 general election. This lack of participation props up the policy status quo, which in turn fans the flames of antidemocratic populism (Montanaro 2020; Norris, Cameron, and Wynter 2018).

Many electoral reform advocates have mounted campaigns that offer packages of institutional innovations: national election standards and voting protections, state and local rank-choice voting and open primaries, and similar ballot reforms aimed at electing more “responsible” or moderate candidates (Berinsky 2005; Klein 2015; Latner 2022a). However, reviving our democracy is going to require more than voting schemes designed to shuffle existing voters between current partisan coalitions.

Achieving effective democracy reform requires building common understanding around the institutional problems we face, and then mobilizing energy toward solutions. A prodemocracy coalition supporting even basic voting rights protections that can carry the day in the current political climate has yet to materialize (Latner 2022a). For example, the Democratic Party failed to unify its own caucus behind a legislative effort to pass national election standards and revisions to the Voting Rights Act out of the US Senate. Even minimalist administrative reform, aimed at updating the Electoral Count Act, has yet to gain enough bipartisan support in Congress (Foley et al. 2022).

To date, most US election reform efforts have their theory of change backwards: electoral reform does not just “happen” and transform a party system. Rather, partisan coalitions and movements capable of disrupting the status quo must be in a position to change policy, including election policies (Colomer 2005; Tarrow 2021; Weldon 2011). But disruption is not an end in itself. Successful reform entails institutional arrangements that bring the party system into line with the policy preferences of most Americans, rather than their attitudes and affinity for groups (Mason 2018, Cayton and Dawkins 2020). These arrangements require building up grassroots efforts that leverage dissatisfaction with electoral system performance, shifting political power away from dominant party coalitions (Nagel 1994; Leyenaar and Hazan 2011; Norris 2011; Sakamoto 1999; Santucci 2022b). In our view, achieving multiracial, multiparty democracy depends on building a more inclusive and engaged electorate.

The scope of our recommendations is limited to the electoral process and representation with a focus on the local and state level. For example, we do not weigh in on national questions about representation in the US Senate (one of the least representative electoral assemblies in the world), curtailing the election-intervening capacity of the US executive, or the size and
potential expansion of the US Supreme Court. While we acknowledge the importance of such
questions, we argue successful reform movements require a bottom-up approach focusing
squarely on political organizing at the local level. Such an emphasis on the importance of
intermediary political organizations is largely missing from today’s major reform efforts.
Effective Reform Requires Community-Centered Coalition Building

Democratic politics requires robust organization. US democracy has long been marred by deeply ingrained and persistent class- and race-based inequalities (Schattschneider and Adamany 1975; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). Building stronger political networks in marginalized communities is therefore necessary for achieving multiracial, multiparty democracy.

Political participation grows out of social networks that link together voters who share information, energy, and participatory norms (Bond et al. 2012; Carlson, Abrajano, and García Bedolla 2020; Rolfe 2012). Accordingly, increasing the impact of local organizing is the most effective means of building support for democracy reform, particularly with the large pool of potential voters who do not regularly participate in elections. Local community and service organizations—public, private, and nonprofit—have the legitimacy and leadership needed to develop and strengthen political engagement (Fox and Lawless 2014; Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013).

Grassroots leadership incorporates regular communication and outreach to people through organizations with established ties to traditionally underrepresented communities. Grassroots movements articulate interests and represent marginalized groups where formal institutions may otherwise exclude them (Weldon 2011; Young 2002). The political energy built from relational organizing (where contacts already have an established geographic or organizational connection to respondents), with support from state and national coalition partners, can be transformative (Michelson and Benjamin 2021).

Long-term improvements to community democracy come through long-term relational organizing, embedded in traditional civic and political associations as well as local service providers, health care organizations, schools, and, crucially, election administrators, who play a central role in making voting accessible—even under the constraints of restrictive statewide election laws (Brown, Raza, and Pinto 2020; Andrews et al. 2019; Menger and Stein 2018; Siegel-Stechler 2019; Yagoda 2019).

Including a more diverse set of organizations (intermediary political associations, local businesses, public and nonprofit agencies, including health care organizations, etc.) and leaders also multiplies the variety of roles and tactics that people may engage in. While only eligible citizens can vote, canvassing, contact and recruiting, coordinating, scheduling, event planning, poll watching, poll working, ballot certification, and a host of other administrative roles need to be filled for democracy to function effectively. Everybody can serve.
Task Force Recommendations

Secure the Integrity of Elections

The US faces a growing threat from a group of seditiousists directly attempting to subvert upcoming elections (Przybyla 2022; Weiser and Weiner 2022). We already have examples of state legislatures trying to usurp the authority of county administrators, efforts to conduct partisan and unqualified ballot “recounts” in an attempt to reverse election results, and the possibility that courts may be unwilling to enter the coming “political fray,” so we prioritize the prevention of direct election subversion (Grofman 2022; Hasen 2022; Hurt 2021; Wallace 2021). The communities most likely to be targeted for election subversion include voters of color in battleground states (Bender and Roebuck 2020; Hurt 2021; Olesko 2020; Romo 2020). Election protection groups need to focus attention and resources on cities like Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Phoenix, to build resilience going into the 2024 election cycle. Every community nationwide ought to take as many of the following steps as possible to ensure the integrity of their elections.

Community service organizations, local businesses, and other public agencies can work with election agencies to build election capacity and educate the public. Partnering with local associations and businesses can help election administrators maximize outreach efforts, while securing early voting (where it is allowed) and Election Day voting facilities and recruiting and training the larger numbers of poll workers and other election staff needed to manage higher turnout (Brooks 2022; Hale and Slaton 2008). Election administrations can prioritize training through a variety of educational and technological partners (Columbia World Projects 2022; Jacobs and Choate 2022). Securing participatory networks dedicated to protecting the electoral process provides a bulwark of support against attacks on electoral integrity.

In order for election administrators and partners to update and regularly monitor voter databases, election administrators need to make basic voter file and registration data available to grassroots organizers and community organizations that can contribute local knowledge. Administrators can partner with data science experts to maintain more accurate databases and reduce errors with voter registration, ballot applications, application rejections (where required), and related inputs. These partnerships can also generate data on tracking and reporting the chain of custody of ballots sent and received, daily in-person voting, ballot processing, verification, rejections, certification of results, and postelection statistical analysis and audits (Columbia World Projects 2022; Janover and Westphal 2020; Latner 2020; NAACP LDF 2021). With the cooperation of local organizations, increased election administration transparency can help identify pre-election irregularities, while postelection analyses, specifically risk-limiting audits, are crucial to validating the integrity of the electoral process (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project 2020; Alvarez et al. 2020; Alvarez 2019).

Beyond data and technological improvements, legislators and legal scholars need to implement procedures to help ensure the integrity of elections and eliminate impartial, evidence-based rules that specify how votes are to be counted and tallied, the conditions under which authority over election certification may transfer to state officials, and similar areas of discretion in the certification process. Further, federal laws that restrict the sort of frivolous lawsuits used to spread disinformation after the 2020 election, as well as laws to punish the
spread of false election information, intimidation of voters and election administrators, and threats of political violence, also need to be in place if we hope to secure the 2024 election cycle from targeted subversion (Hasen 2022).

**Figure 1. How to Secure the Integrity of Future Elections**

*Every phase in the election cycle needs to be strengthened in order to secure the integrity of future elections. At least three of these phases can directly benefit from expanding local community–election agency partnerships to improve education and training, support early voting and Election Day operations, and produce more timely tabulation and reporting of election results.*

*SOURCE: Inspired by Norris and Grömping 2019.*

These reforms would help secure comprehensive, accurate, auditable data on the electoral process, with multiple and convenient points of access to ballot processing and clear procedural requirements for the certification of elections. Crucially, timely collection, analysis, and dissemination of election data—both inputs and outputs—reduces the uncertainty that feeds the spread of disinformation campaigns (Alvarez et al. 2020; Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs 2022; MIT Technology Review 2020).

Building out a transparent and secure electoral ecosystem with counties and local election authorities will require strong collaborative relationships, with ordinary citizens playing a greater role in providing basic election services. In the face of political violence and targeted
attempts to subvert a national election, local organizations engaged in the election process can also mobilize the public to take action through peaceful demonstrations.

Counter Voter Suppression by Supporting Voter Participation

The United States has a long history of systemically diluting voices in the political process (Bartels 2016; Fraga 2018; Gilens and Page 2014; Lessig 2015; Turchin 2016). Extremist groups disproportionately target underrepresented populations, including voters of color, with disinformation intended to depress turnout (Charles and Boltax 2020). Even well-intended recruitment into political activity often exacerbates and perpetuates biased political participation. Conventional get-out-the-vote (GOTV) tactics are less likely to reach low-propensity (infrequent) voters, and those potential voters are also less likely to respond to GOTV messaging, which is typically transactional (Baily, Hopkins, and Rogers 2016; Enos, Fowler, and Vavreck 2014; Fraga 2018; Ray and Whitlock 2019). We must do a better job of meeting potential voters where they are.

Most 2020 nonvoters reported choosing not to vote, including nearly one-quarter who said they were not interested in politics (Livingstone 2020b; Montanaro 2020; Thomson-DeVeaux et al. 2020). Voter turnout is even lower in US municipal elections, dropping to single digits in some cases (National Civic League 2020). Selective nonvoting plays a greater role in low participation than voter suppression or formal denial of voting rights (limiting voter eligibility, restricting access to voting, strict voter ID requirements, etc.), though discriminatory institutions have a broader dampening effect on turnout.

Studies also show that nonvoters often care deeply about the condition of their communities, but may lack the information and relationships available to voters in resource-rich networks, resources that provide a foundation for political association and participation (Chilcote 2021; Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018). Some nonvoters may not connect local conditions to voting and electoral politics, while others may choose to abstain as a way of rejecting the political system. As Khalilah Worley of Greater Cleveland Congregations discovered, “We talk about the issue of voter suppression. But when we knocked on doors during the Covid-19 pandemic, this felt more like voter depression” (Chilcote 2021).

Passive voter suppression, or disenfranchisement through the exclusionary practice of targeting only high-propensity (frequent) voters, generates additional inequalities in participation (Spencer and Ross 2019). Modern campaign organizations frequently ignore low-turnout precincts, excluding residents from voter mobilization efforts in the well-financed, data-intense mobilization tactics deployed by modern election campaigns in search of high-propensity voters (Hersh 2015).

In contrast, relational organizing and integrated voter engagement (connecting voter engagement to issue-based organizing) rely on securing turnout and election “wins” to help convert low-propensity voters and nonvoters into citizens who exercise their own power in concert with others (Waite 2020; Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation 2011; Kerchner 2019). Channeling organizational energy to specific populations is an effective way to attenuate the inequalities between low- and high-turnout communities. Person-to-person outreach and regular contact among neighbors who target low-propensity voters can organize communities without increasing turnout inequality (Sinclair, McConnell, and Michelson 2013). When precinct captains reach out to their neighbors, leadership development
incorporates the faces and voices of those who bear the burden of underrepresentation, cultivating and strengthening community representation (The Forge 2021; Funders’ Committee for Civic Participation 2011). Targeted outreach to specific low-turnout groups, such as young people, students, and returning felons, can demonstrably improve voter registration and turnout (Doleac et al. 2022; Bennion and Michelson 2018).

Grassroots leadership development incorporates regular communication and outreach to people through organizations that already maintain ties within marginalized communities (Bejarano and Martinez-Ebers 2018; Michener 2020). People need to see the impact of mobilization in their lives and engage in reflection on the political context in which they operate. Elections are best understood as milestones that come in between the year-round work of organizing communities and addressing political marginalization and inequality.
Large majorities of nonvoters say that traditional politicians and parties do not care about people like them, and that elections have little to do with how decisions are made in the United States. While uncertainty over voter registration is a major reason people give for not voting, nonvoters are less likely to cite other institutional barriers. 


Requiring language and disability access is also necessary to ensure that all eligible voters can have a voice in elections (Demos 2014). Translating materials, providing language and disability training to poll workers, and ensuring full accessibility for in-person voters with disabilities will reduce waiting times and poll worker incidents, while improving the overall efficiency of the voting process (Governing 2016; U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2021).

Structural reforms that reduce discriminatory barriers, expand access, and enhance integrity should be advanced in parallel to participatory reforms, where viable. Legislators in 27 states have recently passed or are considering bills to further restrict voting or weaken the integrity of the electoral process (Davies 2022; Schraunfagel, Pomante II, and Li 2020). These
restrictions include duplicitous “proof-of-citizenship” requirements, felon
disenfranchisement and restrictions on voter registration, and limiting voting access,
especially voting by mail, despite evidence that voting by mail is at least as secure as voting in
person (Barreto et al. 2020; Ingraham 2014; Latner et al. 2021).

Political institutions should incentivize voters to take action. A straightforward way to
promote greater voter participation in local elections is to consolidate them with national
elections (Hajnal, Kogan, and Markarian 2021). Moving city elections “on-cycle” with major
elections can more than double local turnout, resulting in city voter participation that is more
representative of the larger public.

Opt-out automatic voter registration (AVR) directly addresses the problem of identifying
eligible voters by integrating public agency information into voter registration databases
(Brennan Center for Justice 2019). Strategic selection of source agencies (public assistance,
health services, etc.) to register voters can reduce participatory inequalities. Similarly, same-
day registration (SDR) ensures that no voters are excluded from the process on technical
grounds (Grumbach and Hill 2022). Universal vote-by-mail (UVBM) is perhaps the single
most-effective institutional reform to improve turnout among low-propensity voters,
including young people, voters of color, and blue-collar voters (Bonica et al. 2021; McGhee,
Paluch, and Romero 2022). However, consolidating voting precincts into vote centers may
amplify turnout gaps, so it is important to balance efficiency with maintenance of

We also urge caution about “solving” nonvoting by compelling people to vote (Herron and
Smith 2014). Research suggests such rules are designed to prevent the sorts of policy changes
that (a) might deprive right-wing populism of the “oxygen” now fueling it and (b) deal with
other forms of systemic inequality. Moreover, reformers have adopted such systems to blunt
the electoral impact of the very communities at the center of this report (Kouba 2021; Kouba
and Mysicka 2019; John and DeBats 2014).

Reduce Barriers to Political Association

The First Amendment protects an individual's right to associate politically through the vote.
That right is denied when states unreasonably burden the opportunity to join with others for
the purpose of advancing common beliefs (Charles 2003; Tokaji 2016). For example, courts
have historically prohibited legislatures from enacting voting procedures that
disproportionately burden voters of color. However, given the Supreme Court’s increased
willingness to interpret exclusionary rules as falling within the “usual burdens on voting,”
successfully challenging restrictive election laws through litigation is getting more difficult
(Fuentes-Rohwer and Charles 2021).

The adoption of government-printed ballots and “good government” reforms, dating back to
the Progressive Era, has determined standards for political parties and candidates to gain
ballot access. Excessive signature requirements and filing fees, bans on cross-endorsements or
fusion ballots, restrictions on party-building activities, mandating nonpartisan ballots in local
elections, and an array of judicial decisions have made it more difficult for minor party
competitors to gain ballot access (Bennett 2008; Winger 1996). The major parties that control
state legislatures (and their surrogates in nonpartisan elections) serve as ballot gatekeepers.
Figure 3. The US Has More Restrictive Registration and Ballot Access Laws, Compared to Other Democracies

Compared to other democracies, the US makes it more difficult for people to register to vote and for candidates and parties to get onto ballots. The two major political parties in the US now function as effective gatekeepers of representation.

Notes: The sample of countries in this figure includes only those scoring 4 or 5 on the Electoral Integrity ranking (the highest two scores). Fairness scores are composite indices evaluating fairness of voter registration (all voters were listed in the register, accuracy of register, whether ineligible voters were registered), fairness to small parties, and whether women and ethnic and national minorities had equal opportunity to run for office. Scales range from 1–100 (voter registration laws) and 1–15 (ballot access for small parties, women, and racial minorities). For country abbreviations, see: https://laendercode.net/en/3-letter-list.html


Achieving multiracial, multiparty democracy requires breaking down barriers to effective political association, so that people can exercise political power in concert with other like-minded actors. Expert surveys suggest that women, candidates of color, and small parties face greater barriers to ballot access in the US compared to other democracies (Norris and Grömping 2019). We often overlook administrative restraints on political association as a
target for reform, yet the energy required to qualify candidates for elective office is often marginalizing and prohibitive, requiring community organizations to draw resources away from actions to directly address local inequities (Burden 2007; Reed 2017; Winger 1996). Making it easier for candidates to qualify, cross-endorse, and use fusion balloting (where parties can cross endorse candidates) are important supply-side reforms to strengthen democratic representation by better reflecting the dimensionality of electoral coalitions (Drutman 2022; Santucci 2022a).

We also urge caution about popular intraparty-directed reforms, such as changes to party nomination procedures and primaries that further weaken the capacity of organizations to represent distinct community voices. First, evidence is mixed that opening partisan primaries to all voters, or otherwise weakening the role of party activists in candidate selection, actually expands “voter choice” or reduces partisan polarization (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016; Latner et al. 2017; McGhee and Shor 2017; Patterson 2020; Sparks 2020). Some have even suggested that such reforms facilitated the right-wing-populist takeover of the Republican Party (Drutman 2021).

While it is clear that powerful corporate interests have an incentive to weaken political parties (Schleifer 2021; Edgecliffe-Johnson 2021; Musk 2022), their goal of “moderating” representation runs counter to incentives that encourage policy entrepreneurs and activists to expand political association through new groups competing for representation (Cox 1997; Strøm 1992; Klein 2015).

**Expand Representation by Increasing Assembly Sizes**

Electoral systems, specifically the rules that determine the number of seats in representative legislatures (assembly size), the number of seats per district (district magnitude), and how votes are converted into seats (electoral formula) for elections, are among the most important factors that shape incentives for political coalitions. Assembly size can directly constrain the diversity of representation in a given system (Allen and Stoll 2018; Latner, Santucci, and Shugart 2021; Lublin and Bowler 2018; Moser, Scheiner, and Stoll 2018; Norris 2006; Shugart and Taagepera 2017; Taagepera and Shugart 1991). Increasing the number of seats in an assembly lowers the threshold of representation for (numeric) minority groups in several ways. Adding seats to a legislature will either add more seats to existing electoral districts, or add more districts. More seats per district can allow smaller groups to win seats, whereas more districts, with smaller populations, allows smaller coalitions to win seats. Both mechanisms help "open the door to marginalized, under-represented groups" (Allen and Stoll 2018).

Lowering the threshold to representation for marginalized groups increases the likelihood that candidates who share their racial and gender identities can effectively compete for office (Fraga 2016; Fraga 2018; Hughes 2013; Montoya et al. 2021). Crucially, the intersectionality of identities among constituencies, candidates and organizational leaders has mobilizing capacity, with political identity working through multiple complex channels (Bejarano et al. 2021; Gershon et al. 2019; Hardy-Fanta et al. 2016; Uhlane and Scola 2016). Coalitions can condition the strength of such ties by adjusting the size and number of assembly seats, with larger assemblies reflecting latent political diversity within racial groups (Latner, Santucci, and Shugart 2021; Corral and Leal 2020; Sanchez, Fraga, and Ramírez 2020; Sadhwani 2022).
Increasing the number of seats on city councils in the United States should be an especially effective reform, given the ridiculously small size of many US city councils compared to those in other cities across the world (Latner, Santucci, and Shugart 2021; Fissell 2022). For example, the Los Angeles city council has 15 seats to represent approximately 4 million people, compared to 45 council seats representing a population of a million in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

To be clear, we are not just calling for longer ballots or more candidates in elections, which can demobilize voter engagement, especially for low-propensity voters (Brockington 2003). Rather, more seats on city councils increases the capacity for representation, even in low-turnout precincts, and resulting changes in the racial composition of districts can generate a greater supply of viable candidates and greater competition (Atsusaka 2021), depending on the choice of electoral formula.

**Design Electoral Districts to Represent All Voters**

Electoral systems typically reinforce the power of the coalitions that designed them and are resilient to change in the absence of a shift in coalitional strength (Santucci 2022b). Like assembly size, district magnitude (or the number of seats per electoral district) directly constrains the possible diversity of representation at the district level. Choosing an electoral system is a contentious political issue, in part because these rules are such a decisive factor in determining racial and partisan representation.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 initiated a legal and administrative turn toward single-seat districts (SSDs) and the creation of majority-minority districts to ensure that voters of color could elect a candidate of their choice (Davidson and Grofman 1994). The remedy has certainly been effective (Lublin et al. 2009), yet the Supreme Court’s growing animosity toward the consideration of race in districting, or even standards that incorporate racial data, threatens the future of such remedies (Fuentes-Rohwer and Charles 2021; Jones and Polsky 2021; Latner 2022b; Schroedel and Hart 2015). The irony of the majority-minority district remedy is that it has itself become a tool of vote dilution in redistricting litigation, under the increasingly protected veil of partisan advantage (Keena et al. 2021).

Larger assembly sizes and more proportional electoral systems create incentives for coalitions to compete for the support of more voters of color, as more seats allow more diverse representation (Moser, Scheiner, and Stoll 2018; Norris 1997). While the politics of race within racially defined groups are more likely to receive political representation under more permissive systems, the same breadth of voice provides multiracial coalitions an incentive to build broader winning coalitions.

Moreover, the basic logic of political equality demands proportionality in election results (McGann 2006). A wide variety of electoral systems can be engineered to achieve proportional results, from SSDs that carve out districts so that voters are represented roughly proportional to their partisan voting strength, to large-magnitude, multiseat districts (MSDs) that precisely award seats proportionally to parties (or coalitions), to candidate-based systems with preferential lists, to SSD/MSD hybrids—known as mixed-member proportional—that compensate seat shares to smaller parties unable to win majority support in single-seat districts (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001; Diamond and Plattner 2006; Herron, Pekkanen, and Shugart 2018).
Figure 4. More Permissive Electoral Systems Are Associated with More-Diverse City Councils

This sample of cities illustrates how the number of parties seating candidates of color increases with the Seat Product, the product of assembly size (number of seats on council) and district magnitude (number of seats per district). As the number of seats increase, the Seat Product value increases. Note: The number of parties seating candidates of color derives from the number of parties seating at least one candidate of color in the city council in recent (2016–2019) elections, weighted by the parties’ share of legislative seats.

SOURCES: Updated analysis from Latner, Santucci, and Shugart 2021. Shugart and Taagapera 2017 develops the link between Seat Product, number of parties, and candidate selection.

Electoral system designs interact with social conditions and populations to shape politically salient identities and representation in complex ways (Bowen 2022; Montoya et al. 2021; Niven and Solimine 2022; Trounstine and Valdini 2008; Vowles and Hayward 2021). Rather than advocate predetermined reform packages onto communities “from above,” we advise that the choice of electoral system be left to those communities—who must live under and compete through those rules.

Advantages and disadvantages of electoral system choices will play out differently under different conditions. Extremely racially polarized voting, coupled with geographic segregation, may warrant engineering racial representation through SSDs, whereas the greater permissiveness of explicitly proportional systems supports more geographically dispersed minority groups. Decisions about optimizing political equality are highly sensitive to the
dynamics of local coalitions. Perhaps the best advice is to caution against attempts to insulate transitory coalitions from competition. To ensure that the process of selecting electoral rules is inclusive as possible, local communities should make these choices through participatory, deliberative processes.

**Foster More Deliberative Policymaking**

Considerations about electoral system design and related policy questions lead to our final recommendation, which is to support deliberative institutions capable of adjudicating both structural and policy questions. The goal of citizen juries, panels, and deliberative forums, concrete expressions of our collective political lives, is to better incorporate the practices of inclusivity, listening, mutual respect and justification, reflection, and openness to persuasion into formal political institutions (Dryzek et al. 2019; Nino 2009).

On many of the issues that we have addressed, deliberation ought to take priority over sheer political strength, especially when choosing institutions for collective decisionmaking (Bellamy 2010; van der Does and Jacquet 2021). Deliberative forums may be particularly suited for diagnosing deficits in representation and democracy, by articulating the interest of otherwise-marginalized groups, giving people an opportunity to get to know local leaders, and deliberating policy outside of the space of electoral politics (Fishkin 2013; McGann 2006; Weldon 2011).

*Bringing people together to deliberate collective choices, including institutional choices, can add more voices to the conversation and lend greater legitimacy to the outcome.*

*SOURCE: Christos Bacharakis/Creative Commons (Flickr)*
We are not naively optimistic about the prospects of deliberative policymaking. Our recommendations up to this point reflect an acute concern for the ways that inequalities shape political persuasion (Stokes 1998, Johnson 1998). Communities must structure deliberation with facilitators, expert testimony, a diverse array of information and evidence, justifiable reason-giving, and respectful listening. This is a tall order, but if the proliferation of experiments in deliberative decisionmaking are any indication of its potential, there is reason for hope (Warren 2022).

Moreover, neighborhood and city venues provide a unique opportunity for policy deliberation, as even residents less likely to partake in electoral politics may show up when their communities are directly affected by policy change (Nuamah and Ogorzalek 2021). Greater opportunities for participatory decisionmaking provide a venue for voices to be heard and for participatory social networks to be strengthened.
Recommendations to Stakeholders

This section provides recommendations to stakeholders whose commitment is necessary to achieving these objectives. Democracy stakeholders frequently face a misalignment of objectives: election workers on the ground need basic data management, while researchers want generalizable field experiments to answer theoretical questions; community organizations face tremendous hurdles in providing basic services to members, while well-funded reformers seek volunteers to implement preordained visions. Our recommendations are directed at better aligning reform objectives with community needs, creating spaces where shared values can produce tangible improvements in democratic performance.

Community Organizations

As the engine of change for achieving multiracial, multiparty democracy, nearly all of our recommendations are directed at or dependent on strengthening the capacity of community organizations. Our recommendations focus on expanding efforts to strengthen their political reach without straining their capacity to provide the services that make them vital in the first place.

Local organizations, including those that have not traditionally engaged in voter mobilization, can plug into national election-protection programs to help answer their members’ questions about voter registration deadlines, requesting absentee or mail-in ballots, and how to vote in-person during early voting or on Election Day. These organizations can also support monitoring, reporting, and documenting polling precinct incidents and related problems that threaten election integrity (Election Protection 2022; Latner 2020; Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs 2022).

In a year where many election offices are experiencing an exodus of experienced administrators, threats from extremists, and political pressure from state officials, local election administrators need all the help they can get (Wines 2021). Community organizations can partner with election offices to conduct polls, ensure accessibility, and assist with ballot processing and the like, as well as help them become effective public educators. GOTV organizations regularly rely on election administrators for election data, but that relationship should be reciprocal; integrating membership data with registration and voter files can facilitate precinct organization and relational organizing efforts.

Community organizations also need more partners and financial support to build the infrastructure needed to bring marginalized voices into the electoral process (Brooks 2022; Abramovitz et al. 2019). Data science experts and advocacy organizations can successfully challenge voter suppression and disengagement by working with election agencies to reduce registration and ballot rejection errors, for example (Latner 2020). In turn, when service organizations build support through voter engagement efforts, that political capital can in turn sustain and stabilize school funding, expand health care services, and secure public resources to support a variety of local challenges. Social welfare organizations and partners in battleground states, such as Arizona and Georgia, have already demonstrated impressive, scalable efforts to strengthen local political networks (Carranza 2020; Higgins 2021).
**Election Administration Agencies**

Election administrators must also seek out cross-sector collaboration, where election officials, community organizations, and researchers can share expertise, build out data exchanges, grapple with common problems, and advance effective reforms.

It is increasingly important for election administrators to partner with private and nonprofit vendors to improve election performance and the voting experience, particularly if long-term voter mobilization goals are realized (Hale and Slaton 2008; U.S. Digital Response 2022). Finding ways to contribute to data transparency without straining administrative resources is essential. Academic partnerships provide one such an opportunity (Columbia World Projects 2022).

Extraordinary progress has been made in the field of redistricting—through collaboration between election scientists, mapping engineers, and software experts—to create public mapping projects in an effort to combat gerrymandering (Redistricting Data Hub 2022). Putting the same effort toward curating more granular eligible-population, voter-registration, voter-contact, voting, and ballot-processing information would greatly improve our ability to understand, assess, and improve electoral ecosystems.

Other productive partnerships include public education and deliberative opportunities with nonprofits and other public agencies to better integrate service providers, such as family resource centers, into the voter outreach process (Disinfo Defense League 2022; Menger and Stein 2018; Brown, Raza, and Pinto 2020). Additionally, making space to partner up for deliberative opportunities can ensure that election agencies maintain regular ties to their clients (for example, see Orange County Registrar of Voters 2022).

**Electoral Reform and Voting Rights Organizations**

Election reform organizations and voting rights advocates are central to the success of any broader democracy movement, but they often work at separate ends of democracy reform. Whereas reform organizations have historically focused on legislating specific administrative or ballot-related changes that gain popularity among experts, voting rights groups are more active in litigation and the enforcement of existing federal voting rights protections. These groups need to collaborate more extensively as partners to support the efforts of community organizations.

Effective collaboration requires that these organizations change the ways they typically approach community work. Organizers often perceive election reformers to be elites with solutions in search of problems, lacking commitment to the postreform work of sustaining stable political coalitions to ensure that reforms work as intended (or at least, as they have been sold). Conversely, voting rights and litigation groups are justifiably cautious in their approach to reform. After all, having successfully built a legal regime around an established set of voting rights protections, they are hesitant to change course—even if established solutions no longer fit current conditions.

These organizations would benefit from engaging in more active listening prior to advocacy. Grassroots tactics that incorporate active listening also strengthen their capacity to build leadership in communities most impacted by policy, strengthening the link between the fate of
communities and organizational representatives (Kitson and Howell 2019; Roche 2017). The environmental justice movement has demonstrated perhaps the greatest success at modeling these practices (Energy.gov 2022; National Resource Defense Council 2016; Schneider 2014; Towers 2000; Union of Concerned Scientists 2022). We view better integrated voting rights, electoral reform, and environmental justice coalitions as the best hope for a broad-based prodemocracy movement in the United States (Latner 2022a).

Active, deep listening is the first step. Using deep-canvassing techniques, including face-to-face, issue-based conversations, organizers build trusted and nontransactional relationships with community members that sustain beyond election cycles. Real-time data maps of the community electoral ecosystem—such as voter eligibility and demographics, patterns of registration rates, ballot applications, verification, and rejection rates—can amplify communication and organizing capacity.

Relational organizing also builds power locally through administrative partnerships, then identifies and eradicates administrative barriers that systemically depress voting in marginalized communities. Cadres of local leaders and organizers lead power hubs that enact a culture of organizing and policy change and grow this work in marginalized neighborhoods, through peer recruitment and compelling storytelling. Deep canvassing techniques, which use people’s personal experiences as a basis of uncovering shared goals, build a foundation for continued communication. Organizations can then analyze data identifying institutional barriers to participation, to engineer scalable, replicable blueprints for network building. Legal, technical, and organizational experts also contribute to movement building by developing new legal strategies, technological advances, and evidence-based assessments to shape policymaking at higher leverage points in government.

Philanthropic/Funding Organizations

A growing number of funding organizations are entering the democracy reform space. We are cautiously optimistic about this development, but also concerned about the possibility of funders “capturing” and distorting the goals of reform movements (McCambridge 2019). Local community organizations must lead by setting advocacy and organizing agendas. Funding organizations should stand in solidarity with local organizations to ultimately make the democracy movement broader, stronger, more effective, and more likely to survive.

Funders should direct more resources to movement builders and existing community organizations who experience the weakness of democracy on a daily basis, rather than establishing branch organizations of larger, national reform groups. Philanthropic organizations should not focus on getting a win and then getting out, but instead make long-term investments in movement building and postreform policy implementation. Local capacity-building and multiorganizational collaboration are making important progress, but much more collaboration is needed (Battle for Democracy Fund 2022; Healthy Democracy Fund 2022; More Equitable Democracy 2022).

Research funding also needs to be better attuned to the immediate needs of community organizations and administrators. More applied research can focus on improvements to the election experience and election outcomes. Researchers should focus on working with data that can be produced and assessed without drawing down the resources of election office or community organization staff.
In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published “Securing the Vote: Protecting American Democracy” and called on Congress to “authorize and fund immediately a major initiative on voting that supports research relevant to the administration, conduct and performance of elections” (National Academies 2018). We concur that increased federal funding is imperative, but we also recognize that there is a great deal that funding organizations can do now to support scientists and science organizations and generate collaboration between researchers and local election administrations.

**Conclusion**

We brought together a unique group of organizers, activists, scholars, and election experts to confront the challenges facing our democracy, consider the dynamics of building successful reform coalitions, and chart a trajectory toward achieving truly multiracial, multiparty democracy in the United States.

The expansion of democracy in the United States and across the world has historically relied on the energy of social movements to mobilize and upset status quo coalitions. We find ourselves again in a period of shifting partisan alignments, which present direct challenges to existing institutions and opportunities to improve democratic performance. We do not wish to repeat the mistakes of the past, as compromises in previous reform efforts have helped create our current crisis. In this new era of reform, we have charted a path forward to bring us closer to our democratic ideals, without compromising effectiveness or exploiting those most in need of a seat at the table.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Beyond those who contributed their time and expertise to the content of this report, we wish to acknowledge the guidance and editorial assistance of those who brought the report to completion.

Andrew Rosenberg’s leadership at the Center, until the final stages of the report, has been instrumental. The concept of a democracy reform course bringing analysts and organizers together was first conceived at a Center retreat, and Dr. Rosenberg helped build support for this work throughout UCS.

Danielle Fox, the Center’s campaign and science network manager, led a great deal of the internal work.

Lindsey Berger, Kiana Coleman, Sophia Marjanovic, Michell McIntyre, and Taofik Oladipo all helped at various stages to think through how electoral reform should be incorporated into the existing legislative and organizational priorities of UCS.

Keisha Krum, Khalilah Worley, and other partners at Greater Cleveland Congregations have provided indispensable leadership in helping us understand the needs and capacity of grassroots organizations in reviving our democracy.

Finally, all of these ideas and recommendations were brought to life by the editorial talents of Bryan Wadsworth, Katy Balatero, Cynthia DeRocco, Matthew Heid, and Seth Shulman.

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