

Political Reform

 NEW
AMERICA

2023



Year in Review

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Ten Years of Political Reform

It's been a full decade since we launched New America's program on U.S. democracy. While it's been gratifying to see the program evolve and our ideas and people gain visibility, what I'm reflecting on most at the end of 2023 is how dramatically our perception of the challenges to democracy has changed, and how we've aspired to meet the moment in our work.

Looking back to the end of 2013, our main worries then were still the influence of concentrated wealth on elections, mostly through campaign spending, and the partisan polarization that seemed to bog down Congress and limit our ability to respond to human needs. But these could be seen as well-defined exceptions on the margins of democratic institutions. As urgent as those problems seemed, they reflected an assumption that the core of our elections, legislatures, and political parties were otherwise sound and stable.

But they weren't. Ten years later, we've encountered the inherent limits, not necessarily of democracy itself, but certainly of the distinctive U.S. model, with its winner-take-all elections, calcified two parties, and now a political movement willing to test and challenge every democratic and constitutional norm in order to claim and entrench power. These cascading crises, intersecting with the climate and migration crises, have pushed ever-new issues onto the agenda of democracy, such as procedures for choosing county election officials.

For us, it's led us to think more fundamentally about institutional alternatives. And we're growing optimistic about the path to such reforms. We're at the beginning of a transformation in the relationship between people and government, represented by innovations such as citizens' assemblies and other models of collaborative governance at the local level, as well as the federal government's work to change the way the regulatory process engages the public. And as senior fellow Lee Drutman has argued, the current moment may be like the Progressive Era, in which decades of democratic dysfunction and oligarchy converge in a moment of sweeping reform, potentially including changes that would lead to a richer, more inclusive, multiparty democracy.

Many things make this a terrifying moment for the future of democracy, but we're genuinely more hopeful than at any point in the previous ten years.

Sincerely,

Mark Schmitt

Director, Political Reform



Mark speaking at an event on democracy and climate change in November.

Year in Numbers

25

Op-eds
covering our team's
range of fresh analysis

16

Outlets
that published our
team's articles

20

**Reports &
Policy Papers**
offering a deep dive
on a range of topics

27

Podcast Episodes
produced by the team

15

**Radio & TV
Appearances**
where we broadcasted
our ideas

27

Events
including public and
private conversations on
timely issues

14

**Conferences,
Speeches & Panels**
where we shared our
work behind the scenes

36

Quotes & Citations
highlighting our team's
work in the media

33

Publications
that referenced our
work

6

Staff
who work full-time
on political reform

5

Fellows
whose insights take our
work to the next level

Our Two Pillars of Work

*Reimagining Political
Institutions*

*Designing Governance
for Civic Trust*

Reimagining Political Institutions

More Parties, Better Parties

“Political parties are the central institutions of modern representative democracy. They must also be at the center of efforts to reform American democracy. To redirect and realign the downward trajectory of our politics, we must focus on political parties. We need them to do better. And to create better parties, we need more parties.”

– Lee Drutman, New America Report



Left-to-right: Jennifer Dresden, Didi Kuo, and Daniel Stid, presenting at the More Parties, Better Parties conference at Stanford

The Political Reform program envisions the transformative potential of a multiparty system in the United States. In a dynamic political landscape, a range of parties, each deeply rooted in community, work collaboratively to reflect the nation's diverse voices and interests.

The vibrant, healthy political parties we envision would be characterized by their commitment to transparent, inclusive processes, and the principles of democracy. They would engage in rigorous candidate vetting, effective organizing, and strategic coalition-building. By doing so, these parties would serve as robust platforms for aggregating the long-term policy goals of various groups, thereby enhancing the democratic process.

In 2023, the program continued to facilitate this vision by exploring and promoting specific, party-centric reforms through our research, writing, events, and growing partnerships. Key among our recommended reforms are fusion voting and proportional representation, which are designed to encourage the emergence of new political entities, empowering voters to make informed choices and support candidates who genuinely represent their views.

We aspire to cultivate a political environment where about five to six parties can coexist, providing diverse yet manageable representation. This “modest multipartyism” is aimed at creating a more fluid, responsive political system, capable of adapting and evolving in response to societal needs. Such a system, we believe, is the key to unlocking a more effective, representative, and resilient democracy in the United States.

Related Work

Publications

NEW AMERICA | LEE DRUTMAN

“More Parties, Better Parties: The Case for Pro-Parties Democracy Reform”

NEW AMERICA | MARK SCHMITT AND MARESA STRANO

“From Polarization to Pluralism: Harnessing Parties and Fusion Voting for a Healthier Democracy”

THE BULWARK | LEE DRUTMAN AND BEAU TREMITIERE

“The Presidential Race Could Use a Third Party—But Not a Third Candidate”

TIME | LEE DRUTMAN AND DUSTIN WAHL
“The Only Way to Fix Congress”

WASHINGTON POST | LEE DRUTMAN

“Our Two-Party Political System Isn’t Working. The Fix? More Parties.”

BALLOT ACCESS NEWS | MARESA STRANO AND JOEL ROGERS

“More Than Semantics: Distinguishing Dual Labeling from Traditional Fusion Voting”

SLATE | LEE DRUTMAN

“Wish You Had More Political Choice? The Answer Isn’t a Third-Party Candidate.”

Events

“More Parties, Better Parties: Building a Stronger Democracy in America,” co-hosted by New America; Stanford’s Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law; the Center for Ballot Freedom; Protect Democracy; and Lyceum Labs
(Private - April 2023)

“Factions, Coalitions, and Institutions: The Role of Political Parties in a Democracy,” co-hosted by Protect Democracy and New America (October 2023)



Left-to-right: Dave Palmer, Andy Craig, Julia Azari, Lee Drutman, and Joel Rogers.

Reimagining Political Institutions

Structural Resilience



Lee presenting at the Aspen Ideas Festival

Overcoming the many threats that American democracy faces today will require more than effective and brave leadership. We need to reimagine our political institutions so that they encourage us to work together instead of pulling us apart. Our institutions should facilitate consensus instead of division. And they should incentivize us to improve our democracy instead of tempting us to subvert democratic norms for partisan gains.

New America's Political Reform program is spearheading initiatives and projects that examine the shortcomings of our current institutions, what it would take to reform them, and what institutions for a multiracial democracy could look like.

Our work this year has focused on diagnosing the problem, showing how our current electoral system contributes to many of our current political ailments. We have explored how the current winner-take-all system is **unable to reflect the diversity** of the country, how it **gives outsized influence** to a small number of competitive districts, and how it contributes to the spread of **misinformation**. We have also researched how views towards democracy have evolved among Americans since 2017 and how the two-party system has made a concerning share of Americans willing to put partisan interests over democracy.

“To address the root causes of misinformation, our efforts should be focused on making misinformation less useful to voters, politicians, and media companies. That requires structural changes like reforming our electoral institutions to move beyond the winner-take-all system and reduce the current us-vs-them mentality in our politics.”

– Oscar Pocasangre, The Thread

Another part of our work has focused on the solutions. We believe more and better political parties can help us get closer to a thriving and resilient democracy and we are working with many partner organizations, including Protect Democracy and the Center for Ballot Freedom, to research how reforms like fusion voting can encourage the creation of more parties. In partnership with the MGGG Redistricting Lab, we have analyzed what different voting procedures would mean for the representation of voters belonging to ethnic groups and minority parties. Together with Protect Democracy, we are producing a series of white papers on the possibilities for proportional representation in America, including a forthcoming paper on how a multiparty system could enhance electoral accountability and bring policies closer to public opinion. Finally, in partnership with R Street, we produced 27 new episodes of our podcast **Politics in Question**, where Lee and his co-hosts James Wallner (R Street) and Julia Azari (Marquette University) go beyond the headlines to debate ideas for repairing our failing political institutions.

Related Work

NEW AMERICA | LEE DRUTMAN AND OSCAR POCASANGRE

“Understanding the Partisan Divide: How Demographics and Policy Views Shape Party Coalitions”

NEW AMERICA | JESSE CROSSON, ALEXANDER FURNAS, GEOFFREY LORENZ, AND KEVING MCALISTER

“From Polarization to Pluralism: Harnessing Parties and Fusion Voting for a Healthier Democracy”

NEW AMERICA | AARON TIEDEMANN

“Why Americans Crave Fake News: How Our Electoral System Drives Demand for Misinformation”

NEW AMERICA | MARESA STRANO

“Where Have All the Local Candidates Gone?”

THE ATLANTIC | LEE DRUTMAN

“Matt Gaetz Is Half Right”

NEW AMERICA | JONATHAN COLNER

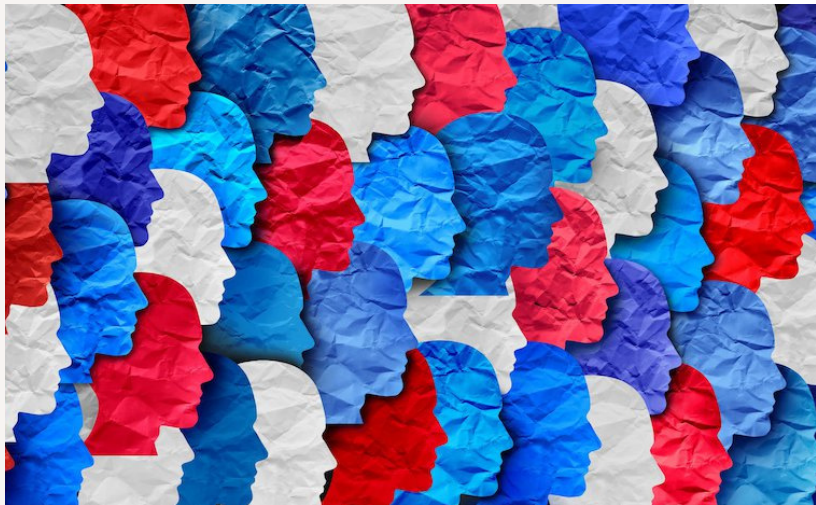
“The Short-Term Impact of Ranked-Choice Voting on Candidate Entry and Descriptive Representation”

NEW AMERICA | OSCAR POCASANGRE

“The Flaws of Federalism: On “Laboratories Against Democracy”

MARKETPLACE | MARESA STRANO

“What You Need to Know About Ranked Choice Voting”



Designing Governance for Civic Trust

Collaborative Governance

In response to the decline in public trust between people and government, we need innovative models of democracy that bring everyday people into the process of making policy. Two new forms of engagement are particularly promising: citizens' assemblies, which have been tested to resolve public questions across the globe; and collaborative governance, a broader concept of engagement between organized community members and government. New America's Political Reform program recently published Building the Democracy We Need for the Twenty-First Century, a toolkit to support local leaders inside and outside of government in exploring new models of equitable participation. This new form of engagement, which we highlighted in a series of case studies, seeks to break down the boundaries between advocates and officials. We recently hosted a closed-door, high-level convening bringing together senior leaders across sectors to launch a network to support democratic experiments across the country.

Nationwide, there are innovative efforts underway to empower democratic participation, from new digital tools that create opportunities for civic networks and collective action to a new generation of community organizers who are experimenting with fresh ideas for how to form more robust and agile civil institutions and organizational structures.

Through the Co-Governance Project at New America, we are working in close partnership with cities and communities to support innovations in collaborative governance ranging from participatory budgeting to people's assemblies and citizen assemblies, to name but a few examples of promising models. Ultimately, this body of work aims to revitalize local democracy from the bottom up.

“Building shared power is important not only for effecting structural change but also for delivering more equitable and effective policy. Allowing people most impacted by governing decisions to be involved in the design process ensures that the policies match on-the-ground realities, recognizing the expertise of lived experience that too often elected officials lack.”

– Hollie Russon Gilman, Grace Levin, Jessica Tang, and Lizbeth Lucero, New America Report



Hollie presenting at a Bloomberg Harvard City Leaders seminar.

Related Work

Publications

NEW AMERICA | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN,
GRACE LEVIN, JESSICA TANG, AND LIZBETH
LUCERO

**"Building the Democracy We Need for the
Twenty-First Century"**

BOSTON GLOBE | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN
AND AMY EISENSTEIN

**"It's Like Jury Duty, But For Getting Things
Done"**

**BLOOMBERG HARVARD CITY LEADERSHIP
INITIATIVE** | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN,
JORRIT DE JONG, ARCHON FUNG, REBECCA
ROSEN, GAYLEN MOORE

"City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement"

NEW AMERICA | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN,
LIZBETH LUCERO, AND PEGGY FLYNN

**"Building the Future of Democracy in
Petaluma, California"**



Events

**"Collaborative Governance & Citizens'
Assemblies: Promising Innovations for a New
Democracy Paradigm in the United States,"**
co-hosted by New America, DemocracyNext,
and Bard College (Private - October 2023)

**"Revitalizing Civic Engagement through
Collaborative Governance: Success Stories
From Around the United States,"** co-hosted
by New America, the Forge, and What Works
Plus (March 2023)

**"Democracy in a Hotter Time: Narrative,
Governance, and the Quest for
Environmental Justice,"** co-hosted by New
America and the Climate Democracy Initiative
(November 2023)

**"Governing for Future Generations: Lessons
from Indigenous Communities,"** hosted by
New America (November 2023)

**"Democracy Innovation 2023: Citizens'
Assembly and Beyond,"** co-hosted by Bard
and New America (November 2023)

Designing Governance for Civic Trust

Equitable Implementation

“The U.S. federal government should look to cities around the world, including Brazil, Lisbon and Bogotá, which are pioneering and embedding public participation as an everyday practice for policy making. As millions of federal dollars from ARPA, IIJA and IRA flow to U.S. cities, there is an unprecedented opportunity to transform how we govern.”

– *Hollie Russon Gilman and Grace Levin, Next City*

After the federal government’s historic **Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government**, New America convened former senior White House leaders and leaders from philanthropy and academia to glean the lessons learned from the administration’s efforts to advance equity. We are expanding our work to spotlight governmental innovations leading to equitable outcomes in communities and recognize continuing gaps in design, execution, accountability, and evaluation. The goal is to reimagine the relationship between the government and its residents and to mobilize public support for navigating the intricacies of a multiracial democracy.

In 2024 New America will launch a multimedia series and case study collection to capture key lessons and identify the next stage of an environment in which the legal basis for remedies to strengthen racial equity have been limited.

We are continuing to examine how to build greater awareness among civil society and movement organizations about new opportunities for engagement with the government. This entails translating these initiatives into sustained opportunities for movement and power-building, as well as fostering stronger relationships among those advancing equity, democracy, and racial justice work within the federal government, civil society, and movement leaders.



Lunch discussion at New America on lessons from the White House's efforts on advancing equity.

Related Work

Publications

NEXT CITY | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN AND GRACE LEVIN

"Civic Innovation Is Flourishing In Cities Right Now"

NEW AMERICA | HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN, SARAH JACOB, AND FARAH AHMAD
"Rural Partners Network: Connecting Local Community to Government"

NEW AMERICA | SARAH JACOB, AMY EISENSTEIN, HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN, AND D'ARTAGNAN SCORZA

"Revitalizing Civic Engagement through Racial Equity"

NEW AMERICA | CLAUDETTE SALINAS LEYVA, KIRTHANA SUDHAKAR, DEWA ATMAJA, JERO DODO, CHARLIE EUCHNER, AND GORDON LAFORGE

"Lessons from the Past to Govern for the Future"

Events

"Making Equity Work Through the Federal Government," co-hosted by New America and What Works Plus, Hyphen, and Brookings Metro (April 2023)

"White House Equity Learning Group on Civic Engagement in Climate Infrastructure," hosted by New America (Private - June 2023)

"New Opportunities for Co-Governance in the Biden Administration: Lessons for Movement and Powerbuilding in the Regulatory Process," co-hosted by New America and Columbia University's Institute of Global Politics (Private - December 2023)



Cecilia Munoz, Sabeel Rahman, Kimberlyn Leary, and Clarence Wardell speak at "Making Equity Work Through the Federal Government: A Conversation with Recent Senior White House Leaders" in April.

Introducing Political Reform’s “Gender, Extremism, and Engagement Project”

The United States is in the midst of a growing gender divide that is manifesting economically, culturally, and politically. The picture of progress many young men experience in our current age is bleak, fraught with declining social and economic status, a reality that reactionary forces in our society have sought to exploit. Rising technology has exacerbated this challenge by facilitating job loss through automation, scaling platforms that serve to deliver disinformation and extremist content, and creating products that incentivize further retreat and isolation from participation in civic society. The collective impact of these mutually reinforcing dynamics has emerged as a primary threat to democracy here in the U.S. and in countries abroad. The entanglement of digital technology, male identity, and democracy is recognized but studied in silos.

The Gender, Extremism, and Engagement project, led by Political Reform Senior Fellow Ilyse Hogue, seeks to understand the interplay between rising social and economic dislocation of men and technologically enabled pathways towards isolation, nihilism, and extremism as a growing threat to democracy. The project focuses on three primary areas in service of shoring up a robust and inclusive democracy:

- articulating the challenge in a way that informs ongoing advocacy and policy; conversations about strengthening democracy and mitigating risks to rising technology
- identifying and testing potential interventions in the individual journey to mitigate the impact of this growing threat; and
- seeking and architecting solutions for repair through increasing attractive and meaningful civic engagement opportunities.



Political Reform Senior Fellow Ilyse Hogue leads the Gender, Extremism, and Engagement Project at New America.

Leadership Behind the Scenes

Apart from our visible activities, which include writing op-eds and reports, organizing events, and participating in conferences, our team collaborates behind the scenes with various organizations and influential thinkers. We also inform stakeholders about political reform in a variety of institutional contexts. This work ranges from lecturing at universities to hosting private cross-partisan discussions, aiming to share our insights and expertise, and to continually learn from others how we can do better.

Hollie helped launch a curriculum for teaching senior city leaders about civic engagement at Harvard. She presented her findings to numerous government leaders and federal agencies including the International Open Government Partnership. She attended several funder conferences including in St. Louis. She has been advising multiple cities across the globe about how to advance participatory democracy. She has held hands-on, closed-door workshops for federal agencies. She is cited frequently in publications and has hosted several high-profile convenings.

Lee attended and presented at democracy reform gatherings at UC-San Diego, Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, and Northwestern. He also presented at a Leadership Now meeting in NYC and the Aspen Institute's Ideas Festival. He advised multiple members of Congress on democracy reform and is frequently consulted and quoted by many columnists and journalists about democracy issues.

Maresa designed a curriculum and taught a course on political reform at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management. She also served as lead organizer for the More Parties, Better Parties conference at Stanford University in April.

Sarah participated in an organizer training for South Asian activists in San Francisco and an organizer training for climate activists at Greenpeace in Washington D.C.

About Us

Our Team

Lee Drutman, Senior Fellow

Ilyse Hogue, Senior Fellow

Sarah Jacob, Program Associate

Lizbeth Lucero, Program Associate

Oscar Pocasangre, Senior Data Analyst

Hollie Russon Gilman, Senior Fellow

Mark Schmitt, Senior Director

Maresa Strano, Deputy Director

Fellows

Lydia Bean

Ann Florini

Didi Kuo

Kimberlyn Leary

Vann E. Newkirk

Robert Oldham



Lee, Maresa, Lizbeth, and Mark at New America.

Friends of the Program

Our co-governance partners include [The Forge](#), [What Works Plus](#), and [Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#). We're especially grateful for the collaboration and support of PowerSwitch Action, Georgia STAND-UP, CivicLex, Delaware Cares, Puget Sound Sage, Local Progress, NYC's Public Engagement Unit, Richmond's Office of Community Wealth Building, Petaluma, CA, USDA RURAL Partner's Network DemocracyNext, Democracy Innovation Hub at Bard's Arendt Center, and Racial Equity for Los Angeles County.

Thanks to our More Parties, Better Parties conference co-organizers: Stanford University's [Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law](#); the [Center for Ballot Freedom](#); [Protect Democracy](#); and [Lyceum Labs](#).

Other vital project partners in 2023 include [Democracy Rising](#), the [R Street Institute](#), [Fix Our House](#), and the [MGGG Redistricting Lab](#).

Our Funders

William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Democracy Fund
Ford Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Lumina Foundation
Mike Schroepfer and Erin Hoffmann Family
Fund
Omidyar Network
Open Society Foundations
Rockefeller Foundation
JPB Foundation

[Donate here to support New America](#)

Our Mission

New America's Political Reform program starts from the premise that repairing the dysfunction of American democracy and restoring trust in government calls for more than just public outrage, new advocacy coalitions, or smarter messaging. It requires fresh ideas and perspectives, experimentation, a robust and innovative public sphere, and an aspirational yet realistic vision of American democracy and equality. Launched in 2014, the Political Reform program seeks to develop new strategies and innovations to repair the dysfunction of government, restore civic trust, and rebuild the promise of American democracy.

You can stay in touch with the [Political Reform program](#) by following us on Twitter (@PolReformNA) and [subscribing](#) to our program's email list.