

# **Towards a Less Imperfect Union**

The Challenges and  
Signs of Progress for  
Political Reform in 2018

 **NEW  
AMERICA**

**POLITICAL  
REFORM**

**A YEAR  
IN REVIEW**

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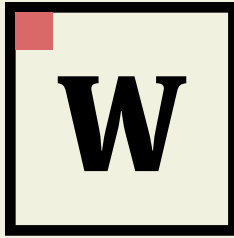
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When I returned to New America to launch our program on political reform in 2013, a colleague suggested our topic should be “the marketplace for power.”

That is, we wouldn’t just look at reforms to campaign finance or lobbying rules, but take a much broader perspective, scoping out all the ways in which the inequalities of economic and political power reinforce each other, disconnect people from government, and make it difficult to move forward on national priorities.

Five years later, that phrase is still a good description of the range of work that my colleagues and I have been engaged in, as we explore ideas about procedural reforms, such as ranked-choice voting, try to better understand the norms and practices that encourage democratic participation, and draw connections between politics and policy. Our long-term objective is not just an idealized democratic practice, but lasting improvements in people’s lives realized through a government that isn’t bogged down in inaction or cycles of backlash.

2018 brought us the first glimmers of hope for American democracy in recent years. On election day, several states and cities enacted significant democracy reforms by ballot initiative. Then, the new House majority proposed H.R. 1, a package of reforms that reflect the emerging consensus in our field, particularly by foregrounding a model of campaign finance reform that seeks to boost small donors and help new candidates run

and be heard. We’ve never seen these ideas given such high priority, by any party. This is, however, only the beginning of a long debate at every level of government that could result in a democracy that is less like a marketplace dominated by the already powerful, and more open to the voices of every citizen and finding ways to solve problems together.

Projects to improve democracy in the US often devolve into a competition among silver-bullet solutions. Advocates will promise that, say, reversing the Citizens United decision, ending partisan redistricting, or strengthening political parties will return government to the people. We recognize that political life is a complex interaction among formal rules, political culture, and the issues that define partisan conflict at any moment. That’s why our program tries to see the whole system, recognizing that the rules aren’t the only determinant of the ways that people will behave in the fragile attempt at collaborative governance that is democracy.

That’s an insight that was reflected in one of our major reports of the last year, a study of civic engagement projects in Philadelphia, where our staff explored the ways in which the city’s existing political power structure and its bureaucracy responded to a new push to engage citizens in decisions. It’s also reflected in our deepening engagement with electoral reform, particularly ideas such as ranked-choice voting. We’re enthusiastic about RCV, but will watch closely to see whether the added complexity might deter participation. Similarly, Seattle’s campaign finance innovation – giving every voter a voucher to make small contributions to candidates – holds great promise, in theory, but success depends on whether

voters, with imperfect knowledge, make effective use of the opportunity to support campaigns. In our work on gender and national security, we recognized that the people involved, and not just abstract policies, have much to do with our interaction with the world. Moving forward, we’d like to look much more closely at the ways in which people’s experience with government programs affects their trust and engagement as citizens in a democracy.

We’ve seen a lot of backlash and changes in American democracy over five years, but we’ve tried to discipline ourselves to look roughly five years into the future, to think about what American democracy could be, and not let ourselves be distracted by the outrages of each moment. Still, as 2019 dawns, we enter one of those rare and remarkable periods where the ideas that we and others have developed may begin to find a real audience in the political process. As this policy window opens, we hope that the ideas and perspectives we’ve put forward over the last several years will begin to see some paths to progress.

**Mark Schmitt**  
*Director, Political Reform  
Program and Senior Advisor,  
Leadership Team*



107

**articles**  
in a wide gamut  
of outlets.

10

**events**  
that brought together  
thought leaders across  
academia, journalism,  
activism, and government.

6

**reports**  
that took a deep dive  
into what kind of  
democracy we want.

13

**convenings**  
that bridged political  
ideologies.

90

**media mentions**  
in podcasts, newspapers,  
op-eds, TV, and reports.

**NEW AMERICA — POLITICAL REFORM  
2018 at a glance**

2

**books**  
in the making with Oxford  
University and Cambridge  
University Presses.

4,136

**data points**  
in our new Laboratories  
of Democracy database.

17

**outlets**  
that published our team's  
range of fresh analysis, with  
two running columns.

7

**staff**  
who make up a small but  
mighty team of political  
reform experts.

4

**fellows**  
whose insights take our  
work to the next level.





e focused this year on documenting opportunities for more inclusive engagement across various cities and identity groups, offering rigorous analyses of many different lessons learned. Of particular note is our deep research dive into Philadelphia’s big experiments with improving civic engagement through public spaces and human-centered service design, offering important takeaways about aligning philanthropy with the uncertainty of local politics and bureaucracy. An ultimate goal of this work is to deepen the opportunity for people to have a meaningful say in their democracy and to strengthen the decision-making points between residents and the public policies which impact them.

# Civic engagement & organizing:

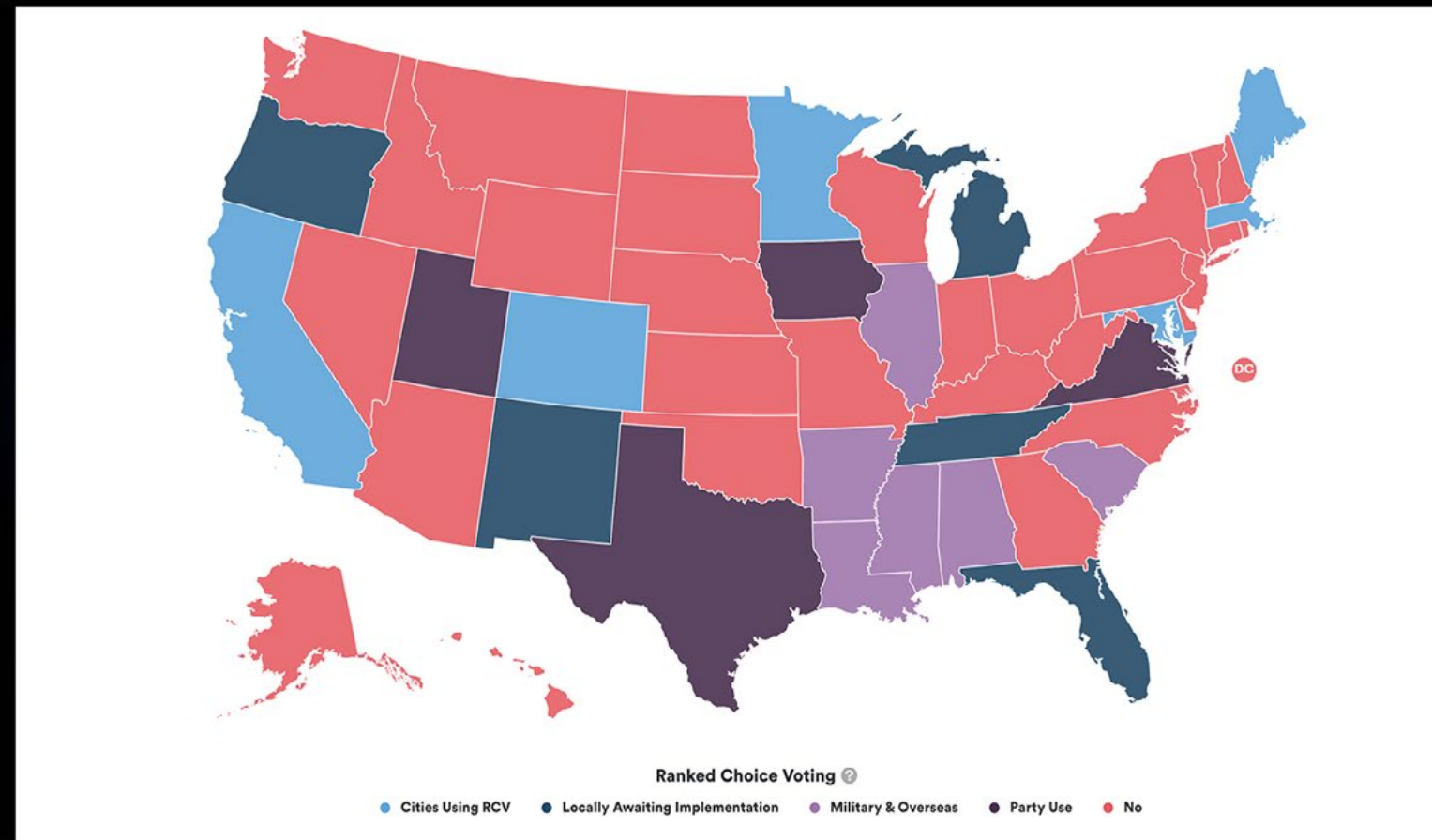
## Show up, dive in, stay at it

*“In an environment characterized by instant news...the slow changes which come about from civic engagement can be difficult to believe in or measure. ...but the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day work of making governance equitable and inclusive can make communities more resilient and responsive.”*

— Chayenne Polimédio, Elena Souris, and Hollie Russon Gilman, “Where Residents, Politics & Government Meet: Philadelphia’s Experiments With Civic Engagement,” *New America Report*

## Laboratories of Democracy Database

A platform for information and ideas about reform based on state experimentation. This evolving online resource allows advocates and citizens alike to examine states that seek to lower the barriers to political participation with reforms like same-day registration, ranked-choice voting, and partial public campaign financing.



# Congress: A crisis of capacity & legitimacy

**F**or decades, Congress has been cutting investment in its own capacity, ceding more and more power to K Street and the executive branch. Congress has become more centralized, more polarized, and more dysfunctional. We're trying to reverse all that. We've partnered with the R Street Institute to advocate for congressional reforms through a joint project, the Legislative Branch Capacity Working Group. As we look ahead to 2019, we see Congress leaning into a special committee on its organization. In the new year, we will play an active role in helping Congress re-think its future.

*A supine Congress unable to hold a president accountable. Members who find the job miserable (except for the status). A persistent problem of understaffing and lack of policy expertise. For decades, Congress has faced these growing problems and others. The Trump era has thrown them into overdrive.”*

— Lee Drutman, “The Other Biggest Problem in Washington,” *The New York Times* Op-Ed



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# Gender & security:

## Diversifying people & perspectives



he social science showing that diversity delivers policy outcomes — including on the hardest challenges of making and keeping peace — is growing. As security policy fails to incorporate this research, it also fails to deliver policy perspectives that reflect the world as it is in 2018. Throughout this year, we documented two unique challenges: diversifying both the people who work in national security and the lenses through which that field views the world.



*We are at an inflection point both in the national security industry and in the culture at large. It's a time when we have both cultural and policy momentum - and a bipartisan cohort that's advocating for change."*

— Heather Hurlburt, Elizabeth Weingarten, and Elena Souris, "From the Classroom to the Capitol: A Missing National Security Gender Link?," *New America Report*





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# Identity & polarization:

## The more sorted we become



Today, American's partisan alignments are deeply split along religious, ethnic, regional and gender lines, more so than any time since the 1850s. From race to class to religion to sexuality, global citizens have self-sorted, shaping the way that they vote and advocate. Despite these challenges, we presented a number of ideas for how we can loosen the stranglehold of polarization on our democracy.



“When partisan opponents have less and less in common, politics becomes more of a zero-sum game: I see any political gain for you as a loss for me, and vice versa. Being right becomes more important than getting it right, since our sense of self-worth is on the line.” — Lee Drutman, “United We Fall,” *Washington Monthly*

A group of four women are shown from the chest up, smiling and laughing. They are dressed in formal attire. The woman on the far left is wearing a red dress. The woman next to her is wearing a dark blue dress and a necklace. The woman next to her is wearing a teal dress. The woman on the far right is wearing a light blue blazer and a dark red scarf. In the background, several men in suits are visible, including one with an orange tie and another with a striped bow tie.

***“The new class of congressional Democrats, one of the largest in history...is striking for its near-total absence of sons, daughters, spouses, ex-spouses, grandchildren, even nieces and nephews of other elected officials.”***

— Mark Schmitt,  
“Is Dynastic Politics On the Way Out?,” Vox





his year, we saw the power corporations have in Washington, courtesy of the Facebook hearings with CEO Mark Zuckerberg and COO Sheryl Sandberg. Senators called on the company to come up with its own ideas for self-regulation, demonstrating what we see time and again: Congress deferring to industry expertise. On the local level, we've been hyper-focused on tracking different regulations for contribution limits, disclosure, and filing in all fifty states to compare the way states prioritize and address money in politics — all through our Laboratories for Democracy platform.

# Money in politics: One dollar at a time

VOX // MARK SCHMITT

Can Small Donors Stop the Financialization of Politics? [READ ▶](#)



*“You hire a lot of lobbyists who are well-connected. You spread a lot of money around. People will get that warm glow. This company’s a good friend to my campaign. Then you go in, and you make your case.”*

— Lee Drutman, “Relations Between Washington And Tech Industry Are Frosty,” *Interviewed on NPR*



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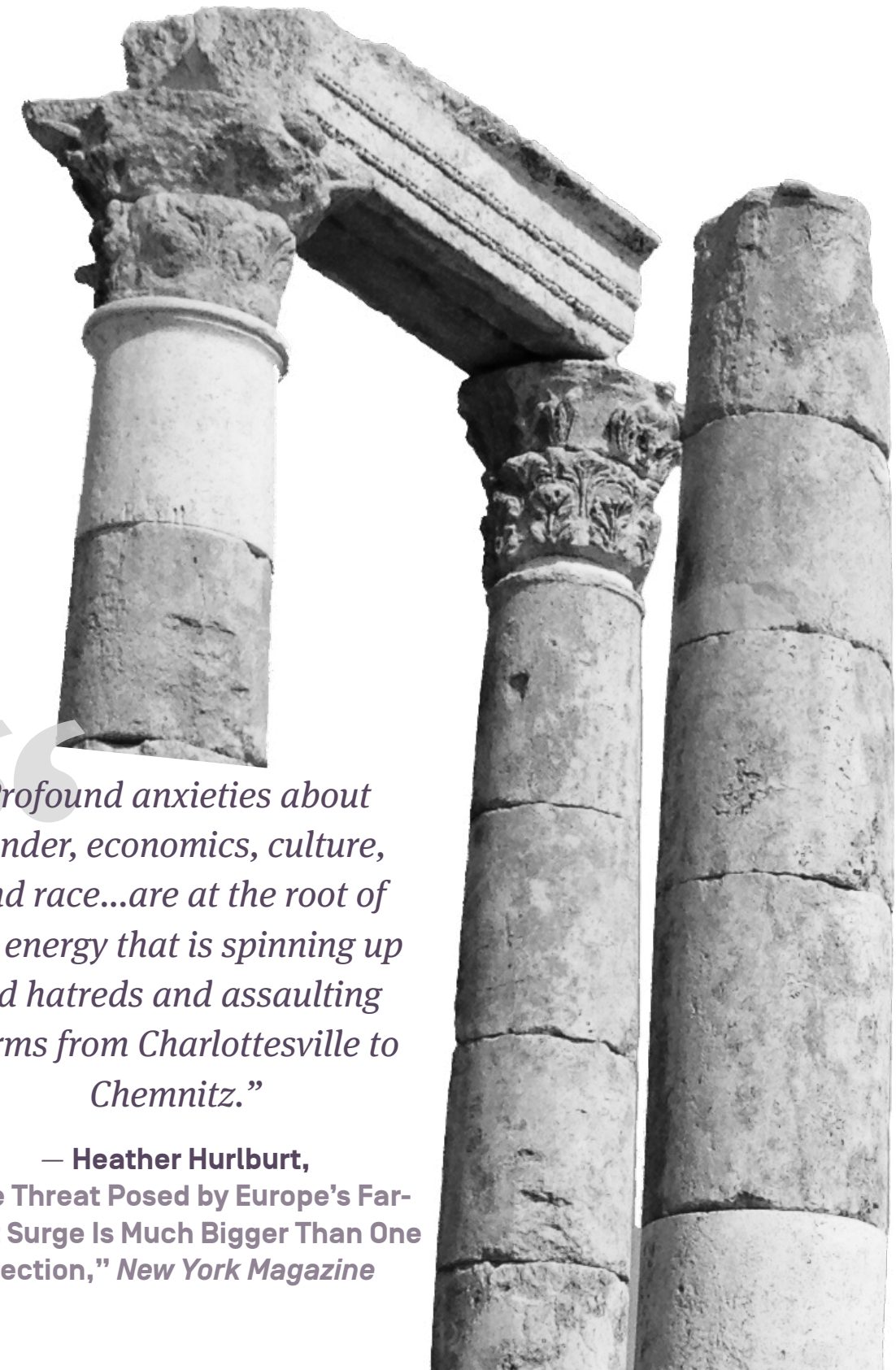
# State of global democracy: Toward new foundations



This year's challenges tested democratic governments and open societies both at home and abroad. An increasing number of countries around the world are in political turmoil, driven in part by discomfort with diversity, residual effects of the financial crisis, and the growing impact of globalization. This year, we diagnosed the discomforts and drove the cutting edge of debate. Our question: As the fundamentals of U.S. foreign, trade and security policy change, how will they respond to new political realities?

*Profound anxieties about gender, economics, culture, and race...are at the root of the energy that is spinning up old hatreds and assaulting norms from Charlottesville to Chemnitz."*

— Heather Hurlburt,  
"The Threat Posed by Europe's Far-Right Surge Is Much Bigger Than One Election," *New York Magazine*





***“A more protectionist, isolationist U.S.—one that continues to alienate important allies and undermine the international system—won’t be a safer one. ...Trump, to think of it in a different way, is trying to take a blunt, unilateral approach to a global, multilateral problem, essentially using a hammer for a situation that calls for a scalpel: It makes no sense, and will do little more than create unnecessary scar tissue.”***

— Elena Souris, “Could Trump’s Tariffs Unravel the World Trade Organization?,” *Pacific Standard*







***What role does the U.S. play in the world?. ...my first draft of the bumper sticker is “to sustain our communities, institutions and values in a globalized world.” But jumping to patch up the old institutions, without thinking through whether and how they serve contemporary goals, is not going to get us toward anyone’s goal.***

*– Heather Hurlburt, “ Foreign Policy After Trump: The U.S. Has Homework to Do,” Lawfare*



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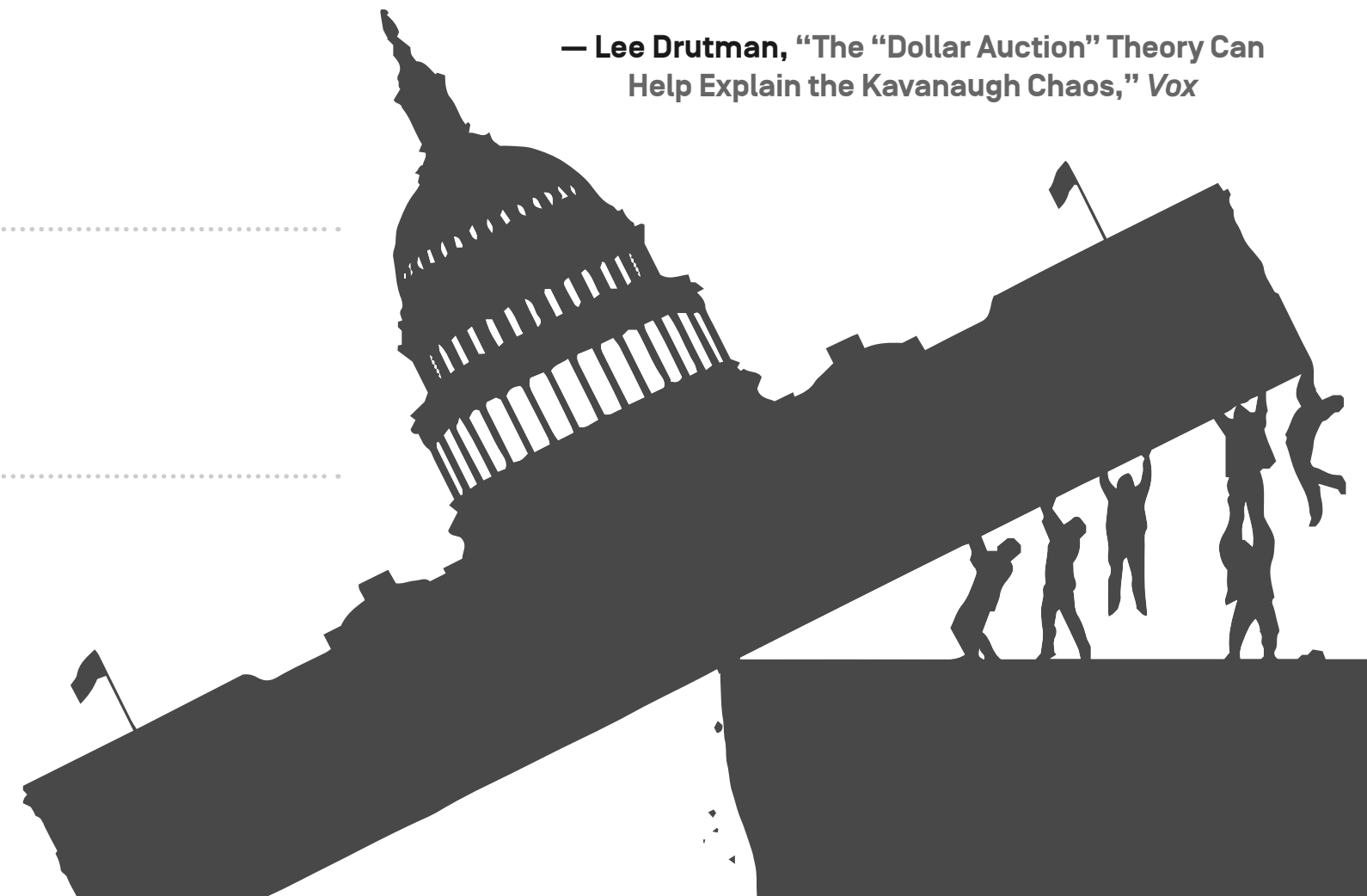
# The politics of American policymaking:

## Explaining the headlines

**I**n addition to the specific issues we cover, we also look at politics through a structural lens to analyze how foreign and domestic policies are made. This category of our work examines what makes policies effective, translates confusing political headlines, and breaks down complicated debates. In each case, we looked beyond breaking news alerts to provide historical, theoretical, and data-driven perspectives to help contextualize events and understand the “why,” not just the “what.”

“It’s hard not to see Democrats and Republicans as trapped in a dollar auction-esque escalation game over the Supreme Court...They’ve now riled up their bases so much that they will pay a big price in backlash and disappointment if they lose. But the escalation continues. And both sides are sure they are in the right.”

— Lee Drutman, “The ‘Dollar Auction’ Theory Can Help Explain the Kavanaugh Chaos,” Vox





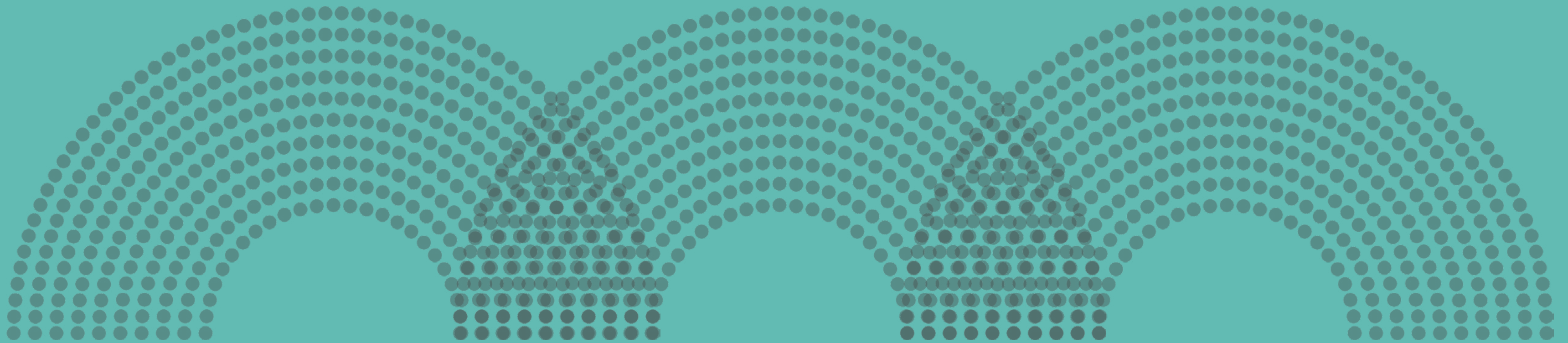
any of this year’s midterm races had political reform on the ballot. Independent redistricting, campaign finance, and voting reforms all won. This should send an important message to politicians: Reform is popular. But we also need to approach reform with appropriate caution. None of the reforms are transformative in their own right, and might have limited effects. They are all experiments, and we should watch closely.

# Voting, electoral & local reform:

## Putting elections back into the hands of people







***“Expanding the House would strike a more powerful blow against the influence of money in politics than any past campaign finance regulation, simply by cutting down on the costs of campaigning—reducing the candidate demand instead of trying to cut off the supply.”***

— Lee Drutman,  
“To Fix Congress, Make It Bigger. Much Bigger.,” *Washington Monthly*



# Our 2018 events

**O**ur events feature leading thinkers on today's pressing political reform issues in the U.S. and abroad. We strive to facilitate conversations that are both stimulating and constructive, engaging high-profile practitioners and academics who span the ideological divide.

To bring the best and the brightest to the table, we partnered with organizations, such as the Pew Research Center and Common Cause, and featured the latest innovative published work from new and established authors. In 2018, the topics ranged from how companies turn their employees into lobbyists to reforming the composition of the Supreme Court, attracting thousands of attendees in person and via our livecasts.



Oct. 25th, 2018

## Reforming the Court

The American Constitution Society and a panel of experts discussed reforming the composition of the Supreme Court.

Jul. 17th, 2018

## Are Americans Giving Up On Democracy?

We joined the Pew Research Center for a conversation about the state of our democracy and how to move forward.

May. 24th, 2018

## Democracy Between the Lines

Along with the Family-Centered Social Policy program, we held a discussion of Jamila Michener's new book, *Fragmented Democracy*.

Apr. 11th, 2018

## The Undemocratic American State? Race and the Lessons of History

Our Fellows discussed whether America, like many countries around the world, are experiencing democratic decline.

Apr. 4th, 2018

## The "Good Fight" LIVE

New America hosted the inaugural live edition of "The Good Fight" podcast.

Apr. 4th, 2018

## Politics at Work: How Employers Use Workers to Promote Their Own Politics

We partnered with the Economic Policy Institute for a discussion on how employers impact workers' political behavior.

Feb. 23rd, 2018

## Can Federalism Save American Democracy?

We joined Common Cause for the launch of the Laboratories of Democracy database.

Feb. 20th, 2018

## Is Solidarity the Key to Bridging the Racial Divide?

Our Fellows explored the present state of race relations in the United States and the prospects for developing national solidarity.

Jan. 10th, 2018

## Unusually Cruel and Inefficiently Just: A Conversation About Punishment In the U.S.

Marcia Chatelain, Dwayne Betts, and Marc Howard challenged assumptions about what prisons can and cannot do.



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# Our leadership behind the scenes

In addition to our publications and events, the Political Reform program also plays a convening role in the reform community across non-traditional venues and different ideologies, from libertarians to progressives.

Given the enormous challenges facing our work, collaboration, often behind-the-scenes, is essential. That’s because “zombie thinking” is a perpetual problem in the political reform field — groups and coalitions are wedded to solutions without a here-to-there theory of change. Others aim to “do something” for the sake of claiming an achievement, no matter how small, at the expense of long-term planning and creativity. And some others are locked into diagnoses of politics based on problems and solutions of previous decades.

We bring together our reform colleagues in off-the-record settings to provide a space that helps the community more easily confront old assumptions and develop fresh ideas.

This year, we expanded our reach by hosting meetings, giving presentations, and advising and facilitating other projects.

**Heather Hurlburt** facilitated a strategic planning retreat for the transpartisan Pentagon Budget Campaign and cohosted an event series with colleagues from the Center for American Progress and the CATO Institute on the changing international system. She served on the agenda planning committee for the Halifax Security Forum and served as an informal adviser to a number of foundations on security, political and gender issues, including the Compton Foundation and the Ploughshares Fund’s Gender Initiative.

**Lee Drutman** has been advising the Rebuild Congress Initiative, an exploratory cross-partisan group of members of Congress interested in congressional reform. He has also been advising on informal efforts to expand ranked-choice voting.

**Hollie Russon Gilman** facilitated a conversation at the 2018 CityLab Detroit conference with chief innovators from cities across the United States and served as a Network Member for the MacArthur Research Network on Opening Governance. She also led a visioning session for IBM’s Center for The Business of Government in Civic Engagement in 2040, and participated in a Longpath roundtable on governance.

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# Our mission and team



ew 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 ideas; fresh perspectives; experimentation; a robust, 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 citizen trust, and rebuild the promise of American democracy.

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## 2018 Fellows and Friends

### **Christian Hosam**

*2017-2018 Millennial Fellow*

### **Didi Kuo**

*Fellow, Political Reform Program*

### **Elizabeth Weingarten**

*Gender and national security contributor and senior fellow for the Better Life Lab*

### **Jamila Michener**

*Assistant professor of government at Cornell*

### **Julian E. Zelizer**

*Fellow, Political Reform Program*

### **Perry Bacon Jr.**

*Journalist, FiveThirtyEight*

### **Yascha Mounk**

*Fellow, Political Reform Program*



With your support, we were able to expand our work, including continued research, journalism, convenings, and fellowships at New America.

Thank you for supporting our commitment to revitalizing democracy in the U.S.

Help us continue our efforts.

[newamerica.org/our-funding/donate](https://newamerica.org/our-funding/donate)



POLITICAL  
REFORM

## Our funders

