

Inquiring Minds– 18 December 2020

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How to Revitalize Democracy

Back in June, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a report called *Our Common Purpose*. Produced by a 35-member demographically-diverse commission that held 47 listening sessions around the country, the report proposes 6 strategies with 31 proposals to revitalize American democracy. Some recommendations focus on specific changes in institutions and processes while others involve strengthening our civic culture and building “social capital.” *Our Common Purpose* points out that this year Congress appropriated \$300,000,000 to underwrite the promotion of democracy in 90 countries abroad and then asks, “Why not fund democracy at home?”

Read through the excerpts that follow.

First off, do you buy the basic premise of the study, namely that a “fundamental reassessment” of American institutions is needed?

Next, take a look at their recommendations. Are some strategies more important than others? As you read the specific proposals, think about the pros and cons of each. Which ones would you support? Which would you oppose? Which would have the biggest impact in revitalizing our democracy? Which would be hardest to achieve? Do you have ideas you would like to add to the list?

Our Common Purpose

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

Th[is] report and its recommendations seek to increase citizens' capacity to engage in their communities, call attention to promising local initiatives around the country, combat rising threats to democratic self-government, and rebuild trust in political institutions....

Strategy 1: Achieve Equality of Voice and Representation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategy 2: Empower Voters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strategy 3: Ensure the Responsiveness of Government Institutions

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

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

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

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

Strategy 4: Dramatically Expand Civic Bridging Capacity

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

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

Strategy 5: Build Civic Information Architecture that Supports Common Purpose

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

5.2 Through state and/or federal legislation, subsidize innovation to reinvent the public functions that social media have displaced: for instance, with a tax on digital advertising that could be deployed in a

public media fund that would support experimental approaches to public social media platforms as well as local and regional investigative journalism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You can find the full report at :

https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic-Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose_0.pdf