Editors’ Note

The proposals in this report were authored by fifteen graduate and undergraduate students participating in “American Democracy at a Crossroads” (PUBPOL590S), a seminar at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy, during the Spring 2023 semester.

The proposals have been edited lightly for clarity and consistency by Sanford Associate Professor of the Practice Asher D. Hildebrand and Sanford MPP ’23 Mona Zahir and are republished here with the authors’ consent. Their content does not represent the views of the instructors, the Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, or any entity or individual other than the authors.
When this seminar convened for the first time in January 2022, it felt like a moment of acute peril for American democracy. The trauma of the January 6 insurrection was still fresh; state legislatures across the country were debating sweeping new voting laws; the 2022 election loomed large as the first major test of a vulnerable electoral system—and polarized electorate—in the post-Trump era.

A year later, the second cohort of “American Democracy at a Crossroads” faced a more nuanced landscape. The midterm elections had proved remarkably uneventful, with no significant violence or irregularities, high turnout despite some new restrictions, and high-profile “election deniers” in key states losing (and then conceding) their races. A bipartisan investigation into January 6, and a swirl of legal proceedings, offered new hope for accountability (if not reconciliation) for the insurrection. And the outgoing Congress had been historically productive, reforming a key election law in addition to major new initiatives on infrastructure, climate change, scientific research, and other priorities.

Yet the long-term trends that produced our sense of acute peril are still evident. The 2024 presidential election is shaping up to be an unnerving rematch of 2020. And new fronts in the battle for the future of American democracy have emerged: a judicial system increasingly unmoored from public opinion, legislators expelled from their chambers for peaceful protests, a wave of book bans and other threats to freedom of expression. The democratic alarm bells are ringing less shrilly, but they are ringing still.

The charge for this seminar’s second cohort thus remained unchanged from the first: “How can we defend the imperfect democracy we have against the serious threats it faces, while also rebuilding and renewing it to move it closer to perfection?”

To answer this question, 15 Duke students—graduate and undergraduate, with diverse identities, beliefs, and lived experiences—examined three defining challenges facing American democracy today: polarization and partisanship, political inequality, and threats to voting and election integrity. Working in teams, the students analyzed the causes and consequences of each challenge, identified and debated potential solutions, and engaged with experts from the Duke community.† Each student then selected a single solution to develop into a longer proposal, presented here in one-page format.

This report thus represents the culmination of the seminar’s work: 15 distinct proposals for democratic reform and renewal, authored by students whose generation’s commitment to democracy will determine our future.

† The seminar is grateful to Sunshine Hillygus, Adriene Lentz-Smith, John Rose, and Mallory SoRelle for their contributions.
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Regulate Big Money in Politics
Reduce polarization by curtailing the influence of ideological donors.

THE RISE OF POLARIZATION
Polarization in the United States is rising at alarming levels. A 2022 poll revealed that eighty percent of Americans believe that the opposing party poses a threat to the county, and “if not stopped, will destroy America as we know it.” This sense of political divide and imminent threat has led to increased violence, legislative gridlock, and a fractured political system.

Polarization is largely driven by political elites, whose divergence from the ideological center has spurred the public’s increasing identification with a political party and hostility towards the out-party. This creates a downwards spiral in which political elites and individual voters feed off each other’s increased partisanship, leading to intolerance between individuals of differing political parties, curtailing Congress’ ability to enact legislation, and eroding public confidence in the institutions that uphold democracy.

THE ROLE OF BIG MONEY
Reducing polarization among political elites requires creating a degree of separation between candidates and their hyper-partisan donors. To do so, Congress should pass the Democracy For All constitutional amendment, which would authorize Congress and the states to regulate campaign finance. A constitutional amendment is needed because a series of recent Supreme Court rulings severely limited Congress’ ability to legislate on campaign finance. The result has been unprecedented spending in elections and an environment in which the super-rich have an outsized influence on politics. In 2022, a group of only 465 billionaires pumped over $881 million into federal midterm races, a dramatic increase over the $32 million spent by billionaires in the 2010 elections.

DEMOCRACY FOR ALL
The Democracy for All Constitutional amendment would empower Congress to limit campaign finance spending by 1) clarifying the Constitution does not restrict Congress’s ability to legislate on campaign finance, 2) prohibiting corporations from spending unlimited sums to influence elections, and 3) allowing states to enact public campaign financing systems.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED
We must take action to reduce the influence of wealthy interests on the polarization of Congress. The most effective way to make your voice heard is to contact your representative and encourage them to support the Democracy For All constitutional amendment. This activist toolkit includes key talking points and guidance on communicating with Members of Congress. Another effective way to elevate the conversation is to write a letter to the editor in your newspaper raise public awareness. You can also join the cause by financially contributing to organizations combatting the influence of big money in politics.

Rachel Bojanski (MPP/MBA ‘25) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Expand Student Exchange Programs
Reduce elite polarization through a new Sanford MPP pre-orientation.

ELITE POLARIZATION THREATENS DEMOCRACY
Elite polarization can be understood as “high levels of ideological distance between parties and high levels of homogeneity within parties.” The ideological divergence exhibited by elites does not correspond to the divergence observed at the level of the general population; rather, elites are significantly more polarized than the masses. This means that legislators are taking more extreme positions than their constituents and no longer represent the views and interests of voters.

STARTING LOCAL: A NEW MPP EXCHANGE PROGRAM
A first step toward reducing elite polarization could focus on the future political “elites” in master’s programs such as the Sanford School of Public Policy. Sanford should create a Pre-Orientiation Master of Public Policy (MPP) Exchange Program in which policy students engage with polarized policy scenarios. For example, environmental policy students might visit a rural coal mining town as a way of better understanding energy policy and its effects on different communities.

Ideally, this foundational experience rooted in empathy and perspective—taking would guide students throughout their careers and would better prepare them to craft and implement policies that represent all constituencies. As future elite policymakers, Sanford students can combat the distorted representation elite polarization has fostered and ensure a future that is less polarized than our current one.

Combatting elite polarization has elicited a wide range of solutions, all of which are considerably less feasible than a Pre-Orientiation Sanford MPP Exchange Program. The political science literature suggests there are few opportunities for reducing polarization via electoral reform. The likelihood and feasibility of national change is so slim that we are all but forced to turn to local solutions to address elite polarization.

IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN
To implement a Pre-Orientiation program, the Sanford admissions office should begin by developing a proposal with defined metrics to present to the school’s leadership. While no replicable model exists for Sanford to adopt, the school can look to similar programs, including DukeEngage and the National Student Exchange, for inspiration and partnership opportunities.

Anna Hallahan (MPP ‘24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Reimagine Civics Education
Reduce polarization through Project YOUTH, an original civics initiative.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IS ON THE RISE

In recent years, polarization has contributed to a growing acceptance of undemocratic activity within the United States. There is a widespread perception among the public that illegal activity has become ingrained in U.S. politics: regardless of political affiliation, most Americans believe that politicians “often or sometimes” engage in illegal activity to win elections.¹⁴

One major consequence of this problem is the recent and dramatic rise in levels of violence and politically motivated domestic terrorism. As more individuals accept the validity of undemocratic methods, they also may accept violence as a valid method to achieve political goals. In 2020, the U.S. saw a record number of domestic terror incidents, most perpetrated by violent right-wing actors.¹⁵ In 2021, 53% of domestic terror attacks targeted demonstrators, an increase from only 2% in 2019.¹⁶

REDUCING VIOLENCE BY REBUILDING CITIZENRY

Investing in civics education is an equitable and effective solution to address rising political violence. Project YOUTH (“Youth Organizing Unity” Town Hall) would be a new civics program aimed at helping high school students develop their citizenship and democratic skills through community-based projects. The curriculum allows students to identify and define a problem and solutions, connect with local legislators and community leaders, and organize a town hall to present their solutions to those members.

Schools that incorporate this program into their civics education will foster a culture of civic engagement and provide youth with the tools necessary to discuss controversial topics with their peers. Youth will leave with a greater understanding of the democratic process. Students who receive high-quality civics education are more likely to vote, be four times more likely to volunteer, be more confident speaking with elected officials, and score higher on skills assessments, including news comprehension and critical thinking.¹⁸ As a result, students will be less likely to tolerate undemocratic activity or political violence.

START LOCALLY, SCALE NATIONALLY

With civics education under attack and political violence on the rise, empowering youth through citizenry development is more critical than ever. This solution starts locally with students, parents, and educators who want to see this program implemented in their schools. If you want to see this program in your school, contact your school, district, or elected officials today.

Elizabeth Paul (MPP ’23) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Incorporate Service into Schools
Reduce affective polarization by rebuilding a sense of common purpose.

A POLARIZED NATION
Increasingly, Americans dislike and distrust those of the other party, a phenomenon known as affective polarization.\textsuperscript{19} Partisan hostility can affect behaviors and attitudes outside of the political arena, causing everyday interactions and life choices to be compromised by politics.\textsuperscript{20} The mechanisms of electoral accountability through which officials can be punished for misdeeds can also be undermined because individuals may favor their party at any cost, which threatens the foundation of our democracy.\textsuperscript{21}

Studies suggest this is occurring partly because our partisan and ideological identities are becoming increasingly aligned.\textsuperscript{22} Other salient social identities, such as race and religion, have also been converging with partisanship.\textsuperscript{23} Political campaigns and parties employ the same tactics to increase the turnout of their bases by regularly portraying the other side as an existential threat, a trend reinforced by the proliferation of partisan media.\textsuperscript{24}

UNITY THROUGH SERVICE
Democrats and Republicans seeing each other as part of a shared group—as Americans, rather than partisans—can be achieved through a solution utilizing intergroup contact theory and superordinate goal theory: universal national service.\textsuperscript{25} Such a program could be five months long and completed between the ages of 16–28. Participants would travel to an unfamiliar location so their status as strangers is equalized.\textsuperscript{26} Work would be assigned based on preferred focus area at a civil government, military, or nonprofit project. Room and board, transportation, and hourly pay equivalent to the minimum wage would be provided to ensure equity. Employers would be required to permit five months of unpaid leave for their employees to participate in national service.

“Out-group” Hate Increases Affective Polarization

Funding from the private sector should be encouraged, as downplaying politics can help reduce partisan behavior.\textsuperscript{27} A mandatory service program risks increasing fear and partisan animosity, so this proposal relies entirely on volunteerism.\textsuperscript{28} Nearly universal adoption of the program can be obtained to ensure decreased affective polarization through incorporation into high school curriculums nationwide.

CALL TO ACTION
Many of our nation’s boldest ideas are first piloted at the local or state level. Reach out to your state lawmakers and encourage them to introduce legislation to adopt universal service in your state! Members on both sides of the political aisle have favored various service proposals, which have potential in red, blue, or purple states. Be cognizant of whom you are talking with and how you frame the proposal: Democrats have traditionally valued community engagement, while Republicans have valued patriotism and service.\textsuperscript{29}

Ryan Phillips (MPP ‘24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
POLARIZED AND DIVIDED

The rise of mass and elite affective polarization is threatening American democracy. Perceptions of disagreement on an issue are no longer simply a difference of opinion but an affront to a person’s core identity. Increasing activism in support of extreme ideas is reflected in social media, in broader American society, and more recently, in the rhetoric of elected leaders. This problem has been compounded by feelings of political disempowerment by the broader public. Many withdraw from the political process, leaving elites catering to the will of the remaining vocal ideological extremes. Moderate policies or compromise on issues fail to gain support.

While the Selective Service remains, the draft has not existed since 1973. A revival of national service with broad participation seems timely, using the military as an example of bringing diverse groups together towards a common goal while simultaneously inspiring trust and confidence in the American people.

RESTORING CIVIC DUTY

The United States should institute a new national service program for citizens 17 years of age or older that is “near-mandatory” via its structure and incentives, such that 75% or greater of eligible citizens volunteer to participate for at least a minimum term of six months. This new “Department of National Service” would be analogous in size and scope to the Civilian Conservation Corps of the Depression era. Participants would have the opportunity to serve in many supporting government agencies beyond the military that best suit their current interests or passions. Participants could elect to serve anywhere from the minimum of six months up to 36 months with corresponding tiered incentives and benefits, modeled similarly to the post-9/11 GI Bill. In return for six months of national service, participants would receive a salary during their service, access to an individual “Baby Bond” that provides economic mobility at an early age, and/or access to existing and expanded benefits for higher education. Tiered levels of roles, responsibilities, and salary can be structured based on service time.

CALL TO ACTION

Further policy design work is required to develop a politically and fiscally feasible option that allows for volunteer participation rates to approach 75%. The current all-volunteer military and post 9/11 GI Bill provide useful starting points. Political advocacy is further required not solely from retired American generals but from prominent current and previous political figures. Lay citizens can become involved by advocating to their federally elected leaders and contribute by raising public awareness of the policy benefits via social media and broader socialization.

Nate Schwartzbauer (MPP/MBA ‘24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Reform the Census
Reduce inequality with a fairer and more accurate population count.

INACCURATE DATA AND UNEQUAL REPRESENTATION

The 2020 Census undercounted Black, Latino, and Native American people (by 3.30%, 4.99%, and 5.64%, respectively), while overcounting people who identify as white and non-Latino.\(^{31}\) The Census also was less accurate for some states than for others, with overcounts in eight states of up to 695,000 people, and undercounts in six states of up to 560,000 people.\(^{32}\)

Since the decennial Census determines the reapportionment of congressional seats and the distribution of more than $1.5 trillion annually in federal funding, undercounted communities are less able to promote their interests and elect leaders who represent them.\(^{33}\) This can contribute to substantive inequality, as policymakers are not representative of, or responsive to, undercounted communities.

UPDATING THE CENSUS ACT

Increasing census accuracy and participation will require heightened trust in government institutions. The Ensuring a Fair and Accurate Census Act, which passed the House along party lines in the 117th Congress, takes an important first step by appointing a Census official in charge of racial and ethnic equity, prohibiting new Census questions without extensive research, and other measures.\(^{34}\)

This is particularly important given the citizenship question debate that occurred in the lead-up to the 2020 Census, which critics argued would lead to an undercount of immigrant families.\(^{35}\) Although the citizenship question was blocked by courts, damage to trust had already been done. The Ensuring a Fair and Accurate Census Act should be supplemented with confidentiality provisions that create a private right of action if the Census Bureau discloses personally identifiable information.\(^{37}\) Although the Census Act requires personal information to be kept confidential, there is historical evidence of census data being used against Japanese Americans in World War II and against Arab Americans after 9/11.\(^{38}\)

GRASSROOTS ACTION

The current path to enacting the Ensuring a Fair and Accurate Census Act or a similar bill is difficult given the lack of bipartisan support.

In the meantime, advocates can focus on grassroots efforts, which were effective during the 2020 Census. For example, the “Yalla Count Me In” movement, a partnership among various grassroots organizations, promoted an accurate count of Arab Americans in the 2020 Census.\(^{39}\) By building trust at the grassroots level, Census participation can become more fully representative of the U.S. population.

Hayley Barton (MPP/MBA ‘25) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Empower Small Campaign Donors
Expand public financing of elections to reduce political inequality.

BIG MONEY, BIG PROBLEMS
The flood of unlimited, often untraceable campaign spending by corporations and billionaires undermines the integrity of American elections. Since “SuperPACs” were created in 2010, hybrid Political Action Committees have become the largest source of election spending. These “hybrid PAC’s” are created when the same organization, often a large corporation, maintains two separate accounts, one a traditional PAC subject to spending and donation limits, and another account with the ability to spend unlimited amounts of money in elections.

Rising campaign costs incentivize candidates for elected office to spend much of their time courting wealthy donors, to the detriment of their connections with the communities they seek to represent. Even in the absence of explicit corruption, a system that incentivizes candidates to be more attentive to donors than voters makes a mockery of the democratic process.

Given that recent Supreme Court decisions such as Citizens United have decimated decades of campaign finance regulation by allowing for unlimited independent expenditures, a countervailing force is needed to counter the outsized influence of wealthy interests.

EMPOWERING SMALL CAMPAIGN DONORS
Public financing of elections offers a solution to the undue influence of big money on our elections. Among the most promising proposals to empower citizens is a matching system for small dollar, in-state contributions of $250 or less to campaigns. This solution would increase the incentive for candidates to seek broad-based community support for their campaigns and diminish the ability of a handful of wealthy interests to dominate election spending.

Public matching of small donor funds amplifies the voices of ordinary citizens and helps prevent them from being drowned out by big money flooding elections.

WHAT YOU CAN DO
Small-dollar donation public matching programs have been incorporated into recent election reform legislation in Congress, including the For the People Act (HR1). This bill passed the House along party lines in the previous Congress but was stalled in the Senate by a filibuster by Republicans. Similar legislation has been introduced in the current Congress but faces steep odds given Republican House control.

Contact your Senators and urge them to suspend the filibuster to allow legislation creating public financing of elections with small dollar public matching to pass by a simple majority vote.

Ian Hitchcock (MPP ’24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
VOTING RIGHTS DENIED

Felons in 48 of 50 states are not allowed to vote during incarceration and do not have their voting rights reinstated automatically upon release, due to restrictions like paying outstanding fines.62 63 This causes felony disenfranchisement, which refers to the denial of the right to vote for those convicted felony crimes.64 In addition, because the U.S. Census counts individuals in the communities where they are incarcerated, rather than in their home communities, voters who live near the prisons have more political clout per capita, while felons are deprived of political representation in home communities.65 66 Known as “prison gerrymandering,” this problem disproportionately affects inmates of color because they are incarcerated at higher rates than White inmates even for the same crimes. This practice undermines the constitutional principle of “one person, one vote” and violates liberty and equality, the cornerstones of American democracy.67

REINSTATING RIGHTS

Voting rights should be reinstated automatically for felons who complete their sentences, with no requirement to pay monetary obligations such as fines or restitution. Additionally, individuals convicted of crimes whose sentences do not entail prison time should not be deprived of their voting rights.68 While about 8% of the total adult population in the United States has a felony record, the share of Black adults is about 23%. This rate is even higher for Black men, with 33% having a felony record.21 In North Carolina, the North Carolina Supreme Court recently overturned a ruling reinstating felons’ voting rights, leaving approximately 56,000 citizens without their newly restored rights.69 70

In addition to reinstating voting rights, the Census should count inmates in their home communities to end prison gerrymandering and achieve more equal representation. In 2016, the Census Bureau discussed changing its residence rule accordingly; although the agency did not change the regulation for the 2020 Census, it received 77,863 comments in favor of the move.23 The Census released a new data product that will assist states in allocating jailed individuals to their home areas.24 Currently, 11 states have permanently altered their regulations regarding where incarcerated people should be considered for redistricting reasons.25

CALL TO ACTION

The For the People Act, which would count inmates into home states, passed the House in 2021 but was blocked in the Senate. Call your U.S. Senators and urge them to take up this legislation without delay.26

Jiayue Allison Lu (MPP ’24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Give Citizens More Lobbying Power
Advocacy vouchers could elevate the public’s voice in agenda-setting.

UNEQUAL POLITICAL VOICE

Political inequality can be thought of as “structured differences in influence over decisions made by political bodies and the unequal outcomes of those decisions.” This mismatch in political voice and influence has perhaps its greatest effect at the agenda-setting stage of policy decision-making. The political agenda is the set of issues that are the subject of decision-making and debate within a given political system at any time.

The American public increasingly feels that Congress is serving the interests of economic elites over the public good. Compared to the average citizen, elite preferences have an outsized influence on whether a policy is adopted. The public’s inability to influence whether an issue or policy is considered or addressed is a threat to democratic norms and values that must be addressed.

LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

This uneven playing field stems from the power of money in politics and the influence it buys. Scholars note that CEOs and professionals, who comprise only about 20% of the public, are represented by a staggering 94% of interest groups in Washington.

Inspired by Harvard Kennedy School professor Archon Fung, one solution for equalizing organizational power is creating an “advocacy voucher” system that the public could use to support issue-based organizing, movement-building, and legislative advocacy. Given congressional gridlock, a private philanthropy dedicated to democratic civic participation and governance could pilot the program at the state or local level to establish proof of concept before scaling. A pilot could also demonstrate to the nonprofit and philanthropic community that engaging in advocacy can be done legally and effectively, a worry often expressed by both sectors as a reason to avoid political engagement.

The stakes are high, but so is the solution’s promise. As Fung says, “if each of us had the same political power as executives and professionals—including the power to lobby, develop public policies that benefit us and fight for our interests—it would transform American politics.” A hundred people combining $500 vouchers could fund one organizer on an issue failing to gain a place on the agenda or become law. Imagine the political power and influence 10,000 or 100,000 people coming together could have!

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Share information on how to incorporate advocacy into a nonprofit’s work from sources such as Bolder Advocacy with any organization you volunteer with or believe in. Learn how to use your voice on the issues you care most about and cultivate habits of doing so.

John Rooney (MEM/MBA ‘25) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Create National Citizens’ Assemblies
Give everyday citizens a greater voice in their government.

WHO HAS THE EAR OF THE GOVERNMENT?

According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, less than 40% of Americans believe the government somewhat responds to their needs. And this belief is not unfounded: according to one study, “the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt.”

In the United States, policy solutions often cater to the wealthy, overlooking the differing needs and priorities of the ordinary American. The resulting mistrust in the effectiveness and impartiality of the government due to bias toward the affluent leaves many Americans feeling voiceless.

By randomly selecting a group of residents according to demographic criteria such as gender, age, race, and income, citizens’ assemblies can act as a sort of miniature version of the polity. This representative group is then given the time and resources to understand and deliberate over policy issues and then make recommendations based on consensus within the group.

If implemented and fully supported by the federal government, citizens’ assemblies would increase public participation in decision-making, thereby improving the quality of democratic governance and increasing public trust in government.

STAY INFORMED & ENGAGED

While the concept of citizens’ assemblies is still quite new, and the U.S. government has yet to attempt one at the federal level, there are steps that you can take to support the creation of such assemblies:

1. Educate yourself and others about citizens’ assemblies.
2. Advocate to use citizens’ assemblies in Congress by reaching out to your representatives.
3. Participate in non-governmental citizens’ assemblies (such as CommonSense American) and other participatory democracy efforts to model what is possible on the national level.

Jaquell Sneed-Adams (MPP ’23) is a graduate student at Duke University.

Citizens’ Assemblies in Practice: After the Irish Parliament established a Citizens’ Assembly to consider the controversial issue of abortion legislation, the assembly’s recommendation to legalize abortion was brought to a public referendum and passed by 66.4% of the vote.
GROWING DISTRUST

Public trust in the institutions of American government is near an all-time low. A lack of understanding of how government functions, mixed with widespread misinformation, has created the conditions for pervasive distrust in American democracy. While STEM courses receive around $2.95 billion annually, civics education only receive around $4 million annually. A 2016 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only 26% of Americans can name all three branches of government, and there has likely been regression since the start of COVID. Since 1998, overall test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam have shown that less than a quarter of students have proficient civic knowledge. In the digital age, misinformation runs rampant, causing confusion and facilitating distrust in the government: 23% of Americans say they have shared a made-up news story.

FOSTERING RENEWED CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

The combination of misinformation and lack of civic knowledge has resulted in low civic engagement and growing distrust in elections. To foster renewed trust, quality civics education must be standardized across the country. As one of the few institutions that exist in virtually every community in America, schools can play a critical role in increasing confidence in American institutions. The 2011 report Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools found that students who receive high-quality civics education are more likely to “understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic activities.”

Ideal standards for a nationwide civics requirement have already been agreed upon by leaders in the education field. The Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy is a collection of research-backed pedagogical practices established by leaders in civics education. Making use of these practices in a required civics curriculum will raise civic knowledge and participation and combat susceptibility to misinformation.

ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATION

Community and state endorsement of civics standards are critical to adopting a federal civics education requirement. Once community and state buy-in for these new standards and practices increases, the introduction of a federal requirement will become more possible. As there is little political will to pass federal education requirements now, more community support will be needed.

Attend your local school board meetings. When social studies curriculum is up for redesign in your community or state, reach out to those designing the curriculum to ensure that quality civics practices like those described in the Roadmap are included.

Thomas Crowe-Allbritton (MPP ’24) is a graduate student at Duke University.
POOR REPRESENTATION REDUCES PARTICIPATION

The single-member district, winner-take-all electoral system in the United States discourages voter turnout by failing to reflect a broad range of preferences. Candidates often win with slim majorities, yielding “wasted votes” from those who did not vote for the winning candidate. When voters do not see their preferences reflected in their elected representatives, they are less incentivized to vote because they feel their votes do not have a tangible impact. Uncompetitive elections, caused by “safe seats” and the incumbent advantage, are also one of the most prominent causes of low voter turnout in the United States.

In addition, the increasingly polarized two-party system no longer represents the viewpoints of a large majority of the population. 62% of Americans believe there should be a third party. However, single-member districts do not provide opportunities for new parties to emerge so that people may vote for a feasible option over one they feel unenthusiastic about.

MULTI-MEMBER DISTRICTS

To remedy this problem, the U.S. should adopt multi-member districts—a form of proportional representation (PR)—in states with six or more representatives, which is proposed in the Fair Representation Act (H.R. 3868). Voter turnout in countries with PR is 18% higher than in countries without it.

In each state, independent redistricting commissions would combine small, single-member districts into larger, multi-member districts, making them more politically diverse and more competitive. The number of representatives from each party would reflect the proportion of votes it receives. For example, if a district voted 40% Democratic, 40% of its representatives would be Democrats. Elections for multimember districts would occur through Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), in which voters rank candidates in order of preference and their second choice is counted if their first choice does not win. There would no longer be candidates who are elected with slim majorities yet obtain outsized power. People could vote for candidates that are both realistic and exciting to them without “wasting” votes.

CALL TO ACTION

State and local advocacy groups focused on electoral reform should emphasize multimember districts and the common platform of RCV. As more states implement multimember districts and work with constituents to adjust to the reform, momentum builds for national-level proportional representation. Additionally, in states that adopt multimember districts and RCV, local election administrators must mobilize volunteers and employees to educate low-information voters about changes in the electoral process.

Charlotte Kramon (PPS ‘24) is an undergraduate student at Duke University.
Incentivize Ranked Choice Voting
Enact the Voter Choice Act to support state and local electoral reforms.

PLURALITY VOTING FUELS UNFAIR OUTCOMES
Voting is one of the most fundamental ways citizens can participate in democracy, but America’s plurality electoral system fuels unrepresentative outcomes because it does not account for voters' true preferences. In a plurality system, voters select only one candidate, and the candidate with the most votes is elected. Candidates regularly win without majority support. This is especially harmful in primary elections, where a small plurality can send unpopular party nominees to general elections.

RCV GIVES VOTERS VOICE
Ranked choice voting (RCV) allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate wins a majority of the first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated. Voters who ranked the eliminated candidate as their first choice will have their votes given to their next choice. This process continues until a candidate receives a majority. RCV allows voters to express their full range of political preferences and ensures that the winning candidate has the support of a majority of voters, not just a plurality.

The Voter Choice Act (S.2939/H.R.5500) would provide $40 million in federal funds for state and local governments that choose to adopt a ranked-choice voting system. The U.S. election administration system is highly decentralized, and each state and jurisdiction has its own election process. With financial and technical assistance from the Voter Choice Act, local jurisdictions will have the flexibility to enact an RCV system that best meets local needs.

SUPPORT BIPARTISAN REFORM
Voters can contact their congressional representatives and advocate for a bipartisan approach to RCV election reform. Proponents of the Voter Choice Act may find success by targeting endorsements from representatives of states with strong RCV Republican primaries. For example, RCV Republican primaries in Virginia delivered candidates that went on to win the offices of governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general for the first time since 2009.

American Voter Satisfaction With Presidential Candidates Continues To Fall

Pew Research Center found that during the 2016 presidential election, just one-third of registered voters were satisfied with the presidential candidates. Plurality voting incentivizes strategically voting for an unfavorable candidate to avoid wasted and split votes, rather than voting for preference, leading to voter apathy and low voter turnout. Low voter turnout exacerbates unrepresentative outcomes by allowing the will of the few to decide election outcomes for all.

Caitlyn Leary (MPP/JD ‘26) is a graduate student at Duke University.
Counter Disinformation at its Roots
Establish a Center of Excellence to coordinate evidence-based responses.

AN UNCOORDINATED RESPONSE
The United States is experiencing a concerning level of election mistrust, fueled by pervasive falsehoods about election integrity. Much of the distrust and disinformation about elections is centered around the 2020 presidential race and the “Big Lie” that Donald Trump’s victory was stolen by a “rigged” election.

One in Four Voters Refuse to Accept President Biden’s 2020 Election

This breakdown of trust has led to violence and unrest, reduced rates of political participation, and generally diminished faith in American democracy. Yet the United States lacks a centralized body to investigate and respond to dis- and misinformation. Additionally, existing efforts have mostly sought to address dis- and misinformation only once it begins to spread, instead of working to increase the public’s resiliency against falsehoods. There is no single entity to coordinate research or implement larger-scale initiatives to address domestic disinformation.

A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE
The United States needs a response to dis- and misinformation that matches the seriousness and scale of the problem. To effectively address this issue, the federal government must mount an organized, sophisticated, and large-scale response. A Center of Excellence should be created to coordinate the government response to dis- and misinformation and engage partners in academia, industry, and the public sector. Centers of Excellence are university-led entities that are sponsored by federal agencies (e.g., the Department of Homeland Security) to conduct research and disseminate knowledge on specific topics.

The Center must combat existing falsehoods while increasing the American public’s resilience to dis- and misinformation. Such an effort would “pre-bunk” dis- and misinformation and reduce its psychological impact on those who encounter it. Fostering resilience requires a “whole of society” approach, so the Center should actively pursue partnerships with a wide range of outside stakeholders, including in academia, industry, and the public sector.

To create a dis- and misinformation Center of Excellence, the Department of Homeland Security would need to allocate funding and then announce its intentions to create the Center, inviting institutions to apply for consideration. Any accredited U.S. institution of higher education would be eligible for selection as a Center of Excellence.

CALL TO ACTION
Creating a Center of Excellence requires the authorization of Congress, so the best way to advocate for a more centralized approach to combatting dis- and misinformation is to contact your representative and express that this issue is important to you. Additionally, support candidates who speak out about the dangers of dis- and misinformation.

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DECLINING CONFIDENCE

Confidence in the trustworthiness of American elections has been declining since at least 2004. The downward pressure has been exerted primarily by those identifying as Republicans, as their trust in the accuracy of U.S. elections has steadily declined over that time (with a brief rebound in 2018).

At the same time, the use of partisan election observers has emerged as a tool of the “Stop the Steal” movement. While partisan election observation has long been a feature of American elections, its nature changed when tens of thousands of Americans were recruited to serve in these roles by groups pushing false claims about the validity of the 2020 election. The result was an uptick in misinformation, harassment of voters and poll workers, and general disruptions to elections offices. Each of these outcomes serves to further erode the trust that Americans have that elections will be administered fairly and accurately.

A NONPARTISAN SOLUTION

To combat the weaponization of partisan election observers, federal lawmakers should pass legislation encouraging states to rely more heavily on nonpartisan election observers. The best way to do this is to create a federal standard for election observation that explicitly allows nonpartisan observers at numbers at least equal to those of partisan observers. Tying state compliance with the federal standard to “bonus” funding for election administration activities will then give states incentive to adopt the new standard. For some states, this will mean simply tweaking their current policy. For others, it may mean a more extensive change in state election law.

Partisan Trends in Election Confidence

This proposal will increase the number of nonpartisan organizations involved in domestic elections. Doing so should result in more positive reports from trusted organizations, which have been shown to increase trust in elections when shared with the public. Additional benefits should include a better international perception of U.S. democracy and better poll worker retention, as many workers have left due to harassment from partisan observers.

ENGAGE STRATEGICALLY

For this to be a viable solution, citizens must support it in two ways. First, contacting state and federal representatives to champion nonpartisan observation as a preferred policy option. Second, volunteering for an organization already doing this work in states where it is allowed. This second strategy puts actions behind the outreach to elected representatives. It also ensures that scaling up nonpartisan observation will be more easily accomplished if/when more states adopt it, as more volunteers will be readily available.

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Endnotes

1. Barber and McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization.”
4. Barber and McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization.”
5. “Schiff, Phillips, Jayapal, McGovern Introduce Constitutional Amendment to Rein In Unrestricted Campaign Spending.”
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Schiff, Phillips, Jayapal, McGovern Introduce Constitutional Amendment to Rein In Unrestricted Campaign Spending.”
14. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
Endnotes


41. Ibid.


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87. Ibid.


100. Fingerhut, "Already—Low Voter Satisfaction with Choice of Candidates Falls Even Further."


Endnotes


114. Masterson et al., “The Case for a Mis- and Disinformation Center of Excellence.”


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