AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS

PROPOSALS FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORM AND RENEWAL

May 2022

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Editors' Note

The proposals in this report were authored by fifteen graduate and undergraduate students participating in "American Democracy at a Crossroads" (PUBPOL 590S-08), a seminar at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy during the Spring 2022 semester. Duke's Polis: Center for Politics provided generous support for the seminar's work.

The proposals have been edited lightly for clarity and consistency by Sanford Associate Professor of the Practice Asher D. Hildebrand and Sanford MPP '22 A.C. Keesler and are republished here with the authors' permission. Their content does not represent the official or unofficial views of the Sanford School, Polis, Duke University, or any entity or individual other than the authors.

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Foreword

By Asher D. Hildebrand
Associate Professor of the Practice of Public Policy

"Our democracy is fundamentally at stake. History will judge what we do at this moment."

Thus concludes an open letter circulated recently by more than 100 scholars of democracy from across the ideological spectrum.[1] Their concern is well-founded: across a range of empirical measures of democratic performance, the United States is slipping—and the American people's faith in democracy is slipping, too.[2]

Yet concerns about democratic "backsliding" underscore the fact that for many Americans, the promise of democracy has never been fully realized. How can we defend the imperfect system we have against the serious threats it faces, while also rebuilding and renewing it to move it closer to perfection?

This question became the defining charge for a new seminar at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy during the Spring 2022 semester. The participants—fifteen graduate and undergraduate students with diverse beliefs, identities, and experiences—collectively examined four major challenges facing American democracy today: (1) polarization and partisanship, (2) money and politics, (3) voting and civic participation, and (4) election integrity and subversion.

> *"Perhaps amid the chaos of today there is an opportunity to redesign a true democracy: A government of the people, by the people, and for the people."*
>
> -Mona Zahir, MPP '23

Image: A.C. Keesler

Working in teams, the students analyzed the causes and consequences of each challenge, debated alternative solutions, and engaged with experts from the Duke community.[†] They read classical democratic theory, researched comparative examples from around the world, and reflected on the United States' uneven history of democratic advances and setbacks.

Each team then proposed a single solution to each of the four challenges and presented it to the seminar for feedback. Finally, each student selected one of their team's initial solutions to develop into a longer proposal, summarized here in one-page format.

This report represents the culmination of the seminar's work: fifteen unique proposals for democratic reform and renewal, developed by students whose generation's commitment to democracy will determine our nation's future. The ideas they propose are neither exhaustive nor entirely original; many are indebted to the scholars, advocates, and policymakers whose work we consulted. Yet by viewing seemingly intractable challenges in a fresh light, we hope to contribute a new and valuable perspective to the public discourse over these vital issues.

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Table of Proposals

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Engage across the Partisan Divide

Reducing Polarization by Confronting Misperceptions and Distrust

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Affective polarization, the growing animosity between opposing partisans, results from conceptualizing partisanship as a social identity.[3] Known causes of polarization in individuals include social media use, partisan media consumption, and negative campaign rhetoric. However, isolation from partisan outgroups lays the foundation of the phenomenon. Organizations promoting intergroup interaction provide a plausible and effective, if difficult to scale, solution.

GROWING ANIMOSITY

Growing animosity between Republicans and Democrats, or affective polarization, results from the conceptualization of social identity.[4] As Americans increasingly view partisan affiliation as a social identity, they opt to isolate themselves from people who identify with the other party. Isolation leads to misperceptions and engenders distrust. As distrust grows, opposition rule becomes an existential threat. This threat justifies extreme actions including repression of opposing political views and support for political violence. Social media use, consumption of partisan news sources, and negative campaign rhetoric drive further increases in affective polarization.

Feelings toward In-Party and Out-Party Members, 1976-2016[6]
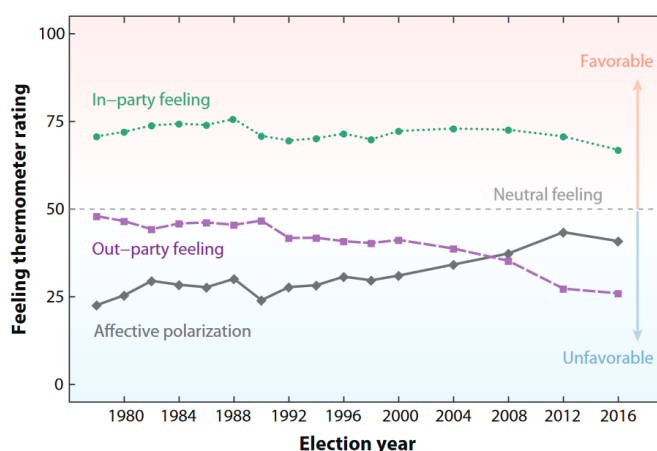
These programs rely on individual participation and personal interactions, so scaling them will require creativity and a massive grassroots effort. The cost of each program is relatively low compared to the cost of major legislative reform.

REBUILDING TRUST

Organizations, like the members of the Listen First Coalition, teach participants non-confrontational conversational skills and host events where participants can engage in conversation with individuals with differing political ideas.[5] These programs address the root of affective polarization by facilitating interactions designed to correct misperceptions and increase trust. Robust evidence supports this solution, and it avoids difficult legislative battles that governmental solutions would face.

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

Hosting or sponsoring an event run by a member of the Listen First Coalition de-escalates tensions between liberals and conservatives. Founding a local branch of an organization or officially partnering with an existing one goes a step further by helping to spread this evidence-based intervention to places across the country. Resources are available on the Listen First Coalition website.[7]

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Strengthen Publicly Funded Media
Providing a Viable Alternative to Polarizing Media Coverage

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Slanted media coverage contributes to tribalism and affective polarization, encourages politicians and media to run more extremist rhetoric, and, at its worst, delegitimizes democratic institutions. One promising intervention given these risks is moving from partially funding public broadcasting players, such as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR), to a fully publicly funded model of financial support through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Slanted media is the intentionally hyper-partisan coverage of politics, catering to outrage and engagement for its core audience. At its most extreme, slanted coverage disseminates mis- or disinformation that erodes our shared sense of reality and delegitimizes democratic institutions. Consuming even modest amounts of partisan news coverage can contribute to confirmation bias and make it difficult to rationalize opposing views.

The causes of this problem are twofold: the financial model of news encourages coverage of more radical positions, and audiences seek news sources that reinforce partisan viewpoints in a phenomenon known as partisan selective exposure.[8,9]

PROPOSED SOLUTION

One promising intervention in the United States is expanding investment in publicly funded media organizations, such as PBS and NPR, to create a fully public service. Countries with robust public media services display less extremism, less tolerance for corruption, and[10] more press freedom. Implementing this change would require federal funding to cover costs for NPR, PBS, and their respective online outlets, with additional funding for more journalists for online content and PSAs about the changes.

Corporation for Public Broadcasting Budget, Fiscal Year 2022[11]
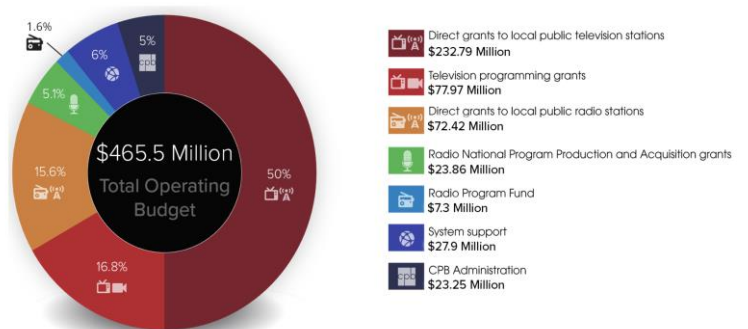
Investments would need to be made through increased CPB funding in the congressional appropriations process to support this shift to full public funding. This proposal is easily scalable, relies on trusted and established institutions and federal processes, requires relatively little funding for success, and will likely sustain bipartisan support.

CALL TO ACTION

Implementing this proposal will require congressional leadership, especially from members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. Call your Members of Congress about fully funding public broadcasting in defense of democratic values. In the meantime, public broadcasters including can be supported with individual donations and public attention.

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Incentivize Universal National Service

Building Trust in Others to Reduce Political Polarization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasing affective and ideological polarization among partisan elites and everyday Americans has threatened our country's ability to maintain an effective and stable democracy. To remedy this, President Biden should sign an Executive Order requiring the U.S. Department of Education to include a national service requirement for college applicants who apply for federal student aid and incentivize colleges and universities to favor admitting applicants who have performed national service.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION CREATES TRIBAL POLITICS

Our country is becoming increasingly and irreparably divided along political and ideological lines. The Pew Research Center found that adults with conservative political ideologies are overwhelmingly White, while adults with liberal ideologies have more racial and ethnic diversity. Adults with conservative views now identify overwhelmingly with the Republican Party and liberal-leaning adults with the Democratic party.[12] Escalating affective (identity-based) and ideological (policy-based) polarization threaten to increase legislative gridlock, reduce trust in government, and destabilize American democracy.
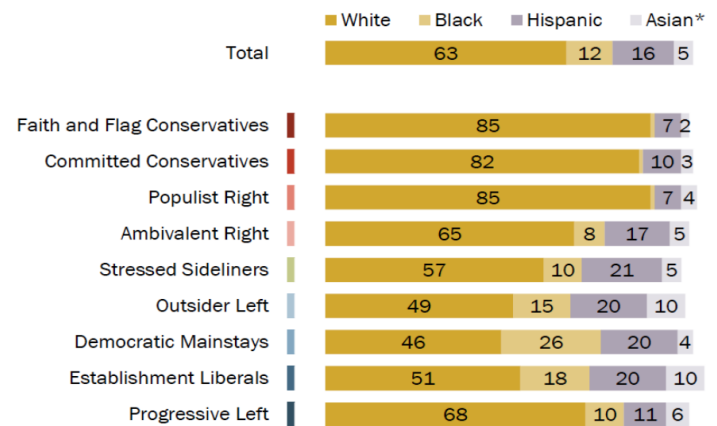
REBUILDING TRUST

Establishing a universal national service program for young adults aged 18-24 would decrease affective polarization by building trust and camaraderie among Americans from different social identities. This argument is grounded in "contact theory," which has been proven to reduce animus between groups of people with differing identities and ideologies.[13]

Americans could fulfill the requirement by joining the military or organizations like AmeriCorps or Peace Corps and would be incentivized to participate by government-provided funding for post-secondary education.

GOP-oriented groups are largely White; Democratic-oriented groups are far more ethnically diverse

% who are ...

Legend: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian*

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian*
Total	63	12	16	5
Faith and Flag Conservatives	85		7	2
Committed Conservatives	82		10	3
Populist Right	85		7	4
Ambivalent Right	65	8	17	5
Stressed Sideliners	57	10	21	5
Outsider Left	49	15	20	10
Democratic Mainstays	46	26	20	4
Establishment Liberals	51	18	20	10
Progressive Left	68	10	11	6

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 8-18, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER [14]

STROKE-OF-PEN ACTION

President Biden should issue an Executive Order (EO) directing the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) to incorporate universal national service as an eligibility criterion for pursuing post-secondary education. First, the DoE could require all Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applicants to demonstrate that they are qualified to pursue additional education by completing national service. Second, DoE could choose to reallocate federal aid to institutions that favor applicants who performed national service.

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Establish National Voter Referenda

Providing an Escape from Dangerous Partisan Gridlock

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Polarization in the United States Congress has increased in recent decades with dramatic consequences for the country.[15] A national referendum policy could force Congress to consider legislation that is responsive to the people's preferences. If Congress does not act, the president could be given special powers to enact the referendum through executive order. A national advocacy campaign could help influence lawmakers and bring back the government to the people.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Bipartisanship is dying in the United States Congress. In the Senate, the filibuster is at levels never seen before, and in the House, the two parties do not cooperate. The 116th Congress was among the least productive in three decades.[16] Congressional gridlock has serious adverse effects: it damages the legitimacy of Congress since it is becoming incompetent to legislate for the people; it increases the risk of government shutdowns; and it damages U.S interests worldwide by weakening its diplomatic presence.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

A national referendum would encourage lawmakers to work together and enact bills selected by voters. Citizens would vote for one specific policy proposal during presidential elections. Recommendations for national ballot measures would be developed at political party conventions based on each party's policy priorities. Every presidential candidate could propose zero to three policy questions and let voters select which is more popular and urgent. The referendum would follow the same procedure as the presidential election so that electors would vote for the policy picked by voters in their state. The policy with the most electoral votes would win. Congress would then have two years to enact

Bipartisan Agreement in the U.S. House, 1981-2012[17]
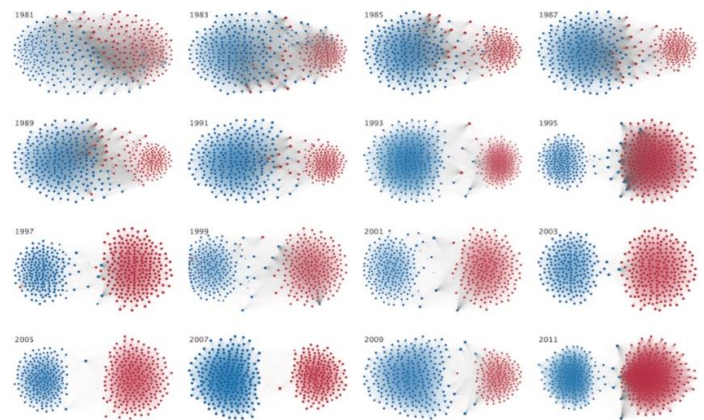
legislation based on the popular mandate. The incentive to increase bipartisanship is that if Congress does not pass legislation, the President could sign an executive order with special powers only related to the topic of the referendum.

CALL TO ACTION

To end congressional gridlock, it is time to establish a national referendum. Advocacy groups should recruit people and develop the infrastructure necessary to run a referendum pilot in the 2024 elections. The only way to convince politicians to work on this topic is by making them see that the American people have opinions. It is time to pass the ball to the government. Will they play?

Mateo Morales (MPP '22) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Expand "Democracy Voucher" Programs
Combating Inequality in Campaign Giving

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Campaign spending in the United States has skyrocketed over the last several years.[18] Inequality in campaign giving results in distorted policy outcomes, disproportionate representation of the wealthy in positions of power, and decreasing trust in government.[19] The high cost of campaigning, weak campaign finance laws, and lack of public financing are all causes of this problem. A publicly-funded campaign voucher program is ultimately the most promising solution.

WHY REFORM CAMPAIGN FINANCE LAWS?

Wealthy Americans dominate campaign funding, and the majority of Americans believe big donors have a disproportionate impact in politics.[20] Less than 2% of the United States population made over 76% of all contributions in the 2020 federal election (see graph).[21] This inequality distorts policy outcomes to favor affluent Americans and makes equal representation impossible.[22] It also weakens trust in government.[23]

Inequality in campaign giving is due to both legal loopholes and the incredible cost of campaigning. Further, campaign knowledge and access to resources can limit participation by low-income constituents.[24]

WHY VOUCHERS?

Vouchers are the most effective and feasible way to promote equity in campaign finance. Citizens and permanent residents will be eligible to donate four vouchers of $25 each to the participating candidates of their choice. This allows low-income individuals to make their voices heard and counters the influence of wealthy donors. In Seattle, vouchers have resulted in increased giving by women, people of color, and low-income communities.[25] Support for public matching indicates there would likely be support for a voucher system.

Campaign Contributions, 2020 Federal Elections
- Large Individual Contributions ($200+)
- Small Individual Contributions ($1-199)

24%

1.44% of total US population

76%

Data: OpenSecrets
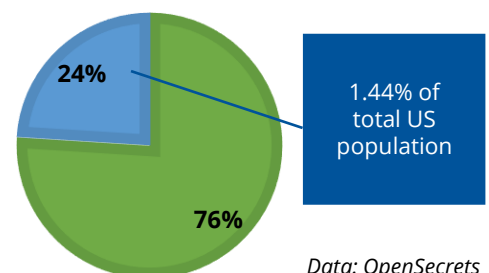
Aside from raising taxes or diverting funds from other uses, one proven funding option is a tax checkoff. Embracing creativity, running strong public education campaigns, and emphasizing public support for reform will all help to expand voucher programs across the United States.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Advocates should consider expanding vouchers via ballot measure in states that allow it, which moves the power directly to the voters and out of the hands of the politicians who use campaign funding to get elected. Check the laws on ballot initiatives in your state or write to your elected officials about your interest in publicly funded vouchers. Support the efforts of groups like Common Cause to advocate for campaign finance reforms such as vouchers.

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Empower Working-Class Candidates

Rebalancing the Socioeconomic Makeup of Elected Officials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Working-class Americans make up a majority of our labor force but less than 2% of Congress.[26] Millionaires make up less than 5% of the country but are overrepresented in all three branches of the federal government.[27] This imbalance affects policy decisions and outcomes that favor the rich. Implementing state-run, campaign-focused training and education programs could give a significant boost to working-class representation within elected offices.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The current socioeconomic makeup of both elected officials and candidates running for office does not reflect the American people. Working-class citizens represent over 50% of the population but less than 2% of Congress,[28] while millionaires represent 5% of the population but are overrepresented in all three federal branches.[29] Growing research finds wealthier politicians favor legislation that exacerbates economic inequality.[30]

Descriptive inequality among candidates arises from a combination of rising incumbency rates, lack of knowledge and financial barriers, and the tendency of elites to recruit elites for office.

INCREASING WORKING-CLASS REPRESENTATION

The best solution for changing the representation of elected officials is to provide blue-collar workers with the knowledge and support necessary to run a successful campaign. The New Jersey AFL-CIO implemented one such program that provides union workers an overview of fund-raising and election law research, message development, public speaking, media relations, fundraising, voter contact, volunteer recruitment, targeting, and get-out-the-vote operations.

Representation of Women, Minorities, and Workers in Congress[31]
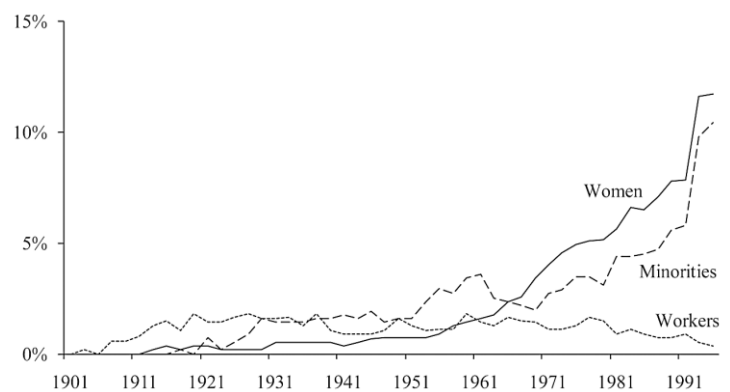
The AFL-CIO program's success has been promising: the pilot program has trained 700 candidates with an election rate of 75%, and several state-led AFL-CIOs have followed New Jersey's lead with over 964 candidates around the country taking part.[32]

IMPLEMENTATION

The creation of state-run, campaign-focused education and training programs (rather than union-led) teaching the same fundamentals as AFL-CIO could reduce information and financial gaps and increase access to elected office for all working-class citizens. Keeping the program nonpartisan could also ensure party influence is kept to a minimum and encourage bipartisan solutions.

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Mandate Free Campaign Airtime
Addressing Substantive Inequality by Reducing Barriers to Elected Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American democracy faces many challenges, including the relationship between money and politics. Within this multifaceted relationship is a chain-of-effect dynamic that links wealth and campaign advertising to inequality in political representation of the ideas and interests of different citizens. To address this inequality, legislation that establishes free and equal campaign advertising space on designated platforms is proposed.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Substantive representation is when ideas and interests of certain citizens are reflected in policy. In America, that representation is greatly unequal, with some groups overrepresented while others are vastly underrepresented. That's thanks largely to the influence of money. While the wealthy don't "buy elections" outright, they make disproportionate campaign contributions, which support campaign advertising, which can win elections. Those outcomes influence policy decisions.

In 2020, media advertising accounted for 55 percent of all campaign expenditures.[33] Much of that money came from donations from a select few wealthy individuals (see graphic). Thus, if campaign advertising costs can be targeted to reduce inequality of substantive representation.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Congress should enact legislation to restrict all campaign advertising to designated media platforms and mandate that platforms offer an equal amount of free ad space, at equitable viewership slots, to all candidates. There are international precedents for promoting campaign fairness with mandated free and equal ad space, but models vary.
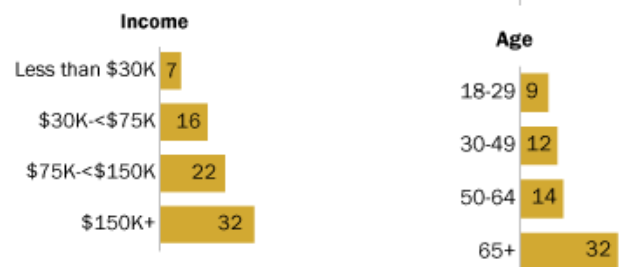
Source: Pew Research Center [34]

In Britain, the two main parties are each entitled to five TV broadcasts lasting 10 minutes, with the stipulation that air times have equal viewership.[35] The proposed legislation would include such stipulations.

CALL TO ACTION

The public wants to improve election fairness, including by limiting campaign spending.[36] This legislation does that while improving substantive representation. It has bipartisan appeal, doesn't limit free speech, improves election transparency, and doesn't involve a heavy tax burden. Members of Congress should act.

Amanda Ostuni (MPP '23) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Publicly Fund All Federal Campaigns
Empowering Small Donors with a Federal Public Matching Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Large individual donors disproportionately account for a majority of federal campaign giving. The disparity between large and small donors undermines political equality by inflating the influence of the wealthy on elections and policy outcomes. This trend is shaped by growing economic inequality, increasingly expensive campaigns, and weak campaign finance regulation. To empower small donors, Congress should enact legislation creating a federal public matching program.

DONOR DISPARITIES

Large donors disproportionately outweigh small donors in federal campaign giving. Despite comprising only 1% of the U.S. population, donors who gave more than $200 contributed to more than 75% of all donations.[37] Rising economic inequality, the growing costs of elections, and current campaign finance regulation are the root causes of this disparity.[38]
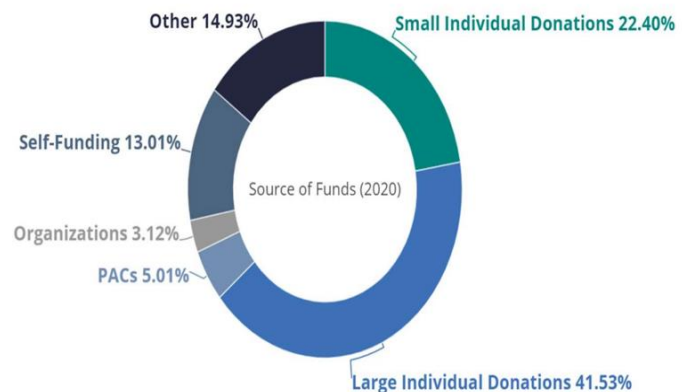
The gap between large and small donors undermines political equality by making politicians more reliant on, and responsive to, wealthy donors.[39] As a result, policy outcomes are skewed to favor the wealthy and public trust is eroded.

THE SOLUTION: MATCHING SMALL DONATIONS

Congress should enact legislation to implement a robust public matching fund for small donations in federal elections. Candidates who agree to specific requirements and limitations will receive a $6 match for every $1 of donations up to $200.[40]

This policy is a promising solution because it has demonstrable success at the state/local level and it is more politically feasible than its

Sources of Campaign Donations in the 2020 Election[41]

- Other 14.93%
- Small Individual Donations 22.40%
- Self-Funding 13.01%
- Organizations 3.12%
- PACs 5.01%
- Large Individual Donations 41.53%

Source of Funds (2020)

alternatives (e.g., stricter contribution limits, voucher programs).[42] Matching small donations will effectively amplify the impact of small donors on the political process. As a result, politicians will be less reliant on the affluent and more responsive to voters.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Call your representatives! Ask them to sponsor and support legislation for a public matching program for federal elections. Then be sure to advocate for candidates that opt-in to the system. Your support will incentivize more candidates to participate.

Sarah Thomas (BA '22) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

End Felony Disenfranchisement
Restoring Voting Rights after Time Served

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are 4 million Americans who have served their complete time in prison yet are deprived of their right to vote because of felony disenfranchisement.[43] These Americans are disproportionately Black and overwhelmingly located in the South. Many live in their communities as workers and taxpayers but are unable to take part in the democratic process. The Democracy Restoration Act would ensure that formerly incarcerated people are not deprived of their right to vote. Its successful passage would take coordinated strategy and bipartisan support, but it is possible.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Across the United States, 4 million Americans have served their complete time in prison yet are deprived of their right to vote because of a past felony conviction.[44] In 11 states—the majority in the South—formerly incarcerated people can lose their right to vote indefinitely for certain crimes or must petition to a governor to have their rights restored.[45] Black people are disproportionately disenfranchised, exacerbating disparities in the political system.

Felony disenfranchisement is antithetical to democracy and produces a system in which people who are contributing to society and paying taxes have no political representation. Where disenfranchisement laws are in place, recidivism rates are more likely to increase, so these laws often cause more problems than they solve.[46]

PROPOSED SOLUTION

The Democracy Restoration Act—which has been proposed as part of HR1 and also as a standalone bill—would ensure a more inclusive voting system.[47] Under the draft legislation, voting rights would be automatically restored upon a person's release from prison.

Felony Disenfranchisement Rates by State[48]
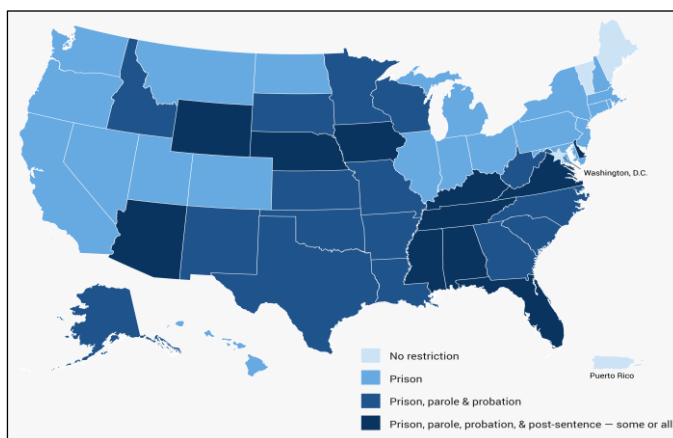
Passing the Democracy Restoration Act would help individuals to feel more a part of their community as they reacclimate into society. It also ensures that those who are living in the community, working in the community, and even paying taxes are able to have a political voice. In the current system, up to 1 in 5 Black people are disenfranchised in some states, so the passage of this legislation would also help address racial disparities.[49]

CALL TO ACTION

Join the fight! Call your congressional representative now and urge them to support the Democracy Restoration Act and push for its passage!

Rebekah Barber (MPP '22) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

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Hold All Elections at the Same Time
Increasing Voter Turnout and Diversity at the Local Level

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local elections across the United States suffer from overall low voter turnout and especially low turnout among traditionally underrepresented populations. Passing federal legislation to fund public education efforts and movement at the state level to eliminate off-cycle local elections will increase voter turnout and ensure more diversity of voters in local elections.

LOCAL VOTER TURNOUT: TOO LOW AND TOO WHITE

For years, low voter turnout has plagued local elections across the United States. The voters who turn out for these elections are whiter, older, and more conservative than those who vote in national elections.[50] This small subsection of eligible voters has disproportionate power to select the local officials who allocate the over $2 trillion that local governments disburse annually.[51] This failure of local democracy requires a solution that increases overall voter turnout and voter participation among traditionally underrepresented populations.

STATE & FEDERAL ACTION

Federal funding for public education programming designed to inform voters about local government and local elections, coupled with an organized movement to pass state-level reforms that eliminate off-cycle elections, will increase voter turnout and diversity in local elections. Public Service Announcements that educate voters about their local government and local elections should stimulate interest and support for state-level reforms to synchronize local and federal elections. These efforts working in concert will increase voter turnout and the participation of underrepresented populations in local elections.

Age Difference Between Voters and Adult Population[52]
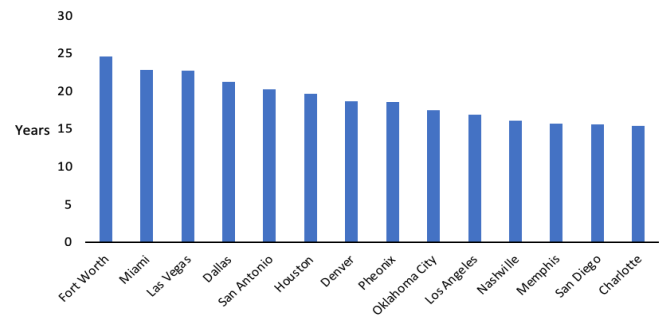
Data Source: "Who Votes for Mayor?" Who Votes For Mayor? . Portland State University and the Knight Foundation. Accessed April 19, 2022. http://whovotesformayor.org/.

CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

In order to increase voter turnout and voter diversity in local elections we all need to urge our federal representatives to draft and pass legislation to fund public education programing informing the electorate about local elections and the functioning of local government. Additionally, we need to contact our state representatives and encourage them to eliminate off-cycle elections. To support these efforts, recommend they contact representatives in Arizona, Nevada, and California for guidance on how to successfully pass this legislation.

Moses Manning (MPP '22) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Implement Automatic Voter Registration
Increasing Voter Participation and Diversity through Federal AVR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In most elections, American voter turnout trails other developed democracies. Those who do vote tend to be disproportionately White, older, and more educated. Most eligible non-voting citizens are unregistered, and over 23 million Americans cited the lack of voter registration as the reason they did not vote. Federal Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is an effective tool to combat this disparity.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most presidential elections in the United States are decided by 55-65 percent of eligible voters.[53] The lack of diversity and representation in voter turnout results in policies that do not reflect the population writ large. Although people choose not to vote for many reasons, studies have found that a plurality of nonvoters identify registration issues as the main reason.[54]

Many people do not know how to register to vote or have difficulties doing so because of varying state requirements. Because the American voting system requires individuals to register before they can vote, many organizations hold registration drives to help. Even with these events, 60% of US adults have never been asked to register (see graphic).[55]

PROPOSED SOLUTION

The U.S. is one of the only democracies to place the burden of voter registration on the individual voter. Due to confusing and differing requirements by state, 20 states and Washington D.C. have implemented AVR to help citizens register to vote and enable them to exercise their democratic right.[56] These programs have increased voter registration and turnout, regardless of a state's size or partisan composition.[57] It is time to implement federal AVR to expand these benefits to the entire nation.
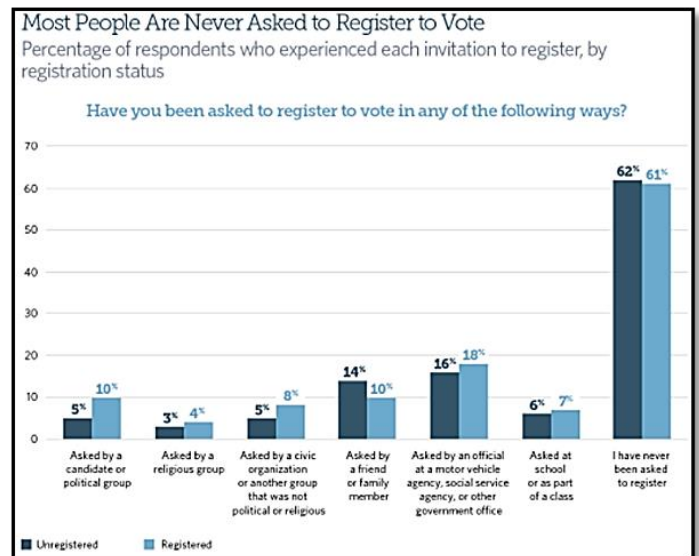
Source: Pew Research Center [58]

The benefits of AVR extend beyond increasing voter access and participation. AVR maintains the accuracy of voter rolls by enabling updates between registration agencies and election officials.[59]

CALL TO ACTION

AVR legislation has been introduced in Congress, but it is currently stalled as part of a broader package of reforms. You can help! Contact your elected officials and stress the need for bipartisan agreement on federal AVR. Highlight the importance of simple, targeted legislation and the absence of fraud in existing AVR programs!

Rob Mixon (MPP '22) is a student at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Support "Growing Voters" Frameworks
Increasing Youth Turnout with Youth-Focused Election Programs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young voters participate in elections in the United States at lower rates than the rest of the voting-eligible population. This participation gap leads to skewed policy outcomes and is an indicator of poor democratic health. Growing Voters is a framework for programming to focus elections on being more youth-centered. By engaging children before they are voting eligible, these programs increase youth participation through education and encouragement of lifelong healthy voting habits.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Eligible voters aged 18-29 turn out at lower rates than other voters. 50% of eligible young voters voted in the 2020 presidential election compared to 64% of the population.[60] The U.S. lags behind other countries in this regard (see graphic).

Low youth turnout stems from multiple causes: registering to vote is complicated and habits take time to form; election workers are overwhelmingly older and polling sites are unwelcoming; campaigns don't engage enough with young voters.[61] It also has significant consequences: the electorate is less engaged which leads to lack of trust in democratic institutions, and policy outcomes are not representative of the electorate and favor older voters.[62] Forming good voting habits early increases faith and familiarity in the election process, and focusing resources on young voters is vital to forming good habits.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

"Growing Voters" frameworks are educational programs that directly engage young voters and create opportunities for youth-centered election administration. They allow young people to learn about voting prior to becoming eligible. They are nonpartisan and can be implemented in schools, addressing equity concerns.

Turnout Gap Between Youngest and Oldest Voters[63]

US	37.74
Bulgaria	31.09
UK	22.81
Germany	18.48
Canada	15.65
Norway	14.01
Mexico	6.05
Iceland	3.36
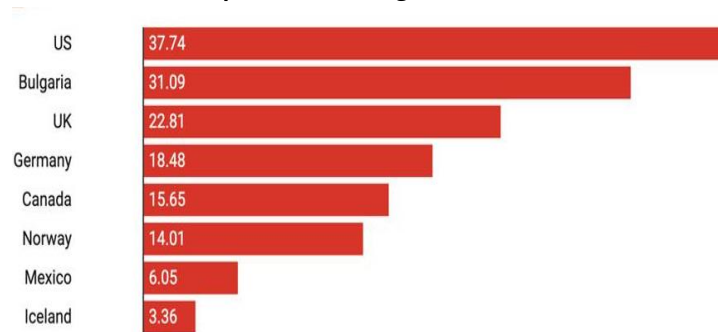
Growing Voters programs can take many forms to meet the needs of each community. Montgomery County, MD has piloted a Future Voters Program in its schools. Weber County, UT creates special ballots for kids to fill out alongside parents at the polls. Candidates for office can also visit school classes to engage students and hire young people. [64]

CALL TO ACTION

Legislatures, candidates, and community organizations should provide funding to create a practical civic engagement infrastructure through Growing Voters frameworks and initiate programs to educate and encourage young voters before they reach voting age. Exposing kids early to the election process is in democracy's best interest.

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Regulate Social Media Misinformation
Restoring Trust in Elections through More Effective Regulation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using social media, former President Donald Trump and his supporters sowed doubt in the electoral process by spreading unfounded claims of voter fraud.[65] This is an imminent threat to American democracy as it reduces civic participation, incites violence, and facilitates the passing of restrictive voting laws. Restoring trust in the electoral process can be done by regulating social media companies to reduce the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories and prevent disillusionment.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Following the 2020 presidential election, data shows election distrust reached an all-time high among voters. The perception of election fraud was chiefly spread on social media by former President Donald Trump and other political figures. As a result, large portions of the country came to believe the election had been stolen. In response, protestors stormed the Capitol building, demonstrating how dangerous the spread of disinformation on social media can be.[66]

Additionally, research shows when people distrust elections, they are less likely to vote. The perception of voter fraud has also been weaponized to pass restrictive voter laws across the country, including over 250 laws proposed or passed since the 2020 election.[67]

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Social media algorithms tailor content to each user for maximum engagement. Unfortunately, divisive content tends to garner the most views; an unintended side effect of engagement is exposing users to increasingly radical content. Algorithms funnel people into echo chambers, making them more susceptible to misinformation and conspiracy theories (see graphic).[68] The best way to rebuild trust in elections is to regulate social media to prevent the spread of misinformation.

The Structure of a Polarized Discussion on Social Media[69]
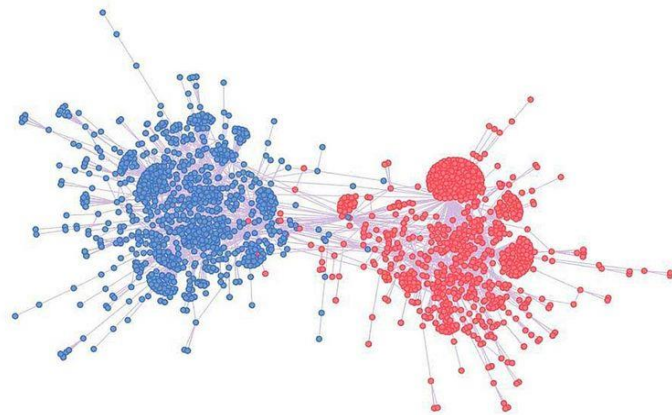
Companies are beholden to their bottom line, so government intervention is needed to effect change.[70] Congress should hold companies accountable and prevent harmful information from spreading by requiring misinformation to be deleted, adjusting algorithms away from promoting divisive content, and allowing the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to punish companies who do not comply.

CALL TO ACTION

Congressional gridlock is the major barrier preventing more effective social media regulation. Research shows over half the country supports such legislation, and supporters are encouraged to voice their support to their elected officials.

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Increase Election Administration Funding
Improving Perceptions of Election Legitimacy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing number of Americans distrust electoral systems and actors.[71] Misinformation, disinformation, news media, social media, lack of clarity in the electoral process, and lack of public knowledge of the process foster this distrust. The consequences of the growing distrust are wide-reaching and include political violence and distrust in government. To combat this problem, the federal government should increase funding for personnel, training, and equipment for local election jurisdictions.

## DECLINING DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Public trust in elections leading up to and directly following the 2020 presidential election shows a stark divergence along party lines in confidence that the election was held fairly.[72] Democrats increased their belief that the election was held fairly while Republicans saw a significant drop.[73]

CAUSES	CONSEQUENCES
• Misinformation • Disinformation • Lack of Knowledge of Election Systems • Polarization and Partisanship	• Political Violence • Distrust in Democratic Systems • Dissatisfaction with democracy

FUND LOCAL ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

To combat declining perceptions of democratic legitimacy, the federal government should increase funding for personnel, training, and equipment for local election jurisdictions by 25%, or just over $500 million per cycle. Despite declining trust, Americans maintain higher levels of trust for local officials relative to national figures.[74] Some local officials are already engaged in efforts to combat misperceptions, including online educational resources and public tours of election facilities.

Confidence the 2020 Presidential Election Was Held Fairly[75]
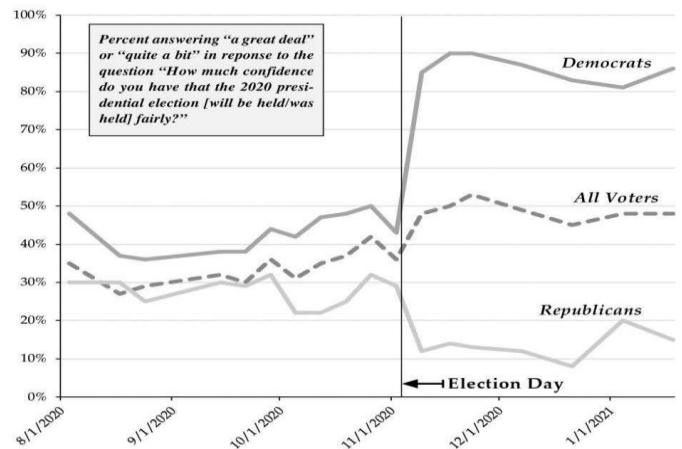
Source: Economist/YouGov poll.

Increasing funding for training would allow all officials to be trained with the communication skills necessary to combat misinformation.

SUPPORT LOCAL ELECTIONS OFFICIALS

President Biden has proposed $15 billion, allocated over 10 years, to increase election funding.[76] However, there is no guarantee that the funds would go towards combatting election misinformation. To ensure the funds are used effectively, citizens should attend local election board meetings to recommend trainings for communication in an age of misinformation.

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Reform the Algorithm
Addressing Amplification Instead of Content Moderation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media has created fragmented hubs of misinformation and weakened faith in electoral systems. Distorted realities fueled by political extremism call for reform to reduce their traction, restore citizen confidence in election results, and protect election officials' safety. To slow disinformation practices and restore election integrity, regulating social media's amplification algorithm is recommended. Refining the Platform Transparency and Accountability Act (PATA) as a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) oversight bill will also address tech companies' harmful practices.

DISINFORMATION DRAINS FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

Today, more people receive their political news on social media than ever before (see graphic).[77] Misinformation not only causes harm to the experience and integrity of social media platforms, it permeates into the electoral process through public perceptions, operations, and staff safety.

The unprecedented actions of January 6, 2021 trace to the belief that the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent, or "The Big Lie."[78] Despite enforcement attempts by social media companies, voter fraud content was shared on Facebook approximately 283,000 times with a reach of over 31 million users during the 2020 elections.[79] On Twitter, false information is 70% more likely to be retweeted, reaching 1,500 users six times more quickly than facts.[80]

REFORMING THE SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHM

Regulating algorithm amplification can restore trust by reducing election-related misinformation. Congress could require manual resharing after an original post has been shared at least three times or labeling misinformation from third-party fact-checkers. These new product features can serve as baseline requirements.

Websites Used Most Frequently for Political Information, 2016 [81]
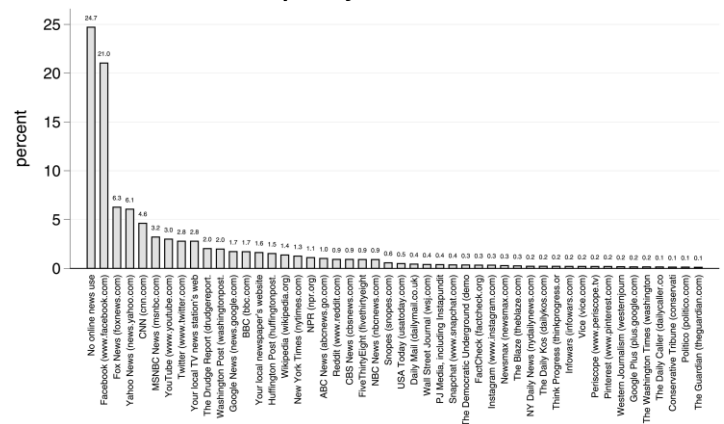
LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

Senators Chris Coons (DE), Rob Portman (OH), and Amy Klobuchar (MN) have introduced the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act (PATA). By allowing researchers to review sensitive materials, more insights can equip public officials with the accurate level of resources to respond proactively. A new Federal Trade Commission (FTC) privacy bureau can take action against algorithms that maximize harmful engagement for profit. Interest groups can provide the FTC with ideas for executing amplification controls. Public campaigns can educate citizens on how social media algorithms work and improve digital literacy.

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