

# Political Reform

 NEW  
AMERICA

# 2021



# Year in Review

# *Contents*

- 2 Letter from the Program Director
- 2 Year in Numbers
- 3 Our Three Areas of Work
- 4 Democracy Under Threat
- 6 Trust in Government
- 7 Reimagining Institutions in a Divided Society
- 10 Leadership Behind the Scenes
- 11 About Us
- 12 Our Funders

# Letter from the Program Director

A year ago, at the end of 2020, many of us were breathing a guarded sigh of relief. We had envisioned so many scenarios under which the 2020 national election might have ended inconclusively, or in violence. Yet, at that moment, we seemed to have avoided them. The defeated president was complaining about fraud, unsurprisingly, but the election had run smoothly, results were definitive, the Electoral College aligned with the popular vote, and American democracy appeared to have regained its footing, with all its flaws. None of us were so naive as to say, “the system worked,” but the worst had not happened.

From its first week, though, 2021 brought new risks to democracy in a rush, including the organized political violence of January 6 and a wave of state legislation that will limit voting and politicize the administration of elections. Legislation to restore the Voting Rights Act, limit the extremes of partisan redistricting, and limit the power of political money has not been treated with commensurate urgency in Congress, though it faces barriers in the anti-democratic structures of the Senate. Globally, even countries with formally democratic processes seemed to slide further into autocratic or illiberal forms.

Throughout the year, in the Political Reform program at New America, we’ve asked ourselves, are we doing enough to respond to the crisis? So many of the challenges that have emerged this year are so unlike those we identified when we launched the program in 2014. For example, state and local election officials were almost universally professionally nonpartisan and believed everyone should vote; now those offices are being won by people who believe the 2020 election was fraudulent.

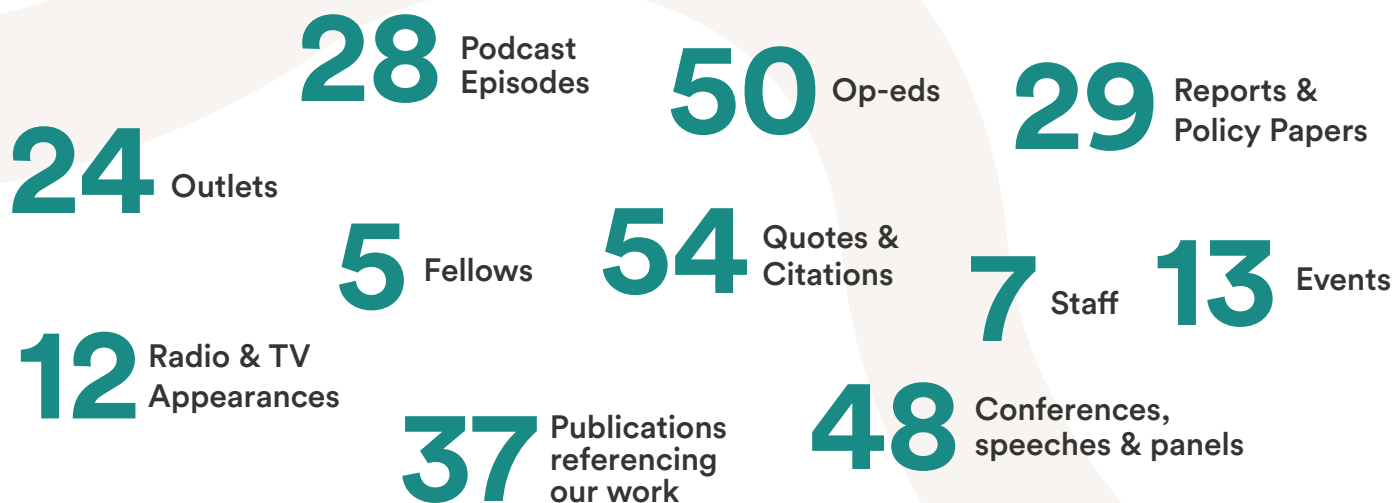
While much of the crisis is urgent and immediate, as reflected in the letter we organized with eight scholars of democracy—and signed by 190 more—warning of the dangers to democracy unless the Freedom to Vote Act is enacted, many of the solutions remain deeper and longer-term. While partisan redistricting will distort the public voice in many states, shifting to nonpartisan redistricting, although urgent, will not on its own give voice to the diverse, complex preferences of voters, which is why we continue to pursue solutions such as ranked-choice voting, proportional representation, and multiparty democracy.

But making democracy work will require more than procedural reforms and a revitalization of the Voting Rights Act. We also need to strengthen the connection between people and government. We’ve found hope this year in local initiatives toward co-governance, where mobilized residents are working together with government to address problems, in place of an adversarial relationship. In our work with the federal government, we’ve sought to bring the lessons of co-governance to the work of regulation and rulemaking.

Political reform has always been a long mission, requiring both patience and urgency. We will continue to bring both to our work, adapting to new challenges as well as opportunities of democratic hope.

Sincerely,  
**Mark Schmitt,**  
Director, Political Reform

## Year in Numbers



# Our Three Areas of Work

**Democracy Under  
Threat: Democratic  
decline at home and  
around the world**

**Trust in Government:  
Designing governance  
for civic power**

**Reimagining  
Institutions in a  
divided society**

# Democracy Under Threat

Democratic decline at home and around the world

The January 6 assault on American democracy, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the continued rise of hyper-partisan polarization fueled a year of much-needed reflection on how we got here and what can be done to help. We saw renewed focus on democratic backsliding at home and abroad, as well as solutions ranging from the For the People Act to the administration's Summit for Democracy, and have used all of our program's tools to inform these efforts. Lee Drutman co-wrote and organized three statements of warning about democratic deterioration and the need for Congress to act on reform. The statements were signed by hundreds of the leading political scientists and scholars of democracy, and garnered wide coverage from traditional and new media.

Lee's work continues to sound the alarm on, and explore solutions to, the threats of an increasingly illiberal GOP and a public more and more willing to say that political violence might be warranted—from analyzing opinion polling on the legitimacy of the 2020

election to challenging us to reimagine our “great political experiment” in order to save it from terminal decline. Lee's regular contributions to FiveThirtyEight and his podcast Politics in Question (which he co-hosts with R Street's James Wallner and Marquette University's Julia Azari), helped us make sense of these threats and offered a vision of a less toxic political culture shaped by multiple parties and proportional representation.

As the year comes to a close, however, so too does the window of opportunity to pass meaningful federal legislation to guarantee free, fair, and secure elections—and to lay down strong supports everywhere people and communities are struggling against rising tides of illiberalism. As Heather Hurlburt told Vox in the lead-up to the administration's international Summit of Democracy, “Biden's global democracy agenda depends on US democracy continuing to strengthen at home.”

## What's happening

Politics · Last night

**Texas Democrats walk off House floor and block passage of restrictive voting bill**



News · Trending

**Maggie Haberman**

16.3K Tweets

Politics · Trending

**Statement of Concern**

Public policy think tank New America releases a Statement of Concern signed by over 100 democracy scholars urging Congress members to 'pass national voting and election administration standards'

10.5K Tweets

**Bloomberg Wealth** · 1 hour ago

**Employees are quitting instead of giving up working from home**



COVID-19 · LIVE

**COVID-19: News and updates for Washington, DC**



[Show more](#)

**Statement of Concern**, led by Lee and signed by 200 democracy scholars, shown here trending on Twitter in June.



Mindy Finn interviewing Lee for a Renew America Movement chat in September.

## Related Work

AMERICAN PURPOSE

- LEE DRUTMAN

**“Democracy on Life Support”**

DEMOCRACY FUND  
VOTER STUDY GROUP

- LEE DRUTMAN

**“Theft Perception”**

NBC THINK

- LEE DRUTMAN

**“Trump supporters storm the Capitol to attack democracy. Here's how Congress can save it”**

FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

- LEE DRUTMAN

**“Why The Two-Party System Is Effing Up U.S. Democracy”**

FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

- LEE DRUTMAN

**“Why Bipartisanship In The Senate Is Dying”**

POLITICS IN QUESTION

- LEE DRUTMAN, JAMES WALLNER, AND JULIA AZARI WITH JAKE GRUMBACH

**“Is American democracy backsliding?”**



## Democracy at Home and Abroad



*Heather, Deputy Mayor of Los Angeles Nina Hachigian, Amb. Tom Shannon, and Brookings' Tony Pipa discuss strengthening U.S. foreign policy through subnational diplomacy at an event in May.*

The democratic decline the United States is facing is not unique; we have a great deal to learn from other societies about both the risks we face and the strategies we might adopt to overcome them. In 2021, it became apparent that, rather than ease after the 2020 election or the shock of January 6, the threat of political violence is with us for the foreseeable future. Violence makes the job of renovating American democracy more difficult, and changes the parameters of the work, because it decays civic institutions and frays the bonds that hold communities together. As we've written, international experience teaches that the risks of violence endure—and sometimes reach their heights—amidst efforts to reform dysfunctional systems and address democratic backsliding. In private funder briefings and public sessions with civic groups across the country, we and our partners at OverZero have laid out the risks, identified

relevant international examples, and spotlighted efforts that succeed in de-escalating or building resilience against appeals to violence. From social networks to national security, our work identifies the less-than-obvious connections between events in our neighborhoods and developments beyond our borders. It highlights the ways that the debate over national security—what it is, and who comprises the threat—is playing out less in foreign affairs than in domestic debates over voting rights, belonging, and safety. We point to tools that don't usually form part of the democracy reform arsenal, like regulating algorithms used by media companies, thinking carefully about the role of the military in a democracy, and supporting city governments against illiberal nation-states, as important additional sources of capacity to build the sustainable, inclusive democratic future we seek.

### Related Work

NEW YORK TIMES -  
HEATHER HURLBURT  
AND CANDACE  
RONDEAUX

[“How Parler Reveals  
the Alarming  
Trajectory of Political  
Violence”](#)

NEW AMERICA  
POLICY BRIEF -  
HEATHER HURLBURT  
AND ALEXANDRA  
STARK

[“Global Cities  
as Reservoirs of  
Democracy”](#)

WORKING PAPER -  
HEATHER HURLBURT  
AND ALEXANDRA  
STARK, WITH  
OVERZERO

[“Violence-Proofing  
U.S. Democracy:  
Immediate Priorities  
for Philanthropy”](#)

POLITICO -  
NINA HACHIGIAN  
AND HEATHER  
HURLBURT

[“United States” in  
Biden’s Summit Won’t  
Save Democracy. Here  
Are 18 Other Ideas for  
How to Fix It.](#)

TNR LIVE -  
HEATHER HURLBURT  
[“Foreign Policy Post-  
9/11”](#)

# Trust in Government

## Designing governance for civic power

The past two years have proven the limits of a purely top-down approach to governing. Rebuilding public trust in government, and testing new models for participatory democracy, is a key aspect of transcending our polarized politics. In 2021, Hollie Russon Gilman, co-author of *[Civic Power: Rebuilding American Democracy in an Era of Crisis](#)* with K. Sabeel Rahman, brought her work on civic engagement to a wide range of audiences across the country, in conversation with figures like [Maurice Mitchell](#), national director of the Working Families Party and a leader in the Movement for Black Lives.

One key aspect of rebuilding trust in government is building new models for collaborative governance, or co-governance—a democratic process where residents, activists, bureaucrats, and elected officials share in decision-making power to achieve common goals. This year, with the Biden-Harris Administration showing keen interest in scaling the models and practices of

co-governance from its first days in office, Hollie and Mark, in collaboration with nonprofits, community groups and elected officials, produced [a report](#) highlighting co-governance case studies across the country. We also teamed up with *The Forge* and Local Progress for [an event](#) to discuss best practices for co-governance, identify promising strategies, and highlight lessons learned from on-the-ground experiences.

The administration's commitment to broadening the role of public engagement in government decision-making also included calls for federal regulatory reform, with a specific focus on equity. Responding to the call, our program and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government have convened groups of academics, local community engagement experts, public sector leaders, and on-the-ground organizers to share their expertise in designing processes that support more inclusive engagement, in particular working with historically underserved communities. We have published two papers on these meetings so far, with more to come next year.

As the opportunities and challenges driving the movement toward more effective and more equitable models of civic participation stretch into 2022, our team will continue to be a hub for research and ideas on how to build sustainable, trusting relationships between government and the people.

**“Let’s build back our communities in a way that simultaneously improves our communities’ physical assets while strengthening our civic muscles.”**

*- Hollie Russon Gilman, Darshan Goux, and Elizabeth Youngling, [The Hill](#)*

### Related Work

**NEW AMERICA REPORT**  
- MARK SCHMITT AND HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN

[“Building the Relationships for Collaborative Governance”](#)

**NEW AMERICA REPORT**  
- ARCHON FUNG, MARK SCHMITT, AND HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN

[“Democratizing the Federal Regulatory Process”](#)

**NEXT CITY**  
- HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN, REBECCA ROSEN, AND ELENA SOURIS

[“Co-Governing to Build Back Better”](#)

**STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW**  
- HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN AND SONAL SHAH

[“Rebuilding Trust in American Institutions”](#)

**COLUMBIA WORLD PROJECTS REPORT** - HOLLIE RUSSON GILMAN

[“Digital Tools for a Responsive Government: A Report for the NYC Civic Engagement Commission”](#)

# Reimagining Institutions in a Divided Society

## Politics of Institutional Reform

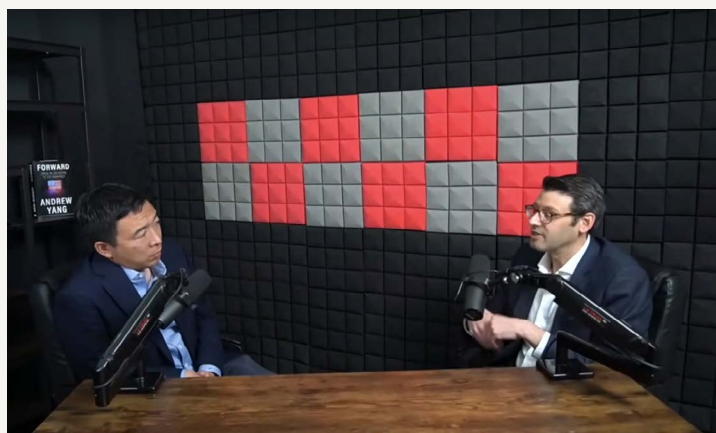
This past year we watched in alarm as rioters stormed the Capitol on January 6. We then witnessed the marginalization of Republican Party members who refused to embrace the party line on the 2020 election result or the second impeachment of Donald Trump. The two-party doom loop, a phrase popularized by Lee's latest book, **Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America**, leaves principled dissenters and would-be moderates with no leverage within their party nor options without.

As the effects of the doom loop come into ever harsher relief, so have both the urgency and possibility of transformative democracy reform. In the spirit of thinking big, Lee initiated a new project, Fix Our House, to lead a focused educational and advocacy campaign in support of proportional representation for the U.S. House of Representatives. He also led a task force of the Academy of Arts and Sciences on **expanding the size of the House of Representatives**, and worked with the *New York Times* to develop an **interactive quiz** allowing readers to explore their place in a potential six-party system, which was the top story on nytimes.com the day of its release.

As the insurrection and pandemic drew the world's attention to the physical safety of the U.S. Congress, we made sure that other issues central to the overall health of the Legislative Branch, like staff pay and legislative efficacy, did not get lost in the fray. Following the release of the book **Congress Overwhelmed**, co-edited by Lee, we **held a discussion** about congressional capacity problems, and how best to tackle them, with Ruth Bloch Rubin, James R. Jones, and Molly E. Reynolds. Similarly, Maresa argued for reducing Congress's unhealthy reliance on lame-duck sessions in a time of crisis for **NBC Think**.

**“But shouldn’t we expect more from the Senate than merely that it not be an obstacle?”**

- Mark Schmitt, *Democracy Journal*



Lee and Andrew Yang speak about democracy reform on Yang's podcast *Forward* in November.

**“The binary, majoritarian, and highly nationalized party system of the United States as currently structured...violates everything we know about how best to make multiracial, multiethnic democracy work.”**

- Lee Drutman, *NYU Law Review*



## A Roadmap for Expanding Electoral Reform Research



*Lee moderating a New America event on the book *Congress Overwhelmed* with James R. Jones, Molly E. Reynolds and Ruth Bloch Rubin.*

**“While single-winner ranked-choice voting does have many positive effects both in theory and in overseas usage, in practice these benefits have been somewhat limited and/or difficult to quantify based on limited usage thus far in the United States.”**

**- Lee Drutman and Maresa Strano, [New America report](#)**

While federal action on electoral reform remains blocked, states and local governments across the country, along with activists, have continued to test new ideas that might create space for more ideological and partisan diversity—or, at the very least, lower the temperature of American politics.

Two such ideas that have galvanized interest and experimentation in recent years are primary reforms and ranked-choice voting. This year, Lee and Maresa published the first comprehensive reviews of the literature on [ranked-choice voting](#) and [congressional primaries](#). The reports, which lay out a roadmap for future study, were supported and informed by the work of the [Electoral Reform Research Group](#) (ERRG)—a collaboration between our program; the American Enterprise Institute; the Unite America Institute; and Stanford University’s Center on

Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law—which we formed in 2019 to create more, and more accessible, research into the ways that changes to our electoral rules impact participation, partisanship, and power. In 2021, ERRG published [14 original studies](#) on the impacts of ranked-choice voting, conducted by political scientists and graduate students from across the United States and abroad. We also hosted a convening to discuss what we learned—and still need to know—about the reform. We will publish a final summary report on the first round of ERRG research in 2022, in addition to new research on what multipartyism in America would look like, and a report on redistricting reform.

### Related Work

**NEW AMERICA REPORT**  
- LEE DRUTMAN AND  
MARESA STRANO  
[“What We Know About  
Ranked-Choice Voting”](#)

**NEW AMERICA REPORT**  
- LEE DRUTMAN  
[“What We Know about  
Congressional Primaries  
and Congressional Primary  
Reform”](#)

**NEW AMERICA BRIEF**  
- MARK SCHMITT  
[“Democracy Reforms Go  
Better Together”](#)

**NEW AMERICA  
COLLECTIONS**  
- ELECTORAL REFORM  
RESEARCH GROUP  
[“Ranked-Choice Voting  
Research”](#)

## The Meaning of Security

**“Neither researchers and practitioners nor the publics we serve have the language, let alone the policy, to begin confronting the national security challenges we currently face.”**

- Alexandra Stark, Candace Rondeaux, and Heather Hurlburt, New America report

A global pandemic, the national movement for racial justice, and the rise of violent right-wing extremist groups are just some of the seismic changes testing Americans’ mental models of what national security means, and who it includes. This year, the New Models of Policy Change Initiative explored how Americans’ conceptions of national security are changing. In a society where views on security, like so many other issues, are deeply polarized along partisan lines, we asked how we can transform U.S. national security policy to keep Americans safe and build sustainable support for policies that promote human well-being around the world. Our report The Meaning of Security maps how Americans’ perceptions of national security have shifted, and analyzes media conversations about the pandemic to see whether how we talk about national security has evolved to meet these new and complex challenges.

Transforming national security policy means building national security institutions that look like America, and opening the national security debate to historically marginalized voices. New Models is proud to promote policy innovation in U.S. security and connect it to diversity, equity, and inclusion, including by placing 10 published essays and 7 podcast appearances from our 2020 cohort of emerging voices in the field. We were again proud to partner with NextGenNatSec and Out in National Security to celebrate emerging national security leaders from diverse backgrounds, and to participate in Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security’s (WCAPS) #OrgsinSolidarity initiative to combat racism and promote diversity in the national security field.

*Heather spoke on a panel on foreign policy after 9/11 hosted by The New Republic in September.*

### Related Work

**NEW AMERICA REPORT**  
- ALEXANDRA STARK, CANDACE RONDEAUX, AND HEATHER HURLBURT  
“The Meaning of Security: Can a Divided Society Provide for the Common Defense?”

**FOREIGN POLICY**  
- HEATHER HURLBURT  
“Inside Joe Biden’s Foreign-Policy Worldview”

**JUST SECURITY**  
- HEATHER HURLBURT  
“A Soldier and His Establishment: In the Life of Colin Powell, Who Failed Whom?”

**LAWFARE**  
- ALEXANDRA STARK  
“Giving Diplomacy a Chance in Yemen”

**INKSTICK MEDIA**  
- ALEXANDRA STARK  
“Ending Endless Wars Responsibly”

# Leadership Behind the Scenes

Heather served on the Agenda Committee for the Halifax International Security Forum and chaired an off-the-record dinner on the challenges of cultural change and inclusion in modern militaries. With Chatham House, she co-convened policymaker sessions exploring trans-Atlantic understandings of democracy promotion. She built consultative processes for State Department and National Security Council initiatives and frequently engaged with Administration and Congressional officials.

Lee worked closely with congressional Democrats on major voting rights legislation. Lee consulted with several House and Senate offices on democracy reform throughout the process. Lee Drutman also joined the Electoral Systems Working Group, a consortium of democracy scholars, a collaboration of NYU Law, OSU Law, and Stanford. Lee Drutman regularly consults with reporters at the New York Times, Economist, Atlantic, Washington Post, Vox, and others to help them think through their coverage on democracy issues.

Hollie spoke to Finnish public officials about participatory democracy, in a dialogue organized through the U.S. Department of State. She has been working closely with multi-sector leaders inside and outside of government on advancing participatory democracy and building out digital tools for and designing more equitable participation.

Alex partnered with State Department officials to shape discussions around non-military aspects of US-China competition in the Middle East, and presented to an off-the-record group of national security thinkers on the future of US Middle East policy.

Maresa taught a first-of-its-kind course on political reform at the George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management. She worked closely with the Electoral Reform Research Group scholars to bring their work to a broader audience through a series of research briefs and organized our team's second ERRG convening in June.

Mark participated in conferences on policy feedback, political economy, and the relationship between democracy and economic inequality.



*Heather and Ambassador Daniel Shields meet European officials at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's 2021 Brussels Security Talks.*

# About Us

## Our Team

**Lee Drutman**, Senior Fellow

**Heather Hurlburt**, Director,  
New Models of Policy Change  
Initiative

**Hollie Russon Gilman**, Fellow

**Mark Schmitt**, Director,  
Political Reform Program

**Alexandra Stark**, Senior  
Researcher

**Maresa Strano**, Policy Analyst

## Fellows

Lydia Bean

Ann Florini

Jeannette Haynie

Didi Kuo

Camille Stewart

We were thrilled to continue our partnerships with the **Diversity in National Security Network**, **NextGen National Security**, **Organizations in Solidarity**, and **Out in National Security** this year, recognizing two cohorts of diverse emerging national security leaders and participating in a community effort to promote equity and justice in the field.

Our Electoral Reform Research Group partners include the **American Enterprise Institute**; the **Unite America Institute**; and **Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law**.

You can stay in touch with the **Political Reform program** by following us on Twitter (@PolReformNA) and **signing up** for our seasonal newsletter, where we share all of our team's recent work throughout the year.

# *Our Funders*

William and Flora Hewlett  
Foundation

Democracy Fund

Arnold Ventures

Ford Foundation

Rockefeller Brothers Fund

American Academy of Arts  
and Sciences

Open Society Foundations

Unite America Institute

Compton Foundation

Ploughshares Fund

Ash Center for Democratic  
Governance and Innovation at the  
Harvard Kennedy School

---

*Donate Here*