

Political Reform

2022



Year in Review

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Letter from the Program Director

The 2022 midterm election was the first in my lifetime when the phrase, “democracy is on the ballot” was more than an empty slogan. Where democracy was put before voters, it won. In every swing state, voters rejected candidates for governor and secretary of state who had questioned the outcome of the 2020 election, and almost all candidates who lost their elections conceded promptly.

“Threats to democracy” emerged among voters’ leading concerns in polls in the fall. Eschewing doubts from party strategists and older pundits who argued that democracy was an abstraction relative to “kitchen table” economic issues, the President gave two major speeches putting democracy at the center of electoral conflict.

Democracy is likely to remain a contested electoral issue. It matters to voters and it wins support from majorities. This is a new development and a source of hope that we can move forward with other reforms to strengthen democracy and innovate on ideas that will create a more robust, effective government that deserves the public’s trust.

While acceptance of legitimate election results and the peaceful transition of power are foundational principles of democracy, on their own they offer the narrowest definition imaginable, a stub of all the principles and habits that go into the fragile accomplishment of self-governance. It is not enough to vote for democracy to survive, we need a politics that will encourage democratic practices to flourish, engaging more people in meaningful ways and, ultimately, creating the conditions under which all human beings can achieve a secure and rewarding life.

But the election also brought promising results for that more expansive vision of democracy: Portland, Oregon, revamped its city council to include proportional representation; Maine and Alaska held elections using ranked-choice voting with broad public acceptance; a Nevada initiative established a top-five nonpartisan primary system coupled with ranked-choice voting in the general election; Arizona voters passed a model disclosure requirement for “dark money” donors.

“Democracy is on the ballot,” though, also means that democracy is contested. It’s no longer a matter of consensus, so broadly accepted that we don’t worry much about it. The days when challenges to democracy could be addressed with a blue-ribbon commission, such as the one chaired by former President Jimmy Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker after the 2000 election, are long gone. But deeper voter engagement on the health of democracy itself also means that there’s room for more ambitious solutions than were possible before, including the deep structural reforms that begin with some of the ballot initiatives that passed this year and would include reforms such as proportional representation, ballot fusion, and multiparty democracy that New America’s Political Reform program has prioritized.

But as with any contested issue, winning the fight for democracy also requires people to have a positive and engaging experience of democracy in their daily lives and in their communities. That’s why our work on co-governance – a model of civic engagement that can be less adversarial but also conscious of power – is essential to winning the contest for democracy. It’s also why we work on these two aspects of democratic practice in combination, while structural reforms and civic engagement are often treated as separate realms. We’re excited to expand this work, including through the Ballot Freedom Project and other new initiatives, in the year ahead.

Sincerely,
Mark Schmitt,
Director, Political Reform

Year in Numbers

27 Podcast Episodes

30 Op-eds

13 Reports

21 Outlets

7 Staff

17 Events

17 Radio & TV Appearances

3 Fellows

21 Publications referencing our work

32 Conferences, speeches & panels

Our Three Pillars of Work

**Defending Democracy in a
Post-January 6th World**

**Trust in the Public: Designing
Governance for Civic Power**

**Reimagining Political
Institutions**

Rethinking Assumptions

Two years after the 2020 election and the January 6th insurrection, those events still cast a shadow on democracy at home and abroad. In 2022, one of two major parties in America remained dominated by a faction that rejected the results of the 2020 election and sought control of election administration in states and counties across the country. Over the summer, the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative majority eliminated the constitutional right to abortion, putting the Court at the center of political conflict and leading more Americans to doubt its legitimacy. Election workers, law enforcement, and lawmakers face constant threats of political violence, which culminated in the attack on the husband of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

For New America's **Political Reform program**, these are not short-term challenges but demand a deeper rethinking of the institutions, assumptions, and practices that led to the recent crises and that shape American democracy and our approach to the world.

In 2022, that meant two priorities for our program. First, our work is at the center of a broad effort to move us toward meaningful multiparty democracy, to break the two-party "doom loop" so powerfully described by Lee Drutman. As lead partners in a collaborative project that won the Stronger Democracy Award in June, we helped launch an effort to restore the legal status of fusion voting, which would allow new parties to emerge by

cross-endorsing candidates from existing parties. We also launched and spun off a new organization, Fix Our House, intended to promote proportional representation and multi-member districts in Congress.

Our second priority involves not just restructuring formal institutions of democracy, but rethinking the relationship between people and government at all levels, starting at the neighborhood or town level. New practices of collaborative governance have emerged in urban and rural settings alike, and in an extensive research project and series of case studies, we've drawn out the lessons from the more successful innovations in civic engagement and shared them broadly, including with officials in several federal agencies who are themselves looking for innovative strategies to engage the public.

We've helped to build a community of researchers, journalists, and activists, internally and across the country, who are seeking to build a more resilient democracy through new coalitions and approaches to public engagement and participation. This year alone, this community included the R Street Institute, OverZero, the Harvard Ash Center, What Works Plus, Fix Our House, Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Local Progress, Democracy Rising, Protect Democracy, Working Families Power, Center for Ballot Freedom, Lyceum Labs, and others.

In partnership with R Street, we produced 27 new episodes of our podcast **Politics in Question**, where Lee and his co-hosts James Wallner (R Street) and Julia Azari (Marquette University) examine what's broken in our democracy and how we can work together to fix it. We dedicated multiple episodes to democratic decline, including a live episode on the **democratic legitimacy of the Supreme Court**. As the challenges facing American democracy widened in scope in 2022, we invited more guests onto the podcast including political scientists Amanda L. Hollis-Brusky, Leah Stokes, Sophia Jordán Wallace, Hans Noel, Lara Brown, Vanessa Cruz Nichols, Seth Masket, Kevin Munger, Tim Shenk, among many others.

We also collaborated internally, taking advantage of the diverse expertise and points of view within our team. This summer, as the January 6th Select Committee began its televised hearings, our team wrote an **essay series** that included original polling examining Americans' views on January 6th, prospects for reforming the Electoral Count Act, and a historical comparison to Watergate. For the midterm elections, we held an **internal briefing** and published a team **blog post** on our takeaways and what's next for American democracy.



Lee and James Wallner (R Street) discuss their podcast *Politics in Question* on **C-SPAN**.

Related Work

FIVETHIRTYEIGHT

- LEE DRUTMAN

"Reflections on the Insurrection"

NEW AMERICA

- MARK SCHMITT, ALEX STARK, MARESA STRANO, LIZBETH LUCERO & LEE DRUTMAN

"January 6 Select Committee Investigation Preview: What We're Watching Ahead of the Hearings"

TIME

- MARESA STRANO

"Plenty Voters Care About Democracy. It's Still Not Enough"

NEW AMERICA

- MARK SCHMITT, MARESA STRANO, LEE DRUTMAN, OSCAR POCASANGRE & LIZBETH LUCERO

"What the 2022 Midterms Portend for the Next Era of American Democracy"

At Home and Abroad

Declining democratic institutions at home are part of a global trend of democratic backsliding. While we often treat American democracy as exceptional, we know we have much to learn from other societies about the risks of democratic decay and political violence, as well as the strategies we can adopt to mitigate these threats. This year, we continued to bring experts and practitioners together to identify threats to democracy at home and what we can learn from the world about protecting democracy. In partnership with OverZero and Protect Democracy, we conducted nationally-representative polling and published a [series of reports](#) exploring Americans' views of the violence on January 6th and related accountability efforts, briefing a wide range of key stakeholders in the policy, advocacy, and [philanthropy](#) communities on our findings.

Lee co-wrote a piece for the [Chicago Tribune](#) with Protect Democracy's Farbod Faraji arguing that Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, a champion of illiberal democracy, found inspiration in the U.S. electoral system. Following Florida's passage of the so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill, we published a [guest essay](#) by Ari Shaw of UCLA's Williams Institute that explained how the bill was modeled on similar efforts from Hungary. "LGBT rights are the canary in the coal mine of democratic backsliding," he wrote.



"Rather than asking whether the United States will have a new civil war, commentators ought to be asking: What kinds of risks for political violence does the United States face? What forms might that political violence take?"

- Alex Stark, Anjali Dayal & Megan Stewart,
[War on the Rocks](#)

The Political Reform team also organized a set of convenings, culminating in an in-person conference, to better understand the role of the military in democracy from a comparative perspective. These conversations set the stage for our work to reimagine and reinvigorate our democratic institutions through the 2024 election season and beyond.

As we reflect on the past 12 months, we can find inspiration and resolve in the historical lessons from Lee's essay "How Democracies Revive." Counterintuitive as it may seem, he argues, the pervasive panic that has gripped America since January 6th could be the key to unlocking the next great era of pro-democracy reform.

Related Work

INKSTICK -
ALEX STARK,
STEPHEN WETHEIM,
LUCAS ROBINSON &
JAMES SIEBENS
["The US' Democracy Problem"](#)

1A WAMU -
ALEX STARK,
BARBARA WALTER &
KATE MASUR
["The Threat of Political Violence in the United States"](#)

INSIDE
PHILANTHROPY -
HEATHER HURLBURT,
SADIA HAMEE &
RACHEL BROWN
["In 2022, Philanthropy Must Engage Decisively With Political Violence"](#)

CHICAGO TRIBUNE -
LEE DRUTMAN &
FARBOD FARAJI
["Hungary's Viktor Orbán can thank the US for facilitating his rise to power"](#)

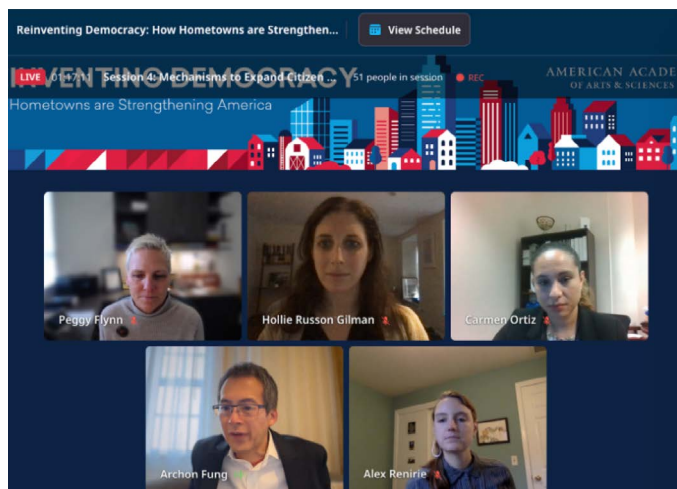
NISKANEN CENTER -
LEE DRUTMAN
["How Democracies Revive"](#)

Designing Governance for Civic Power

The ongoing political tensions in our democracy call for a broad approach to democratic reform focused on meaningfully redistributing power to people and communities. Building the capacity of communities to exercise sustainable political power requires a novel approach to government aimed at dismantling the current power dynamics.

Over the past year, Hollie Russon Gilman led our work to expand public participation in federal policymaking by increasing knowledge of and support for innovative approaches to civic engagement. New America and Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation hosted a private listening session for senior government officials, moderated by Archon Fung, Faculty Director of Harvard's Ash Center. The session was attended by over 40 senior government officials across the executive branch to hear from people with experience in successful collaborative governance, or "co-governance," models across rural, urban, and tribal contexts. We later summarized the discussion in a [report](#) for a broader audience.

Building on our efforts to create spaces and resources for senior agency officials to learn from effective community engagement models, this December, we organized a second convening in partnership with Harvard's Ash Center and What Works Plus, attended by nearly 50 senior government officials, to examine the role stakeholder engagement plays in improving government programs and services, and trust in government, especially in under-served communities.



Hollie on the panel "Reinventing Democracy: How Hometowns Are Strengthening America," part of the Our Common Purpose Communities Project.

"Co-governance creates positive feedback loops, which encourage and foster genuine respect and a shared understanding of power between government and civil society. Even in cases where policy wins aren't immediate, the relationships established can be impactful in the long run."

- Hollie Russon Gilman & Mark Schmitt, [SSIR](#)

Our work spotlights models beyond traditional governance and moves toward institutionalized practices that break down the boundaries between people inside and outside government to influence radical change. This year, we also partnered with [The Forge](#) to [spotlight successful stories](#) of co-governance models across rural and urban communities. In this moment of political turmoil, we are keen to provide a platform to amplify those doing incredible work on the ground to advance equitable and inclusive models of collaborative governance.

As we enter the new year, our team will continue to be a hub for research and ideas to deepen relationships for co-governance that shift people beyond traditional roles as 'customers' to active co-creators of policy.

Related Work

THE HILL
- HOLLIE RUSSON
GILMAN

"SCOTUS decisions leave little recourse but to try new models of civic engagement"

THE THREAD
- MARK SCHMITT
"Can Governing Well Save Our Democracy?"

THE CHRONICLE OF
PHILANTHROPY
- HOLLIE RUSSON
GILMAN & ARI WALLACH
"The Metaverse Is Coming, and Philanthropy Needs to Be Prepared"

NEW AMERICA
- ARCHON FUNG, MARK
SCHMITT & HOLLIE
RUSSON GILMAN
"Strengthening Models of Civic Engagement"

A Vision of Multiparty Democracy

This past year saw progress on short-term reforms such as updates to the [Electoral Count Act](#). But as Mark wrote in our program's [Summer newsletter](#), we need a bigger vision that gets at the deepest causes of the “doom loop” of hyper-partisan polarization — and leads us past it. For our program this year, that meant looking further ahead and looking at state and local innovations.

We've been most excited in 2022 to be a lead partner in the Ballot Freedom Project, which won one of the two \$10 million grants in the [Stronger Democracy Award](#) competition. Through this collaborative project to promote multiparty democracy, as well as the new organization [Fix Our House](#), which we incubated, and our continued analysis through the [Electoral Reform Research Group](#), we have begun efforts to understand and promote fusion voting. Next year, we will co-host a conference that will expand scholarship on multiparty politics and strategies for reform, with a focus on fusion.



Lee testifying before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

In 2022, Lee's work continued to raise awareness of the dangers of zero-sum winner-takes-all politics through his contributions to FiveThirtyEight, the New York Times, and other media outlets. He, along with his co-hosts and expert guests also continued to debate various electoral reforms on our podcast, [Politics in Question](#). This summer, he testified in front of the [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#) to advocate for increasing the size of the House of Representation and multi-members districts. Finally, in September, Lee co-wrote and organized an [open letter to Congress](#) signed by over 200 democracy scholars urging the adoption of multi-member districts with competitive and responsive proportional representation.

“To break the deadly cycle of hyper-partisan polarization that threatens American democracy, we should have a system that creates and supports more viable political parties, simply by allowing parties to cross-endorse candidates.”

- Mark Schmitt, [CNN](#)

Related Work

NOEMA
- LEE DRUTMAN

[“A Remedy For Undemocratic Democracy”](#)

NEW AMERICA
- LEE DRUTMAN

[“The Case for Fusion Voting and a Multiparty Democracy in America”](#)

POLITICS IN QUESTION
- FIX OUR HOUSE, PROTECT DEMOCRACY & NEW AMERICA

[“How do winner-take-all elections harm American democracy?”](#)

FOREIGN POLICY
- LEE DRUTMAN
[“Abolish Two-Party Systems”](#)

NEW YORK TIMES
- LEE DRUTMAN

[“Why Do People Who Don’t Like Politics Hold the Fate of the Country in Their Hands?”](#)

NEW AMERICA
- LEE DRUTMAN
[“New Jersey Voters on Political Extremism, Political Parties, and Reforming the State’s Electoral System.”](#)

THE ANNALS OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE
- LEE DRUTMAN

[“Moderation, Realignment, or Transformation? Evaluating Three Approaches to America’s Crisis of Democracy”](#)

Roadmap for Electoral Reform Research

Intensifying political polarization has left many reformers feeling hopeless, or else continuing to tinker around the edges with the same, incremental changes. However, the research we have conducted on the effects of various electoral reforms — particularly through the Electoral Reform Research Group (ERRG) — has made us and our partners more confident in our assessment of what’s wrong with our political institutions and the most promising solutions.



Lee at an IACC/RepUs event on political reforms.

Earlier this year, we published a [compilation](#) of 15 original ERRG research briefs on ranked-choice voting and related reforms, edited by Lee and Maresa Strano, who also wrote an extended introduction to the report. Our conclusion is that ranked-choice voting is an improvement over the status quo plurality method; however, switching to RCV alone is unlikely to bring about the large-scale change we need to repair our

national political dysfunction. Similarly, our systematic analysis of [redistricting](#) and [redistricting commissions](#) found that while independent commissions are superior to partisan legislatures, many of the problems attributed to gerrymandering are actually problems with the use of the single-member district.

This work has informed a new electoral reform research agenda focused on political parties, districts, and pro-party reforms such as fusion voting and proportional representation. We commissioned two (forthcoming) papers in partnership with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Trinity University that explore what a new party system could look like, and what might be preventing it from materializing. We commissioned a [survey](#) and published two reports in support of the idea that voters are dissatisfied with the two-party system, open to new parties, and that the revival of fusion voting could help to rebuild the political center in American politics.

We also examined the ideologies and identities of undecided voters in order to gain further insight into the flaws the two-party system and what new parties and issue coalitions might form if the duopoly were broken. In their [report](#), Lee and Oscar Pocasangre found that many voters who hold moderate-to-conservative views on social issues and moderate-to-liberal views on economic policy have no party to represent them.

“What counts for a mandate in U.S. electoral politics in 2022 is nothing more than random noise on the edges of two deeply divided and entrenched voter coalitions, with a small group of idiosyncratic voters showing up at the last minute.”

- Lee Drutman & Oscar Pocasangre,
[New America](#)

The analysis raised questions about whether the current U.S. electoral system makes any sense, given the ways in which it can narrowly award total power to one side or the other.

American democracy is in a precarious place, but it doesn’t have to be. This moment is pushing us to think creatively about the future of the American political system. In the year ahead, we will organize a new research series around party reform and the possibilities for fusion voting.

Related Work

NEW AMERICA
- LEE DRUTMAN AND
MARESA STRANO
[“Evaluating the Effects of
Ranked-Choice Voting”](#)

NEW AMERICA
- LEE DRUTMAN
[“What We Know About
Redistricting and
Redistricting Reform”](#)

NEW AMERICA
- OSCAR POCASANGRE &
LEE DRUTMAN
[“Undecided Voters: Who
They Are, What They Want,
and How They Decide Our
Politics”](#)

FIVETHIRTYEIGHT
- LEE DRUTMAN
[“What We Lose When
We Lose Competitive
Congressional Districts”](#)

Diversity in National Security

Transforming national security policy means building national security institutions that look like America and opening foreign policy conversations to historically marginalized voices. This year, the New Models of Policy Change Initiative of the Political Reform program continued to play a leadership role in elevating emerging voices and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the national security arena. Partnering with Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (WCAPS), we launched an essay series that explored what a national security strategy focused on racial equity and justice could look like at home and internationally. We hosted a series of conversations about new research and a workshop on emerging technology and strategic stability with Bridging the Gap, featuring emerging voices. We were also proud to continue our partnership with Out in National Security, hosting the 2022 LGBTQIA+ Out in National Security Leadership and New Voices Lists and celebrating these next-generation leaders with an event headlined by Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX 20th District), and to participate in the #OrgsinSolidarity initiative to combat racism and promote diversity in the national security field. Our Nuclear Futures Working Group put a spotlight on emerging voices in nuclear security.

“America’s greatness is very much tied into the example we set. We know that if we’re going to fight on behalf of LGBTQ rights around the world, we need to have a workforce that is representative of the American public.”

- Senator Chris Murphy, Celebrating the 2022 LGBTQIA+ Out in National Security Leadership and New Voices List



Out in National Security and the New America New Models of Policy Change program co-hosted Celebrating the 2022 LGBTQIA+ Out in National Security Leadership and New Voices List.

Related Work

THE THREAD
- ALEX STARK
“Redefining Security
in an Era of Mass
Shootings”

ESSAY SYMPOSIUM
- NEW AMERICA &
WCAPS
“Equity and Racial
Justice: Where Do
They Fit in a National
Security Strategy?”

JUST SECURITY
- ALEX STARK
“Assessing Civilian
Casualties Linked to
U.S.-Made Weapons
in Yemen”

LAWFARE
- ALEX STARK &
VLADIMIR RAUTA
“What Does Arming
an Insurgency in
Ukraine Mean?”

About Us

Our Team

Lee Drutman, Senior Fellow

Hollie Russon Gilman, Senior Fellow

Lizbeth Lucero, Program Associate

Oscar Pocasangre, Senior Data Analyst

Mark Schmitt, Director

Alexandra Stark, Senior Researcher

Maresa Strano, Senior Policy Analyst

Fellows

Lydia Bean

Ann Florini

Didi Kuo

Partners

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.

[Fix Our House](#), an organization incubated by the Political Reform program and co-founded by Lee Drutman, is a new education and advocacy campaign promoting proportional representation in the House of Representatives.

Together with Working Families Power, we formed the [Center for Ballot Freedom](#) in 2022 to advance research and build support for fusion voting and multiparty democracy.

The Electoral Reform Research Group is a collaboration of New America, the [American Enterprise Institute](#), the [Unite America Institute](#), and [Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law](#).

Our co-governance partners include [The Forge](#), [What Works Plus](#), and [Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#). We're especially grateful for the collaboration and support of PowerSwitch Action, Georgia STAND-UP, CivicLex, Delaware Cares, Puget Sound Sage, Local Progress, and NYC's Public Engagement Unit.

Our Funders

William and Flora Hewlett
Foundation

Arnold Ventures

Democracy Fund

Ford Foundation

Open Society Foundations

Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Mike Schroepfer and Erin Hoffmann
Family Fund

American Academy of Arts
and Sciences

JPB Foundation

Ploughshares Fund

Compton Foundation

Unite America

What Works Plus

Donate Here

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.