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Tisch College Report

America's Civic Renewal Movement

The View from Organizational Leaders

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Our Premise: Civic Renewal is Essential for Political Reform

Our national government is stuck. No one expects solutions to emerge from Congress in the short term. Not only liberals and moderates but also most Republicans who voted for the new House majority that took office in 2015 are skeptical and pessimistic. For the first time ever this year, Gallup finds that concerns about the broken political system come first on the public's list of issues, surpassing the economy.¹

We believe that Americans would be better served by legislators and other political leaders at all levels who practiced compromise, deliberation, and constructive problem-solving.

Voters choose our leaders (albeit in a system full of bias and distortions), so it is important that voters prefer deliberative representatives and reward constructive behavior in institutions like Congress.

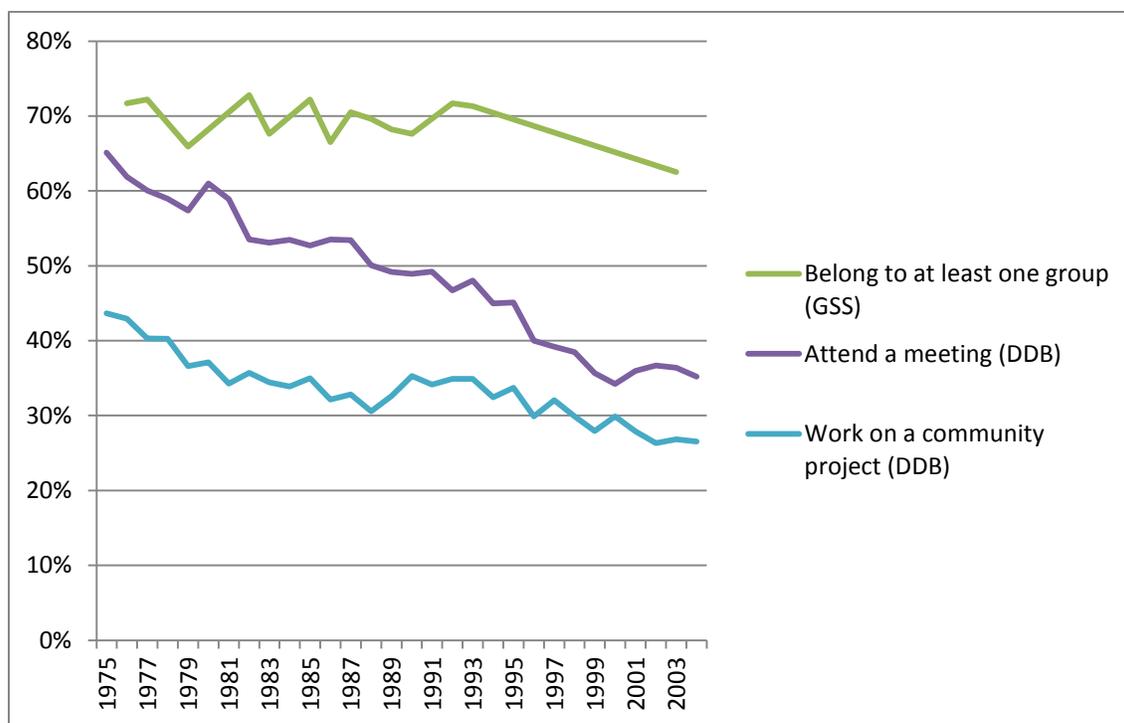
In turn, people learn those values by actually talking, listening, and working with fellow citizens who hold diverse objectives and ideals. If you have never had to facilitate a meeting on a contentious topic, you are unlikely to understand what constructive engagement looks like. And therefore, you are unlikely to choose constructive politicians to represent you.

In *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen argues: “Trust only grows through experience; habits of citizenship are fashioned only through actual interaction.” Citizens, she writes, “must take risks together in shared decisions making with real consequences, if they wish to solidify a politics based on political friendship.”²

¹ Rebecca Riffkin, “Mentions of Jobs as Top U.S. Problem at Six-Year Low,” Gallup Politics, January 14, 2015.

² Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 174, 182-3

If opportunities for everyday discussion and collaboration weaken, the public will become less committed to deliberation. And indeed, such opportunities have declined. The proportions of Americans who say that they have attended community meetings, worked with neighbors to address problems, and belonged to organizations have fallen between 1975 and 2005 (see fig. 1). To be sure, American civic life has improved in important respects, but opportunities for discussion and problem-solving have, on the whole, shrunk.



America has succeeded in building an infrastructure for volunteer service—but not for other forms of engagement. The Associated Press-GfK recently repeated survey questions they had asked in 1984 about voting, volunteering, serving on a jury, and keeping informed about news and public issues. All of those activities had fallen, with two exceptions: voting (which fluctuates with the campaign cycle) and

volunteering, which has been buoyed by a substantial *increase* in the youth volunteering rate.³

That last trend can be explained by the substantial investment in youth volunteering through high school service-learning programs, AmeriCorps, Campus Compact member colleges, and so on. Proponents of service have won new funding and rewards for volunteering, positive media coverage, intensive research and evaluation, and favorable policies, including mandates in many school districts. But there has been no comparable investment in the other forms of civic engagement.

Reviving everyday discussion and collaboration will require changes in institutions: K-12 schools, colleges, media, civic organizations, and others.

Who will work to strengthen broader opportunities for civic engagement? Not political elites, who have limited interest in empowering citizens. And not average citizens, who have had too little experience with rewarding civic engagement to understand its value. National polling has found that average Americans are lukewarm about civic engagement, no matter how it is named and described.⁴

Our best allies are the citizens who *already* strive to deliberate and collaborate at the grassroots level. They have demonstrated their commitment. They grasp the value of civic engagement. They are numerous enough to be powerful. But they tend to work on specific projects in specific issues domains within their own geographical communities. They are not coordinated to promote civic renewal. They are not conscious of being part of a movement or nascent movement for democracy. To change that situation, we must first understand more about these civic leaders, their values and strategies.

³Associated Press, “5 things about Americans’ slipping sense of civic duty,” Dec. 29, 2014.

⁴National Conference on Citizenship, “How to Talk About Engagement” (2008), <http://www.ncoc.net/222>.

This Study

For this study, we interviewed 20 key informants who would be well placed to share insights and information about America's grassroots civic activists. Most of our interviewees manage national organizations whose members do civic work. A few are experts on civic life.

These individuals certainly disagreed amongst themselves and should not be assumed to endorse the arguments we present here. On the other hand, they were chosen because they tended to believe that better civic engagement is necessary for political reform. Thus, rather than *test* the argument presented above, we *sharpened* it by collecting diverse perspectives and insights on the relationship between civic engagement and better government. In the process, we discovered a virtually universal desire for more detailed information on the kinds of citizen activists who may be able to change institutions and policies to strengthen civic engagement.

The Interviewees

Alphabetical List

- **Martin Burns**, AARP
- **Ernesto Cortés**, Industrial Areas Foundation
- **Anna Galland**, MoveOn
- **Rodrigo García**, Student Veterans of America
- **George Goehl**, National People's Action
- **Cristina Jiménez**, United We Dream
- **Carolyn Lukensemeyer**, National Institute for Civil Discourse
- **Martha McCoy**, Everyday Democracy
- **David McKinney**, Alliance for Children and Families
- **Mark Meckler**, Citizens for Self-Governance/Tea Party Patriots

- **Lenny Mendonca**, McKinsey & Co. and nonprofit boards
- **Eugene Meyer**, the Federalist Society
- **Bill Muse**, National Issues Forums and former college president
- **Norm Ornstein**, American Enterprise Institute
- **Scott Reed**, PICO
- **Amanda Roman**, Citizens Campaign and Living Room Conversations
- **Tom Rosenstiel**, American Press Institute
- **Paul Schmidt**, Ducks Unlimited
- **Josh Silver**, United Republic
- **Bob Woodson**, National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise

By Category

Deliberative Democracy Practitioners

- Carolyn Lukensemeyer
- Martha McCoy
- Bill Muse

Generally Identified with the Left

- Ernesto Cortes
- Anna Galland
- George Goehl
- Scott Reed

Generally Identified with the Right

- Mark Meckler
- Bob Woodson
- Eugene Meyer

(**John Bridgeland**, **Norm Ornstein**, and **Amanda Roman** have Republican Party backgrounds. **Ducks Unlimited** members tend to vote Republican)

Community Organizers

- Ernesto Cortés
- George Goehl
- Scott Reed
- Robert Woodson

Representing a Professional Group

- David McKinney (settlement house directors)
- Tom Rosenstiel (journalists)

Representing Membership Organizations

- Martin Burns
- Anna Galland
- Rodrigo Garcia
- Cristina Jimenez
- David McKinney
- Mark Meckler
- Eugene Meyer
- Lenny Mendonca (as Common Cause board member)
- Paul Schmidt

Findings

1) The Nation Faces Polarization, Corruption, and Weakened Civic Capacity

The interviewees generally agree about our chief problems, although some emphasize one problem more than others.

- **Polarization:** Norm Ornstein of AEI decries a “really coarsened culture.” He says we must create or recreate a public square that will give legitimacy to vigorous debate but that still “recognizes a common set of facts and is within some reasonable boundaries.”

Martin Burns of the AARP says, “It seems that politics in America today is far more about motivating your supporters than it is about persuading the undecided. How does that impact potential activists? I think it means that we are far less interested in solutions than we are in continuing conflict.”

David McKinney from the Alliance for Children and families observes: “Everyone is sick-and-tired of hyper-partisanship,” and we need “stories of leaders and their lives, folks that are doing the work in ways that are trying to cut through.”

On the other hand, the community organizer George Goehl wants to work with other organizations that are in the same ideological “ballpark” as his (i.e., the left). From the conservative end of the spectrum, Robert Woodson reports a lack of connection with other community organizing groups (presumably progressive), which “are mostly indifferent to what we do.”

Amanda Roman began her career in partisan politics (on the Right) but realized it “doesn’t get results.” There is “wisdom in diversity.”

- **Inequality of political influence (and corruption):** Anna Galland from MoveOn says, “Right now, our government is captive to lobbyists with money to spend.” Ornstein adds that “money dynamics” exacerbate polarization in national politics. Donors pull “one party to the right” like “an electoral magnet.” Groups like Heritage and Club for Growth use money to block compromise.

The electoral process is also a problem. Scott Reed from PICO says that elites deliberately “make it difficult to vote.”

Roman notes that New Jersey still has “bosses.” She says of the Citizens Campaign, “We are democratizing political power,” “sharing the power “with the people it belongs to in the first place.” Thus “lots of what we do is explaining legal and political rights.”

Unequal political participation extends beyond formal politics. Martha McCoy of Everyday Democracy laments that young

people, low-income people, people with less education are least likely to participate in professionalized forms of civic engagement (public hearings, lobbying, and advocacy).

From the right, Woodson criticizes liberal elites for reducing the agency and autonomy of poor people. The War on Poverty, he says, “injured with a helping hand.”

- **Citizens’ inability to solve their own communities’ problems:** Many interviewees work to strengthen citizens’ capacity to address local problems directly and believe that this doesn’t happen enough today. Rodrigo García of Student Veterans of America sees active citizenship as lagging for two main reasons. One is the time squeeze: many people are too busy to engage. The other is the media. The 24/7 TV news cycle “erodes the faith of the American populace in our democratic process.” Today, “engagement does not have the same depth.” It is sporadic, emotional, and not sustainable. Schmidt of Ducks Unlimited says, “The need and desire for affiliation has eroded.” This trend has harmed the conservation movement, he says, because “Belonging and partnering are key elements ... to conservation.”

Bill Muse of the National Issues Forums says that polarization has brought us to a “point where it is impossible to deal with the issues that must be dealt with.”

2) Citizens are Part of the Solution

As we noted in the introduction, the sample of interviewees was biased in favor of the premise that citizens will have to play a substantial role in combatting polarization and corruption. Lenny Mendonca says civic

engagement is “incredibly important—essential for making democracy work.” Distrust, cynicism, and a sense that your participation doesn’t matter are rampant. John Bridgeland says that we need civic engagement “now, more than ever” because of the paralysis and dysfunction of government and changes in society such as emerging conflicts, gaps in education and social mobility, racial conflict, divides over immigration. “All risk tearing us apart.” There is an “urgency” to “engaging citizens in communities” so that they work together across differences and really understand problems “on the merits.” Ornstein calls on people to “speak out more aggressively when there is behavior that is out of bounds.”

These respondents are explicit that civic engagement is a—or *the*—solution to faults in the political process, such as polarization and corruption. Others emphasize the essential roles citizens play in addressing more concrete issues in their own communities. For Schmidt, one kind of exemplary citizen is a private owner of land who values stewardship and “sees that [the land] has value to the public and the citizenry.” Going beyond that, some people “will stand up in their community and talk in a way that instills the value of stewardship.”

McKinney argues that we “get caught up in moving the needle on indicators like income or job-readiness,” but we often “overlook the conditions that make all that possible.” Neighborhood-level conditions affect what’s going on with kids (even their neurons); and civic engagement can improve neighborhood conditions. Roman explains that the Citizens Campaign encourages the participation of diverse people to address problems in education, public safety, arts and economic development, and environment.

United Republic’s Josh Silver is one insightful dissenter. He argues that people act when their self-interests are profoundly affected. They participate when they “need to engage to protect their own self-interest.”

For example, the anti-Vietnam movement started when white, middle-class people were being drafted. Unless the economic or environmental situation gets much worse—causing “direct and acute suffering”—we are not going to see mass citizen movements. We asked what we should do if we don’t get those movements. He said: look instead at marijuana decriminalization and marriage equality. These examples show that you do need some grassroots support to win change and to protect changes you’ve won. But you don’t need mass movements. On his issue (campaign finance reform) a mass movement is not necessary.

Another partial dissent comes from the Federalist Society’s Eugene Meyer, who certainly values voluntary participation in the “little platoons” of civil society and who is somewhat concerned about their condition today. But he emphasizes that it is individuals’ choice whether or not to participate. We can create a culture of engagement, he says, but should not use the state’s power to alter civic behavior. We should not impede engagement with red tape but rather make it interesting.

3) There is a Debate about Citizens’ Roles

We asked explicitly what defined excellent citizenship, and the answers reveal several contrasting theories:

Influencing government: This role is central for Burns, Galland, Cristina Jiménez of United We Dream, Ornstein, and Silver. Lukensmeyer thinks that “citizen-driven activism” is fine—and she salutes the work of groups like Habitat and KabOOM—but citizens must ultimately connect to politics. She is “most frustrated by the inability of people to see the whole,” including the essential role of government.

Deliberating, creating relationships, and/or directly solving community problems: McKinney wants to “Flip the paradigm from seeing people as

consumers to engaging them as producers.” A core principle of the Alliance for Children and Families is “co-creating with community.” McCoy says, “Some of our most serious problems are not amenable to being fixed by government, the market, or citizens alone.” She calls for “dialogic, empathetic, problem-solving work, connected to the community as a whole.” Woodson describes community residents addressing gang violence. Roman sees diverse groups as uniquely capable of finding workable solutions, “doing the doable.” For the mission of Ducks Unlimited, the most valuable citizens are private rural landowners who can choose to manage their own land in ways that support waterfowl.

Fighting against entrenched power: Goehl defines participation as “Being engaged in an organization or institution that builds collective power” and “fights to change underlying structures.” Similar views seem to be implicit for Galland and others.

4) Who participates?

We asked the respondents to generalize about the people who are most engaged today. We ultimately hope to conduct more systematic research about these highly engaged Americans but wanted first to benefit from the broad and deep experience of these informants.

Demographic Differences

- **Social class:** Several interviewees say that economic challenges are now broadly enough shared that more of the middle class is motivated to activism. Ernesto Cortés says that the Industrial Areas Foundation used to organize the “have-nots,” but now people are also engaged in affluent suburbia. 85% of people are being

“clobbered” and have reasons to organize. McCoy speculates that the top 5% of the income distribution is the least likely to interact with others. Reed says that typical PICO leaders probably “hover around 200% of poverty” with some economic diversity (including some suburban congregations).

- **Generation and age:** Some interviewees’ see important generational differences. Muse says that younger people are missing as moderators of community conversations, but when they do moderate, they do a fantastic job. The National Issues Forums as a whole are probably older than the US population. Reed says that whites in the PICO network tend to be older; Latinos, younger. Roman observes that Millennials and elders are motivated to engage in deliberative politics; Baby Boomers, less so. Cortés thinks that a long-term perspective is essential, and therefore new parents and new grandparents are especially motivated to engage. Schmidt notes that Ducks Unlimited had aging membership until recently; in fact, the mean age of members was rising by one year per year, a troubling sign for the future. But that has turned around lately, in part because of Facebook. (The organization has more than one million “likes,” which yield a stream of members who are mostly between 25 and 35.)
- **Religion:** Faith commitments seem to lead many citizens into civic leadership. Cortés argues that congregations are “meaning-seeking institutions.” Moses, he says, introduced hope in things that are not there but can be. God said, “I am the God of your forefathers ... but I am also the God of your children. I will emerge out of what you do. Go out and make a nation.” Woodson calls neighborhood leaders “Josephs” (from the Bible). They include “People who were fallen but by God’s grace have been redeemed.” Thirty-eight

religious traditions are included in the PICO network, mostly Christian. Moslems and the Asian religions are less represented. Reed explicitly names the times we live in as “demonic,” thus alluding to a theological perspective

On the other hand, faith does not come up at all in several of the interviews.

- **Race/ethnicity:** Several of the groups we interviewed have especially deep roots in minority communities (Chicanos for IAF; African Americans for the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise; new immigrants for United We Dream). Mendonca describes members and leaders of groups like Common Cause as “people like me, middle-aged white men who want to help.” He wants to see younger people, people of color, non-English-speaking. For PICO, Asian Pacific/Islanders are an underrepresented community in an otherwise diverse network. For Ducks Unlimited, a challenge is that starting a new hobby of waterfowl hunting requires equipment and training, so if it is not a cultural tradition for a particular group, they face a barrier.
- **Profession:** Most of these organization recruit “citizens,” defined in contrast to particular professional groups. However, Tom Rosenstiel’s core constituency at the American Press Institute is reporters. Bridgeland observes “pockets of mayors and other elected leaders who have a sense for the soul of community.” The Alliance for Children and Families staff are savvy professionals, according to McKinney. They have to be able to navigate real estate markets, government funding, and other “waves of change.” They are credentialed, if only because of government requirements. But they seek a “balance between professional

career trajectories and vocation and values,” which include civic engagement.

Ideology

- **Trans-partisan:** Some groups in our sample, such as Living Room Conversations and National Institute for Civil Discourse, are primarily concerned with putting people from different points on the political spectrum in conversation with each other. Cortés says that IAF seeks a “bipartisan agenda and outlook” in “very polarized and partisan times.” In Arizona, the IAF’s goal is to make the world safe for moderate Republicans—not by endorsing them, but by demonstrating they have a constituency. Cortés asks: “How do we create space for people who are reasonable? It is not enough to be right, you also have to be reasonable; you have to be able to make concessions.” Student Veterans of American works deliberately to avoid having an ideological valence. García says, “It’s important to avoid partisanship or a partisan tag if you’re trying to activate a community.”
- **Left:** PICO recruits participants who are mostly moderate and would not want to define themselves as progressive. However, Reed says, “As people begin to ask themselves what’s the purpose of an economy, what’s the purpose of a government [etc.], they tend to rest in the space of caring for others.” That space is coded “right now” as progressive, although Reed wishes that care extended across the spectrum. Lukensmeyer concurs that if the whole community comes together to discuss, “they tend to go center-left.”
- **Right:** Ducks Unlimited members tend to be conservative and vote Republican, certainly with exceptions. Mark Meckler from Tea

Party Patriots believes that if citizens came together in a constitutional convention, they would choose reforms that would dramatically limit the role and power of the federal government. Meckler echoes Reed's commitment to open-ended dialogue but predicts the opposite outcome from it.

Personal experiences

- **Experiencing injustice:** McCoy observes that “Organizers have had some kind of personal experience that makes them understand the power of voice in their own lives” Often they “did not grow up in the most empowering circumstances,” and so they understand marginalization. Likewise, Goehl says that National People's Action organizers are often people with experience of unfairness who have made meaning of it, alone or with help. Some can point to a teacher or mentor who helped them analyze it. Lukensmeyer thinks the top reason people engage is because the issue affects them directly (e.g., schools affecting parents). “The issue is what draws people to participate.”

Citizens Campaign finds that some participants have political goals and realize they need to work with other people. Other participants start as very public-spirited and committed to group discussions and processes. Some engage because of particular bad experiences with government or traumas in their community, such as crime. There is a lot of diversity in original motivations, but once people engage with diversity, “they don't walk away.” Finding common ground is satisfying.

- **Social bonds:** Schmidt notes that duck hunters form strong bonds. It is a “unique recreational pursuit” in that sense, different from deer hunting. For many hunters, the real goal is to appreciate

nature together. A classic experience is watching the dawn break over a pond with friends. “We capitalize on [that] experience,” Schmidt says. People who appreciate nature together can be activated to protect it, whether that is through their stewardship of their private land, voluntary cooperation and collaboration, influencing other people, or supporting policies. “They will do what it takes to make sure [the view] doesn’t get bulldozed.”

- **Military service:** García notes a predisposition in the military to make a difference. Veterans “come home with a continuing desire to serve.” A veteran is an individual who has belonged to an institution that is trusted. They have a stake in the country.

Need for more insights about the activists

Every interviewee acknowledged a lack of information about the most engaged people in their own networks. Some groups (e.g., MoveOn) poll their members about issues, but that is different from understanding the motivations of civic activists and their diagnoses of civic engagement today. Most groups were specifically enthusiastic about potentially sharing their own membership lists as part of a research project on engaged citizens.

5) Groups Struggle to Be Large and Diverse

An ideal civic organization or movement would be very large, so that it could have substantial impact on the society. At the same time, it would be deep, in the sense of offering its participants significant opportunities for learning, growth, leadership, and voice. It would be reasonably diverse—although not necessarily representative of the population as a whole—because diverse groups capture more perspectives and

experiences and are more likely to avoid narrow self-interest. And, at the same time, the ideal organization would achieve some degree of unity, because without that, it cannot be an effective political force.

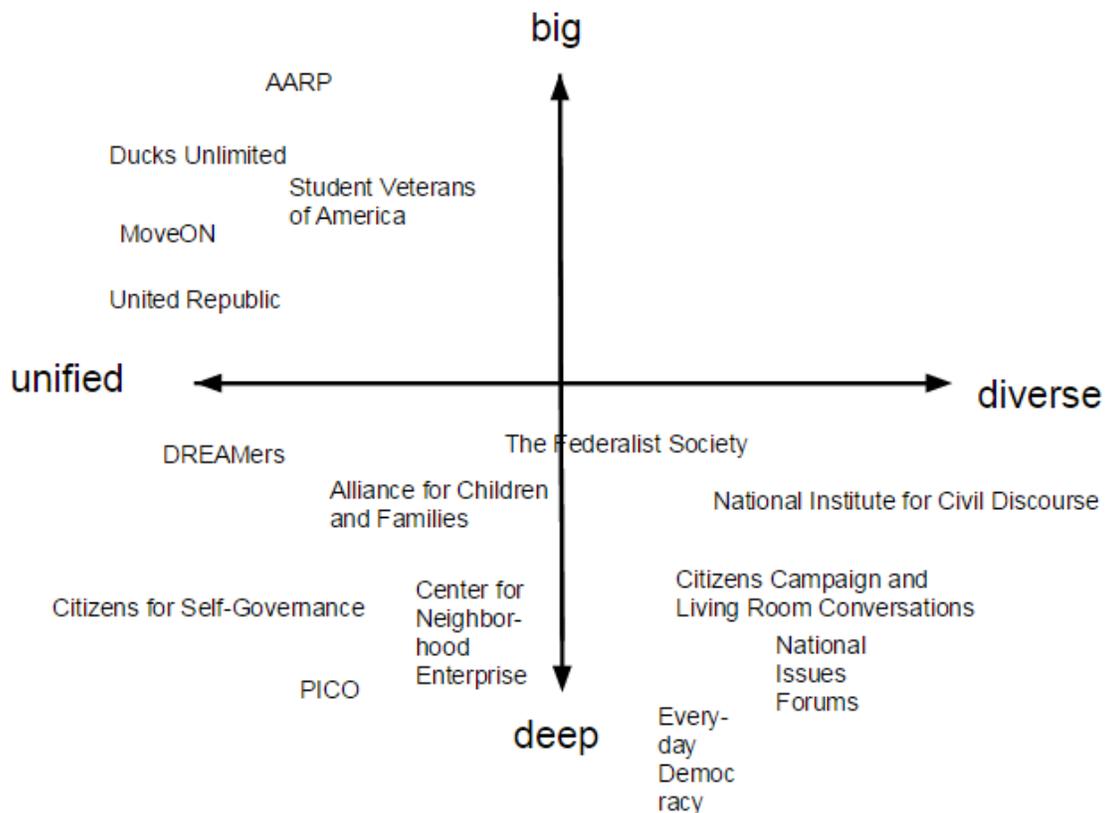
It is possible that some institutions and movements have managed to achieve scale, depth, diversity, and unity all at once. For example, the Civil Rights Movement at its apogee was ideologically, racially, and theologically diverse yet unified behind a legislative agenda. It was large enough to change America yet offered many thousands of people transformative experiences. More mundane examples include political parties that achieve some ideological breadth and encourage internal discussion; the metropolitan daily newspaper of 30 or 50 years ago, which sold a bundle of information and perspectives to a diverse audience; or a political party at its best. Rosenstiel says that journalism benefitted from a happy accident. “You [a newspaper] would take money from car dealers and real estate and you would use that to cover the mayor or investigate water quality or ... even the people who provided the money to you.” Newspapers covered things that people didn’t *want* to but *needed* to know.

More typically, scale trades off against depth and unity against diversity. Several of our interviewees described and lamented these tradeoffs. Stepping back, we categorized all the organizations represented in our interviews by these criteria and found small and deep ones, small and diverse ones, and large and unified ones—but none that were evidently large *and* diverse.

Two organizations that could be placed in the big/diverse quadrant are Ducks Unlimited and Student Veterans of America. Ducks Unlimited has about one million members who have influential experiences through the organization. However, their primary function is recreation and they do have substantive values in common, not being notably

diverse in terms of ideology or demographics. Student Veterans of America now has 1,200 local chapters that “win the hearts and minds” of 400,000 people, all on college campuses. Military service may produce the social capital that undergirds a large and deep group. But it also means that members are not maximally diverse.

We would propose that the lack of large and diverse organizations is one root of the polarization problem at the national level.



Scale versus depth: Scott Reed says PICO “invests lots and lots of time to connect with people and develop relations. ... People begin to understand who they are in a public landscape by engaging with others in contesting for power. ... They begin to discover that their voice can matter. ... Their appetite [for more engagement] grows as well.” This is

deep work, and it builds real power. But “scale is what we are trying to figure out. ... How do you get to scale, because we are nowhere near where we want.”

Meanwhile, Anna Galland says MoveOn began by channeling the mass voice of liberals, “one collective cry.” But mass petitions are not as effective any more, especially on issues like money-in-politics or climate change. “We need to organize in deeper ways to be taken seriously by those in power.” MoveOn has “tremendous scale and little depth.” MoveOn’s goal is to “move from a list of 8 million to horizontal connectivity.”

- **Ideological diversity versus effective mobilization:** Some groups avoid excessive ideological diversity. MoveOn has developed a “threshold of torque.” When one third of members dissent on an issue, it triggers a formal process. “We are member-led,” Galland says, and one third disagreement is too much. They are at their strongest when they are unified.

On the other hand, Everyday Democracy, National Institute for Civil Discourse, National Issues Forums, the Citizens Campaign, Student Veterans of America, and others aim for extensive ideological diversity. Student Veterans chapters organize campus discussions on contentious issues: for instance, Should we have invaded Iraq? They begin by meeting and co-organizing with antiwar activists and then “open it up to the community” and seek common ground. They also strive to build a bridge between the military community (now very small) and the civilian world.

The Federalist Society is expressly conservative or libertarian, but its position statement is intentionally very short and general. Meyer

says that everything else is up for discussion. “Our members care about ideas,” he says; they are “passionately involved in these discussions.” Endorsing an argument by Steven Teles, Meyer notes that the Society’s openness to hearing a breadth of perspectives (including liberal and left perspectives) is its strength, and he observes that the left lacks a similar forum.⁵

6) Civic Groups Use Various Strategies

Each interviewee who represents an organization articulates a different theory of change. To name some examples (described here in simplified terms):

- **The Alliance for Children and Families’ Center for Engagement and Neighborhood Building** is promoting 10 Commitments of High Impact Organizations for the professional leaders in its networks, who run settlement houses. About 6-7 of these commitments are about good business practices, like innovation and assessment. But four involve civic engagement: “co-creating with community,” “engaging all voices,” “advocating equity,” and “partnering with a purpose.” The Alliance provides tools, training, fellowships, and a network.
- **The American Press Institute** tries to develop new business models that can support journalism in the public interest and analyzes cultural resistance to change within the newsroom.
- **Citizens for Self Governance** would like to see a constitutional convention, which would produce a new constitution more in line

⁵ Steven M. Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

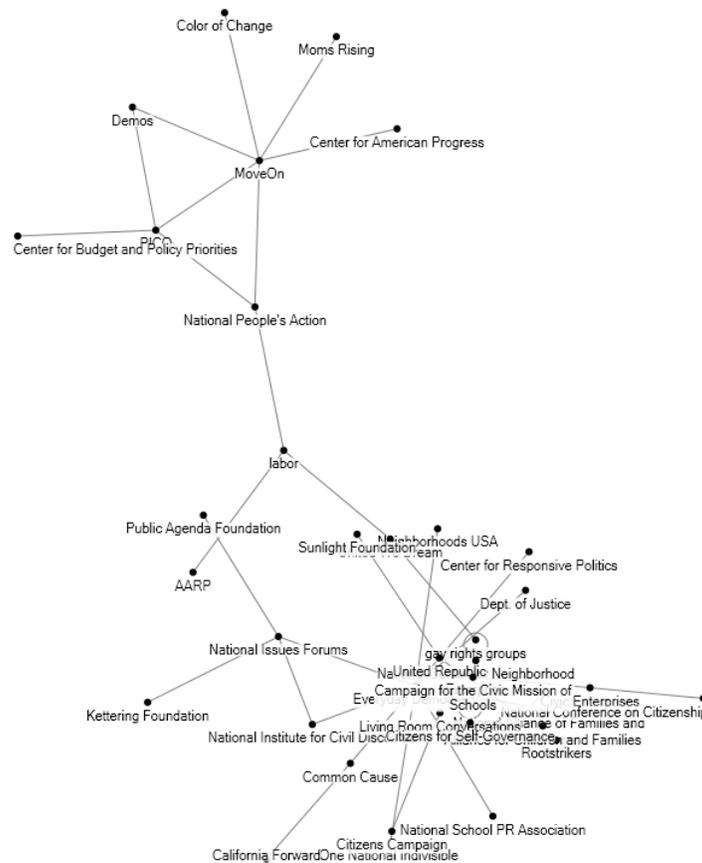
with the founders' original vision of a very limited federal government.

- **Ducks Unlimited** capitalizes on hunters' collective experiences of enjoying nature to build an organization that protects nature.
- **The Industrial Areas Foundation** aims to develop “talented, committed, enterprising relational organizers through recruitment, training, and mentoring.” Cortés explains, “We develop their capacity to be reciprocal, relational organizers. Ask—what do Aristotle and Aquinas say? Explore the different traditions.” The IAF offers “all kinds of seminars” with a wide range of scholars from left, right, center. “We offer what amount to postgraduate-level seminars in how to create effective leaders in an institutional context—not lone celebrity activists: people who build institutions that can then be networked together.”
- **MoveOn** is trying to shift from a mass membership list that generates petitions to a deeper organizing group. They count 15,000 local activists who work on specific issues, e.g., their 100 Fracking Fighters and 24 state Medicare expansion teams. They support these emergent leaders.
- **The National Institute for Civil Discourse** “is tapping into people who are disgusted and bringing them back” into public dialogue, mostly online. They are tracking egregious ad campaigns, putting people in touch online, and giving them tools to push back.
- **United Republic** uses the lever of state initiatives, referenda, and constitutional amendments to get campaign finance reform measures on the ballot. They need activists who collect ballot signatures.

- **Student Veterans of America** uses “centralized command and decentralized control.” Each of its 1,200 local chapters develops its own programming and strategy to meet local needs.

7) Collaboration Could Be Stronger

A simple network analysis of the connections that were either mentioned explicitly in the interviews or implied by the interviewees’ bios (for instance, when an individual holds leadership positions in two or more organizations) yields the diagram below. It is very far from exhaustive but it suggests that there are meaningful clusters of organizations devoted to 1) community organizing/left advocacy; 2) deliberation and dialogue; and 3) political reform and civic education.⁶



⁶ Ducks Unlimited collaborates with other conservation, hunting, and outdoor recreation groups, but not with civic engagement organizations. Student Veterans of America collaborates locally with voting groups.

The left advocacy/community organizing groups are not deeply connected to the two other clusters (only by a shared and vague mention of labor unions as a common tie).

Some people we interviewed—e.g., Norm Ornstein as a scholar—would not be expected to have organizational partnerships. Others, notably Ernesto Cortés and Robert Woodson, explicitly described working in substantial isolation.

Both Reed and Goehl (who work together) report a move in their field from “organizational xenophobia” (Reed) to greater collaboration. Roman notes deep collaboration in local communities and is only starting to work with national partners. Mendonca said there is an opportunity for “a whole lot more” collaboration. Given scarce resources, organizations compete for credit. Foundations make that worse by asking for evidence of individual impact. There is no incentive to collaborate. There is no support for the kinds of collaboration you would see in the private sector: formal partnerships, even mergers and acquisitions.

Questions for further exploration

1. Understanding the “Civic One Million”

The “grasstops” leaders whom we interviewed for this study work with citizen leaders, people who not only engage in democracy themselves but also try to create opportunities for other people to engage in ways that are relatively diverse and constructive. In *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2013), Peter Levine estimates that such citizen leaders number at least one million. They represent a powerful asset in any effort to renew American civil society, because they already

understand and value constructive civic engagement. But they tend not to work together effectively or have much influence on the policies that frustrate civic engagement.

The “grasstop” experts we interviewed shared some insights about the grassroots activists in their own networks, but virtually all expressed a desire for more information. What motivates these people? What aspects of the civic and political culture are they concerned about? What kinds of reforms would they favor? What would permit them to work on those reforms?

We would advocate research into those questions that might involve surveying a representative sample of national civic activists, surveying the diverse membership lists of some of the organizations that we contacted for this study, and focus groups or interviews to probe values and goals more deeply.

2. How we can activate citizen participation specifically in service of the cross-partisan, the trans-partisan, and the bi-partisan?

There is a view, expressed by some in public life, that today’s political polarization is not a problem; that it is, in fact, a necessary and even beneficial result of the fact that the people are deeply divided on the question of how much government to have and to tolerate. On this view, it’s entirely fitting that we have a polarized politics; indeed, *more* polarization might be appropriate. What one might call gridlock and stuckness these commentators (who come more from the right than the left) call Madison’s design working perfectly to block more state expansion in the absence of consensus.

We disagree with this view. Peter Levine’s research has been about citizen action that both precedes and transcends such ideological fixity.

Eric Liu’s writing and organizing are similarly focused on breaking out of the stuckness. But we both recognize that a great deal of today’s citizen action is in furtherance of what one might decry as polarization. This is more true on the right, as Norm Ornstein and others have said, but once the feedback loops of reaction and counterreaction begin, it becomes true also on the left. And so the question we now could well explore next is how we can activate citizen participation specifically in service of the cross-partisan, the trans-partisan, and the bi-partisan.

We mean these three things to be distinct, even though they may overlap. Bi-partisan citizen action is oriented around compromise and the idea that each party or each ideological camp must give a little in order for the country to move forward.

Trans-partisan citizen action is focused on encouraging citizens to shed their party identities and go for a “no-labels” approach to problem-solving. And cross-partisan citizen action celebrates the partisan and ideological differences but recognizes that there are issues—like criminal justice reform, say—where a limited-government right and a social-justice left can find an alignment of interests without compromising anything.

As we contemplate deeper research into the patterns and habits of civic leaders and the one million active citizens, keeping in mind this context partisanship and polarization will be increasingly important.

3. Fostering more cross-cutting collaboration

One common theme across the interviews was a desire among these leaders for more platforms and communities of practice where cross-sectoral and cross-ideological collaboration is promoted and nurtured.

We recognize that such collaboration takes a combination of intention, strategy, and effective curation. Several of the interviewees (and both authors of this study) are members of the Civic Collaboratory that Citizen University has been running since 2012. Catalyzed by this network, the “collaboratory” model itself has begun to spread to other parts of the civic engagement ecosystem, from veterans groups to campaign reform organizations to immigrant rights groups. Liu and the CU team have encouraged others to “steal at will” the model of the Civic Collaboratory, and they are called upon increasingly to coach and guide other civic networks to develop their own forums and formats for productive and mutually beneficial collaborations.

While that is good, it is not enough for the ecosystem. A promising path, both for future research and for incubation of action, could be to accelerate the development of more arenas and networks for effective collaboration among national civic leaders and their organizations.