

The Pro-Democracy Ecosystem: A Landscape Analysis

Companion Reference to “The Civic Participation Gap”

Democracy Unyielding

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Purpose of This Document

This landscape analysis provides the research foundation and organizational mapping that supports the arguments in our primary white paper, “*The Civic Participation Gap*.¹” It is intended for readers who want detailed evidence, specific examples, and a comprehensive view of the pro-democracy ecosystem.

The Scale of Pro-Democracy Investment

The American pro-democracy ecosystem has grown dramatically since 2016. According to Democracy Fund’s comprehensive analysis, institutional philanthropy for democracy-related work increased from approximately 3.8 billion to an estimated 5.4 to \$6.9 billion annually between 2017 and 2022—a growth of 42 to 61 percent in just four years. [1]

The National Civic League’s Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map now tracks over **12,500 organizations** working toward **57 distinct healthy democracy goals**, supported by **79 major networks and coalitions**. [2] This represents a remarkable infrastructure for democratic renewal.

Yet despite this investment, a critical gap remains: the infrastructure for personal civic commitment.

Mapping the Pro-Democracy Landscape

The pro-democracy ecosystem can be understood through ten distinct categories of organizations, each serving a specific function in the broader effort to protect and strengthen democratic governance.

Category	Primary Function	Representative Organizations
Legal & Litigation	Defend voting rights through courts; challenge unconstitutional laws	ACLU, Brennan Center for Justice, NAACP Legal Defense Fund
Election Reform	Advocate for systemic changes (ranked choice voting, redistricting, campaign finance)	FairVote, Common Cause, RepresentUs
Voter Engagement	Register voters, increase turnout, reduce barriers to participation	League of Women Voters, Voter Participation Center, Vote.org
Civic Education	Teach civics, government, and democratic participation	iCivics, Generation Citizen, Street Law
Bridge-Building	Reduce partisan animosity; facilitate cross-partisan dialogue	Braver Angels, Living Room Conversations, Unify America
Watchdog/Accountability	Monitor government, expose corruption, ensure transparency	CREW, Protect Democracy, States United Democracy Center
Research & Academic	Study democracy, produce data, inform policy	Brennan Center, Stanford Democracy Lab, MIT Election Lab
Civic Media	Combat misinformation, support local journalism, fact-checking	NewsGuard, Report for America, Solutions Journalism Network
Funders & Foundations	Provide financial resources to democracy organizations	Democracy Fund, MacArthur Foundation, Joyce Foundation
Civic Technology	Build tools for civic participation, transparency, engagement	Code for America, Democracy Works, BallotReady

This taxonomy draws on the Bridge Alliance's network of over 100 member organizations [3] and the National Civic League's ecosystem mapping. [2]

What Each Category Does Well

Legal & Litigation Organizations

Organizations like the ACLU and Brennan Center for Justice excel at **institutional protection through legal precedent**. When voting rights are threatened by restrictive legislation, these organizations mount court challenges that can block implementation and establish binding legal standards. In 2025, the ACLU and Brennan Center successfully challenged executive orders that would have imposed new barriers to voter registration. [4]

Election Reform Organizations

Groups like FairVote and Common Cause focus on **structural and systemic change** to how elections are conducted. FairVote's advocacy for ranked choice voting has led to adoption in over 50 jurisdictions, with 14 cities and counties using the system in 2025 elections. [5]

Voter Engagement Organizations

The League of Women Voters, Voter Participation Center, and similar organizations specialize in **direct participation increase**. They register voters, provide election information, and mobilize turnout, particularly among underrepresented populations.

Civic Education Organizations

iCivics, founded by former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, reaches millions of students annually through interactive games and curricula that teach how government works. [6] Generation Citizen partners with school districts to deliver community-based civic education with an equity-centered approach. [7]

Bridge-Building Organizations

Braver Angels, the nation's largest cross-partisan volunteer-led movement, and organizations like Living Room Conversations facilitate structured dialogues designed

to reduce affective polarization—the emotional hostility between partisans that has grown dramatically in recent decades. [8]

Watchdog & Accountability Organizations

Groups like Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) and Protect Democracy focus on **institutional accountability**—monitoring government officials, exposing corruption, and defending democratic norms against erosion.

Research & Academic Institutions

The research arms of organizations like the Brennan Center, along with academic centers like Stanford’s Democracy Lab, provide the **evidence base** for democracy work through data on voting access, election administration, and democratic health.

Civic Media Organizations

Organizations combating misinformation and supporting quality journalism address the **information ecosystem** that democracy requires. NewsGuard rates news sources for reliability; Report for America places journalists in local newsrooms.

Funders & Foundations

Democracy Fund, MacArthur Foundation, Joyce Foundation, and other philanthropic institutions provide the **resource mobilization** that enables all other categories to function. Democracy Fund’s analysis shows that 45% of institutional funders plan to increase democracy-related giving in coming years. [1]

Civic Technology Platforms

Organizations like Code for America, Democracy Works, and BallotReady build **tools for accessibility and scale**—making it easier for citizens to find their polling places, understand their ballots, and engage with government services.

The Gap: What Each Category Asks of Individuals

Despite the breadth of the pro-democracy ecosystem, a consistent pattern emerges: these organizations work *on behalf of* citizens, but none provide infrastructure for citizens to make and track their own civic commitments.

Category	What They Ask of Individuals
Legal & Litigation	Support (donate, sign petitions)
Election Reform	Advocate (contact legislators, vote for reforms)
Voter Engagement	Participate (register, vote)
Civic Education	Learn (take courses, play games)
Bridge-Building	Attend (workshops, dialogues, events)
Watchdog/Accountability	Report (tips, information)
Research & Academic	Consume (read reports, follow findings)
Civic Media	Subscribe (support journalism)
Funders & Foundations	Donate (give money)
Civic Technology	Use (apps, tools, platforms)

In every case, the individual is positioned as a **recipient, participant, or supporter** of work designed and led by organizations. What is missing is infrastructure for **self-directed, publicly visible civic commitment**.

How Democracy Unyielding Complements Each Category

Rather than competing with existing organizations, Democracy Unyielding strengthens the civic culture that those organizations rely on.

Existing Category	How Democracy Unyielding Complements
Legal & Litigation	Creates visible public support for democratic norms that courts defend
Election Reform	Builds constituency of committed citizens who will advocate for and use reformed systems
Voter Engagement	Adds commitment layer to registration—not just “can vote” but “committed to vote”
Civic Education	Provides action step for those who have learned about democracy
Bridge-Building	Offers common ground: commitment to democracy itself, across partisan lines
Watchdog/Accountability	Creates citizen base that demands accountability from officials
Research & Academic	Generates data on civic commitment patterns and trends
Civic Media	Provides positive story of citizen engagement amid negative news cycle
Funders & Foundations	Demonstrates grassroots demand that justifies continued investment
Civic Technology	Adds meaning layer to participation tools—not just “how to vote” but “why I’m committed”

The Research on Public Commitment

Psychological research supports the value of public, written commitments. Studies from Dominican University demonstrate that people who write down their goals and share them publicly achieve at substantially higher rates than those who merely think about their goals. [9]

This research underpins the design of the Democracy Resolution Wall: commitments that are written, public, and voluntary create stronger psychological accountability than private intentions.

References

- [1] Democracy Fund. “Field in Focus: The State of Pro-Democracy Institutional Philanthropy.” January 22, 2024. <https://democracyfund.org/idea/field-in-focus-the-state-of-pro-democracy-institutional-philanthropy/>
- [2] National Civic League. “Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map.” 2024. <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/2024-healthy-democracy/>
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- [9] Matthews, G. “Goals Research Summary.” Dominican University of California. <https://www.dominican.edu/academics/ahss/undergraduate-programs/psych/faculty/assets-gail-matthews/researchsummary2.pdf>

This document is a companion to “The Civic Participation Gap: Why Democratic Institutions Need Visible Individual Commitment.” For the primary white paper, visit DemocracyUnyielding.org.

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