



Lessons Learned: Exploring a Conservative Agenda to Build Trust in Elections

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Introduction

OVER THE LAST SIX MONTHS, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University and the R Street Institute (RSI) have jointly led an effort to build and explore a conservative agenda for building trust in elections. To facilitate the creation of such an agenda, leaders from SNF Agora and R Street have traveled across the country, holding convenings with conservative elected officials, election administrators, and local leaders in numerous states: Wisconsin, Arizona, Virginia, Georgia, Utah, Kansas, Idaho, Nevada, Tennessee, Wyoming, Texas, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Michigan. In the fall, the work will continue in Idaho, Nevada, Tennessee, Wyoming, Texas, and Pennsylvania.

The lead organizers of this effort have been Matt Germer, Director, Governance, at the R Street Institute, and Scott Warren, Fellow, SNF Agora Institute. Matt and Scott have traveled to every state, facilitated each conversation, and co-authored this report.

Many individuals have played a key role in the effort, including stakeholders in each state. Chris Deaton, of Objective First Strategies, Mark de la Iglesia, of Freedom House, and Harrison Lee and Lilliana Mason, of the SNF Agora Institute, have also played pivotal roles in the work to date.

The R Street Institute is a leading think tank focused on solving complex public policy challenges through free markets and limited, effective government. RSI consistently offers pragmatic, real solutions that foster American innovation, bolster competition, and safeguard individual liberty—all with the understanding that life in a democratic society sometimes requires compromises that don't necessarily represent first, best solutions.

The SNF Agora Institute seeks to realize the promise of the ancient agora in modern times, by strengthening opportunities for people of all backgrounds to dialogue across difference, vigorously contest values and ideas that form the foundation of pluralistic democracy, and act together to have voice in developing solutions that lead to a better world. The Institute is an academic and public forum that integrates research, teaching, and practice to improve and expand powerful civic engagement and informed, inclusive dialogue as the cornerstone of robust global democracy.

Background

In January 2022, the SNF Agora Institute held an off-the-record convening focused on elections and democracy reform, inviting leading national democracy practitioners, scholars, advocates, and local election officials to candidly discuss progress and setbacks in the sector. Attendees provided feedback that the convening successfully cut through many of the silos that exist within the democracy space. Many organizations focused on narrow solutions, such as structural reforms like ranked choice voting, or passing legislation like HR 1. Other organizations focused more on citizen participation, like getting out the vote or improving civics education. Largely because of the challenges of raising money and running organizations, many profess publicly that individual reforms offer silver bullet solutions to democracy's woes.

Several participants, however, noted a problem. The overwhelming majority of those present leaned toward progressive ideology. Those on the political right in the room felt tokenized—pressured to represent all conservatives, and code-switch to ensure that their perspectives would be understood and valued by the others present.

This breakdown of participants was not surprising: in the wake of Trump's 2016 election and again after the violence at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, many progressives made democracy reform a centerpiece of national politics. Meanwhile, many on the political right have downplayed the substan-

tial damage Trump-era Republicans have inflicted on American democracy.

That said, many Republicans are attuned to lesser but related offenses from the political left. As a group of Republican chief election officials [wrote in *National Review*](#) (in an op-ed stemming from the SNF Agora and R Street efforts), “Democrats have also sown doubt about high-profile election results in [2000](#), [2004](#), [2016](#), and [2018](#). While Republicans acknowledge our responsibility, it will take both parties to break the cycle and restore voter trust.” Additionally, Democrats have spent money propping up Trump aligned candidates in congressional and gu-

bernatorial primaries, with the expressed hope that they will be easier to defeat in the general election.

The reality is that the incentives of partisan self-interest are often stronger than those of guaranteeing the overall political good. Because of the constant pull for policy wins, a healthy, functioning democracy requires both parties to share and practice a high standard of civic norms in order for the whole country to buy into them. Accordingly, a successful agenda focused on improving and fortifying democracy must include both Republicans and Democrats.

Unfortunately, the progressive parts of civil society and philanthropy have largely monopolized the reform agenda to date. To that end, SNF Agora and the R Street Institute proposed a new initiative: the development of a conservative pro-democracy agenda.

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Conservative Agenda for Democracy

In October 2022, we brought together a group of 40 conservatives that comprised election officials and administrators, members of Congress, former Trump Administration officials, and other experts and scholars to begin to explore whether conservatives could agree upon an agenda to proactively restore democratic norms, fortify the structures of the American republic, and build trust in elections.

The candid, introspective, and passionate conversation indicated an interest in building out an agenda. The very notion that this type of community could exist may come across as surprising to some. Indeed, when explaining this initiative to individuals, especially those who fall on the left end of the political spectrum, many express something akin to, “Do pro-democracy conservatives even exist?”

The answer, when one looks beyond just the pool of national-level Republicans and social media influencers, and instead to Republicans in local and state office and conservative thinkers and consultants across the 50 states, is unequivocally yes. Indeed, the Republicans who are focused on building trust in elections and our institutions may represent some of the most important stakeholders in our democracy at the current moment.

Over the last 20 months since that initial convening, we have gathered over 250 individuals in 10 states to focus on such an agenda. Recognizing the acute nature of the problem of election trust on the right, due largely to the reality that the leader of the Republican party is actively campaigning against faith in American elections, we have focused our near-term efforts on building trust in elections. We have found a willing and engaged cohort dedicated to rebuilding trust in institutions and strengthening our shared American democracy.

It is crucial to note that this effort is not an anti-Trump campaign. Indeed, our work has succeeded in large part because it exists to foster dialogue and catalyze solutions to help the country move beyond the current political moment, not to dwell in one more forum on how awful Trump is for America. As multiple participants and partners have noted, this has attracted an unusually wide spectrum of conservatives, from those who harbor a distaste for the former president to those who have actually voted for him. The diversity of participants has provided this work with a more representative sample of the right than similar efforts targeting the “center-right”—and made the work more politically realistic. Indeed, the efforts to rebuild trust in elections and institutions is now bigger than one man or one election cycle.

Our work alone is not capable of changing the political winds. Of course, no single body of work can restore and strengthen democracy.

We do feel, however, that these convenings, and the subsequent work we have catalyzed, have

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played a unique and important role in the ecosystem. Many attendees have expressed that these conversations have provided influence that other “center-right” coalition-building efforts have not created. We do not highlight these outcomes to note how successful we’ve been, but rather to demonstrate how conservatives who genuinely want to help strengthen our democracy need spaces such as the ones these convergences have provided.

Select examples of the impact of the convenings include:

- **Building Community:** Convening attendees have told us about the loneliness they experience when

trying to stand up against disinformation campaigns. As a result of meeting at a convening, some attendees, including elected officials themselves, have formed group chats to provide each other the moral support they need to “hold the line.” A person who doesn’t practice politics for a living might ask, “What’s the big deal about a ‘group chat?’” Relationships are part of the essence of politics—and political strength is often forged in the background, outside public view.

- **Catalyzing state coalitions:** Convening attendees in several states, including Arizona and Utah, have now formed and are managing their own cohorts to engage in pro-democracy work in the community.
- **Engaging in exchange of ideas:** State officials and leaders have invited attendees from other states to present to legislatures on their respective efforts to improve election administration and build trust. This is a way to develop shared best practices and directly address a common problem revealed in research, which is that voters trust elections beyond their community far less than those closest to home.
- **Speaking out publicly:** Providing convening attendees with off-the-record forums to build trust and confidence has inspired some of the most important members of the cohort to stand with each other publicly. This includes the aforementioned National Review op-ed, which was co-authored by five Republican chief election officials and has been used, as it’s been reported to us, as a handout at many gatherings of Republicans unconnected to our own.

These pieces of catalyzed work continue to materialize. It should not be underrated, therefore, just how useful and rare that a safe and candid forum for conservatives and active Republicans to improve the body politic has been, especially on an issue as politically sensitive and fundamental to democratic health as elections.

Each convening follows a similar formula: we work with a champion on the ground (like a local elections official, a Secretary of State) and to build a roster of invitees of conservatives eager to

build trust in elections. The convenings start with a dinner that helps to breed trust and community, and then the next day, we have a full-day, off-the-record session. Each meeting explores the particular dynamics and challenges in a specific state (this led to conversations on disinformation and misinformation on election issues in Arizona and Georgia, and even vote-buying realities in Kentucky). We then provide specific Gallup polling focused on election trust in each state, and explore specific action plans to build trust in elections.

Crucially, we do not come in with a top-down national agenda on how we want states and participants to approach the question of building trust in elections. We provide the space and facilitate the conversation, but let local leaders take the meeting in whatever direction makes most sense. This approach has led to blunt conversations, and we hope, confidence in our approach, and the overall effort.

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Lessons Learned to Date

We conduct the convenings under Chatham House Rules, meaning participant contributions could not be attributed, in order to build trust and encourage candor among participants. With respect to that approach, we have outlined below some of the most valuable lessons we learned so far, without attribution to any speaker.

■ A Conservative Agenda for Restoring Trust in Elections Is Needed

When we started this initiative, we believed that there was a need to bring conservatives together to talk about broader issues pertaining to election integrity and broader democracy reform. This thesis has been borne out.

There may be few endeavors more important to the long-term health of our republic than a responsible two-party system. While both parties have engaged in anti-democratic behavior in recent years in order to further their own electoral goals, including different forms of norm-busting and election denialism, the attempts to overturn the election on January 6th, 2021, and the pervasive 2020 election subversion and denialism have made efforts to restore faith in democracy more urgent on the right.

To that end, the individuals that we have gathered—a compilation of election administrators, elected officials, local civic leaders, and other influential conservatives—are all conservatives who believe deeply in re-instilling basic democratic norms and trust in institutions.

The “pro-democracy” conservatives gathered at our convenings articulated repeatedly how they feel “politically homeless.” We have found a sweet spot with Republicans who are politically

conservative and do not consider themselves in the “Never Trump” crowd, but who are also deeply frustrated by the anti-institutionalist sentiments that have pervaded the party.

The opportunity to convene in a safe space to explore challenges and find new allies has proven valuable. We have focused on ensuring that the convenings are free flowing and constructed as open spaces. While this can make it more difficult to drive toward concrete deliverables, nearly all of the convenings have organically led to both technical results and strategic plans.

For example, our Arizona convening participants noted the challenge in educating voters on the time needed for voter tabulation in a state where up to 75% of the votes are conducted by mail. An election recorder and local official hatched a plan on the spot to provide a pamphlet in mail-in ballots that described how the process works. In other states, like Kansas and Kentucky, participants began to organize more long-term strategic plans to rebuild the local parties.

Bringing these conservatives together and giving them a space to candidly talk about their challenges, perspectives, and work may be the most valuable aspect of the project to date. As one participant noted, “It was a wonderful environment where Republicans could speak freely with similarly minded Republicans about the challenges we are facing and how we can improve our party.”

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■ Behavior and Norms Over Outcomes

In the conversations that we’ve hosted, participants have focused on restoring faith in the electoral process immediately, and in public institutions generally and in the long-term. Restoring trust does not mean blindly asserting that all elections work perfectly—this would be false. Elections are run by humans, and humans make mistakes. Rather, building trust in elections involves listening to voter concerns, educating the public on the general parameters that exist in all election jurisdictions, and working with trusted messengers to broadcast these principles. In this case, restoring trust in elections can serve as a proxy for rebuilding trust in public institutions broadly, which is absolutely necessary for the long-term health of the republic.

This focus on political behavior and norms over specific policy outcomes is rare in the election and democracy reform space. Many conversations—especially those conducted by individuals and organizations on the political left—implicitly or explicitly focus on ambitious reforms such as changes to the electoral system like primary fixes, the composition of the House and Senate, the federal government’s role in elections, etc. Many in the pro-democracy space also assert that Donald Trump becoming president again would be an existential threat to democracy and create political strategies working backward from such an assumption. Regardless of the opinions of those involved in this project about such assertions, they are beyond the scope of our work.

Instead, our goal was to cultivate a group of political partisans who are steadfastly focused on

building belief in the process rather than attempting to secure specific outcomes. If we truly want to build a pro-democracy coalition, this focus on how political actors actually communicate and behave is vital, and has the potential to lead to more trust from an increasingly skeptical public.

■ People are Worried

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discuss these issues, many individuals have expressed deep concern for the future of the country. These concerns are less about which candidate or party will retain control of the White House or Congress after November, but rather, focus on the anti-democratic norms that continue to take hold in our populace.

These concerns are borne out of numerous realities cited by participants, including:

- **Polarization:** The deep polarization that continues to take root in the country prevents Americans of diverse ideologies from even engaging with each other and leads

to the demonization of political opponents;

- **Apathy:** A large segment of the American electorate is simply tuning out of politics because of general distaste and a belief that political parties and candidates are serving themselves rather than the public;
- **Disregard for Facts:** A growing set of people refuse to trust fact-based responses to claims of election fraud and the outcome of elections them, irrespective of the facts provided;
- **Loss of Political Norms:** Many political norms have increasingly been cast aside, including concession or “losers’ consent,” [as researched by the R Street Institute](#); civil or at least responsible political speech, and other forms of previously accepted decorum (one example of this was demonstrated when a Georgia State representative expressed that he never received a concession call from a primary opponent that he recently beat);
- **Appetite for Violence:** As supported by our polling, too many Americans are willing to engage in violence to achieve their political ends—and the environment in the wake of the assassination attempt on former President Trump has made us particularly attuned to these concerns. ([We note that surveys](#) indicate that the appetite and openness to political violence is roughly even on the political left and right, but actual acts of political violence have come in greater numbers from the right)

This increasing anxiety presents opportunities. There is an ability to further mobilize and work with the Republicans we have been gathering. We frequently hear from participants that they want to do more, but are unclear on what they should actually do.

■ States are All Different

The statement that ‘states are laboratories of democracy’ reflects an element of the federalism that is woven into the fabric of this country. It’s been our experience that each state we’ve traveled to has its unique set of challenges pertaining to cultivating trust in elections.

Many participants in swing states (Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin) were deeply concerned about building trust this cycle, noting that they could be subject to the scrutiny that accompanies another close election. They were worried that, irrespective of the formal outcome, voters would dispute the results if they lost.

Other states tended to be more focused on political culture and long-term challenges, including a frustration with local Republican parties and how election denialism has become a defining platform of the party. These states are redder and therefore less decisive in determining the winner of the presidential election, although convening attendees in such places did note that their voters may be distrustful of the results that came from other states if they did not agree with the outcomes.

Accordingly, the proposed solutions and strategies differed state to state. For example, in Kentucky, we heard about how long-established vote-buying practices have affected efforts to build trust in elections. In Virginia, much of the electorate is not from the state and brings with them expectations about how elections ought to be conducted, leading to its own set of challenges. Given the specific challenges that occur in each state, and their accompanying political culture, it is hard to envision a truly effective election-trust strategy beyond messaging broad concepts, such as advocating for the overall legitimacy of American elections. (As this project’s focus potentially widens in the future to include issues other than election trust, it is worth bearing in mind this learning about “democracy” perceived from a top-down, national perspective, and from more of a bottom-up, local and state perspective.)

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■ A Deep Frustration Exists Towards Local Parties

While many of the challenges that participants have articulated differ from state to state, we observed an almost universal antipathy and frustration towards local and state Republican parties.

Participants, many who have been deeply involved in party operations for years, observed that the parties are not focused on winning general elections, but rather purifying the party electorate, struggle to raise money, and too often function as a landing spot for losing candidates.

This party dysfunction leads to concrete ramifications. Business representatives at some of the convenings indicated that they are more reluctant to give to local Republicans because of these dynamics. Oftentimes, conservative state leaders completely ignore the state party and create their own fundraising and campaign infrastructure.

As one participant noted: Parties are strong enough to still matter, but weak enough to be

taken over. The participants expressed their belief that democracy-abiding conservatives need to retake the local party apparatus to help create a better functioning republic.

■ **Democracy Has Become a Partisan-coded Word**

We began this work articulating the project as “Building a Conservative Agenda for Democracy.” While there is sometimes a debate, more on the rhetorical side, about whether the United States is a republic or a democracy, ostensibly, the principles of self-government should be a bipartisan cause.

Unfortunately, the realities of political rhetoric and campaigning have muddied the waters. Democracy is increasingly seen as a term of the political left. In all of our state polls, roughly 20-30% of Democratic Party voters indicated that democracy was among the top three most

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important issues in determining their choice for president in 2024. Meanwhile, less than 5% of Republicans in each state prioritized democracy. Our participants explained these findings as the result of politicization around the term itself, which is apparent in national political branding and messaging in recent years.

President Biden, when he was on top of the ticket, and the Democrats, for example, have noted that this election will be a “fight for democracy” and that “democracy is on the ballot.” During the Trump Administration, some of

congressional Democrats’ highest legislative priorities invoked the word: the “Protecting Our Democracy Act,” for example, and the do-or-die democracy rhetoric around HR1.

While attendees admitted that certain Republican-backed ideas about elections are profoundly anti-democratic, each one needs to be evaluated circumstantially and labeled fairly. The instance of Georgia’s SB202 voting law stands out. Democrats, en masse, noted that the bill equated to voter suppression, with President Biden calling it “Jim Crow 2.0”. The backlash to the bill resulted in a pressure campaign on Georgia’s biggest corporations and Atlanta losing the Major League Baseball All-Star Game. Subsequently, however, the bill does not seem to have caused lower voting rates (with some studies demonstrating it has led to higher voter participation) and MLB is again hosting the All Star Game in Atlanta in 2025 (without noting why they reversed course).

In the opinion of many Republicans who are part of our pro-democracy cohort, using examples like SB202, Democrats have been far too aggressive in defining “pro-democracy” as “whichever changes to election policy that are best for Democrats.” This may or may not be true, but perception, and language, matters.

This learning itself underscores the need to ensure that “pro-democracy” becomes a concept that is as maximally inclusive as possible of both Democratic/progressive and Republican/conservative voices. Democratic ideas should not be reflexively coded as “pro-democratic” and Republican opposition or their own ideas should not be coded just as

automatically as “anti-democratic.”

This is all noted while acknowledging the unique and larger burden the political right bears on these issues, which the majority of participants in convening states have either granted or been comfortable stating forthrightly.

Moving Forward

As mentioned above, this initiative was originally started with the goal to build a long-term conservative agenda for elections and broader democracy issues. This could include issues like primary reform and broader political culture issues, such as re-instilling basic political norms. We made the decision, however, to focus in the short term on building trust in elections, both because of the urgent and pressing nature of the problem and the ability to use the issue as an organizing principle. This decision proved effective. The specific focus on election trust has provided a concrete way to both explore problems and articulate potential solutions. At the same time, the convenings have provided space to begin to explore longer-term challenges that will be necessary to repair our broader political fabric and culture. To underscore perhaps the most important part of all this, these convenings have actually helped assemble the rarest type of resources—people in a position to make things happen—in a new configuration well-situated to pursue work that wouldn’t be possible without their existing as a network.

We do anticipate that this network will be incredibly valuable in the leadup to the 2024 elections,

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as well as in their aftermath. We have helped to cultivate a broad swath of conservatives and Republicans who have committed to articulating forcefully that elections should be trusted, and are willing to affirm this idea publicly. The hope is that these Republicans can do so in advance of the election.

We also hope that if there are states where the election is close, or where tabulation takes a significant amount of time, we have created relationships so that we can connect individuals across state borders so they can speak to the realities on the ground. We have heard from many Republicans who felt like they were on an island in the aftermath of the 2020 election convey this sentiment: We feel that our

community will stand for elections, and stand with each other.

We plan to support this work leading up to 2024 by pro-actively providing communications, strategic, and messaging support, working with a Leadership Circle of officials from each of our states, and encouraging officials to speak up publicly when needed.

But this work will not end after the election. We hope it will become even more relevant, and important.

After the 2024 election, we anticipate having not just a space and opportunity to have some of these longer-term strategy conversations, but to help catalyze action around them. This could include exploring state election reforms—from very specific items like signature verifications and audits—to broader election structure reforms and even principles like reducing executive overreach and securing an independent judiciary, which are conservative perspectives intended to foster a healthy democratic society and particularly relevant during the Trump era.

As one participant noted, “I would be interested in more focus on how we can improve or expand current efforts. We recognized the problem and discussed avenues to move forward, but diving more into that—and looking beyond high-level, costly efforts—would be beneficial to the group.”

A foundational part of this forward-looking work—a “but-for cause” of it happening—is the creation of new infrastructure to facilitate future work. As noted throughout this report, this particular initiative was created because too much of the democracy reform space comprised political progressives. But that has never meant that these broader challenges should enjoy a monopoly on the left. Unfortunately, a vicious cycle has persisted: More funders focused on these issues are progressive, most non-profit and think-tank organizations focused on democracy reform tilt left, and conservatives concerned with democracy are thus often under-resourced and cede the democracy “portfolio” altogether to a progressive superstructure that grows and makes the issues more and more left-coded.

Many conservative organizations that focus on election issues do so as part of a small portion of a larger portfolio. Thus, in order to effectively build a more long-term agenda, it is insufficient to focus on issue by issue—whether election trust or broader structural reforms—but rather invest in organizations and think tanks that will prioritize this work, as has happened on the left; and even create new ones capable of matching authentic conservative perspective with pro-democratic thought and active Republican and conservative audiences.

The work to strengthen our democracy must include authentic Republican voices. We have found individuals across the country willing to do and lead this work. We look forward to elevating their critical voices, and continuing to work with them in the months leading up to the election and its aftermath, and in the years to come afterwards.