Democracy: A National Conversation

As a continuation of the work begun in the State of American Democracy Conference in November 2017 and publication of Democracy Unchained (March, 2020) we will expand the conversation about the repair and strengthening of democratic institutions. Our goal is to put our present crises into context and identify practical steps toward building a more robust, resilient, and truer democracy.

Originally intended to be a fourteen part series of public events beginning at the National Cathedral on March 25th, we are now assembling the means to carry on via ZOOM and similar venues, reaching a larger audience at a lower cost and with greater flexibility than otherwise. Our partners in this effort include: the Alliance Center, Arizona State University, Bioneers, Cleveland City Club, the National Cathedral, and Democracy Now! As well as our sixteen co-sponsoring organizations and network of funders.

The questions to be decided include: (1) how best to coalesce co-sponsors, funders, and others into a powerful national conversation; (2) selecting topics and the sequence of public events; (3) how to collaborate with on-the-ground efforts to bring about practical changes that improve democratic institutions.

The events listed below represent parts of a larger whole, a sketch of possibilities. The participants would be contributors to Democracy Unchained, members of our advisory group, funders, and others with lots to say. Each event could set off a chain of subsequent conversations at various scales.

Possible Topics/Events:


4. The post-Trump presidency a conversation with Jeremi Suri and Stephen Skowronek (others) moderated by Dan Moulthrop


6. The inviolable right to vote: conversation led by Andrew Gumbel, with LaTosha Brown, Mayor Chokwe A. Lumumba, David Daley, Bakari Kitwana

8. Rebuilding Environmental Protection: moderated by Bill Becker with . . . former directors of the EPA.

9. Youth Rising, moderated by Kenny Ausubel with Chloe Maxmin, Mai Ichihara, David Rivera . . .


13. Technology and Democracy, Kevin Roose, Shoshana Zuboff, David Hickton

14. Democratic by design: Denise Fairchild, Tim Beatley, Amory or Hunter Lovins, Penn Design . . .

15. Climate change, urban design, democracy . . . Boston Green Ribbon Commission panel, John Cleveland moderator, Bill McKibben

16. Philanthropy and democracy: Vikki Spruill moderator with Stephen Heintz, Grant Oliphant, John Powers, Ellen Dorsey, Jon Jensen


19. Democracy & higher education: Michael Crow, selected presidents, trustees etc.


Format and Scale: Each session could be organized around a brief position paper that describes the issues and possibilities. Each would begin with description of the context
and purpose of the series. Formats could vary according to the subject and audience size from roundtable/moderated conversation/platform-podium event/ZOOM call style/pre-recorded talks, music/ other?

**Advisory Committee**

Carmen Ambar, President, Oberlin College  
The Reverend Dr. Andrew Barnett, Associate Rector, All Saints Episcopal, Atlanta  
Dana Beach, Founder South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, Charleston, SC  
Conyers Davis, Executive Director, Schwarzenegger Institute  
Stephen Heintz, President, Rockefeller Brothers Fund  
Jon Jensen, President emeritus, Park Foundation  
Bakari Kitwana, writer, publicist  
Marvin Krislov, President, Pace University  
Frances Moore Lappé, writer  
Nancy MacLean, Historian, Duke University  
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John Powers, founder, the Alliance Center (Denver)  
Nick Rathod, founder, State Innovation Exchange  
Vikki Spruill, President and CEO, The New England Aquarium  
Mary Evelyn Tucker, Yale University

**Partner Organizations**

Alliance Center, Denver  
American Renewable Energy Institute  
Bioneers  
CERES, Boston  
City Club of Cleveland  
Color of Change  
Demos  
GreenFaith  
Institute for Cyber Law, Policy, and Security, University of Pittsburgh  
North American Association for Environmental Education  
Physicians for Social Responsibility  
The Tellus Institute  
USC Schwarzenegger Institute  
Represent.US  
The Volcker Alliance, New York  
Yale University Forum on Religion and Ecology

**Funders**

Ford Foundation  
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Wallace Global Foundation
Several anonymous donors

Discussion:

Our democratic institutions are in crisis, everything else is a footnote. The crisis of inequity and political dysfunction has been building for many years but now accelerated by an authoritarian president with his own post-truth media ecosystem, the defection of his Republican Party from the cause of democracy, relentless and sophisticated Russian cyber-attacks on our voting system, all magnified now by the multiple stresses of a pandemic. The first order of business is to get our own house in order.

However and whenever the 45th president leaves office, his successor will inherit monumental problems: the presidency in disgrace, weakened and demoralized Federal agencies, unqualified personnel in key positions, a legacy of political corruption, a politicized judicial system, huge deficits, a battered and shrunken economy, a grieving and fractured public with little trust in government, a tangle of Constitutional issues, a reputation for national leadership in tatters, a porous defense against cyber attacks, and a long list of unsolved domestic and international problems. Compared to the chasm ahead, however, these are pothole-scale problems.

As the temperature of the Earth continues to rise, beyond some unknown threshold our systems of governance such as they are will suffer the equivalent of cardiac arrest. Rising heat and its uncountable collateral effects will overwhelm the systems by which societies preserve public order, maintain viable economies, and supply the public with food, energy, clean water, and security. Many functions of government and corporations will deteriorate and then cease altogether. Designed for different challenges, our political system and laws are unsuited to those posed by complex systems of biology, ecology, epidemiology, atmosphere, and the infinite ways they affect humans. The present pandemic and rapidly de-stabilizing climate ahead, however, will cause us to reckon with a more recalcitrant and complex reality that punishes self-deception and overreach.

Rising seas, will force millions of people to relocate to higher ground. Many coastal cities, here and elsewhere, will become uninhabitable. Super storms will wreak havoc with infrastructure including the electric grid and municipal water systems. Lethal heat waves will decimate urban populations and wither crops. Tropical diseases will move north into populated areas. When, not if, disasters occur simultaneously, pandemics, nuclear meltdowns, category 5 storms, blackouts, terrorist attacks, and the like will overwhelm emergency response agencies. Not just here, but everywhere. Millions of people will flee the heat, drought, floods, and storms. Not just here, but everywhere. Beyond some threshold, the fabric of society will come undone. Not just here, but everywhere on Earth.

In other words, we are in not a crisis but in a crisis of crises and not a single emergency but a “long emergency” that will extend far into the future. No patchwork reforms will be adequate to the scale and duration of the problems. No change in consumer behavior or market response alone will suffice unless it is part of larger changes in the structures of politics, law, governance, education, and economics and what law scholar Jedediah Purdy describes as “the technosphere of roads, rails, utility lines, farmland, and housing” and more. We must learn to think and act as parts of an interconnected whole, something we seem to do better in times of war than otherwise.