The
50 STATE SOLUTION:
Supporting and accelerating
political reform at the state level

THE WAY FORWARD:
Context and Summary of the 50 State Solution Convening
January 2017

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I. Introduction

Americans are increasingly frustrated by the inability of politicians in Washington to get things done. They see both parties engaging in partisan rhetoric rather than advancing solutions to common problems. While toxic partisanship plagues national politics, another narrative is playing out in communities and states throughout the nation, one with the potential to improve the political climate and the capacity for public problem solving. In many communities, elected officials and concerned community members are working across the aisle – or without regard to party – to respond to public concerns. And in many states, citizen leaders are working to change the system so officials can find common ground and forge compromises.

The 50 State Solution project sought to baseline some of these state-based efforts and convene citizen leaders to explore ways to encourage communication among reform groups for the purpose of catalyzing and accelerating change.

Overall, participants were optimistic that change was possible and even refused to accept the status quo. They endorsed the premise that they were more likely to succeed if they engaged with others to share lessons learned and promising strategies, emerging analysis and political opportunities. This summary of the 50 State Solution convening in San Francisco on January 25-26, 2017 is intended to inform future activities of a collective effort.

California Forward (CA Fwd) is a bipartisan governance reform organization advancing analysis and innovations to develop, enact and implement pragmatic solutions that grow jobs, promote cost-effective public services and create accountability for results.

CA Fwd has worked for a decade to make political systems more responsive to the public interest, restore the ability of elected officials to solve problems, modernize the elections process and encourage ethical behavior. CA Fwd has helped to develop, advocate for, and implement citizens' redistricting, top-two primaries, term limit modification, budget process reform and legislative transparency.

Just as CA Fwd looked to its colleagues in other states for wisdom and inspiration, CA Fwd is frequently asked for its lessons learned. The 50 State Solution project was designed to identify ways to satisfy this thirst for shared knowledge.

II.   Executive Summary

How can reformers capitalize on individual efforts across the United States to produce meaningful reform?

At the 50 State Solution convening in San Francisco on January 26, 2017, 75 attendees from many different professional communities — government, advocacy, business, law, philanthropy, and technology gathered to discuss approaches to that question. (The appendix includes a roster of participants.)   Three primary considerations emerged.

First, the diversity of issues, situations, organizational priorities, political cultures and other variables firmly grounded the conversation in the diffuse nature of reform. Given that reforms are unlikely to originate from Washington, D.C., state and local efforts to change the political system are both pragmatic and necessary. States have the latitude to experiment with ways to improve how voters are registered, votes are cast, elections are administered, campaigns are financed, and contributions are disclosed. Thus, innovation is most likely to emerge from the "laboratories of democracy."

Like scientists, the reform community – academic researchers and analysts, civic and public sector leaders, funders and advocates – could benefit from the shared knowledge regarding the effectiveness of individual reforms, the impact of a portfolio of reforms, and political and communication strategies for building understanding and support. A forum for aggregating these diverse experiences – successful and unsuccessful – also could give definition and detail to the body of

reform that is of interest to the growing number of Americans realizing that governance changes are a necessary prerequisite to solving large scale public challenges.

Second, participants recognized that the strategies and tools available to improve the democratic process were increasing and changing due to digital and information technologies. And many were eager to more effectively incorporate the use of technology to optimize governance, transparency, and civic participation. Inspired by the ability of technology to disrupt the status quo, 50 State Solution participants believe there is a growing potential for technology to positively impact the electoral system and political process. In particular, technology has the potential to improve transparency, particularly regarding campaign finance, the influence of special interests and public decisions, as well as the voting process.

"The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger--but recognize the opportunity."

John F. Kennedy.

Finally, for many participants, political reforms must be designed and pursued in nonpartisan, bipartisan and even transpartisan ways, and with a renewed commitment to the inclusion of diverse community interests. Changes to the electoral process, to campaign finance laws and other elements of a democratic system are often pushed by partisans seeking advantage, just as politically neutral reforms are resisted by those benefiting from current power structures. Communication and cooperation among nonpartisan and bipartisan organizations can be a proactive way to encourage and distinguish those proposals designed and intended to advance democratic ideals. And explicitly including community scale activists will infuse diversity and youth into this network.

III.   Chronology of the Event

8:30 am ¦ CO-CHAIRS' OPENING
REMARKS
Lenny Mendonca, CA Fwd Co-chair
Secretary Panetta, event co-chair
Former Mayor Ashley Swearengin,
event co-chair

8:50 am ¦ STATE OF THE FIELD,
Q&A
Panelists:
Karen Hobert Flynn, President, Common
Cause
Mark Schmittt, Political Reform Program
Director, New America
Catherine Hinckley Kelley, State &
Local Reform Program Director,
Campaign Legal Center
John Kowal, VP of Programs, Brennan
Center for Justice
Moderator:
Chris Gates, Executive Director, Council
on Foundations

9:45 am ¦ THE ROLE OF CIVIC
TECHNOLOGY & BIG
DATA
Panelists:
Edwin Bender, Executive Director,
National Institute on Money in State
Politics
Daniel Newman, President, Maplight
Matt Mahan, Founder & CEO, Brigade
Media
Moderator:
Ann Ravel, Commissioner, Federal
Election Commission

10:45 am ¦ STORIES FROM THE
FIELD, Q&A
Panelists:
Andrew Bossie, Executive Director of
Maine Citizens, Clean Elections
Peg Perl, VP, Colorado Ethics Watch
Jim Heerwagen, Proponent of Voters
Right to Know
Moderator:
Carmen Lopez, Policy Officer of Good
Government Relations, Thornburg
Foundation

12:00 pm ¦ KEYNOTE
Keynote Speaker:
James Fallows, National
Correspondent, The Atlantic
Moderator:
Pete Peterson, Dean, Pepperdine
University

1:00 pm ¦ STATE SOLUTION
PLAN
Chris Gates, Council on Foundations

1:15 pm ¦ SUPPORTING STATE-
BASED REFORMS
Group Discussions

2:00 pm ¦ REPORTING OUT
Group Discussions

2:40 pm ¦ REFLECTIONS
Secretary Panetta
Mayor Ashley Swearengin

2: 55 pm ¦ NEXT STEPS
Lenny Mendonca, California Forward
Chris Gates, Council on Foundations
Mark Schmitt, New America

IV. Leon Panetta's Opening Remarks: America at a Crossroads

Leon Panetta's distinguished career in public service spans more than 50 years. After serving in the U.S. Army as an intelligence officer from 1964-66, he was appointed Director of the Office of Civil Rights, where he vigorously enforced civil rights and equal protection laws.

In 1976 he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he championed legislation that protected the California coast and ensured Medicaid and Medicare covered hospice care for all terminally ill patients. As Chair of the House Budget Committee and as Director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Clinton administration, he helped to balance the federal budget and create a surplus. In 1994, he was appointed President Clinton's Chief of Staff, bringing order and focus to White House operations.

As director of the Central Intelligence Agency for the Obama administration, Secretary Panetta supervised the operation to find and bring terrorist Osama bin Laden to justice. As Secretary of Defense, he led efforts to develop a new defense strategy, conduct critical counter terrorism operations, and strengthen U.S. alliances. He pioneered changes that made the U.S. armed forces a more welcoming environment for all service members regardless of gender or sexual orientation. His best-selling memoir, Worthy Fights was published in 2014.

In 1997, he and his wife, Sylvia, established the Panetta Institute for Public Policy in Monterey, which seeks to attract thoughtful individuals into lives of public service and prepare them for future policy challenges. Secretary Panetta co-chaired *California Forward* and served on a bipartisan commission that sought a new path for the war in Iraq. At present, he serves as a co-chair of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Defense Personnel Task Force and trustee for the Center for Strategic and International Studies Commission on Countering Violent Extremism.

As part of the convening activities, Secretary Panetta reflected on the conversations he had with other board members when California Forward was founded. At the time, the problem of gridlock in California was so significant that many thought the cause of political reform could not succeed. The complex factors contributing to

hyper-partisanship and gridlock were so significant that reform seemed unlikely. Nevertheless, history has borne out the potential for incremental reforms, supported by a variety of coalitions, to have a positive impact.

Panetta added that many of the participants at the 50 State Solution convening displayed the same passion and commitment, and demonstrated many of the same leadership qualities as those involved in California's reforms. Most importantly, they were willing to take action and saw value in working together to increase their chances of success.

"We are at a major turning point… In 2017, we are at one of those major crossroads where we decide the direction of this country,"
Leon Panetta

Now more than ever, Panetta said, it is important for these leaders to rise to the occasion as democracy is being tested by a crisis of extreme partisanship. He recalled that during his time in Congress lawmakers used to work together on the big issues. Currently, many of them are ruling by crisis — and too eager to blame the other party for their failure.

Panetta laid out two divergent paths for America's future. He characterized the first path as an American Renaissance. America would follow this path if there is practical leadership that actively seeks compromise and orients the country toward the future. This leadership, in turn, will allow America to harness the hard work and creativity of individuals from across the country. On the other path, leadership is nowhere to be found, and America will inevitably be governed by crisis. Partisanship will prevent collaboration, resulting in increasingly serious political crisis that undermine national security and economic prosperity.

Signals at the national level increasingly suggest that America is on the latter path of decline, but has not reached the point of no return. Panetta asserted that as Americans we have agency— that we are responsible for our future. The promise of the American Dream can be reinvigorated, but it will require public sacrifice. Panetta said ordinary citizens will need to answer the call to action and take up public service. Public service might involve running for office, but it can also include any activity that addresses a community problem. Just as immigrant parents made sacrifices that left their children with better lives, the collective sacrifices Americans make now will leave a better future for generations to come.

Panetta found the most hope in these ordinary Americans. As did James Fallows in his address at the 50 State Solution convening, Panetta asserted that strength of America is not in Washington D.C., but in the resilience, dedication, and will to fight of the American people.[i]

V. James Fallows' Keynote Address: Don't Despair!

James Fallows is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Carter's chief speechwriter.

He is married to Deborah Fallows, author of the book *Dreaming in Chinese*. Since 2013, they have travelled across the nation for their American Futures project. Starting in January 2017, Fallows went on leave from online and print activities at *The Atlantic* to write a book about the America they've seen in their travels and what that means for America's future.

In his keynote address, Fallows reminded participants that the actual mood in the country is much more favorable than the national political narrative. This narrative depicts an America no longer sure of its values, in a crisis of confidence, and depicted by inaction. Once a bastion of science, compromise, and inclusion, America is now characterized as having drifted away from these values toward irrationality, acrimony, and exclusion. While there is some truth to those generalities, they do not accurately reflect the dynamism of cities and towns across the country.

"Division in national politics is real, important, and needs to be addressed. But it is also worth recognizing that it is not the way politics is discussed or lives are lived in most of this country,"
James Fallows

In San Bernardino, a city with struggling finances, decaying city infrastructure, and one of the lowest voter turnouts in the state, people are coming together to experiment with reforms that will improve its future. Young San Bernardino residents have been among the most active in the process of experimentation, leading voter registration drives, covering abandoned buildings with murals, and organizing park clean-up days. Other residents are sharing their expertise and connections to create shared regional prosperity. Using his skills as a technician and manager at General Dynamics, Bill Clarke in his retirement set up a technical school to train students from low-income backgrounds in the advanced manufacturing skills they need to succeed in the 21st century workforce. Through these efforts to solve community problems, San Bernardino and the Inland Empire are seeing progress. Even Clarke, somebody who shares the GOP pessimism about the direction of the country, cannot deny the success of local initiatives.

The contradictory attitudes expressed by Clarke are endemic throughout the country. To drive this point home, Fallows refers to a Politico headline that GOP delegates believed that the economy was in crisis *except where they live.*[ii] The challenge is how we get people to deemphasize the disillusioning elements of national politics and focus on the vitality of their local communities.

For the second part of his address, Fallows focused on this challenge. He noted that this is not the first time Americans have faced political and economic crisis that threatened our survival. The problems of inequality, nativism, and polarization were even more pressing during the Gilded Age than they are today.[iii] Rather than an end to the American experiment, community members were able to overcome the crisis of the first Gilded Age through experimentation and collaboration. Working together, states and cities experimented with new school systems, tax schemes, public health care, and regulatory approaches. If America succumbs to the deadly forces of polarization, it will not be because there is no blueprint, Fallows said. The lessons of history should not be ignored.

To turn this history lesson into concrete action, Fallows emphasized the need for soft infrastructure to connect reformers doing similar things but in different states. The problem is not that there is a shortage of good work by political reformers from across the country, but that they are disconnected. The 50 State Solution Project was launched to fill this critical need. Together, Fallows said, activists can change the political structures that over-represent special interests, limit participation, and defer the American Dream for so many. This challenge should not overwhelm. America has done it before, and, unlike the beginning of the 20th century, activists can take advantage of networking technologies to form and sustain collaborative partnerships.

VI.   A Soft Infrastructure to Support Reform

Paraphrasing Justice Brandeis, the keynote speaker, James Fallows, and other participants emphasized the notion that states should function as laboratories of democracy.[iv] Since political conditions vary widely across the nation, states may have to adopt different versions of reform. While states often have their own practical realities, varied experimentation can produce a canon of better practices. These variations can be of tremendous value to activists seeking to enact the reforms that would work best in their state. For these reasons, the conveners were wary of any process to standardize reform, particularly in the early stages of any shared effort (see Figure 1).

However, reluctance to standardize reform should not be confused with the value of communicating, cooperating and even collaborating among organizations and across states. With that premise, California Forward initiated the 50 State Solution convening to inform and encourage a conversation among reform leaders to assess and advance a soft infrastructure supporting beneficial interactions.

"We are not attempting to come out with a playbook of reform that everyone will follow. But we hope everyone can come out of here with some new plays and use them in their own ways to make a difference,"

Lenny Mendonca, co-chair CA Fwd

Three "Beta" elements were developed prior to the convening to shape and form to the conversation regarding the potential for a shared effort going forward.

- **The *State of the Field* document** enables members of the reform community to track election models and major reform efforts in all 50 states. The State of the Field focuses on nine aspects of democratic practice for each state: voter registration; primary system; campaign finance; disclosure; voting administration; voting technology; voting tabulation; voting participation; and redistricting. For each of these aspects, the documents outline the current system, innovative local efforts, and statewide legislation and ballot initiatives. Efforts to improve election administration through the adoption of new technology are noted separately. When relevant to the ongoing legislative and/or judicial effort, information about the historical context of a reform area is also included. Given the amount of information available, the architects of this project envision a series of crowdsourced documents that will enable activists to add, adjust, or refine information to reflect the current realities of reform in their state.

- **The interactive website,** which includes a newsfeed, blog, and shared calendar, was designed for advocates to keep up-to-date on important issues in the field. The blog series features prominent leaders and activists in the field. These posts ensure that their work is noticed and voices are heard. The curated feed of specific state-based news articles is organized into four priorities: redistricting, the voting process, campaign finance, and the primary process. However, the site provides opportunities for self-organizing around other shared issues, should they emerge. To facilitate that self-organization by issue and region, the shared calendar provides a platform for activists to share what they are doing and track important events.

- **An initial convening** was considered the best venue for framing a conversation on the value of future sessions to inform and accelerate efforts. The enthusiastic response to the San Francisco event was a positive indicator of future interest. As the event was being planned in 2016, the nature of the 2016 presidential

campaign appeared to have increased interest in both state-based reforms and in reform advocates rethinking how to pursue their goals. Participants strongly supported the idea of future convening's as a way to build relationships and an effective network of reform leaders and organizations.

These initial elements triggered ideas for what else could be added to this infrastructure. For example, participants expressed the value of sharing legislative language so that efforts could be more easily replicated in state houses across the country.[v] "An advantage of standardized legislative language is that reformers can respond with a set of shared talking points when they inevitably face obstacles," Chris Gates argued. Other participants expressed the value that these talking points and legislative documents would provide if they were all at a single location on the 50 State Solution's website.

Similarly, participants thought there would be ways to support reforms being reformed through the initiative process. The initiative process can be an effective path, particularly where there is good potential for broad coalitions and grass-roots organizing to mobilize communities and voters. As California's recent election history demonstrates, the initiative process was the only viable way to advance reforms that directly impacted the Legislature in ways that were unacceptable to legislative leaders but were supported by voters.

Participants also discussed ways to maintain momentum and to scale reform. As more individual reform efforts succeed, and as reform advocates learn from successes and failures, participants realized the value of capturing and sharing those learnings to accelerate the pace and breadth of changes. The challenges and complexity of "taking reforms to scale" were recognized as daunting, but learning and communication were viewed as key to identifying challenges and possible solutions.
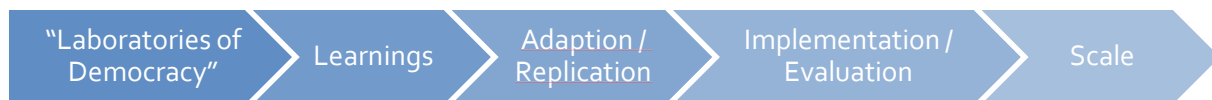

Figure 1. A network dedicated to created shared knowledge could increase the success of individual efforts and encourage and enable similar reform. Similarly, implementation is a learning opportunity that can further support scaling of reforms.

1. Possible Functions: Communication, Coordination, Cooperation

Any undertaking as complicated as modernizing democratic institutions and procedures requires a combination of experts with specialized knowledge and innovators with applicable experiences. For these experts, communicating with reformers in other states competes for time dedicated to the immediate task at hand, crafting reforms, developing strategies, building coalitions, raising funds. Specialization in the reform community further increases the costs of communicating and translating across silos and situations.

"[We are interested in] connectivity, networking with colleagues working on similar issues and learning from them regarding the status of their work, how they are measuring impacts, the challenges they are facing and where there are opportunities to collaborate for greater efficiency,"
Chevenee Reavis, Voters Right to Know.

In many civic ventures, like-minded organizations have adapted variations of communication networks, learning collaboratives and collective impact models with some organized effort to provide backbone support that advances their common interest. The potential functions of the organized effort can be positioned along – and even progress along – a continuum, starting with basic communication among partner groups, enabling organizations to coordinate activities for shared benefits, to strategic and operational collaborations that allow them to accomplish what they cannot do by themselves.

The 50 State Solution project was intentionally cautious – beginning with the suggestion for a soft infrastructure that would connect and support communications among colleagues so that any deeper interactions could emerge organically from participants. Throughout the convening, several recurring themes emerged that could be developed into specific network activities:

Communication

- **Highlight Successes:** Progress requires effective communication of successes. Successes need to be documented for broader audiences of policy makers, business and civic leaders, as well as the general public. Success can lead to success if communicated by networks and third party validators.

- **Explain and inspire:** Participants were seeking better ways to explain why reform is necessary and narratives that can effectively inspire action and build support.

Coordination

- **Create Networks:** The project could connect organizations working on similar reform issues or organizations trying to develop similar strategies for building political coalitions, public outreach or strategic communications.

- **Build capacity:** Reform often requires unusual allies to come together or for cross-sector partnerships to be developed. Building these relationships often require new skills and techniques, and models for aligning business, nonprofit, and government sectors.

Cooperation

- **Assess and identify next steps:** Progress does not have a finish line. Groups of reform organizations and leaders may welcome and benefit from periodic convening's to assess progress in reforms, dramatic changes in the political landscape, or emerging opportunities and obstacles.

- **Identify funding strategies:** As money in politics becomes a dominant theme, innovative strategies will be needed to build financial support for reform efforts. This issue may be of broad interest among reform groups regardless of their focus or strategy.

Individual organizations may want to engage at different levels. Some groups may only be looking for ways to exchange information. Others may want to actively engage in solutions for shared problems in policy or political strategies. Still others may seek partners to help them assemble the skills and capacities needed to advance a reform proposal. The diversity of organizations involved in the convening reflected the potential for participants to find value in different ways.

2. Practical Suggestions from Participants

In the afternoon portion of the event, attendees participated in group discussions on potential ways to develop and improve this support network. Their active participation effectively captured the collective wisdom and experience of all 75 attendees. They provided excellent feedback on issues of interest, how to optimize engagement, and ways to improve the 50 State Solution website.

Overall participants are focusing their efforts on political reforms that will make government less beholden to narrowed or monied interests and more responsive to the public interest. For this reason, campaign finance and disclosure was a major priority. But participants also discussed reforms designed to increase turnout and

make democracy more representative, such as automatic registration and open or "top-two" primaries. To optimize collaborative efforts, participants were clear that face-to-face interaction and networking technologies should supplement one another. Participants thought that making the 50 State Solution website more interactive, both quantitatively and qualitatively, would improve the ongoing effort.

A.   Areas of Interest

Participants indicated significant interest in all of the general topic areas, including campaign finance reform, redistricting, primary process and electoral process. For many organizations, campaign finance issues are growing in importance and an area where more innovation in policy and technology will be needed to address dysfunctional aspects of money in politics.

Many participants also expressed interest in the structure and mechanics of the election process, including automatic voter registration, ranked choice voting, and Electoral College reform. And a number of participants were interested in ways to increase voter engagement. In the portion of the survey where participants could provide suggestions to improve future convening's, a recurrent theme that emerged was the need to focus more on innovative ways to reach out to new and unlikely voters.

> **Where Goals are in Common**
>
> While participants had different priorities, they saw value in creating an inclusive network to encourage synergies among reforms and reform strategies.
> - Campaign finance
> - Redistricting
> - Primaries
> - Electoral process
> - Campaign strategy
> - Citizen engagement

In addition to the nature of reforms, many participants discussed the importance of working in bipartisan or nonpartisan ways. The explicit objective for many is to evolve the system in ways that could serve the public interest, address public priorities, and respond to public concerns. Transcending the hyper-partisanship is both the challenge and the goal.

Consistent with Jim Fallows message, some of the participants see new hope in community-scale organizing and local government reforms as a way to build momentum and increase the diversity of activist leaders reshaping democratic practice.

B.   How do Participants Want to Engage?

Another purpose of the convening was to understand how partners would like to collaborate moving forward. In a survey after the event, all participants indicated

they were interested in collaborating via in-person gatherings. Reflecting the broader group, one survey respondent, John Opdyke of Open Primaries, indicated that these in-person gatherings were vital to build relationships and learn from one another. He added that the internet should only be used to supplement, and not replace, these gatherings. This sentiment supported Chris Gates' recommendation for two face-to-face convening's per year.

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Smart Communications

Participants prefer multiple, scaled and tailored communications channel:
- In-person gatherings
- Conference calls
- Email lists
- Document sharing
- 50 State Solution website
- Slack/Basecamp

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Some participants added that topical working groups might lead to more focused conversations in ways that keep reformers engaged in the ongoing effort. Andrew Crutchfield, Director of Govern for California, offered that smaller groups could convene more frequently. Regular meetings are most effective in keeping active state-based reformers up-to-date on the relevant issues and events across the nation.

Other participants emphasized the opportunity to organize these groups creatively. Rob Richie, Executive Director of FairVote, suggested that future convenings be focused on specific strategies. Concurring with this suggestion in the survey, James Fishkin, Director of Stanford's Center for Deliberative Democracy, hoped that future discussions would focus more on identifying the tactics that work best.

Sarah Bonk, DisruptDC, with Deborah and Jim Fallows

To sustain relationships built at both large and small meetings, participants also showed interest in periodic conference calls and other exchange mechanisms for communications efforts. Nearly every respondent preferred an email list as the primary form of communication, while several others suggested using tools such as Slack or Basecamp to communicate with one another.

C.   Improving the Website

The beta version of the 50 State Solution website was intended as an organizing tool for wonks and advocates to build their case for why reform is necessary. For this reason, participants said developing the organizational and curating capacity of the

site should be a major priority. They will then be able to coordinate a case for reform that persuades the public, who will make reform a reality.

Bonnie Reiss from the USC Schwarzenegger Institute noted that the interactive map should include quantitative data. For example, a visitor should be able to select a particular state and see a pop-up of the voter registration breakdowns by party. She added that some of the existing qualitative data could be expanded upon and improved. Clicking on a state could link back to blog posts, research articles, and case studies that connect reforms to the broader narrative on why reform is necessary. The developers of the site may also consider defining electoral practices, such as absentee voting and early voting, since laws for these practices vary by state.

This quantitative and qualitative data may identify the challenges and potential responses, but the data in itself does not build the case for reform. Michael Murphy, representing the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, noted that this is the main thing that is missing on the site. The blog posts and case studies, Reiss said, should go beyond explaining the actions to describing the impact.

Moreover, the curation process of building a state-by-state case should be decentralized to capitalize on specialized knowledge. The site infrastructure should be constructed in such a way as to encourage state actors to include links to relevant legislative analyses, research, and news articles. Many participants, particularly ones whose organizations are focused on reforms in a single state, were enthusiastic about providing information on the state initiatives they are supporting.

Speaking for other state-based activists, Peg Perl, Vice President of Colorado Ethics Watch, was convinced her counterparts in other states will take advantage of opportunities to share information and build momentum. Given that reformers are actively seeking these opportunities, she believes that the 50 State Solution Project has tremendous potential to strengthen reform pipelines between states.

Finally, a common theme throughout the table discussions was the potential for significant value-added by approaching the topic of reform through a holistic, inter-disciplinary lens. With this in mind, a section of the site should be dedicated to explaining the background and rationale behind Supreme Court decisions relevant to certain reform topics, such as redistricting and campaign finance. Another section should be set aside for relevant historical content. As Fallows emphasized in the keynote address, when it comes to the problems and the reforms tailored to address them, what is past is prologue. If done well, grounding the reform message with a sense of history will be public outreach that inspires as well as informs.

Collectively, the participants imply that the information currently on the site could be organized in ways that increase its accessibility. They imagine a scroll-down menu that allows you to select states based on certain practices, and refines the map to only

include those states. For example, if a visitor selected automatic voter registration, then the only highlighted states would be Vermont, Connecticut, West Virginia, Alaska, California, and Oregon.[vi] The developer might also include lighter shading for states that considered, but did not implement, automatic voter registration. This information is more useful than just knowing that six states have automatic voter registration. An additional field could be included to allow visitors to obtain data among certain subsets of states, such as registration breakdown by party. Lastly, participants believe that clicking on a state should also direct a visitor to relevant articles and legislative analysis for that state. In sum, the interactive map is useful, but there are a few adjustments that need to be made to capture the full benefit.

3.   Stories from the Field

The other aim of the convening was to explore the dynamics of reform efforts. What conditions are needed for reform efforts to succeed? How can activists form unusual coalitions to increase the political viability of reform? What are the synergistic effects of adopting multiple reforms? The focus of the conversation in the State of the Field and Stories from the Field panels was on efforts that captured these dynamics to produce results. The panelists highlighted a few specific campaigns and issues:

A.   Automatic Voter Registration

Many states face the problem of low-voter registration. For example, in California, there are approximately 7 million eligible voters that are not registered. Following the example set by Oregon in March 2015, California and four other states have passed bills that automatically register citizens who obtain certain government ID's. In addition to dramatically increasing voter registration, this policy has the effect of cleaning up voter rolls, reducing the potential for voter fraud, and lowering costs. Since these impacts are overwhelmingly positive, bipartisan consensus on this issue is considered a real possibility. West Virginia and Vermont, two states with different political profiles, have passed automatic registration bills in their state legislators.

B.   South Dakota Ballot Initiatives

To combat the problem of money in politics in South Dakota, two important figures in the state's politics, Rick Weiland and Drey Samuelson, spent 18 months forming a transpartisan coalition intended to reengage voters in direct democracy. As a result of their efforts, their organization, TakeItBack.org, collected 100,000 signatures and placed three reform measures on the ballot. Of course, the movement still faced

significant opposition from well-funded groups, including Americans for Prosperity; a conservative organization funded by the billionaire Koch brothers. Though they were heavily outspent, the most sweeping of the measures, Initiative Measure 22, passed on Election Day with 52 percent of the vote. The measure established an independent ethics commission, lowered PAC contributions in state elections, increased transparency on campaign disclosures, and set aside a $12 million state fund for democracy vouchers modeled on Seattle's program. Their success can be credited to their grass-roots campaigning, including door-to-door canvassing, advocacy events at Main Street cafes and diners, and social media presence.

The conveners believe that these lessons on organization are important. Even in states saturated with dark money, South Dakota proves that good organization at the grass roots level can generate reforms aligned with the public interest.

C.   Supporting Public Campaign Finance

In many states, public finance reforms have been overwhelmed by recent Federal and Supreme Court rulings that have permitted the unprecedented flow of private money into campaigns. Under these rules, many grass-roots candidates simply cannot compete against opponents who are easily able to raise large sums of money through their contacts with established donors. As a consequence, these candidates are discouraged from running, which has adverse effects on the quality of American democracy. In Arizona, a state with public campaign funding, voter turnout decreased from 56 percent in 2010 to 47 percent in the 2014 midterm election. Additionally, according to the Campaign Finance Institute, the number of Democratic candidates who chose to run on clean funds dropped from 82 percent in 2008 to 43 percent in 2014. For Republicans, the number dropped from 52 percent in 2008 to 14 percent in 2014.[vii] These statistics suggest that all candidates have a dominant strategy to raise money through a small group of large donors to maximize their contributions. Among the downsides: Candidates lose the incentive to engage more voters through grass-roots organizing.

"Clean Elections candidates become hog-tied… because they can't raise any additional money and all of the sudden you got these outside groups or a privately financed candidate that's just spending lots more than a clean-elections candidate."

Andrew Bossie, Executive Director of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.

The panelists believe that the representation of special interests at the expense of the public interest is a deeply regrettable turn in American politics. Public financing has proven a viable way to elect blue-collar candidates and members of underrepresented communities to state office, producing democracy that is more representative of the people as a whole. To continue to be a viable strategy for candidates, these public

financing schemes must be revamped. The New York City matching system, where every dollar of small donor contributions raises six dollars in public money, is a promising avenue of reform. In the last election, the City of Berkeley adopted the New York City model for donations up to $50. These reforms serve as reminders that, in spite of recent court rulings, there is still a desire to reform the way campaigns are financed, and states and municipalities should look to other states for lessons on best practices.

VII. Capturing the Revolutionary Impact of Technology

In the panel on Civic Technology and Big Data, moderator Ann Ravel, former chair of the Federal Elections Commission (FEC), and the panelists considered the problem of rising political disillusionment. Participants on this panel – which included Daniel Newman of MapLight, Matt Mahan of Brigade Media, and Edwin Bender of the National Institute of Money in State Politics – offered distinct perspectives and innovative solutions to this problem.

Matt Mahan diagnosed the problem of disillusionment as grounded in barriers to information access. People are rationally opting-out from civic engagement because government is so complex that voting is not a good use of time and energy, he argued. As government increases in complexity, information overwhelms, which leads to the related problems of disillusionment, low information, and low participation (see Figure 2).

1Ann Ravel is interviewed at event.

The panelists argued that technology is particularly well-suited to decrease the costs associated with information access and revolutionize the way people participate in the political process. The networking model that has increased information accessibility in the ridesharing and restaurant industries can bring some of the same dynamics to politics. It is just a matter of developing user-friendly applications that would enable voters to access complex political information. Through an interactive ballot guide and suggestions driven by responses to a 20 question survey, Brigade Media is pioneering this technological infrastructure to help voters collectively navigate the complexities of the political process in the Bay Area.

The panelists foresee a few of the most immediate impacts:

- Reduce cost of communicating to voters

- Facilitate peer to peer communication

- Improve voter education

- Rebuild "social capital"

- Increase efficiency in the administration of various government functions

Referencing the small donor campaign that Maplight ran in Berkeley, Daniel Newman emphasized that Facebook and other existing social networks can increase convenience and broaden a campaign's network by making communication easier. In that campaign, they applied new technology to target individual registered voters with campaign messages directly in their Facebook feeds. Newman also noted the potential for new technologies to facilitate more peer-to-peer communication. Door-to-door canvassing is inefficient because people often are not home and interactions are usually impersonal. Some companies, such as VoterCircle, have addressed these problems by pioneering technologies that enable people who are passionate about a campaign to electronically connect with people they already know. The hope is that facilitating these types of conversations will improve voter's knowledge and get them reengaged with issues concerning their communities.

Matt Mahan cautioned that these technologies were not intended to replace face-to-face communication. In the end, communities must rebuild "social capital", or deep, personalized interactions between people within a community, to reinstill a sense of civic duty. [viii] He implied that no technology, no matter how innovative, can substitute for the active effort of citizens.

On the government administration and nonprofit side, the participants noted that the move from forms-based to data-based systems is a promising development because it increases ease of access. This relative accessibility is the rationale behind the modernization efforts of many states' campaign finance disclosure systems.

For a final comment of the panel, Matt Mahan addressed concerns that the pursuit of technological innovation could also expose the inefficiencies and even outright corruption of government without highlighting government's responsibilities and accomplishments. Edwin Bender added that the whole point of the 50 State Solution Project was to build the coordinating infrastructure that would highlight positive reform efforts of individuals, and make them aware of one another. Together, the panelists concluded that both forms of transparency are important, but activists may need to dedicate more conscious effort to the positive kind.

The reason why the reform community must improve the incorporation of technology in politics is to remove barriers to information access and improve transparency. Even as an end goal, improving transparency is certainly worthy of sustained effort. The panelists also understood, however, that effects of technology will not be exclusively limited to this area. If technological innovation facilitates engagement in ways that decrease information access costs and improve voter information, then voters will be far more likely to participate in elections at all levels of government. This increased participation, in turn, will improve the quality of American democracy.
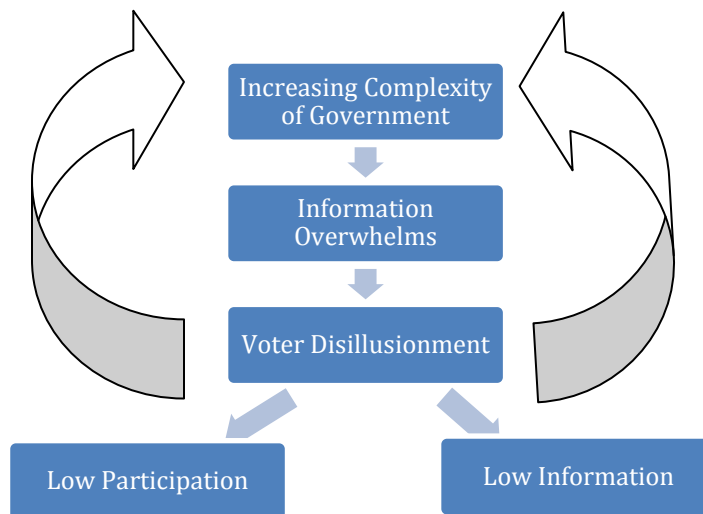

Figure 3. Matt Mahan's explanation of the vicious cycle of disillusionment, as government becomes more complex, it is more costly for voters to acquire information. In turn, decreasing civic engagement and voter participation furthers the *perception* that government is complex. If applied efficiently and creatively, technology is uniquely suited to decrease these costs. The panelists believed that the incorporation of both new and existing technologies will enable many voters to exit this vicious cycle.

1. **What is Measured Improves**

The participants frequently mentioned the importance of innovators figuring out ways to collect data that shines sunlight on certain government practices. Discussing campaign disclosure laws, Jim Heerwagen, referenced Peter Drucker famous truth, "What is measured improves."[ix]

This notion of data-based metrics to encourage accountability among elected officials goes beyond campaign contributions. Indeed, Secretary Panetta suggested

throughout the convening the need for accountability should be the macro-narrative that activists tell the public on the need for reform.

New innovative measures will inform how politicians and policymakers respond on a whole host of issues that people care about, from health care to housing. These measures will direct better responses from nonprofits and the general public. For these reasons, some participants concluded that data-based metrics should be at the heart of the effort to make political structures more responsive to public interests.[x]

This strategy is not to imply that data alone will solve our persistent political problems. When it remains in Ivory Towers and Silicon Valley server rooms, data will do nothing. In the Big Data & Civic Technology panel, the panelists affirmed this reality, emphasizing that collaboration between advocates, analysts, and innovators and the creative use of technology will be necessary to transform isolated data points into a coherent, engaging story.
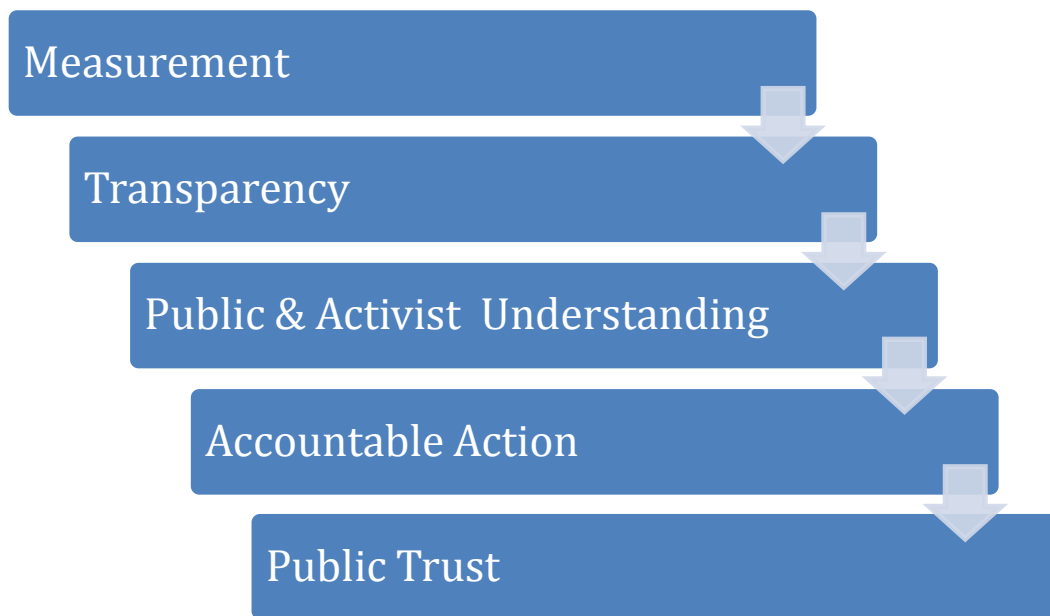
Measurement

Transparency

Public & Activist Understanding

Accountable Action

Public Trust

Figure 4. Measurement and transparency do not always improve understanding, but they do when they are used to tell clear stories. Clarity is therefore crucial in restoring accountability and trust.

VIII. Toward a Transpartisan Future

The most common suggestion from participants was that political reform must be conducted and designed in ways that don't advantage one party. For reforms to genuinely improve the democratic objectives of the political process, they need to be embraced by coalitions that transcend partisan boundaries. These transpartisan coalitions can only be formed and maintained if all participating parties are assured the commitment to five principles. With the exception of the final one, all of these principles were outlined by Chris Gates following the co-chairs' opening remarks:

1. Bipartisanship: The reform movement must build a coalition of Democrats, Republicans, and independents. Successful coalition-building involves building support for reforms both sides value.

2. Nonpartisanship: Most innovative solutions are not associated with any particular political party. For this reason, the effort at political reform must continue to include a diverse coalition of professional communities from business to technology. Nonpartisanship is also about providing analysis that is free from partisan judgment. Both the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) at the federal level and the Legislative Analyst Office (LAO) at the state level are examples of nonpartisan organizations that provide legislative bill analysis. Like the CBO and LAO, the materials posted in the blog and State of the Field section of the site should be reviewed to ensure they do not use language or reasoning that signals a particular partisan leaning.

3. Refrain from Selecting Winners: The 50 State Solution is a reporting and compilation site, not an advocacy site. Successful reforms will be noticed and spread around the country.

4. Focus on Catalytic Leadership: State-by-state political reform is much too daunting to control. Even if top-down management were possible, it would run counter to the foundational objectives of the 50 State Solution project.

5. Create Accountability for Results: Throughout the convening, Secretary Panetta emphasized that politicians that retreat into their partisan trenches and do not produce results should be held accountable. These results must be defined in an objective way to restore a united political system that responds to shared interests.

1. Setting the Example

Along with Secretary Panetta, Ashley Swearengin, former mayor of Fresno and co-chair of the event, gave opening remarks on her tenure. When she began in January 2009, the city was in crisis. In addition to paying $30 million dollars a year on servicing its debt, the city also had to repay $25 million in negative fund balances, which accrued as the result of illegal accounting practices of previous administrations. Fiscal austerity strained the resources of most government agencies. By 2011, Fresno had a fiscal deficit of $36 million dollars and a general reserve fund that was down to just a million dollars. To avoid the catastrophe of bankruptcy, Swearengin proposed a plan toward financial sustainability aimed at improving the city's finances by paying off its internal debt and building modest reserves.

Even in the midst of this fiscal crisis, Swearengin had the boldness to plan for the future. Understanding that the problems of water scarcity, transportation, and homelessness did not disappear with the start of the Great Recession, Swearengin refused to put these issues on the backburner to the more immediate problem of restoring the city's fiscal solvency. Instead, she responded to the crisis by forging relationships across partisan boundaries with both President Obama and Governor Jerry Brown, bringing in $200 million in state and federal grants. With these grants, she made investments in the bus rapid transit center, development projects, water infrastructure, and homelessness. These investments produced results, revitalized the city's downtown, put Fresno on a path toward water sustainability, and reduced chronic homelessness by 51 percent.

These actions reveal that, together, public officials and concerned community members can solve problems that we could not even imagine solving by ourselves. In the end, this idea— that we can accomplish more together than by ourselves— is the reason why transpartisanship is so fundamental to the cause of political reform.

IX. Conclusion

Given the growing intensity of partisan dysfunction in the nation's capital, the positive energy displayed at the 50 State Solution convening in San Francisco in January 2017 was counterintuitive. Many of the participating civic entrepreneurs were veterans of what realistically are unending efforts to improve democracy. Nevertheless, a spirit of commitment and persistence transcended the negativity of the nation's capital. The progress being made in state-based reforms were validated by Jim Fallow's chronicling of community-level and community-minded citizen problem solvers. The steady march of data technology revives expectations that meaningful and fact-based transparency is possible in an era of alternative facts,

social media spinning, and ideologically isolated sourcing. And the challenge from and encouragement of senior statesmen like Leon Panetta galvanized among participants an obligation to lead.

In person gatherings are essential to building and renewing that kind of enthusiasm. But as the conversations revealed in detail, that shared commitment can be reinforced on a daily basis by a more deliberate and structured way to share information, connect colleagues with similar challenges, share work products and strategies. Scientific endeavors have made rapid progress by building on shared knowledge, by peer review and peer collaborations, by continuous evaluation to challenge and affirm conclusions.

As current events – in the United States and other democracies – identify the weaknesses in governance structures, encouraging laboratories of democracies becomes even more important. As the demands on government to solve even more complex problems increases, creating learning and evolving systems of governance may prove to be essential to preserving the fundamental experiment in self-rule.

The 50 State Solution convening demonstrated that for those dedicated to democratic reforms, finding new ways to communicate, cooperate and collaborate may be a prerequisite to making progress fast enough.

On the issue of political reform, the conveners believe that we can create a transpartisan consensus based on shared interests. And reformers are confident that progress is being made to modernize election procedures, simplifying campaign finance disclosure laws, and use technology to transform democracy.

Appendix

To get a sense for the range of professional communities that were represented at this event, below is a full alphabetical roster of all the attendees at the 50 State Solution convening on Thursday, January 26, 2017:

Kellen Arno, Partner at Grandview Campaigns
Heather Balas, President of New Mexico First
David Becker, Executive Director of Election Innovation
Edwin Bender, Executive Director of the National Institute on Money in State Politics
Jocelyn Benson, Director of the Levin Center at Wayne Law School
Sarah Bonk, Co-founder and Chief Strategy Officer of DisruptDC
Kelly Born, Democracy Program Officer at the Hewlett Foundation
Andrew Bossie, Executive Director of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections
Daniel Bowling, U.S. District Court, Northern California
Kahlil Byrd, Founder & CEO of FPPCO¦Invest America Fund
Chris Catterton, Co-founder of DisruptDC
Andrew Crutchfield, Director of Govern for California
Conyers Davis, Director of Programming & Special Projects at the USC Schwarzenegger Institute
Jared DeMarinis, Director of the Maryland State Board of Elections
Larry Diamond, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution
Amy Dominguez-Arms, Consultant at the Hewlett Foundation
Jonny Dorsey, Social Innovation and Advocacy Portfolio Manager at the Emerson Collective
Doug Edwards, Boardmember of Maplight
Justin, Ewers, Deputy Director, Partnership for Economic Prosperity, California Forward
James Fallows, National Correspondent at *The Atlantic*
Deborah Fallows, America Futures Project & author of *Dreaming in Chinese*
James Fishkin, Director for the Center of Deliberative Democracy
Jenny Flanagan, VP of State Operations at Common Cause
John Fortier, Director of the Democracy Project at the Bipartisan Policy Center
Josh Fryday, COO of NextGen Climate
Chris Gates, Executive Director of Council on Foundations
Terry Goddard, Founder of VPA Arizona
Leslie Graves, President of Ballotpedia
Jim Greer, Co-founder of CouterPAC
Annelise Grimm, Program Officer at the James Irvine Foundation
Jim Heerwagen, Proponent of Voters Right to Know
Juan Hernandez, Independent Voter Project

Charlotte Hill, Senior Communications Director of Represent.Us

Daniel Howle, Co-chair of the Independent Voter Project

Jim Jonas, Founder & Partner of JKJ Partners

Catherine Kelley, State & Local Reform Program Director at the Campaign Legal Center

Alexandra Klun, Consultant at Innovate Your State

Charles Kolb, President & CEO of DisruptDC

John Kowal, VP of Programs at the Brennan Center for Justice

Joanne Kozberg, Prinicpal-in-charge at California Strategies

Hannah Linkenhocker, Managing Director of NMA Consulting Partners

Carmen Lopez, Policy Officer of Good Government Relations at the Thornburg Foundation

Susan Lovenburg, Director Partnership for Economic Prosperity, California Forward

Anne MacDonald, Executive Director of Better for America

Laurie Madigan, Partner at Madigan Consulting, Inc.

Matt Mahan, Founder & CEO of Brigade Media, Inc.

Michael Malbin, Executive Director of the Campaign Finance Institute

Caitlin Maple, California Forward

Jim Mayer, President & CEO of California Forward

Lenny Mendonca, Co-chair of California Forward

Julie Menter, Principal at New Media Ventures

Leah Grassini Moehle, Program Manager, California Forward

Estevan Munoz-Howard, Program Officer of Money in Politics at Piper Fund

Michael Murphy, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget

Daniel Newman, President of Maplight

Allan Oliver, Executive Director of the Thornburg Foundation

John Opdyke, President of Open Primaries

Leon Panetta, Secretary of Defense & Former Co-chair of California Forward

Chad Peace, President of IVC Media, Inc.

Peg Perl , VP of Colorado Ethics Watch

Pete Peterson, Dean of Pepperdine University

Deepak Puri, Founder of Skilled Analysts and Co-Founder of Democracy Labs

Ann Ravel, Commissioner on the Federal Election Commission

Chevenee Reavis, Director of Advocacy & Strategic Initiatives for Water.org & California Voters Right to Know

Dave Regan, President of United Healthcare Workers West

Bonnie Reiss, Global Director of the USC Schwarzenegger Institute

Cruz Reynoso, Professor Emeritus of University of California Davis Law School & Former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of California

Rob Richie, Executive Director of Fairvote

Jackie Salit, President of Independent Voting

Mark Schmitt, Director of the Political Reform Program at New America
Bill Shireman, President & CEO of Future 500
Josh Silver, Founder & Director of Represent.Us
David Smith, Managing Director of the Presidio Institute
Jonathan Soros, CEO of JS Capital Management, LLC & Co-chair of New America
Daniel Stid, Director of the Madison Initiative at the Hewlett Foundation
Duf Sundheim, Principal of GPS Mediation, LLC & California Forward Leadership
Council Member
Nick Troiano, Executive Director of the Centrist Project
Phillip Ung, Legislative Director of the Fair Political Practices Commission
Vicki Veenker, Founder of Veenker Law Offices
Pete Weber, Co-chair of California Forward
Abby Wood, Assistant Professor of Law at the USC Gould School of Law

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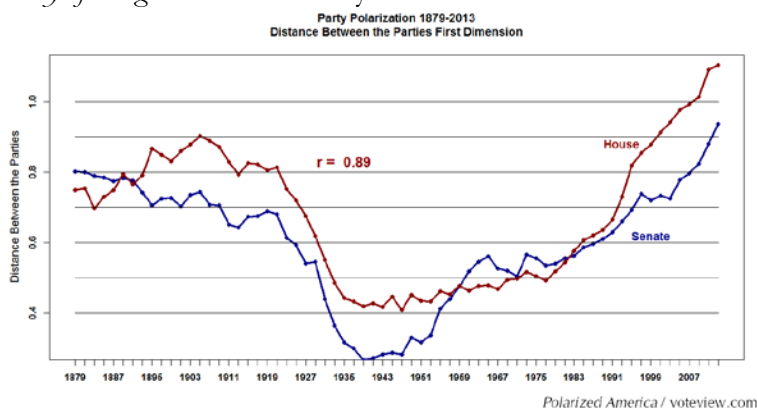
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[i] Here is a relevant historical quote from the French historian, Alexis Tocqueville that is hanging on the wall in California Forward's Sacramento office, "The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened than any other nation, but rather in her ability to repair her faults."

[ii] Grunwald, Michael. "GOP Delegates Say the Economy Is Terrible—Except Where They Live." *Politico*. Politico Magazine, 19 July 2016. Web. 08 May 2017.

[iii] Jenkins, Jeffery A., Sara Chatfield, and Charles Stewart III. "Polarization Lost: Examining the Decline in Ideologically Polarized Voting." (2015): 1-52. *University of Virginia*. Web. 08 May 2017.

Party Polarization 1879-2013
Distance Between the Parties First Dimension

Polarized America / voteview.com

As demonstrated by this graph initially created by researchers Sara Chatfield, Jeffrey Jenkins, and Charles Stewart III, polarization declined following the Progressive movement, but only through collective effort. With this in mind, Fallows and Panetta suggest that we have a choice. We can either harness the efforts of individuals and their community organizations, allowing for the possibility of scaling up our efforts to the national level, or we can do nothing, ensuring that levels of national polarization go off the chart in ways that completely hamper our ability to achieve reform through transpartisan consensus.

[iv] *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann,* 285 U.S. 262, 311 (1932).

In the dissenting opinion of *New State Ice Co. v. Lieberman*, Justice Brandeis wrote, "There must be powers in the State and Nation to remould, through experimentation, our economic practices and institutions to meet changing social and economic needs. I cannot believe that the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment, or the States which ratified it, intended to deprive us of the power to correct the evils of technological unemployment and excess productive capacity… To stay experimentation in things social and economic is a grave responsibility. Denial of the right to experiment may be fraught with famous consequences to the nation. **It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory**; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."

[v] As a practical recommendation, legislative language is of course a vital ingredient to reform. Practicalities notwithstanding, the reform community must only pursue this objective so long as it does not contravene our commitment to varied experimentation. An idea that is able to proceed through the legislative process and have positive intended effects in one state may face severe obstacles in another.

[vi] Other states have since adopted this provision.

[vii] Miller, Justin. "The New Public Option." *The American Prospect*. The American Prospect, 12 Oct. 2015. Web. 24 Apr. 2017.

[viii] In the convening, Mahan noted that communities with social capital "pressure" people who do not participate. While his comments seemed to imply that there is no true substitute for this pressure, at Brigade Media, he is working on social media applications that approximate this pressure. The hope is that the application becomes ubiquitous so people will follow their friends to the polls when notifications indicate that they have cast a ballot. For more, see an article published in Recode, a technology news website, titled "Can Sean Parker's Brigade Media App Send More Voters to the Polls? San Francisco Provides an Early Test".

[ix] There is a variation of this quote that is worth mentioning. The variation is also attributed to Peter Drucker, "What gets measured gets done." Personally, I prefer this quote because it leaves little doubt to the mechanism of how things improve. When you say, "what is measured improves," it can be misinterpreted to mean that it will improve even if you do nothing after measurement. This clearly is not the case. For example, in campaign finance, the development of procedures that more accurately measure and report campaign contributions does not lessen the influence of dark money. Rather, data enables activists to respond in ways that could potentially have that effect.

[x] In an op-ed written for this event, one of the participants, Duf Sundheim, echoed a similar sentiment, indicating that the reform effort should prioritize data collection. In his New Declaration, he wrote, "Our first challenge is to determine what information to measure and then to measure it." Also like other participants, Sundheim argued that measurement should be the focus because it has the potential to bring accountability back to politics.