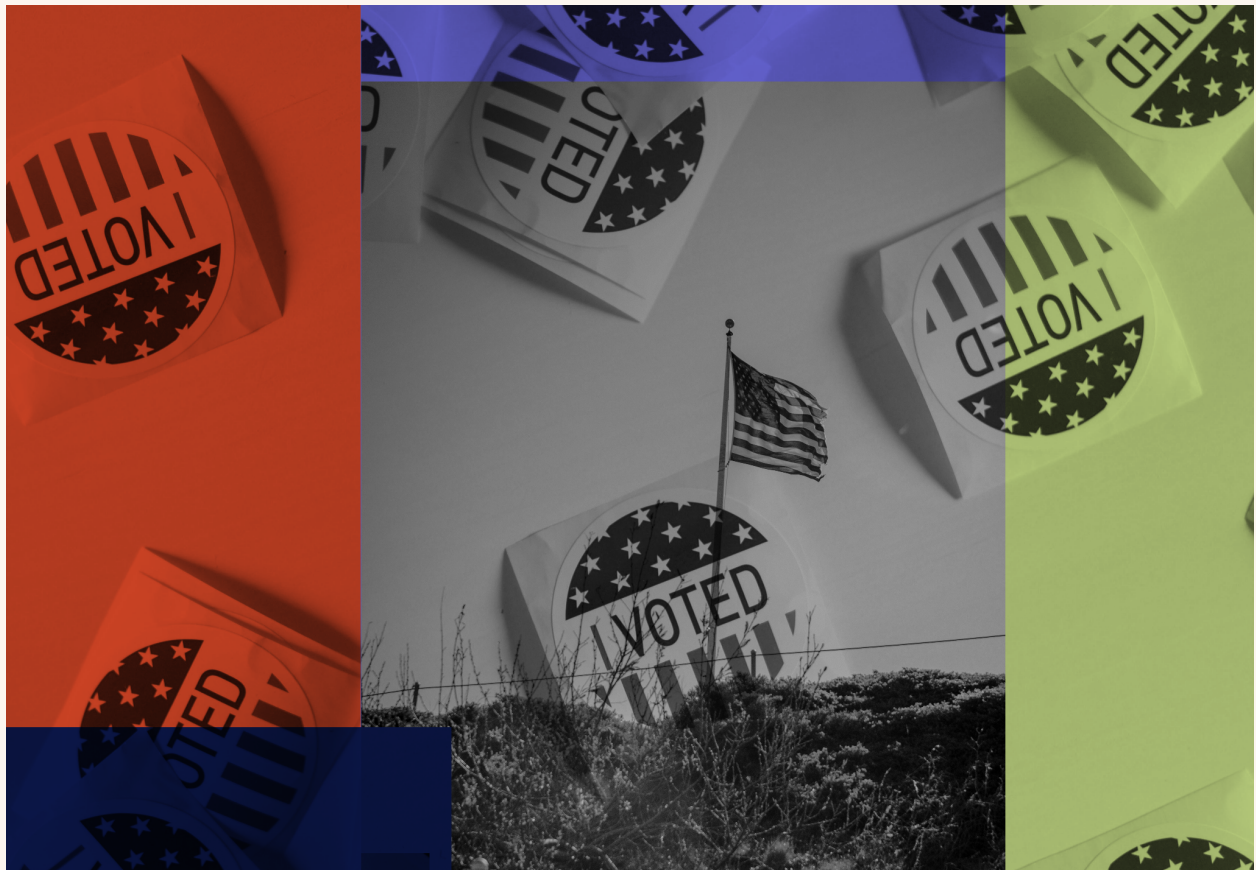


VOTING RIGHTS LAB

Assessing the Pro-Democracy Movement:

2025 Listening Tour Report



From the CEO

Dear Readers,

For the first time in generations, Americans are confronting a once-unthinkable possibility: that the freedom, fairness, and security of our elections could be meaningfully weakened. American democracy is entering a period of institutional stress — one that will test not only our systems, but our collective capacity to respond.

Last summer, Voting Rights Lab traveled across the country, spending more than 70 hours in conversation with 160 community-led organizations. From immigrant rights groups and faith leaders to disability advocates and rural organizers — and from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, to McAllen, Texas — we sought out perspectives beyond the traditional democracy ecosystem.

One thing became clear: the scale of today's challenges demands a fundamentally different approach to building power — one rooted in local communities and in the states, where decisions are made, and impacts are felt most directly.

Three critical insights emerged from our Listening Tour:

First: The professional democracy sector has a credibility problem. Participants consistently described election and voting-rights organizations as well-intentioned but out of touch. Too often, we speak in dense legal language and inside-baseball jargon, debating technical minutiae without translating what it means for everyday people. When urgency is framed in abstractions rather than lived experience, it breeds skepticism. That disconnect has created a trust gap — and unless we close it, we will struggle to build the durable, cross-community power this moment demands.

Second: Federal overreach is both a threat and a mobilizing opportunity. Actions by this administration have disproportionately impacted communities of color, low-income families, immigrants, and other historically underserved groups. The harm is real and ongoing. But participants were clear: democracy cannot be treated as a siloed issue when people experience its erosion through unaffordable housing, lost healthcare coverage, and higher grocery bills. If we connect attacks on democratic norms to the concrete issues communities are already fighting for, we can bring entirely new partners into this work. Federal overreach can serve as a catalyst for broader, values-driven coalition building.

Third: Predictable funding enables long-term impact. Many partners described funding volatility as a persistent challenge — one that felt particularly acute during the first year of the second Trump administration, when organizations were navigating heightened pressure and rapidly evolving threats. Several noted that this unpredictability made it harder to sustain staff, plan strategically, and meet the moment when community needs were

greatest. While rapid-response funding remains essential in urgent periods, participants emphasized the importance of pairing it with consistent, multi-year support alongside accessible resources, training, and mentorship. For philanthropy, this represents a meaningful opportunity to reinforce the organizations building durable democratic infrastructure in communities across the country.

Listening was essential — but it was only the first step. Over the past six months, we have analyzed what we heard and adapted our programs accordingly. Today, we are launching two initiatives designed to empower the next generation of pro-democracy leaders:

Advancing Liberty Coalition (ALC): A big-tent coalition uniting diverse constituencies across the ideological spectrum to advance local democracy campaigns. Co-led by Mormon Women for Ethical Government and We the Veterans & Military Families, our growing network includes veterans and military families, conservative faith leaders, business leaders, people with disabilities, and other trusted community leaders who serve as credible messengers within their communities.

Democracy Campaigns Workshop (DCW): A training and partnership program that equips issue-driven organizations to integrate democracy work into their existing campaigns while cultivating the leaders who will shape the future of this movement. Through messaging, policy and advocacy training, cross-state learning, and collaborative programming, the workshop activates organizations across issue areas and strengthens long-term capacity.

This is a difficult moment for American democracy — but it is also a clarifying one. It is revealing where new leadership is emerging, where coalitions are strengthening, and where the future of this work will be built.

I hope you will read the report, engage with its findings, and share your perspective. We cannot meet this moment without partners like you — nor would we want to.

In solidarity,

Samantha Tarazi

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Tarazi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Co-Founder and CEO, Voting Rights Lab

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Introduction

Voting Rights Lab conducts listening tours of partner organizations at key moments for our democracy. We first developed this practice in 2019 with a listening tour on vote-by-mail, and continued it in 2021 with a listening tour focused on the movement's long-term [vision, infrastructure, and capacity](#). What was striking throughout this year's project is that while much of the world has changed since our last listening tour, many of the challenges our partners and movement face that we identified previously have only deepened.

To meet this moment, we dramatically scaled our engagement for this year's project. This year's listening tour more than doubled in size from 2021 and also featured our first in-person guided conversations. We not only engaged core voting-rights partners but also expanded our universe to include organizations we had not previously engaged with and that are not part of our day-to-day coalitions.

Thank you for participating in this critical project. We invite you to engage with our tools and resources in 2026 and to ask us hard questions about what we have learned. Our team looks forward to stronger collaborations and opportunities to work together in the years ahead.

By the Numbers

- **Engaged 160 partners** in this project, more than doubling the size from 2021 and quadrupling from 2019. Participants included:
 - 100+ people of color-led organizations
 - Representing a diverse set of issues, including immigration, economic justice, reproductive rights and justice, LGBTQ+, youth, direct services, voting rights, veterans, disability rights, and more.
- **Conducted 17 roundtable discussions in eight states**, including outside of major cities.
- **Spent 70+ hours in dialogue** with leaders from across the country.

Assessing the Pro-Democracy Movement

Our team sought to understand the pro-democracy movement by answering **three overarching questions**:

HOW	How are people defining democracy and connecting it to their day-to-day work and partnerships, if at all?
WHO	Who is currently engaging in democracy spaces, and who is missing or needs more support to take on leadership roles?
WHAT	What resources and support do organizations and individuals need to engage more deeply in pro-democracy work?

How are people defining democracy and connecting it to their day-to-day work?

Participants repeatedly reflected that the democracy movement lacks a common language, goals, and even a shared definition of democracy. Participants often viewed organizations focused on elections and voting rights as out of touch or unable to connect our work to the tangible issues organizations are building power around daily.

This disillusionment creates a trust gap that is at the core of the challenges facing the pro-democracy movement right now. While 100% alignment may never be possible, working together to bridge this gap and connect democracy to the more material needs that partners are working to meet daily can strengthen relationships and coalitions, helping us respond in the event of an election crisis or further democratic backsliding.

Who is currently engaging in democracy spaces, and who is missing or needs more support to take on leadership roles?

Many of the participating organizations in this project are those who are closest to democracy in practice, providing mutual aid and support for people seeking abortion care in Texas, organizing employers to bargain collectively, documenting ICE raids, and more, yet are too often the farthest from our voting rights and democracy coalitions.

Many participants believe they are continually called upon to mobilize and respond during election crises, but are not sufficiently centered or supported, even though these issues directly affect their people. **The pro-democracy movement is continually losing expertise and capacity to these organizations, weakening our campaigns overall.**

Moderate audiences also play a role in protecting our democracy against authoritarianism. However, there are very few avenues for them to engage with the pro-democracy movement. In an all-hands-on-deck moment for democracy, they fear litmus tests and even judgment on other issues that hold us back from building the big tent needed to fight authoritarianism.

Participants expressed a need and desire to engage and mobilize these audiences at key moments, but were unsure how to build those connections and alignment.

What resources and support do organizations and individuals need to engage more deeply in pro-democracy work?

Participants expressed a desire to deepen their engagement in democracy work. They intuitively understand how it affects their ability to make progress on issues ranging from child care to housing affordability and healthcare access. However, not only do they often lack the capacity to fully engage with voting rights and election issues, but **they also**

question the current efficacy and impact of time spent in pro-democracy spaces and campaigns.

When asked what was needed to engage more with pro-democracy work, participants named:

- Funding, including material needs like childcare and transportation for volunteers, etc
- Leadership development, capacity building, and mentorship for staff
- True co-creation and opportunities to provide feedback on policy and messaging
- Campaigns that create buy-in and produce tangible results for community members
- Opportunities to find and create joy in work that is too often devoid of it
- An invitation to pro-democracy spaces and coalitions

While some of these are challenges for philanthropy, many are programmatic and cultural shifts that pro-democracy organizations can lead. In the next section, you will find information about a new initiative we are launching to address these challenges head-on.

“Participants often viewed organizations focused on elections and voting rights as out of touch... **This disillusionment creates a trust gap that is at the core of the challenges facing the pro-democracy movement right now.** While 100% alignment may never be possible, working together to bridge this gap and connect democracy to the more material needs that partners are working to meet daily can strengthen relationships and coalitions, helping us respond in the event of an election crisis or further democratic backsliding.”

Recommendations for the Field

What We Heard

“Do we even have a pro-democracy movement in the United States? A movement is made up of people, not just grassroots or national organizations.”

**— Community Organizer,
Organized Labor,
Philadelphia, PA**

“What limited capacity we do have is being taken by a never-ending, rapid response. Engaging with democracy concepts like this feels very removed from what we are being asked to hold right now.”

Our Response

Our organization will build deeper relationships with our partners by co-creating campaigns and materials, seeking genuine feedback, and identifying opportunities to support partner organizations. Connecting true grassroots movements with pro-democracy spaces can challenge our thinking and help us build a stronger democracy movement.

Our team will proactively seek more substantive engagement with partners and also help guide key mobilization and organizing opportunities for pro-democracy work.

We will add capacity to our partners and coalitions through training and workshops on messaging, advocacy, and policy. We will also proactively identify opportunities for them to engage on voting rights issues at key moments, providing a clear roadmap for their work and providing some capacity relief.

**— Deputy Director, AAPI
Organization, Durham, NC**

We will also continue to share these capacity challenges with philanthropic institutions and advocate for additional investment for pro-democracy work at the organizations closest to the impacts of authoritarianism.

“We want to have a big tent, but how do we message in a way that includes people from more moderate, white, centrist parts of the state? There seems to be an inherent conflict that I’m not sure how we work through to build this support for democracy.”

**— Community Organizer,
Grassroots Rural
Organization-Eau Claire, WI**

Launching the Advancing Liberty Coalition — a space for moderate and center-right allies to connect with more progressive in-state partners on aligned policy priorities and public education efforts to protect free and fair elections. This joint project of Voting Rights Lab and our 501(c)(4) affiliate Secure Democracy USA has already helped us defeat documentary proof-of-citizenship proposals in the states in 2025, and we are looking to engage more organizations in this coalition throughout 2026.

In the event of a post-election crisis, or to prevent one, we will proactively engage these partners and make them a resource for progressive organizations.

“The democracy movement always assumes and asks us to show up for them, but

Launching our Democracy Campaigns Workshop through Voting Rights Lab. This workshop will allow organizations across issue areas to

they never, ever, show up for us.”

**— Deputy Director,
Immigrant Rights
Organization, Milwaukee,
WI**

share best practices across state lines, co-create and design campaigns, receive expert policy and messaging support, and mentorship.

We will provide accessible, consistent expertise on issues that feel uniquely challenging to help integrate them into our partners’ programs and empower them to engage as leaders in pro-democracy coalitions and spaces. This will also allow us to receive feedback on our programs to ensure they are as impactful as possible.

Next Steps: Join Our Democracy Campaigns Workshop

We are launching a virtual democracy campaigns workshop to more deeply engage and build the capacity of organizations outside of traditional voting rights spaces. We will be:

- Providing leadership development and support to train new democracy leaders
- Building collaborative campaigns and programs alongside partners outside of conventional voting rights spaces
- Connecting our existing resources (policy, messaging, etc) to partner networks in a meaningful, consistent way that builds capacity and strength
- Sharing cross-state updates and best practices among a diverse group of partners
- Engaging and activating partners on election policy trends, threats, and opportunities early and often

We invite you to join us in this pilot beginning in January 2026, and we are actively seeking to engage more organizations. [You can sign up for the pilot here.](#)

Our Commitment

This moment requires organizations and practitioners to rethink how we view democracy, the partnerships and campaigns we are willing to take on, and challenge existing messaging, tactics, and strategies on elections that have made us feel more disjointed and disconnected than we actually are. **The recommendations here are only part of the solution, not the entire puzzle, and we plan to lead by example in implementing them.**

As we traveled the country, speaking with leaders about the challenges facing us, it became clear that we can rebuild and reshape our democracy by working together more effectively in a collaborative, collective effort. **This begins by empowering new democracy leaders, creating more engaging and accessible coalitions, and building greater trust across organizations to foster collaborative campaigns and programs.** It may even require us to break existing structures and rebuild them all together.

To meet not only the current authoritarian moment but build a more reflective democracy, voting rights and democracy defense coalitions and organizations will also **need to recommit ourselves to connecting our democracy work to democracy in practice — ensuring we are meeting the tangible, basic needs of those who are often left out (and left behind) in our movement.**

Our team is not only committed to taking on that challenge through our work to shore up election vulnerabilities in 2026 and protect election results from bad actors, but also to grow the leadership and expertise of the organizations on the frontlines of the fight for democracy, often outside courthouses and state legislatures. **If we are to build a democracy where everyone can thrive, democracy in practice and democracy in policy can no longer exist in silos.**

Methodology

The listening tour had two components: virtual interviews with 18 national partners and 17 roundtables conducted in multiple cities across eight states. Running from June to October 2025, a total of 160 participants were involved. The data collected were qualitative, and all 70 hours of conversations were conducted by 501(c)(3) organizations and were nonpartisan.

Individuals were compensated \$250 for participating in a 3-hour in-person roundtable and \$150 for a 1-hour virtual interview. An individual took notes and then synthesized internally by members of the Voting Rights Lab team.

Acknowledgements

In addition to our amazing participants in this project, we want to thank the organizations and individuals who helped us identify spaces to host roundtables, use their offices and resources for this project, validate it with their networks, and support recruitment, and who were instrumental in this project's success. Without you, we would not have been able to reach so many new and diverse communities and leaders, and our learning, programs, and organization would be less for it.

Voting Rights Lab is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, state-focused organization with a national perspective. Our comprehensive election policy analysis, research, and data provide uniquely actionable insights to our partners and the public.