

democracy**TBD**

A report on Democracy Fund's first futuring experiment

April 2021

AUTHOR

Katie Donnelly, Dot Connector Studio

PROJECT DIRECTOR:

Jessica Clark, Dot Connector Studio

PRODUCERS:

Mark Glaser, Dot Connector Studio

Sarah Lutman, 8 Bridges Workshop

A global pandemic forces people around the world to upend their lives, livelihoods, and relationships. Protests against racial injustice and police brutality sweep the nation. Increasingly devastating natural disasters take over large swaths of the country. A Supreme Court Justice dies and a president contracts coronavirus just before a pivotal election.

The year 2020 was filled with unprecedented volatility — citizens, communities, and institutions are still struggling to keep pace with cascading disruptions and to adjust expectations, policies, and visions based on these and the inevitable disruptions of the future.

In fall 2020, Democracy Fund worked with strategy firm Dot Connector Studio to bring together a diverse group of thinkers and lead them through a creative futur-ing process. We wanted to think through how the current pandemic, racial unrest, and election concerns might spark a cycle of disruption and reorganization in our democracy. Which aspects of our democratic systems might prove more resilient, and which might be fundamentally challenged? Which parts of our democracy are still to be determined — ***Democracy TBD?***

KEY INSIGHTS

From our sessions, participants voiced major concerns in these areas:

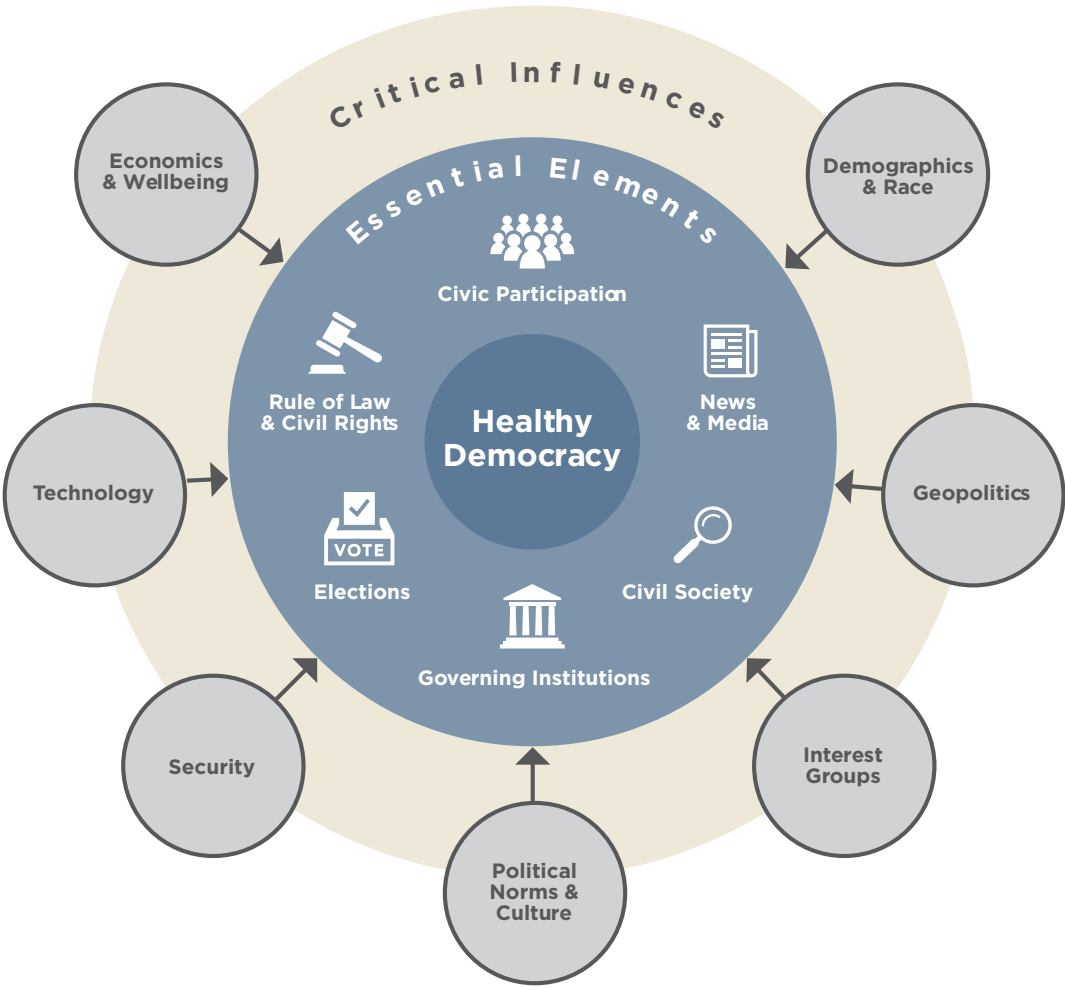
- **Disintegration:** Systems collapsing completely, including a dissolution of the United States itself
- **Fragmentation:** Citizens are cut off into disparate groups, including through increasingly siloed media and technology
- **Inequality:** Increasing caste systems related to race within the U.S. linked to vaccine access as well as technology
- **Corruption:** Increasing fraud, profiteering, and crime from leadership
- **Authoritarianism:** The rise of dictatorships around the globe
- **Polarization:** Intensifying polarization along party lines

However, participants found hope in these areas:

- **Renewal:** Hope for tighter bonds among communities and the opportunity to thrive after a chaotic period
- **Localism:** Hope for renewal primarily in terms of strong local community systems, including mutual aid societies and bartering
- **Cooperation:** Hope for renewal in the form of local cooperation
- **Mobilization:** Hope for shifting from a “politics of persuasion to a politics of mobilization,” with organizing techniques becoming increasingly common

In discussion, participants identified public health infrastructure, elections, the Supreme Court, and communications technology as especially volatile. In relation to the Democracy Fund’s **Healthy Democracy Framework** (see next page), we found that participants’ insights were most commonly associated with **News and Media, Rule of Law and Civil Rights, and Civic Participation**.

DEMOCRACY FUND's HEALTHY DEMOCRACY FRAMEWORK



We were not interested in predicting what will happen; we wanted to surface the assumptions and gaps that have left us unprepared to respond to significant disruptors, including the current pandemic.

Goals & Process

Our primary goal in this process was not to develop a list of fully fleshed-out scenarios for the future — rather, it was to anticipate the pathways by which major changes might happen and then to consider how we could help shape and intervene in those pathways. We were not interested in predicting what will happen. Instead, we wanted to surface the assumptions and gaps that have left us unprepared to respond to significant disruptors, including the current pandemic.

We wanted to know: How does this process challenge assumptions? What are we currently taking for granted? What are the institutions or norms that are most vulnerable to the disruption and the scenarios that we envision? What do we need to imagine in more of a transitional state than we are used to thinking about? Which aspects of our democracy are currently the weakest or most threatened? Which aspects of democracy need to change proactively?

This project was an early foray into futuring for Democracy Fund, which hopes to build out this practice more in 2021.

OUR PROCESS

Futuring is becoming a common approach for making sense of an increasingly uncertain world. Futuring models ask us to explore what different futures could look like and what types of disruptive events (or “disruptors”) might shape them.

Across industries, many organizations have used this time period to implement futuring and scenario planning processes that chart possible futures. From [global markets](#) to [nonprofits](#) and [philanthropy](#) to [museums](#) to the [U.S. workforce](#), researchers and organizations have explored the various paths that may emerge and what future scenarios could look like. Many of these futuring exercises have

explored pandemic response, economic implications, civil unrest and U.S. election results relevant across sectors and scenarios.

Through sharing the results of this experimental process, we aim to inspire other organizations to embark on similar futuring efforts that bring together many different perspectives to imagine and re-imagine our shared future.

As Jane McGonigal, Director of Game Research and Development at Institute for the Future [wrote in the early days of the pandemic](#): “The only way to prepare individually and collectively for what feels unimaginable today is to spend time, deeply imagining it together.” McGonigal, who led a large-scale social simulation that included a pandemic scenario in 2008, said that the impact of such exercises is not to predict what people will do. In fact, “the most important impact is simply to prepare our minds, to stretch our collective imagination, so we are more flexible, adaptable, agile, and resilient when the ‘unthinkable’ happens.”

It’s crucial that diverse groups embark on such processes, [according to](#) Marina Gorbis, Executive Director of the Institute for the Future: “We need to make futures thinking a way of life for more people outside of the enclaves like Silicon Valley, corporate boardrooms, and academic think tanks. To accomplish that, we must distribute the tools of futures thinking and futures-making more widely.” To that end, we’ve included resources for doing your own futuring at the end of this document.

Because our goal was to create the level of intimacy required for participants to freely share their fears and vulnerabilities, we focused on encouraging creativity and free discussion rather than on rigorous adherence to a pre-set methodology. We allowed connections to emerge organically, and we did not put constraints on participants’ ideas. We sought thinkers who would both speak freely and disagree respectfully.

Rather than execute a highly structured process, we went on an experimental journey.

We asked participants to deeply consider what it would be like to be a person living in the U.S. in the future they envisioned. What would it mean in terms of civic participation? What would it mean for news and media? For free and fair elections? For civil society? For our governing institutions? For rule of law and civil rights?

Rather than execute a highly structured process, we went on an experimental journey together: asking participants to brainstorm around uncertainties, then developing a bit more certainty by spinning things out through existing frameworks, then opening things up to bigger-picture questions about democracy, the disruptiveness of our world, and what has left many of us feeling vulnerable at this moment.

We emphasized creativity: both in the process itself, and as a powerful force within the scenarios we asked participants to craft. We also invited participants to reflect on the entire process using a creative medium of their choice. Taking a creative risk requires another level of vulnerability, and we are grateful for those participants who chose to do it.

PONDERING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

From our bedrooms and makeshift home offices — occasionally interrupted by homeschooling children — we brought together a diverse group of American thinkers for a series of structured Zoom conversations that left us with more questions than answers. Through the duration of the process, real life disruptive events continued to happen, which generated even more questions that will shape future inquiries as we continue to struggle with understanding which parts of our democracy may prove resilient and which may be irreparably fragile.

These fundamental questions include:

- How can Americans come to any kind of consensus without legitimate, shared resources for truthful information?
- How much have Americans relied on shared norms of behavior for government officials – such as experts serving in key governmental posts rather than political loyalists – that we’ve seen eroded in recent months and years? Are “norms” enough? Or do we need actual legal precedent?
- How can Americans communicate with one another as media become increasingly siloed and in-person gatherings are restricted?
- Is focusing on the local a potential remedy? Or just a microcosm of these larger problems?
- Is there anything that can be done to rebuild trust in governmental institutions and democratic processes?
- What does all of this mean for press freedom, investigative journalism, and the free exchange of ideas among citizens?
- What can be done to create a sense of shared identity among Americans?
- What will it look like to truly inhabit this changed future? To work in this future? To vote in this future? To send our kids to school in this future?

The process revealed how vulnerable participants were feeling: the mood of the group was dark, with concerns about the 2020 election and authoritarianism looming large. Participants were grappling with multiple current and potential disruptive events, including some that happened over the course of this project. Trust in international and national solutions was almost nonexistent – we did not hear suggestions for large-scale solutions. However, participants did express faith in localized solutions. There was also little hope put into existing political leadership, although some participants expressed hope that major disruptions could lead to the replacement of the “old guard.”

Disruptors

The groups identified 79 distinct “disruptors” — disruptive events that could trigger major societal changes. (Please see page 28 for the complete list).

We saw the following themes about possible futures emerging from these disruptors (listed in order of frequency):

- **Renewal:** Hope for resiliency among communities and the opportunity to thrive after a chaotic period
- **Disintegration:** Concerns about systems collapsing completely, including a dissolution of the United States itself
- **Fragmentation:** Many ways in which citizens could be cut off into disparate groups, including through increasingly siloed media and technology
- **Localism:** Hope for renewal primarily in terms of strong local community systems, including mutual aid societies and bartering
- **Inequality:** Increasing caste systems within the U.S. linked to vaccine access and technology
- **Cooperation:** Hope for renewal came in the form of cooperation, primarily at the local and regional levels
- **Mobilization:** Politics shifting from a “politics of persuasion to a politics of mobilization,” with organizing techniques becoming increasingly common
- **Corruption:** Concerns about increasing fraud, profiteering, and crime from leadership
- **Authoritarianism:** Concerns about the rise of dictatorships around the globe
- **Polarization:** Increasing polarization along party lines

Despite an overall grim mood among participants, **“renewal”** was the most common dynamic among the disruptors, followed closely by **“disintegration”** and **“fragmentation.”**

MAJOR THEMES

Each participant then focused on one disruptor to consider more deeply in terms of its implications for the Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, and Creative sectors (STEEP+C). Below are examples of participant responses, grouped into seven key themes:

- America Comes Apart (page 11)
- Authoritarianism Ascendent (page 12)
- Inequality Compounded (page 13)
- Media and Tech at the Center (page 14)
- Infrastructure: Disrupted, Rebuilt or Both (page 15)
- Renewal after Chaos (page 16)

America Comes Apart



Potential disruptor: *Fragmentation of leadership, efforts to coordinate locally/nationally devolve into gridlock and corruption*

Other potential disruptors that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

Trump loses but refuses to leave office. Real rupture in our presidential succession. States start to secede. Federal government launches cyber-warfare against states, a new refugee crisis looms.

America dissolves as a nation with multiple states voting to secede. States compete around economies, PR battle ensues. Trump's re-election leads to new regional alliances, violence escalates.

In this scenario, our cultural and class divides worsen and seem irreconcilable, with each side shaming the other and creating a “no way out” dynamic in which any effort to bridge divides is seen as traitorous. Meanwhile, tech platforms, especially Facebook, become one of the few points of connection nationally. The lack of federal support or federal leadership creates an even more “K-shaped economy” (rich benefit, others lose) with greater economic divides — gated communities vs. “Hooverilles.” The U.S. economy increasingly looks like the economy of a failed state.

A few blue states/regions push forward with regulations and investments in decarbonization and green jobs, but they lack federal investment resources to make real progress. Red states/regions decry this as “job-killing” and also make environmental protection into a cultural wedge issue.

It feels like a genuine civil war, but without the bloodshed or with two geographic regions in conflict. Regions across the country band together — from central California to rural Maine and exurban Ohio on the one hand; to metro areas such as Charlotte (NC) and Charlottesville (VA), Seattle/Portland, or San Francisco/New York City on the other. Artists, especially recording artists, try to bring people on their side together but aren't able to help recreate a national whole.

Authoritarianism Ascendant



Potential disruptor: *Rise in authoritarianism linked to transnational organized crime*

In this scenario, a rise in dictatorship worldwide has eroded social trust. This outcome is what criminal elites have long sought: unending riches, hijacked institutions that will not hold them accountable — and helpless, sick and impoverished citizens offering no real obstacle. This grim situation will continue unless 1) elite criminals are prosecuted and their operations dismantled, regardless of who is exposed in the process or what corporate bodies are hurt, and 2) a wealth tax on billionaires, or similar measures, are implemented.

Given the enormity of these criminal enterprises, and the refusal of compromised governments to investigate them, much of the burden has fallen on individual journalists. With income inequality now at unparalleled levels, and elected officials frequently funded by transnational organized crime, the average citizen has little recourse. Meanwhile, the stock market soars, divorced from the actual economy.

The people in charge know very well that climate change is real and have no interest in stopping or slowing it. They hoard resources and wealth before the worst damage hits. They see a depopulated earth as easier to dominate, and they do not care about who perishes in the process. These criminals do not care if they are caught; they will only respond to loss of money and power.

Another potential disruptor that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

Shared norms of international liberal order disintegrate. States stop cooperating, and a winner-take-all-ethos emerges as the environment tanks.

Institutions have been gutted, courts packed, and agencies purged as the mafia state becomes more entrenched. We see a reduction in public expenditure on art, education, journalism, and even entertainment, if it does not serve the interest of the criminal oligarchy. A culture of self-censorship emerges before state censorship. However, creativity remains a potent weapon against autocracy in any country.

Inequality Compounded



Potential disruptor: *Disparity in how COVID vaccines are accessed*

In this scenario, a new social caste is created, as the gulf between the “haves and have-nots” expands to include those who have been vaccinated and those who haven’t. Those who haven’t been vaccinated are isolated and face severe restrictions on their movement. Health disparities increase, as does the cost of social services and impact on government services. COVID-19 patients become a minority caste with little political power, becoming their own movement.

COVID-19 continues to mutate in humans, requiring more than one type of vaccine to be administered and creating pressures to develop new and improved vaccines. There is development of rapid self-testing, and the ability to identify people in various stages of contagion to facilitate isolation. We all have to be resocialized to some extent on how to physically be with people.

There is a continued increase in distanced learning and new competitors to Zoom arise to facilitate digital connection. Work from home becomes normalized, with a re-defined “work day.” We’ll see a pre- and post-COVID-19 split in art and architecture, with an impact on music venues, live shows, plays, lectures and a rise in homegrown streaming TV/movies. The decrease in tourism forces communities to create new revenue streams.

Mother Nature gets a big break, but not big enough to undo the damage we’ve already done to the environment. While some areas experience cleaner air and water, waste continues to be dumped in areas populated by those who haven’t been vaccinated.

Other potential disruptors that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

A string of natural disasters occurs and disproportionately harms people of color.

The divide in the U.S. is no longer urban/rural, but climate affected/climate stable.

The increase in COVID-related mass surveillance disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Personal data becomes a form of capital, which drives further polarization.

The nonprofit industrial complex co-opts radical organizing. Corporations and nonprofits seem more compassionate, but are they?

Media and Tech at the Center



Potential disruptor: *Mass social media dissolves as people prefer closed, walled gardens instead*

In this scenario, different groups exacerbate their differences, stepping into mass spaces only to promote their messages through highly influential accounts. Media further resolve to serve narrow segments, leaving no spaces for stories that speak compellingly to all Americans.

Media organizations reorganize themselves to ensure that they have access to the most influential walled gardens. Partisan and advocacy media organizations hire writers to post talking points and article links directly into conversation threads in walled gardens. In response, nonprofit civic media organizations get millions in grant funding to deploy their own fact-checkers and civil conversationalists to these spaces. As influential walled gardens become populated by propaganda voices, offshoots develop.

Other potential disruptors that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

Journalists rounded up for not towing the authoritarian line. Micro-networks, underground art flourish as big tech aligns with the regime.

Loss of documentary filmmaking institutions due to economic fallout of COVID-19.
The ability to tell independent and investigative stories is hampered.

Poor communities that lack “expressive privilege” fall so far behind economically from other communities that they resemble shantytowns and tent villages. “Opposition research” tactics jump from partisan warfare to conflicts between rising walled-garden communities. About 10 percent of the United States population secedes from their local state jurisdictions in several places nationwide. The federal government becomes largely a platform for the party in charge to promote its ideas to the most influential walled gardens in America. The mainstream art scene gives up its mass appeals, and artists identify themselves first by their affiliation to a certain socio-political community, then to the medium in which they specialize.

Infrastructure: Disrupted, Rebuilt, or Both?



Potential Disruptor: *Internet access is mandated in every community in America*

In this scenario, the digital divide is lessened. Indian Country has access to instant information, even in rural areas and reservations. A huge expansion of the national broadband network is needed, but the cost is prohibitive. Strain on bandwidth could disrupt the existing network. Homeless populations and those without electricity may still lack access.

More students can access online learning resources. There is a greater need for trained technical assistance professionals and planning for increased technological capacity. Remote job opportunities are expanded, targeting the best candidates no matter where they are physically located.

The number of digital companies may increase with the new technology. Companies that cater to remote work become more powerful. Banking shifts and more commerce takes place online. The expansion of virtual events offers a new income stream for businesses that previously relied heavily on in-person interaction. Some in-person jobs may be shifted or cut.

There will be a physical disruption of land in order to accommodate the expanded broadband network across the U.S. Federal, state and tribal governments must work in coordination to deliver this expanded service to all applicable communities.

Artists are able to connect more directly with audiences; the expansion of e-commerce could drive more traffic to digital creative platforms.

Other potential disruptors that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

Electrical grid breaks down. People move back into cities, back to connecting with neighbors, back to books and in-person entertainment.

More people are moving out of the cities, new forms of media cropping up, cultural distrust. More tension in rural areas, fewer resources in urban ones.

Renewal After Chaos



Potential disruptor: *Mutual aid societies scale up to create widespread change*

In this scenario, as local mutual aid societies grow, there is more radical joy — working together during a traumatic period creates powerful shared memories. These moments of joy will memorialize into annual events.

Some societies commit to deeper roots in democracy, equity, accountability and transparency, while others have more authoritarian/oligarchical management structures. As basic needs are met, these aid societies begin investing in underfinanced entrepreneurs and communities, leading to more innovation that does not rely on venture capital reducing the labor force. Depending on the broader community context, there are either tax incentives or punishments as the societies grow larger — they may need to classify as traditional business types for tax purposes, and we may see wealth capitalists attempt to leverage this model as a tax shelter.

Communities see an emergence of pocket cooperative economies. Major environmental tasks are not addressed on a larger scale, but some communities begin addressing local environmental issues through organizing and cooperative funding models. There are more collectivist political parties and federal funding for more experimentation in scalable mutual aid models. Meanwhile, conservative communities oppose those efforts and double down on individualist policies. Local creative ecosystems are also strengthened. Artists that don't want to move to major metros can afford to collaborate and share the wealth of success.

Other potential disruptors that the group explored in our autumn discussions:

The police are defunded and community connections are fostered. Civil unrest around killings of people of color triggers a cascade of consequences, some destructive, others liberating.

People organize themselves in new ways, around ideas and shared interests rather than traditional structures. Tech tools provide more opportunities for rapid alignment and shared values.

Implications for Democracy

What might all of this mean for democracy? In relation to the Democracy Fund's **Healthy Democracy Framework**, we found that the disruptors were most commonly associated with **News and Media**, **Rule of Law and Civil Rights**, and **Civic Participation**.

Key themes that came up in the discussions across the elements of the Healthy Democracy Framework include:



News and Media: Participants discussed streaming platforms becoming increasingly powerful and setting the agenda aligned with the political regime. They expressed concerns for the loss of independent and accountability journalism, as well as suppression of people who speak out, and the potential for the truth to become “fringe.” They also discussed a powerful rise of independent homegrown media from marginalized people, amplifying their voices, with some forms of creative expression becoming increasingly in demand. Participants were concerned about gaps in secure digital infrastructure, cyber warfare and disinformation, as well as disparities in broadband infrastructure that could either be alleviated or made worse.



Rule of Law & Civil Rights: Participants noted the amount of pent-up energy and frustration that could lead to increased social unrest, and expressed concern about the erosion of civil and legal rights. This encompasses murky attacks by military and police on protesters, emboldened actors arguing for xenophobia and vigilantism, violations of privacy rights (especially for more vulnerable populations), and potentially shooting wars on state borders as part of a “swirly marble cake of civil war.” Participants addressed racial disparities in

gun rights, and more “delegated violence” executed by militias and others acting as self-appointed agents of the military or police. Participants generally did not express a great deal of trust in solutions coming from the top down — one commented: “There is no savior from above, but there is power from below.”



Civic Participation: Many factors affect future civic participation, including almost-irreconcilable polarization, so-called “public opinion” becoming more elusive, and population and identity shifts, and access to technology. There may continue to be low face-to-face engagement, given the pandemic and its variants. Black conservative movements as well as Black movements centered on the Second Amendment and self-defense may spring up. We may see more cooperation and accountability locally, and a desire to tighten local community resiliency. Alternatively, civic participation may decline because people simply do not have the bandwidth (literal or mental) to participate.



Governing Institutions: There were concerns around accelerated kleptocracy, multiple constitutional crises, internecine personal attacks on political leaders, a possible loss of cohesion among American military, increasing right-wing populist politics and xenophobia, and perhaps a ragged process of secession. Institutions may face legitimacy challenges if Congress fails to stand up to tech companies and questions arise about regulation of vaccines and the long-tail healthcare costs of the pandemic. The power that nation-states have may change, which will mean more negotiation and fatigue among citizens. Compounding these challenges is the likelihood that many people will simultaneously have greater dependencies on government programs.



Civil Society: Participants discussed defunding of institutions, new economic systems, different ways of working, and rethinking of what currency

is and what employer/employee relationships look like. They saw a period of rapid adaptation to changing systems powered by tech that's rapidly scalable, more sophisticated mutual aid within a complex web of value systems, and a moment of rapid reckoning around race and inclusion in many institutions. They also discussed new forms of cooperatives and collectives, tension between older and newer nonprofit organizations, nonprofits contributing to a "shadow state" that moves money from public to private spheres, and potentially "warfare" between different types of nonprofits. We also heard about micro-economies, community management of collective infrastructure, and "sanctuary toolkits" — including psychological first aid, somatics, civil rights training, de-escalation techniques, harm reduction training, and NARCAN training.



Elections: Participants were concerned about the influence of criminal dollars in elections, widespread voter suppression, increasingly intense opposition research, and disturbing uses of data in elections as well as misinformation such as "deep fakes." Several people saw a rise of a multiparty system spurred by siloed communities with a new set of alternatives arising to challenge entrenched politicians, along with new election reforms. Participants stressed that there could be vastly different scenarios and outcomes depending on what happened in November 2020 and beyond.

QUESTIONS OF TRUST

In discussion, participants identified especially volatile areas including public health infrastructure, elections, the Supreme Court, and communications technology. At the start of this futuring process, in the late summer of 2020 there was more consensus around institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) serving as nonpartisan, factual resources for information

One participant wondered:
Is there *anything* that can be
done to rebuild trust at the
national level at this point?

about the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of this process, there was widespread questioning of the credibility of the CDC, both from people mistrustful of scientific experts and those mistrustful of the federal government's pandemic response. With the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, there was a deep concern about the delegitimization of the Supreme Court and the "tyranny of the minority." The Supreme Court may remain out of touch with the majority of the population for generations. What does that mean for the healthy functioning of that institution?

There is also a general lack of trust that runs deep, and is likely to worsen in a K-shaped economic recovery, in which well-off political leaders are increasingly out of touch with the lived experiences of everyday Americans. One participant wondered: Is there *anything* that can be done to rebuild trust at the national level at this point?

Before the pandemic, localism appeared to be one answer to the trust-building question. But fewer in-person conversations means that it is harder to build relationships based on trust. Trust in larger institutions remains low, as they are "not founded on enough of a sense of shared reality and don't tether to enough pieces of society to hold them up," according to one participant, which leads people to "turn to their own silos, which serve informational and emotional needs." Larger institutions may not be up to the task of responding to our firehose of emergencies: "For something to be stable, it has not historically been nimble," said one participant, noting that he has "personally lost trust in the institutions of the government when they cannot respond to change." What is the balance between stability and agility that will allow institutions to be responsive to the moment while retaining some stability?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Our purpose in this exercise was not to generate solutions, but participants did express clear needs and ideas for how to address pressing issues:

- Increased civic education and public service campaigns around the value of democracy, voting, participating in the Census, and more;
- A project of nation-building through a cohesive imagined identity, a need for a national project to tell a more positive inclusive story about America;
- Reforming how we address climate and healthcare, issues that are affecting Americans at the level of survival;
- A national reckoning on race and more ways to work together across racial tensions;
- Resocialization for how to be around people post-pandemic;
- An increase in political accountability especially in rural and other overlooked areas;
- Increasingly agile political methods, with a need for more verified information from candidates and other trusted intermediaries; and
- A change in voting culture to make it more compelling and powerful. (It's not as easy as an Amazon "buy" button yet.) As one participant said, "There's no point in talking about free and fair elections until we have some new 'tyranny of convenience' around voting."

Conclusion: Looking Forward

This is just the beginning of a process that we hope can feed into larger discussions about our shared futures, and inspire other groups to lead their own futuring processes. Marina Gorbis [asserts](#): “People must see themselves as actors in the future. To do that, the abstract future must be made proximate and tangible.”

The future can provoke fear, but it also can “inspire wonder, awe and hope,” or what she calls “urgent optimism.” The future is a process we are building together, and we have the power to change it through individual and collective action. “It has been proven that even in the wake of life-wrecking disasters, hope for the future can be preserved if we are given reason to believe that we live in a caring community of those who will give material support to one another,” Scott Esposito [wrote](#) on *Literary Hub*. “Essentially, there are still decent people and institutions with whom we can build a better tomorrow.”

Appendix

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List of participants

For our series of futuring conversations, we brought together a diverse group of 18 thinkers representing different fields, geographic regions, races, ethnicities, ages, and genders. We sought original thinkers from outside of the Beltway and tried to move beyond the typical experts who are consulted for both futurism and political analysis. Some of the participants were nominated by Democracy Fund; others by Dot Connector Studio and 8 Bridges Workshop. We debated how far to reach out into conservative circles given the anti-democratic sentiments advanced by many in the movement. In the end, the group ended up more ethnically and racially diverse, more female, and less conservative. We took this into account when parsing the scenarios.

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of October 2020.



Alondra Nelson
President of the
Social Science
Research Council



Sharon Chang
Founder of Guild of
Future Architects



Lanhee J. Chen
Fellow at the Hoover
Institution & Director
of Domestic Policy
Studies, Stanford



Lafayette Cruise
Futurist and urban
planner



Karen Finney
Democratic strategist
and political
commentator for CNN



Masha Gessen
Journalist at
The New Yorker



Mónica Guzmán
Cofounder of
The Evergrey



Robert Hernandez
Associate professor
of professional
practice at USC



Sarah Kendzior
Author and co-host
of the *Gaslit Nation*
podcast



Chenjerai Kumanyika
Assistant professor
at Rutgers' Dept.
of Journalism and
Media Studies



Becca Landsberry
Executive director
of the Native
American Journalists
Association



Carrie Lozano
Director of the
IDA's Enterprise
Documentary Fund



Katherine Maher
Chief executive
officer and
executive director
of the Wikimedia
Foundation



Chaka Mkali
Director of
organizing and
community building
at Hope community



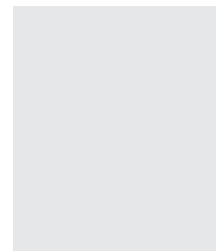
Dalia Mogahed
Director of research
at the Institute for
Social Policy and
Understanding



Malka Older
Author and faculty
associate at ASU
School for the
Future of Innovation
in Society



Felicia Wong
President and CEO
of the Roosevelt
Institute



One participant
chose to remain
anonymous

Methodology

Because our goal was to create the level of intimacy required for participants to freely share their fears and vulnerabilities, we focused on encouraging creativity and free discussion rather than on rigorous adherence to a pre-set methodology. We allowed connections to emerge organically, and we did not put constraints on participants' ideas.

We broke up the group into smaller groups of three to four people. Small groups met for two sessions, and the entire group reconvened for a culminating full discussion. In the first session, we asked participants to share what they feared for the future as we brainstormed a list of potential disruptive events that could shape future scenarios. Democracy Fund staff members participated as observers and hosts, but left it up to members of the group to drive the discussions.

We then walked participants through an example STEEP + C framework. STEEP is a common framework used for scenario planning, which invites participants to consider how a particular disruptor could affect the Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political sectors. We added a "C" for "Creative" for this exercise as creativity was a central part of our process. We stressed creativity in this process because we wanted participants to feel comfortable generating truly out-of-the-box ideas and not feel constrained, and we wanted the artists who took part in these conversations to feel open to imagining new possibilities that drew upon their creative imaginations.

Participants chose a disruptor to consider more deeply for homework and completed a STEEP + C process on their own. In the second session, participants shared their STEEP + C scenarios and we discussed what they mean for democracy, using the elements of Democracy Fund's **Healthy Democracy Framework** (page 4) as a guide.

We asked participants to deeply consider what it would be like to be a person living in the U.S. in the future they envisioned. What would it mean in terms of civic participation? What would it mean for news and media? For free and fair elections? For civil society? For our governing institutions? For rule of law and civil rights?

We also wanted participants to respond through creative means, as neuroscientists have discovered that creating art [activates different regions of the brain](#), and this type of creative output is often lacking in scenario planning processes. We invited participants to reflect on the entire process using a creative medium of their choice, and five accepted, creating two speculative fiction pieces, one alternate history, and a six-movement hip-hop song. (Participants were compensated for their time, and for their creative responses.) Democracy Fund staff has been discussing ways to incorporate these creative responses into their own internal strategic conversations.

Full list of disruptors generated in initial meetings

1. "Prairie fire" — widespread environmental decimation clears the path for radical new actions
2. A natural disaster forces us to take climate change seriously
3. A string of natural disasters happens, disproportionately affecting people of color
4. All media move to partisan sides
5. America dissolves as a nation with multiple states voting to secede. States start to compete around which economies work best, PR battle ensues
6. Artists take a more coordinated and active role in politics, centering imagination and liberation
7. Authoritarian national response, militarized and undemocratic
8. BIPOC activists focus on self-defense and self-sufficiency
9. Communities with stronger social networks and civic ecosystems fare better in the wake of the pandemic, while suffering increases everywhere else
10. Complete environmental disaster
11. Corporates become the primary movers of logistics and support in crisis response
12. COVID vaccine turns people into zombies!
13. Diaspora communities are cut off due to failing infrastructure
14. Dictators working together
15. Disparity in how COVID vaccine is applied
16. Disruptions to higher ed lead to barriers to entry, higher ed institutions that can't innovate shut down en masse, larger scale online public-service institutions become the model for higher education
17. Electrical grid breaks down
18. Elevation of indigenous climate conservation practices
19. Environmental "green zones" which prioritize the local health of a community rise up
20. Everything is rosy for those in power: police state is working the way that it should, stock market is booming, elites see no need to course correct
21. Exponential growth in gun sales, with simultaneous increasing mistrust of police
22. Facebook faces a reckoning: "tech boys" of social media platforms are held accountable
23. Fragmentation of leadership, efforts to coordinate locally/regionally/nationally devolve into gridlock and corruption
24. Housing is reframed as a human right, homelessness is not treated as a crime
25. Information sphere ruptures: Loss of shared consensus on what is actually true or happening
26. Internet access is mandated in every community in America
27. Internet access is not reliable nationwide
28. Journalists rounded up for not toeing the authoritarian line
29. Larger community and political refragmentation and organization
30. Less reliance on social media and technology leads to stronger ties to geographic communities
31. Local civic engagement and community aid models rise
32. Local journalism flounders in the vacuum of the collapse of institutions
33. Loss of a sense of time, shared rituals, shared calendars
34. Loss of documentary filmmaking institutions due to economic fallout of COVID-19
35. Loss of positive group identity as "Americans"
36. Mass mobilization movements increase
37. Mass social media dissolves as people prefer closed, walled gardens instead
38. More collaborative leadership style takes hold
39. More people are moving out of the cities, new forms of media cropping up, cultural distrust

40. More women and people of color in elected office
41. Movement toward new models for storytelling
42. Multinational corporations step up their “extranational” behaviors, acting as if they are countries
43. Mutual aid societies scale up to create large-scale change
44. Native American nations enshrine free press in their laws
45. New shared narratives and movements rise, driven by empathy and mutual vulnerability
46. Our concept of the nuclear family as the core unit evolves into something more expansive, spurred by life under the pandemic and its “pods” and multi-generational dependencies
47. Overwhelming environmental catastrophes occur
48. People organize themselves in new ways, more around ideas and shared interests and not traditional structures and candidates.
49. People who do not primarily identify themselves by which state they live in are activated to lobby for a different system or form different alliances
50. Rise in authoritarianism linked to transnational organized crime
51. Rise of non-monetary currencies (bodies, cigarettes, toilet paper), community currencies and barter, underground and bitcoin
52. Rise of trust in local microeconomics and cooperative endeavors
53. Science discovers that there is a particular gene sequence that makes people immune to COVID-19, resulting in a caste system
54. Secessionist movements are exacerbated by COVID-19 as states form different policies than the federal government
55. Shared norms of international liberal order disintegrate
56. Shift in the way journalists see their role — a new set of practices and understandings emerge
57. State secession: border enforcement, shooting wars across borders, mask wars. Cyberwarfare steps up.
58. State secession: Maybe artists move to where there is universal basic income?
59. Strong leadership emerges, a new New Deal is enacted
60. Tech consolidation grows as people only want to engage in digital spaces that feel safe, unthreatening, policed, mirroring places of power in the offline world
61. The economy is de-carbonized; different political decisions lead to better outcomes than what we have now
62. The increase in COVID-related mass surveillance disproportionately affects marginalized communities, infringing on privacy rights
63. The new recession is worse than 2008
64. The nonprofit industrial complex co-opts radical organizing strategies
65. The police are defunded and community connections are fostered
66. The U.S. ceases to exist as one nation
67. There is a rise in grassroots support, micro-communities; people find a way to thrive in small scales
68. There’s a vaccine that works, but it’s only available in some countries or regions, or to particular people
69. Things are broken, but even when put back together, they have a “rougher texture,” with events triggering new protests
70. Trump loses but refuses to leave office. Real rupture in our presidential succession. States start to secede
71. Trump wins legitimately, signaling the end of an era for the old Democratic guard. Led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a younger generation of Democrats takes over as leaders of the Democratic Party
72. U.S. economy collapses
73. Underserved communities get to tell their stories, enabled by technology
74. Uptick in already rampant surveillance and encryption
75. U.S. citizens experience mass depression and trauma and lack of social cohesion
76. U.S. politics move away from persuasion to politics of mobilization
77. Vaccine skepticism — among the Black community, among anti-vaxxers, among the right wing
78. We discover a cure for the disease and go back to complacently thinking we can solve anything with science
79. Working class disappears

Resources for doing your own futuring

COVID-19 scenario planning for nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, Deloitte: This report from the Monitor Institute by Deloitte is based on interviews with over 75 social sector leaders in the early months of the pandemic to understand what the future might hold for the sector, including assumptions, uncertainties, scenarios, takeaways and what to do next.

Design and Futures, Stuart Candy and Cher Potter: This collection of essays, manifestos, interviews and peer-reviewed articles explores the field of “design futures” and how it is practiced around the world.

Equitable Futures Toolkit, Institute for the Future: The Equitable Futures Toolkit is a free guide that includes templates and a deck of cards to lay out hypothetical scenarios, responses, and outcomes. (See the [Institute for the Future’s](#) website for more resources, research, and training opportunities.)

Foresight Cards: This deck of foresight cards from Dutch company IVTO can help you conduct STEEP analyses and do other scenario planning work.

How to Future, Matt Smith with Madeline Ashby: This book provides a “flexible, design- and innovation-friendly approach” for creating better futures through tools and practices — including

building habits of “everyday futuring” — and ways to prototype ideas and tie those ideas to strategy.

The Future, Nick Montfort: This book is not focused on scenario planning, rather, it’s about the work of how artists, designers, inventors and technologists have imagined and created the future.

Making Sense of Uncertainty: Nonprofit Scenario Planning in the COVID-19 Pandemic, Bridgespan Group: This article and toolkit are designed to support nonprofit leaders through scenario planning processes. Bridgespan Group worked with nonprofit leaders to implement an approach based on an adaptation of [Bain & Company’s coronavirus](#) scenario planning guidance and strategy in uncertainty methodology.

“*Mapping Impacts and Implications*,” Practical Futuring: This article from Matt Smith, author of *How to Future*, explains how to use an Impact wheel — “a straightforward, practical tool to help map out future possibilities. It simply helps you think about and carefully unpack orders of impact of significant change.”

About the organizations

Democracy Fund: an independent and nonpartisan, private foundation that confronts deep-rooted challenges in American democracy while defending against new threats. Since 2014, it has made grants of more than \$150 million in support of those working to strengthen our democracy.

Dot Connector Studio: a media strategy and production firm founded and led by noted journalist and researcher Jessica Clark. Dot Connector Studio collaborates with funders, journalists, and experts to develop social impact media projects, imagine new futures, and build emerging fields.

8 Bridges Workshop: 8 Bridges Workshop collaborates with leading social sector and nonprofit clients in culture, public media, and philanthropy. Led by Sarah Lutman, 8 Bridges provides strategy, evaluation, research, and organizational capacity building services.