

Advancing Pluralism in a Time of Democratic Stress

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Purpose & Summary

In a time of systemic pressures on US democracy, this document invites national pluralism ecosystem leaders to consider current risks to pluralism. While there is broad field alignment around the importance of pluralism within American democracy, there is less clarity about the *conditions that make pluralism possible* as well as current threats to those conditions. This document aims to fill that gap. The authors acknowledge that possible implications are by no means straightforward or uncontested, and that this memo's approach may not translate for a range of additional audiences. The memo nevertheless suggests potential action items for the field to consider—thought leadership, policy engagement, coalition-building, and culture change—to protect the conditions necessary for American pluralism to thrive.

Context

Pluralism is the practice of building a society where we're able to live with, work with, and care about people who are different from us. It is not a peripheral civic value, it is a foundational American strength that enables people of different identities, beliefs, and ways of life to coexist, participate, and shape a shared future together. In moments of democratic stress, pluralism becomes both more difficult and more essential.

The United States is currently navigating a period of profound strain on democratic norms and institutions. Many scholars and civic leaders across the political spectrum—including Danielle Allen, Daniel Stid, Robert Putnam, Scott Warren, and Rachel Kleinfeld— as well as [objective democracy measures](#) warn that democratic backsliding is no longer hypothetical. Some jurists and commentators (Sarah Isgur, Raymond Kethledge, and Gene Healy, among others) also observe a systemic degradation of the Constitutional separation of powers, resulting in over-concentration of executive authority, weakness in legislative power, and concerns about judicial supremacy. Alongside these critical national developments, American values remain consistent, with Americans holding deep, widely shared commitments to [fairness](#), [freedom](#), [dignity](#), and [self-government](#).

Leaders across the pluralism ecosystem may reasonably differ in how they describe the current political moment. **What unites this work is not a single diagnosis, but a shared commitment to preserving the conditions that make pluralism possible, especially amid increasing use of punitive state power that constrains civic life, chills participation, and undermines trust.**

¹ This memo has been drafted through a project jointly led by Cohesion Strategy, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution, Interfaith America, New Pluralists, and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE). After a series of listening conversations on the first draft of the memo in spring 2026, the authors updated the document to incorporate insights from those discussions while also prioritizing focus and brevity.

Pluralism and Democracy are Mutually Reinforcing

Pluralism can exist in limited form under many systems, but it flourishes culturally and socially in democratic societies where people can organize freely, express differences without fear, and participate meaningfully in shared governance. In the United States, pluralism relies on several foundational democratic capacities:

- **Independent civic institutions** that can operate without political interference or retaliation
- **Protected civil liberties and due process of law** that allow diverse communities to speak, assemble, and freely exercise their rights and beliefs
- **Participatory democratic processes**, like free, fair, and trusted elections, that ensure diverse perspectives are fairly represented in shared governance
- **Responsible public leadership and rhetoric** that affirm belonging and safety rather than fueling division and violence
- **Institutional courage** that prevents fear and silence from becoming the norm
- **Binding narratives** which hold the diversity of the nation together into a shared identity

When these democratic capacities are weakened, pluralism does not simply recede—it becomes harder to imagine, practice, and sustain. In periods of democratic strain, pluralism can play a vital role in strengthening it, by building trust across diverse communities; providing decision-making tools for better problem-solving; deepening respect and appreciation for an expanding range of views, identities, and communities; promoting engagement that counters zero-sum competition; and helping communities find common ground.

Key Stressors to Pluralism in the Current Landscape

Each of the democratic capacities above face unique strain in the current landscape **in ways that directly affect pluralism**. These stressors have been a growing threat for more than a decade as federal and particularly executive power have expanded. That threat has accelerated significantly in the last year.

1. ***Pressure on Institutional Independence:*** America's rich civic associational life—faith communities, nonprofits, universities, trade schools, philanthropy, and community organizations—has long enabled pluralism to thrive. When institutions face political pressure, selective enforcement, or threats of retribution, the result is not neutrality but constraint. Pluralism depends on institutions that can convene difference, hold moral space, and act in accordance with mission and conscience without fear.
2. ***Chilling of First Amendment Freedoms:*** Pluralism requires the freedom to express, organize, and dissent. When individuals or communities are targeted for exercising constitutional freedoms, fear replaces participation, especially for minority and targeted groups. As legal scholars such as John Inazu have argued, civil liberties are not abstract ideals; they are the legal scaffolding that allows pluralism to function in practice.

3. *Erosion of Trust in Participatory Democratic Processes:* Free, fair, and trusted elections are one of many important democratic processes which make pluralism a reality through governance. These processes are the mechanism through which diverse interests coexist, compete, and compromise peacefully to co-create their government. When electoral processes are undermined, pluralism is weakened, not because difference disappears, but because shared rules for managing difference lose legitimacy.
4. *Dehumanizing and Violent Public Rhetoric:* Rhetoric from public leaders that vilifies or dehumanizes communities fractures national cohesion and undermines pluralism’s moral foundation: the dignity of all people. Narrative research consistently shows that dehumanization increases social permission for exclusion and violence, while eroding the sense of shared fate that pluralism requires.
5. *Risk-Avoidant Silence by Institutional Leaders:* In moments of heightened pressure, many leaders manage risk by staying quiet or minimizing values-based engagement. While understandable, widespread silence creates a chilling effect that cedes additional power and compounds democratic erosion. Pluralism is sustained not only by law and policy, but by leaders willing to model principled presence even when doing so carries risk.
6. *Contesting and Narrowing American Identity:* Pluralism depends on binding national narratives that define American identity through shared civic ideals—freedom, dignity, equal protection under the rule of law, and self-government—rather than bloodlines, religion, or ideology. When American identity is narrowed in exclusionary ways, the cultural foundations of pluralism weaken, making active stewardship of an inclusive, civic understanding of belonging essential to a shared national future.

Strategic Directions for Collective Action

Informed by this assessment, the following possible action areas emphasize constructive pushback, shared values, and visible commitment to pluralism as a public good. These ideas are meant to activate conversation on potential activity; any intentional next steps would likely require a formal working group to be moving this forward intentionally and in collaboration.

Thought Leadership	Policy & Legal	Coalitional	Culture Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop shared, values-forward language which frames pluralism as essential to freedom, fairness, and self-government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Connect with legal advocacy organizations (Democracy Forward, ACLU, FIRE) to explore support for lawsuits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clearly and strongly communicate the above themes broadly within the pluralism field. ● Support/engage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop longer-term narrative strategies that proactively counter dehumanization (e.g., Be the

<p>Align on concise principles and corresponding messaging which drives the above themes without exacerbating division (aka “pluralistically”).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Organize coordinated messaging (op-eds, social media engagement, webinar briefings, network communications, etc.) on antipluralist tactics (individual institutions & coalitions) ● Identify and cultivate right-leaning “trusted messengers” who can serve as public face for public messaging ● Create central talking points for pluralism organizations; resource organizations to operationalize and adapt those talking points within their communications streams ● Create holding 	<p>underway</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop an amicus brief strategy for relevant cases ● Identify legislation that will advance antipluralist tactics (e.g., potentially the SAVE Act); consider messaging and lobbying strategies to counter ● Identify legislation/policy opportunities that are pro-pluralist; consider messaging and lobbying strategies to promote ● Build a sustainable pro-pluralism policy agenda, advancing local, state, and federal policies which create infrastructure for pluralism to thrive 	<p>in efforts to protect the nonprofit sector’s independence (Independent Sector led)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support/engage in efforts to protect the philanthropic sector’s independence ● Fill gaps on civil liberties protection (e.g., Pluralism and Liberty Network focused on protecting religious liberty) ● Host coalitional spaces to normalize courage, counter chilling, and share information and opportunities for cross-sector organizations committed to pluralism ● Convene locally-oriented organizations to distill these principles into concrete activity ● Keep bridging - continue to advance the essential work of building social connection across divides 	<p>People)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support locally-rooted, community-based efforts to put pluralism in practice (e.g., civic hubs, collaboratories, Trust for Civic Life, Community Foundations for Civic Health Initiative) ● Invest in research to surface proven, scalable strategies for shifting social norms, incentivizing pro-pluralism behavior and discouraging tolerance of threats ● Normalize mutual aid in communities affected by sudden onset of threats to pluralism
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<p>statements for rapid-response activation that reinforce pluralistic norms without exacerbating division</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Disseminate content/versions of this memo to various audiences to socialize the analysis 			
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Reputational Risks to the Pluralism Ecosystem

A critical priority for the pluralism field has always been leading in ways that build broad, cross-identity coalitions, with particular attention to ideological diversity. For this reason, pluralism leaders have often been reticent to take the types of actions outlined above, given the real risk of being perceived as partisan. While we are aware that notions of partisanship are quickly changing, with illiberal forces on the political left and political right and increasing attention on class divides, field leader caution could come at a cost. If left unchecked, a range of illiberal actions could fundamentally and permanently alter the conditions that make fair disagreement and pluralism itself possible in a democratic society. Both of these realities – the risk of partisanship, and the risk of inaction – is the difficult landscape in which the field finds itself.

Rachel Kleinfeld’s [report](#) on the closing of civic spaces points to moral ambiguity as an enabling force for illiberal actors. The solution, she suggests, is to ground action in deep and abiding principle. The opportunity before field leaders is to articulate these principles in a durable way, and to act on those principles *pluralistically*, with the goal to draw communities together rather than drive them apart. Done well, this could be a unique and trustbuilding contribution in the civic context of democratic stress and actually grow the reach and impact of the field. Done poorly, the credibility of the field may be fundamentally undermined.

Moving Forward Together

Advancing pluralism in this moment does not require consensus on every diagnosis or tactic. It does require shared commitment to preserving the conditions that allow difference to coexist with dignity. This memo is designed to invite pluralism ecosystem leaders to consider what is required to support those conditions when they are under threat. We look forward to feedback and conversation to identify institutional and collective action steps which the pluralism field is uniquely situated to advance.