REDESIGNING DEMOCRACY

HOW CAN WE ENVISION A DEMOCRACY THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE?

A GUIDE FOR DISCUSSION ORGANIZERS AND FACILITATORS
Acknowledgments

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Dear Colleagues:

Democracy Re/Designed addresses a pressing problem: Americans today are feeling frustrated and hopeless about the current state of democracy. They do not think the system is working well, and they question whether things can change. Young people are especially skeptical of the value of democracy. Almost half of Gen Zers say it might not matter whether they live in a democracy or a dictatorship.

People need opportunities to talk about what qualities they want in an ideal democracy, and how our democracy can rise to that standard. To make these discussions possible and productive, IDHE offers Democracy Re/Designed, a conceptual framework and set of tools for campus-wide conversations about what people envision as the attributes of a more aspirational, inclusive, equitable, and robust democracy—one that works for everyone.

Listening and discussion were chosen as the pedagogical approaches for a reason. When organized and facilitated well, discussions (and dialogues) can be powerful tools for healing tense campus climates, leveraging diversity, finding common ground on an issue or conflict, facilitating change, and learning. Often, the discussion is the action because it builds relationships and establishes better ways of interacting. Also, based on more than a decade of research on highly politically engaged campuses, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) found that pervasive political discussions across campus, when combined with student leadership opportunities, can increase student participation in democracy. Discussion takes more time than a lecture or survey, but it yields more benefits.

About this Project: Democracy Re/Designed is the most recent iteration of IDHE’s efforts to align the attributes of an inclusive and responsive democracy with postsecondary student learning experiences and institutional priorities. The original framework, published as Democracy by Design in 2014, and updated in 2018, emerged from discussions with civic leaders working to improve democratic structures and public decision-making processes. In 2022, IDHE received a grant from Lumina Foundation to revisit Democracy by Design in the context of authoritarian threats to democracies globally, as well as domestic threats posed by unprecedented wealth and racial disparities, rising extremism, rampant disinformation, growing distrust of institutions, deepening partisan polarization, and threats to academic freedom. After relocating to AAC&U in 2023, IDHE received another Lumina grant to roll out Democracy Re/Designed as a national listening and discussion initiative. Throughout this guide, you will see references to “we” and “us.” These refer to team members at both IDHE and AAC&U who have worked to create these materials. For more on the goals and history of IDHE’s efforts to redesign democracy, please visit the Democracy Re/Designed website.

About this Guide: This guide is written for organizers and facilitators, not participants. Although written for student groups, it can easily be adapted for faculty, staff, institutional leaders, trustees, or members of the local community. It is written for affinity groups, but feel free to experiment with heterogeneous groups of students, faculty, and staff combined. Ideally, you can bring together people with diverse perspectives starting this fall when people are talking about policy choices and voting.

The discussion timing and organization are flexible. They are designed for small groups (6 to 10 people) to meet for two hours, but by doing some things in advance (e.g., setting group agreements), you might be able to get the discussions down to 90 minutes. You can also spread out the sessions—for example, two 60-minute sessions a week apart. You can also convene large forums with small group breakout tables.
These discussions are not debates; people can agree and disagree. The task is to gather perspectives on the attributes in the conceptual framework, *Democracy Re/Designed*. Participants can offer additions and alternatives to the named attributes. The most important goal is to listen, and to convey that students are heard.

IDHE recommends using trained discussion leaders—people who know how to manage conflict, troubleshoot facilitation challenges, and keep the discussion on track. Consider notetakers as co-facilitators, and if you opt for online discussions, enlist someone with technical skills to assist.

Start with your end goals in mind. This guide includes some suggestions, and you might want to review the closing remarks at the end about what is at stake.

The discussion follows this sequence:

**Part I: Introductions and Setting Group Agreements**

**Part II: Perspectives on Democracy**: The state of democracy, what’s working and what’s not.

**Part III: Envisioning the Ideal**: Attributes of a more aspirational *Democracy Re/Designed*.

**Part IV: What next?** Getting closer to the ideal.

The guide includes scripts (e.g., facilitator instructions to participants), discussion questions with optional probes, and facilitation tips. This guide is not proscriptive. You can make it your own.

Organizers and facilitators can get familiar with the framework, *Democracy Re/Designed*, its purpose and its roots, by skimming this FAQ. Note too that IDHE has defined “democracy” in the red box next to the framework. Democracy is not simply a set of rules or systems (or just voting). Democracy is also a set of cultural norms, values, and ideals that guide how people interact and work together to solve social problems and build community. One way to think if it is this: Democracy is a set of practices *and* principles. It is both political and social. Norms evolve with each generation. *Democracy Re/Designed* invites participants to consider which norms should evolve with generational changes, and which should stay constant. It asks them to envision how new generations introduce new perspectives and catalyze change.

Thank you for joining this nationwide effort to design a democracy that works for everyone. Please let us know how it goes!

Happy listening,

Nancy Thomas, Executive Director
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BEFORE YOU START: BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Discussion (or dialogue), especially across differences of identity, ideology, and lived experience, can be a constructive tool for thinking deeply and learning about what it means to live in a democracy. But some participants, especially students, might question the value of the discussion if they do not know how to follow through with action. They will want to know, what next?

Often, groups conclude with a list of suggestions, and even demands, directed at others: “The institution should create...” or “the government should change...” We encourage them to explore changes that are in their own hands, too.

For this, IDHE followed an approach used by Everyday Democracy, which places some responsibility on the participants. It includes questions that probe what they, as individuals or small groups, can do.

How can institutions empower the participants to act? For this, IDHE developed a simple self-assessment tool for identifying existing opportunities on campus for students to develop skills in leadership, organizing, advocacy, activism, and change. We recommend using this tool to map what your campus already supports before the first discussion. From that, compile a list of resources/opportunities and share it with students at the end of each discussion. Encourage students to get involved in one or more of the options on your list.

You can also host an action forum after the discussions have concluded. In an action forum, participants from all discussion groups reconvene and self-organize around specific issues, interests, or upcoming events. These are another opportunity for directing attention to existing student leadership opportunities and helping students create new ones.

Finally, you might want to tape the discussion sessions and use what you learn as data for research. You can join the national initiative and/or create a report on what people on campus are saying. You can use the report as a foundation for more discussions and action on how students can achieve a democracy that works for everyone. For more on joining IDHE’s national study or running your own, see the website.
TIPS FOR ORGANIZING CAMPUSWIDE DISCUSSIONS

Institutional Leaders. Start with buy-in from the president or chancellor. IDHE’s FAQ has language to help you “make the case.” If that doesn’t work, email us at idhe@aau.org for help. Ask the president or chancellor to announce the project and invite participation across campus.

Research or not? You can join IDHE’s national research initiative by taping the discussions and uploading the transcripts to a secure national repository. You can also use them for institutional research. You will need IRB approval, Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) approved researchers (or your institution’s equivalent), and consent of the participants. IDHE offers more information about contributing to the national research on the IDHE Redesigning Democracy website (see FAQ). Note: You need to make this decision before the first discussion so that participants understand how their viewpoints will be used and have consented in advance.

Champion/Coordinator. Identify a steward for the project, such as a dialogue program or an office of institutional research. If you do not have an obvious office to champion this, ask the president to appoint a steering committee, usually 3 to 5 people from across campus. Identify someone to serve as the coordinator. The coordinator can also manage the logistics of a coalition or task force.

Create a task force or coalition to serve as advisors and recruiters. Task force members should represent diverse groups (including student groups and clubs) and departments on campus. It is tempting to involve the “usual suspects” because they get things done. But casting a wide net and involving people not usually tapped for committees on campus will help you reach a diverse set of participants, especially if they have the trust of others in their department or group.

Develop a Recruitment Plan. A diverse coalition of representatives from across campus can recruit in their circles. Reach out to faculty and staff who teach a variety of classes and oversee an array of student-facing offices, including coaches and multicultural affairs staff. Involve student government and club leaders. Set a timeline and benchmarks, for example, “150 participants by December 1.”

Prepare Facilitators. If your institution has not yet done so, identify a cadre of individuals who are either already trained facilitators or willing to learn. If you need to train facilitators, consider our training guide for preparing facilitators for politically charged discussions (see Resources). Members of the IDHE team can also come to your campus to run the training or recommend someone who can do it.

Understand the Guide. Go through the discussion guide as a group. It contains tips for facilitators, discussion questions and probes, and scripts. The guide should be self-explanatory, but do not hesitate to ask questions.

Support Facilitators. Create a system for facilitators to stay connected with each other so they can share concerns and tips throughout the process. Consider bringing facilitators together periodically for advanced facilitation training.
Where to Hold Discussions. Discussions can be embedded into classes and offered in existing group events, such as club, student government and sports team meetings. One often overlooked place for discussions like these are disciplinary clubs and societies (the Chemistry Club, the Engineering Society). Disciplinary groups are especially valuable to students who commute or juggle family or work obligations and who may appreciate opportunities to meet with peers.

Logistics Matter. Physical spaces matter, so hold discussions in a room with comfortable lighting and good acoustics in a location that is welcoming to all participants. Make sure there is enough parking and provide transportation and childcare if needed. Consider sign language interpreters and hosting sessions in other languages. Ensure that people who need accommodations for disabilities have the support they need. If you opt to run a large forum with small-group discussions, use round tables and place a facilitator at each one. (One advantage of this approach is the time savings of establishing group agreements and offering introductory remarks to the entire room.)

Online Options? Hosting discussions online can compromise relationship building and the likelihood of future teamwork, but virtual discussions do enable you to recruit more people – especially busy students with jobs, families, and commutes. The key is to plan and use technology to make up for face-to-face engagement. Some facilitation strategies, like brainstorming, sharing in pairs, and collecting ideas can be done online with Canvas, or Kahoots (quick surveys), PollEverywhere (group answers), and Miro (virtual post-it notes). These require tech skills, so you might need a different kind of co-facilitator.

Offer Incentives. Some campuses pay participants with small gift cards to a coffee shop or bookstore or run a raffle drawing from a list of the participants’ names. At a minimum, feed them. Students are busy people who need to double task.

Consider a Kickoff. Aim for broad participation and host an event to launch the discussion series. This will increase visibility, excitement, and credibility. A good kick-off event brings together a broad group of people (invited by your diverse coalition). Make the kickoff both informative and celebratory. Consider including a fishbowl mock discussion using a short section of the discussion guide to generate interest.

Reflect. Ask participants about their discussion experience. If you have time, invite them to fill out a quick evaluation before they leave. You can find sample evaluation questions in the FAQ. Consider putting the questions into a survey with a link, which is easier to evaluate.
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Setting Up: What you will need.

• Copies of the framework to distribute to each person (do not distribute in advance): paper if in person, electronically if via Zoom.
• Copies of the compiled credit and non-credit opportunities on campus for students to develop leadership, agency, and political efficacy (see Self-Assessment tool).
• Ground rules written out in advance and posted on the wall or disseminated to participants.
• If in person, post-it notes, pens, and small pads of paper on each table—enough for everyone.
• If online, consider setting up a process for capturing ideas using virtual post-it notes.

PART I:
INTRODUCTIONS AND SETTING GROUP AGREEMENTS
(20 minutes)

Welcome! My name is _______ and I am your facilitator for today’s discussion. My job is to keep the discussion on track and moving. I am also here to make sure everyone has a chance to participate.

Let me introduce you to my partner in this effort, ____________, who will serve as both the notetaker and backup facilitator, meaning s/he/they might jump in and ask a follow-up question from time to time. We and others working on this project are working with the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE), an initiative of one of the nation’s national associations for higher education institutions—the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Over the past decade-plus, researchers at IDHE periodically met with civic organizations dedicated to a range of political and social reforms. These included democracy reform advocates, civil rights organizations, and groups that help communities solve problems using dialogue. From these discussions, the researchers compiled a set of characteristics of what the civic leaders identified as a more aspirational, ideal democracy. IDHE published the first version in 2014 and updated it in 2018. Today, we are discussing the most recent iteration, called Democracy Re/Designed. IDHE wants to expand this exercise by listening to more voices, especially those of students.

We are going to start with some open-ended questions that explore what you think a healthy democracy looks like. Then we will turn to the framework itself, Democracy Re/Designed. We will ask you what you think of it, and what might be missing from it.

Let me make one clarifying point. IDHE defines democracy as more than just a system of government. Democracy is also understood as a set of cultural values or norms that shape how policies are made, and how people interact and work together. Think of democracy as a set of practices and principles. As both political and social or cultural systems.

We will end with some questions about what’s next, and your ideas for achieving a better, more aspirational democracy—the one we want, not the one we have.
To recap, there are four parts to this discussion:

- **Part I:** Introductions and Setting Group Agreements
- **Part II:** Perspectives on Democracy: The state of democracy, what’s working and what’s not.
- **Part III:** Envisioning the Ideal. Attributes of a more aspirational Democracy Re/Designed.
- **Part IV:** What next? Getting closer to the ideal.

The discussion will last about 2 hours.

*Any questions?*

**Group Agreements**

Before we get started, let’s set a few guidelines or norms about how this discussion should go. When we talk about democracy, the discussion inevitably becomes political. We think that is OK—and in fact, that is what is supposed to happen—but it can also get contentious or personal. Disagreements are fine, being disagreeable or personalizing is not. Here are our group agreements for today:

- **Assume good will:** Give people the benefit of the doubt. If they say something offensive, tell them and say why. Not everyone has experience talking about their opinions. Let this be a space of forgiveness and curiosity.
- **Share airtime:** We do not have a lot of time, so it is important that everyone has a chance to speak. Be aware of how much time you are taking and step back if you need to. And if you are holding back too much, try to lean in and contribute more. If the pace is too fast—you don’t have enough time to think—let me (the facilitator) know. We need to respect everyone’s preferences for participation.
- **Silence is not bad:** At times, I might pause us so that people have time to reflect. I know it is downright un-American, but let’s try it.
- **Cell phones off!** They can be distracting, and we don’t want anyone to worry about pictures or recordings.
- **What is said here, and who says it, stays here:** It is OK to share the broad themes, but do not share other people’s stories or comments without their permission.
- **Share responsibility for making this discussion work:** This means that I, as your fearless facilitator, am not the only one who needs to make this work. Talk with each other. Ask clarifying questions. Stick with these agreements. Help make this a valuable experience for everyone.

*Any questions? Anything you want to discuss or add? Can we all agree to these? Thumbs up. Great! Let’s get going!*

**Introductions**

Circle around and exchange first names only, what they want to be called, and pronouns.

- **Tip:** If you are using name tents or tags, first names only. *Remind them of the agreement that they cannot share the names of other participants—ever.*
- **Tip:** You might want to start with a fast icebreaker. Here is an example:
  - Share your name and one of your favorite foods to eat during a holiday.
PART II: PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY: WHAT’S WORKING AND WHAT’S NOT
(20 minutes)

In this segment, we will talk about the current state of democracy, what's working and what's not.

**Question:** What do you think of when you hear the word, “democracy”? Share an adjective or short phrase to describe what you think.

**Tip:** This can be a quick brainstorming exercise that should take about 2 minutes. You can model what you want by giving an answer, like “Complex”! Try to pick an adjective that does not lead the group in a certain direction. Brainstorming is not for everyone, however. Consider having everyone take a minute to jot down ideas or talk in pairs for 2–3 minutes before for sharing ideas.

**Tip:** This is a good opportunity to remind the group that democracy is understood as both systems and cultural norms, or practices and principles. In a governing system “of, by, and for” the people, values matter.

**Question:** Is democracy working?

**Tip:** This is just a show of hands, so it should be quick. The probes make it more interesting.

**Probes (show of hands):**

- How many of you think U.S. democracy is working exactly as it should?
- How many of you think U.S. democracy is struggling, but it is a lull—a pendulum that will swing back—give it some time?
- How many of you think democracy is “failing” or in a dangerous decline?
- What works and what doesn’t? Name some things that are going well and some challenges you see.

**Question:** What is your relationship to the democratic system and culture?

**Tip:** This is when you start a real discussion, so slow down.

**Probes:**

- How does democracy directly affect your life?
- What are some ways in which you participate in or contribute to a democratic society?
- Are there ways you could participate but choose not to? Why?

**Question:** What does a healthy democracy look like? Let’s get some ideas down on paper.

**Probes:**

- What should democracy look like?
- What words would you use to describe it (words or short phrases, not stories)?
- What might someone not in this room say?

**Tip for notetaker:** List words on newsprint as they talk.
Tip: Consider brainstorming. Their ideas do not need to be complete or perfect. The goal here is to get them thinking about what a better democracy looks like, so you can line up their ideas against Democracy Re/Designed.

PART III: ENVISIONING THE IDEAL: ATTRIBUTES OF A MORE ASPIRATIONAL DEMOCRACY RE/DESIGNED (60 minutes)

Here is a copy for each of you of the framework itself. Take a few minutes to look it over. Our goal is not to adopt this verbatim. It is to discuss it, consider what is missing, what you like. Also, we are not trying to “renew” or “restore” anything. The goal is to discuss what a “redesigned” democracy would be. The idea is to hear what you want. And as you can see from the image, there are blank honeycombs, suggesting that things can be added or swapped out.

Tip: Hand out copies to everyone (if in person) or share screen (if online). Point out the understanding of “democracy” in the red box.

Tip: Read the words (you can call them “attributes” or “pillars” of “the democracy we want, not the one we have”) in any order: responsive and just, accessible and participatory, trustworthy, educated and informed, compassionate and empowering, and contested and reinvented. There is no hierarchy in these attributes.

Question: What is your first reaction?

Probes:
- Do you agree with the attributes identified in this framework? Why or why not?
- Is anything missing? What and why?
- Does anything here surprise you?
- Which of these attributes come closest to the ones you want?
- Are there any you do not support? Which ones and why?
- The center honeycomb is not just in the middle. It is in larger font, suggesting it is important and even nonnegotiable. Should democracy be, by definition, inclusive and equitable? Are some attributes more important than others?

Let’s compare this with your list (captured earlier on newsprint)—how close were you as a group?

Tip: Capture their ideas; continue until you think they have all had an opportunity to express their views.

Probes:
- Should “free” be a characteristic of democracy?
  - Why or why not?
- Is one person’s freedom another person’s burden? How do we balance that?
  - What about free speech? The freedom to practice religion? The freedom to assemble?
- How about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or the freedom to “prosper”?
- Is “equitable” the right word—or should it be “equal” or “equal opportunity”? What is the difference? Does it matter?
• How about “representative”? Should that be in the framework? Why or why not?
• How about “civil” or “respectful”? Should that be in the framework? Why or why not?

Question: How does this compare with the democracy we have?

Probes:
• Are we realizing any of these attributes already? Which ones, and why?
• Do you see gaps between the democracy you want and the one you have? Which ones are closest to the idea? Which ones are far off the mark?

Question: Can you envision a society where we can realize these attributes? Why or why not?

Probes:
• How important is it that people come to an agreement, or as close to an agreement as possible?
• Are there attributes that you think will receive widespread support?
• If we realized a democracy that is closer to the ideal, would you be willing to work for it, to protect it?

PART IV:
WHAT NEXT? GETTING CLOSER TO THE IDEAL
(20 minutes)

Tip: Now the discussion has moved into the “solution” space. The goal here is to help students to develop voice and agency, to feel that they can do something as individuals or in groups. The other goal is to identify things that this institution can do to enable student voice and agency.

Tip: What often happens in groups is that they identify things that other people, organizations, or groups can or should do, such as what your elected official should be doing. Here is where you want to get to what they as a group or as individuals could do. It is OK to name what others can do, but do not stop there.

Question: What needs to happen?

Tip: You will need to ask many of the probes.

Probes:
• What ideas do you have for improving democracy? (It is OK to name what others can do, but do not stop there.)
• What can you as individuals or a small group do?
• What do you need to move ahead?
  • Are there organizations, groups, or others who can help?
  • Are there programs on campus that can help you?
  • What more could this institution do?
• Of your ideas, which:
  • Are most likely to facilitate change?
  • Are the most feasible?
  • Are you the most likely to participate in?

All right, we’re wrapping up now.

**Question:** What are your key takeaways from today?

Let’s talk about what you might do next.

**Tip:** Hand out a document (or disseminate via email) with descriptions and contact information for leadership opportunities on your campus or in the community.

**Concluding Remarks (by facilitators to participants)**

Most Americans want to live in a democracy. They just think it is not working well, and they are not sure if it can change. Young people are especially skeptical about democracy. They question whether democracy is worth defending. Nearly half of Gen Zers believe that it does not matter if they live in a democracy versus a dictatorship.

The differences between democracies and autocracies are huge. Democratic societies adhere to the rule of law, guarantee an independent media, and protect people’s rights to free expression, to practice their faith, or to not have a faith. People in democracies are better off economically, and they have better systems for health care, transportation, commerce, and education. In democracies, people resolve their differences peacefully. They can think and act within the bounds of the common good. Everyday people can run for office, organize to demand change, and criticize the government freely. These are not the rights people have under autocracies and dictatorships.

U.S democracy is not perfect, and too many Americans have never realized the full advantages of living in a democracy. But in a system “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” democracy can and does change from generation to generation, and for most of the past century, that change has brought the benefits of democracy to more Americans.

Over the past decade, however, our country has backslid. What we are witnessing now are struggles over the role of government and how everyday people can participate in achieving systems and communities that are closer to the ideal. This is not only an American dilemma. Around the world, nations are struggling with these and other questions.

There are 18 to 20 million college students every year—you are a powerful group that can influence friends, families, and neighbors of all ages. By envisioning a more aspirational democracy, you have a template for improvements that you can work toward and discuss with others.

Thank you for joining today’s discussion about a Democracy Re/Designed. Your perspectives have been heard and are valued. By naming the attributes of the democracy you want, we can all work collectively to achieve it.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!
Selected Resources


Everyday Democracy.


Appendix: Democracy Re/Designed Framework

Organizers and participants can also download the framework here.

DEMOCRACY RE/DESIGNED

A more aspirational democracy, one that works for everyone, is ...

Contested & Reinvented
Educated & Informed
Accessible & Participatory
Inclusive & Equitable
Compassionate & Empowering
Responsive & Just
Trustworthy

We understand democracy as both governance (systems and structures) and culture (ways people live and solve social and political problems together) optimally informed by these intersecting and reciprocal principles and practices.