



CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

THE TRUST FOR CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE


Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

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Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and distinguished members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, thank you for having me today.

My name is Danielle Allen. I am the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University, the Director of Harvard's Edmond and Lily Safra Center for Ethics, and a Co-Chair of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship.

I grew up in Southern California in a family that prized civic engagement. On my mom's side, my great-grandparents helped fight for women's right to vote in the early 20th century. My great-grandmother was President of the League of Women Voters in Michigan in the 30s. On my dad's side, my granddad helped found one of the first NAACP chapters in Northern Florida, an exceptionally dangerous undertaking. As a matter of family inheritance and personal conviction, I bring to this hearing a deep and enduring belief in the value to all people of the chance to participate in self-government as free and equal citizens.

Today I speak not only out of my own convictions but also on behalf of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and its Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. The Academy was founded in 1780—before the Constitution and by the same people who led the Revolution, including John Adams and John Hancock. Ben Franklin and George Washington were early members. They sought to secure for the new nation the knowledge resources it would need for its daring experiment in self-government. Today, the Academy is an honorary society and independent, nonpartisan research center.

In 2018, the Academy convened a BIPARTISAN COMMISSION to assess and address the widespread sense that our constitutional democracy is in crisis.

In 2020, the Commission released its final report — Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century. We made the case that in a healthy constitutional democracy, improvement of our civic culture and of our political institutions must go hand in hand. Each is necessary; neither on its own is sufficient.

You have asked to hear “Big Ideas” and “Innovative Approaches to Fixing Congress.” My core message today is that tweaking how Congress operates is not in itself enough. A healthy Congress can grow only out of the soil of a healthy civic culture. Investment in our civic well-being is investment in the health of Congress. I understand that you will also be hearing about another recommendation from our Commission's report - to increase the size of the House of Representatives as the Founders intended. I endorse that Big Idea, too, but for my own testimony today, I focus on the need to support institutional change through investment in civic infrastructure.

We define civic infrastructure as the local places, programs, and people that encourage all residents of municipalities and regions to interact, find common ground, and solve problems together. We are currently underinvesting in this infrastructure. The results speak for themselves.

Underinvestment shows up in isolation, disengagement, mistrust, and contention instead of the participation and collaboration. Too often, even communities that have some civic infrastructure lack consistent funding and organizations work in isolation from one another.

Our Commission conducted roughly 50 listening sessions around the country. We heard despair about the state of democracy, the distrust that Americans feel for one another and our institutions, and the sense that nothing unites us. Yet we also heard a yearning for connection and common purpose. People told inspiring stories of community renewal and local efforts to bridge differences. We saw first-hand the good that can be done through investments in local civic health and what happens when those aren't there.

- Even before the pandemic 80% of Americans said they had not gotten together with others to do something for the good of their community in the past year.
- Public spaces that encourage disparate groups to come together are crumbling. In 2021, The American Society of Civil Engineers gave our parks a D+ grade.
- 60% of Americans have little to no faith in the political decision-making of their fellow citizens.

Yet even against this backdrop, many local communities are seeking to turn the tide:

- In Inman, South Carolina, a small town of 2900 people, local government, businesspeople, and community residents have come together to design and implement a plan to build community through shared experiences, forge new connections, and bolster the local economy through resident-driven master plan for a revitalized downtown. Projects include a new public library and greenway, murals, and physical infrastructure improvements to make the area more walkable, accessible, and welcoming for town residents and visitors alike.
- In Lexington, KY, civic educator and artist Richard Young launched CivicLex, a non-profit civic education organization that builds civic health through education, local media, and relationship building. Through its civic engagement programs and accessible coverage of local government meetings and proposals, CivicLex makes it easier for Lexington residents to engage with and understand local government and make change in their community.
- The Citizens Campaign, launched first in New Jersey, engages and educates local residents in techniques of “no-blame” problem-solving; participants form “Civic Trusts”—non-partisan, community based civic associations that come together in monthly solution sessions to search for successful policies at work in other communities and propose them for adoption in their own.

Our report recommended the creation of a Trust for Civic Infrastructure to bring sustained, nationwide investment in support of the places, programs, and people that encourage all residents of municipalities and regions to interact, find common ground, and solve problems together. Those working to build civic infrastructure often lack the sustained support and opportunities to share knowledge, collect and access data, and build a movement with others in this ecosystem.

The Trust for Civic Infrastructure will be a new national organization that engages in grantmaking, knowledge sharing, public education, and research and evaluation to strengthen the civic capacity and connectivity of local communities. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund has undertaken to build a pilot for such a Trust, providing seed funding and building a cross-ideological coalition of anchor national funders. Community foundations, too, will be activated to the degree possible.

While the Trust is launching with private support, the scope and scale of investments in civic infrastructure needed across the country means that we should make such investment a national priority. Just as the United States has supported the infrastructure of democracy abroad through the National Endowment for Democracy, we are hopeful that in the years to come, Congress will consider investment in civic infrastructure, whether through the Trust or another vehicle.

We believe that the work of the Trust will enrich our civic soil with the nutrients necessary to support healthy self-government in the 21st century. Our hope is that future members of your body would have the chance to learn the practice of democratic citizenship in rich schools of democracy provided by local communities. Our hope, too, is that strengthening local communities to bridge divides, create safe and vibrant public spaces, and equip local leaders to engage their fellow citizens in productive collaborations will help secure a healthy political culture generally. This will improve the conditions within which Congress must do its work.

We thank you for your commitment to the project of self-government, and for your willingness to innovate so we can pass on our valuable inheritance of constitutional democracy to future generations in better shape than we currently find it.

The views expressed in this testimony are Danielle Allen's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the President and Fellows of Harvard College.