



FixUS Focus Groups Summary – September 2020

Topic: “Our Common Purpose” Report

FixUS, a project of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, seeks to better understand and engage citizens to address America’s growing divisions and dysfunction that are threatening our democracy. Given the declining trust and exhaustion many have with our political process, we believe deep and meaningful citizen engagement will be required to guide necessary changes.

To that end, FixUS is engaging citizens around the country through a variety of means to crowdsource what shared values, goals, and reforms could help chart a better path. As part of this effort, we hosted multiple virtual focus groups with FixUS supporters to obtain feedback on a recent report, [*Our Common Purpose*](#), published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ [*Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship*](#). The report identified 31 recommendations grouped among six strategies to reinvent American democracy for the 21st century.

Given the impressive scope of its recommendations, we determined the report would serve as an effective springboard for engaging citizens on ideas to improve our democracy. Each of three focus groups had more than a dozen attendees, with representation from 22 different states. Participants ranged from young professionals and small business owners, to democracy reform experts and former members of Congress.

Participants were asked to review a summary of the report’s recommendations in advance. During the focus groups, opinions were offered on 1) what they most liked about the report and what resonated with them and why; 2) what recommendations they did not support and why; 3) what they felt the report might be missing; and 4) any ideas for how to move these recommendations forward.

Focus Group Findings

What Participants Liked

Among the most commonly supported recommendations were those related to establishing citizens' redistricting commissions, general campaign finance reform, and ranked-choice voting. Participants saw these reforms as ways to depolarize the political system and force those in power to look more broadly at the diversity of the electorate.

"[Gerrymandering] to me, has been the single largest cause of the divisions in representation, in Congress, because there is so few districts that are in play, and therefore those people who are running for office are really trying to win the extremes in their own party as opposed to the general public. So, that one hit me first and loudest and I really think of all of these is the single most important issue that has to be address because it will impact so many of the others" – Larry (TX)

"Big money is corrupting our representative government, that's just plain and simple...These people dial for dollars for hours of the day, and they do that instead of legislate, so they don't do anything that they are dialing dollars for – it makes no sense." – Tom (MO)

Many people also spoke highly of the recommendations for moving Election Day to Veterans Day (or at least making it national holiday) and the preregistration for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds as part of a push for more access to voting and making it more meaningful.

"...moving Election Day to Veterans Day to make it a national holiday I think would be great for ease of voting, access to voting, but also a way to connect service and the fabric of service...to the vote and to what this country is supposed to be about." - Troy (NY)

"In Strategy 2, [I] really resonated with preregistration of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds as I think it is more and more important to mobilize the youth vote as we are the future leaders of the country going forward and making sure that students especially are getting the tools they need to understand our democracy and would be really important to increasing civic participation." – Samantha (NJ)

Additionally, many participants strongly supported greater investment in civic education. Generally, the consensus was that citizens need to better understand how the country operates, its history, and our place in the world. In fact, a few participants hinged their support for greater voter access on the condition that the average voter needed to be more educated.

"Have we created a system where we have some inefficiencies that are so ingrained that can't be changed?...If the structure is going to be so difficult to change, then the key is going to be the education component. And if we can have an educated citizenry that can vote responsibly, then maybe we can accomplish some things." - Yvan (FL)

More broadly, participants viewed the report as a whole in a very favorable manner, as it provided many different solutions for various fields of interest.

“I think [the report] is very good. In particular, I think Sections 1 and 2, by and large, are fantastic; I love the very important calling out and identifying some of the structural problems that lead to a less than perfect democracy. I don’t think we are necessarily in this report trying to go for the perfect solutions to those problems, but they felt like very practical proposals to address some of the shortcomings that could actually get done.” – David (DC)

“I really liked the report...I think it does a lot to try and fix a very, very, structurally broken system that we have right now...I think ranked-choice voting might actually be the thing I liked the most out of the first strategy because I think it would do a lot to make this less of a two party system and make it more representative for everyone and less polarizing in a lot of ways for elections.” – Kelsey (MD)

What Participants Disliked

There were some recommendations in the report that received either a mixed or negative reaction. There was a general rejection of anything that forced citizens to commit an action, such as mandatory voting or a required commitment to national service. Even if they thought the intentions were good, they felt these proposals were political nonstarters and not the right way to incentivize the public citizenry.

“Any time things are talked about in terms of being mandated, that is going to be a tougher sell for people... you are going to have entrenched interests and all that type of stuff, so it is automatically going to create roadblocks.” – Marshall (CA)

“I am very much against mandatory voting. Opening up opportunities for people to vote is key, but mandatory doesn’t feel quite right to me.” – Kahlil (NY)

There was support for expanding the House of Representatives, both in terms of making Congress more representative of the population as well as a way to decrease the inequity of the Electoral College. However, others objected that it would only magnify the problems of the current Congress or that the legislative branch would be better served with more additional internal resources. There was also support to limit Supreme Court justices to 18-year terms, but many felt that it would increase the politicization of the process (the opposite of what it is meant to do). This pointed to a larger reluctance of the groups to endorse large structural changes to institutions and/or the constitution.

“The one thing in the report that I sort of had an immediate adverse reaction to was expanding the House of Representatives. I look at the British system and the number of constituencies they have, and I am not sure that has increased diversity – it has just increased the number of people who follow along with the leaders as opposed to the number of people who try to stake out a separate path. I am not wild about that approach.” – Brad (AK)

“I think the recommendation about the Supreme Court terms was pretty novel, especially with what we are looking at right now with replacing Justice Ginsburg. The only hesitation I have is if we are looking for a legislative fix that means that that can also be adjusted in subsequent Congresses also. So I worry about the Court composition in terms being in flux so much. So that is a danger, but I do agree that the way the court is structured right now is not conducive to our democracy.” – Greg (MD)

Participants did not discuss many of the recommendations pertaining to social media or information infrastructure in Strategy 5 until prompted to do so. When asked about these topics specifically, many expressed concern that the industries responsible for these issues are changing so quickly that legislative reforms could not possibly keep pace with them. At the same time, others were concerned that reforms in this area could impact free speech rights or interfere too aggressively in the free market. Most - though not all – thought dealing with these issues was important, but they were not seen as high a priority as the other issues.

“My view is that all of Strategy 5 can be eliminated from the report and the report would be stronger. Social media, tech, all of this is transitory. Five years from now, social media will be a completely different thing than what is today. It is not fundamental to the infrastructure.” - Greg (MA)

“I view where we are with [the issues in Strategy 5] as a little bit of the Wild West right now, and we are in a period of chaos and evolution at the same time...I generally like some of those recommendations - I just don't know that I would prioritize them in the same category as some of these other reforms as far as trying to fix them. - Mike (GA)

What Participants Thought Was Missing

Some participants pointed out that the report had significant omissions. They stated it should have addressed open primaries and the general rise of independent voters, both in terms of a solution and how this was affecting the political system as a whole. They also felt there should have been more of an “equity” aspect to the report: to talk about ways to reduce socioeconomic inequality, as well to make the Senate more equitable. Other topics that were not mentioned that they felt should have been included were term limits for members of Congress and ways to address foreign interference in elections.

“The decline of party membership is a very real thing in the electorate and the rise of independent voters as an opposite poll is a very real thing, and that changing dynamic of the electorate is not represented in the report... ” – Jeremy (FL)

“I don't have anything to criticize, but I did feel that the report didn't address the issue of the Senate. Every state has two senators, and yet some states with their small populations represent a disproportionate voice of votes in the Senate, and I thought there could have something to address that.” – Ruth (MI)

More broadly, a few participants - even those who agreed with the solutions – indicated the report failed to strike the right tone. They suggested it was out of touch with the current state of affairs in the country and did not do enough to acknowledge the deep-seated problems that were preventing these issues from being addressed in the first place. Similarly, they said the report did not do enough to explain how these reforms would be implemented and/or which solutions needed to be prioritized, feeling it was too much of an academic exercise rather than a way to move forward.

“I agreed with about 92% of what is written down there, and yet, I had no experience that it was written about the United States of America, 2020... It is kind of a set of recommendations for a country that I don't recognize. It is way too clean. It is as if we are living in an era of rational politics, no massive partisan divisions ripping people apart.” – John (NY)

“[The report] has the feel of not really addressing some of the core issues that people in America are facing today... like the survival level issue of the economic mobility and things like that are completely missing and that is some of the main drivers...” – Debilyn (MD)

What Is Needed to Move Report's Ideas Forward

Some participants believed more needed to be done to address the process of achieving reform. The report provided plenty of solutions, but they wanted to see how these could be enacted in Congress or, more viable, on the grassroots level. However, while they did not agree on all the solutions and had misgivings about the report, they all felt motivated to discuss these topics further to see what could make a difference in the future.

“I think we all love the report in general, [but] how does this become reality? An execution plan is needed. What is the low hanging fruit? What can be done with the current people that we have in office? What can be done after we have changed some of the people we have in office? I am seeing this stuff as for my grandchild – this is going to take decades to put through properly. And so what can be done in four years and five...and then what continues – how does that become the base for continuing to reform and improve the democracy system?” – Rick (FL)