IMAGINING BETTER FUTURES FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

BY **Suzette Brooks Masters**

AND **Ruby Hernandez**

Acknowledgements

Interviewees

We thank the following individuals for their time, insights, and convictions that better futures are possible. Their reflections comprise the core of this report. More information about them can be found on page 17.

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Thought partners

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Designers

Adam Griffiths and Bryan Byczek

"The future exists first in imagination, then in will, then in reality."

– Barbara Marx Hubbard, futurist

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AN INVITATION TO OUR READERS

To Our Readers,

There is no way to sugarcoat the personal and societal predicament many Americans – as well as millions of others across the globe – find ourselves in today.

Whether reeling from the torrid pace of change affecting every facet of our lives, overwhelmed by the multiple complex challenges to be addressed at the local, state, federal, international and planetary levels, depleted by conflict-driven media and political environments, or numbed by the expanding array of visible and invisible crises, the cumulative pressure of these conditions can feel oppressive and foreboding. They imbue and darken the narrative air we breathe.

Under these circumstances, it may be tempting to give up, throw up our hands, sit on the sidelines, or pass the buck to others to shape what lies ahead.

We in the American democracy movement are not immune from these temptations. We have become so focused on preventing dire outcomes that we have neglected to paint a picture of the future(s) we're building towards. Without imagining and articulating such positive visions, it will be infinitely more difficult to develop strategies to get there and to inspire people to join us in that journey. Many of us working in the democracy field will also run the risk of becoming demoralized and disengaged.

The Better Futures Project is born of a desire to gain succor and inspiration from those within and outside the democracy space who not only aren't giving up, but instead are moving beyond critique and reaction to creation, who are inspiring those around them, generating abundant visions of better futures ahead, and laying the groundwork for achieving them.

We want to learn from them, tap into their energy and optimism, and consider how our efforts might support one another. We want to create a virtuous cycle of imagination and transformation to meet this critical moment. So we asked hard, probing questions of dozens of very thoughtful people about the futures they'd like to see and how to get there.

We approach this journey of exploration with humility and curiosity. We are not experts in future visioning or foresight, nor have we discovered any simple solutions that will reinvigorate American democracy and the systems of governance necessary to support better futures. We deliberately refer to "better futures," not a particular better future, because each person imagines their own unique aspirational future, and infinite numbers of futures are possible. What eventually comes into being will be the product of co-creation through collective imagination, action, and collaboration – or its absence.

We see futures thinking as a tool that encourages creativity, identifies threats and opportunities, motivates and mobilizes, and relates possible future choices and consequences to core values. At its best, futures thinking is an exercise in "anticipatory democracy,"[1] enabling people to determine the future they want and how they might achieve it. It involves exercising their collective imagination to shape the future through participation in civic and political life. Those of us in the democracy space must embrace this practice in order to escape the reactivity and pessimism that dominates our field.

Four basic types of futures are widely recognized by futurists: possible (what may happen), plausible (what could happen), probable (what will likely happen) and desirable (what we want to happen). The Better Futures Project is about imagining and bringing about desirable futures – what we are calling "better" futures.

There are times when it's difficult to think beyond the plausible or the probable, when aspirations are constrained, when breaking out of the problems of today seems nearly impossible. We would argue this is such a time.

We are learning as we go, opening up our minds to new possibilities and ways of thinking and engaging. We believe this report, and especially the work and mindset it spotlights, is sorely needed today – a historically consequential period of societal, demographic, technological, political, and informational transition, of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety, but also of immense possibility. It's precisely at times like these that we need to step back and open up, imagine what could be better and, in the words of Star Trek's Captain Jean-Luc Picard, "make it so."

Accordingly, this report is designed to provoke, invite, and inspire.

Provocation. This report is designed to stimulate fresh thinking and prompt reflection on how you, our readers, think and operate, what guides your work, and what your time horizon is. We hope you will begin to see how your work contributes – or might contribute – to creating better futures, not just defeating opponents, maintaining the status quo, or forestalling undesirable outcomes. We also hope it serves as a precious antidote to despair and apathy.

Community. Ideally, this report will encourage a wide range of civil society actors to want to become part of a burgeoning positive visioning community – one capable of mobilizing and engaging growing numbers of people to realize better futures, including a robust, effective and healthy democracy. We hope to connect the various leaders across the futures thinking and positive visioning space with one another and with the leadership of the democracy field. We're gratified that the connections we've already made informally are leading to exciting collaborations.

Inspiration. Finally, we want this report to be useful to you. We've prioritized information that can accelerate your own journeys of exploration with a curated selection of materials organized thematically, including illustrative examples and an extensive list of people and organizations – to connect with or learn more about – who are thinking and acting expansively about the future. In building this curation, we unleashed our own imagination. We hope it inspires you and spurs you to share your examples and ideas with us.

Please join us on this vital journey. Share your questions, suggestions, and reactions with us at BetterFutures@ThirdPlateau.com.

Thank you for reading!

Suzette Brooks Masters

Lead, Better Futures Project

Mike Berkowitz

Executive Director, Democracy Funders Network

ROADMAP
AND SUMMARY

The Imperative

WHY THE BETTER FUTURES PROJECT

Extraordinary times call for imaginative thinking and action. Building a robust, high functioning pluralist democracy in the U.S. capable of ushering in better futures for Americans requires us to think differently about what the times demand. We need positive disruptors who dare to dream and imagine what could be. But looking forward and offering up hope can be challenging. Even with the best of intentions, we can still become trapped in cycles of reaction, apathy, and even surrender.

We in the American democracy movement are not immune from these forces. While our democracy faces significant threats that require a robust response, response alone is insufficient. If we fixate on preventing dire outcomes and neglect to paint a picture of the futures we're building towards, it will be infinitely harder to develop strategies to get there and to inspire people to join us on that journey.

This report, and the Better Futures Project more broadly, is born of a desire to gain energy and inspiration from those within and outside the democracy space who aren't giving up, but are moving beyond critique and reaction to creation, inspiring those around them, generating abundant visions of better futures ahead, and laying the groundwork for achieving them. We want to learn from them, tap into their energy and optimism, amplify their efforts, and create a virtuous cycle of imagination and transformation to galvanize bold, creative solutions to realize the futures we want for our democracy and our country.

Below is a roadmap and high level summary of the report.

A Roadmap to This Report

To learn more about positive disruptors and their visions, we asked a diverse and thoughtful group of informants about the futures they'd like to see, how to get there, and who is inspiring them. We describe our process in the WHO, WHAT, and HOW sections of the introduction. Our secondary research on the perils of dystopian thinking and crisis framing, and the role of positive visions of the future in promoting social change, is described in the WHY section. That research makes a compelling case for imagining better futures for our democracy and our society, both to guide us and to align our social movements around shared aspirations. The

responses from our in-depth interviews, organized into key themes and peppered with direct quotes from interviewees, are in the WHAT WE HEARD section. We make strategy and funding recommendations in WHAT'S NEXT and conclude with INSPIRATION, a curated compendium of imagined and real examples of better futures, along with an extensive list of people and organizations who think and act expansively about the future.

What We Heard and Learned

Interviewees represent diverse skills, areas of expertise, disciplines, identities, political leanings, and geographies. We cast a wide net, tapping a mix of doers/activists, thinkers/thought leaders, creatives and artists, content shapers, funders, spiritual and religious leaders, gamers, designers/architects, and futurists and future-oriented practitioners.

We asked them these questions over hour-long Zoom interviews:

- ✦ Why does positive visioning matter?
- ✦ What is your vision of a better future, and how does it relate to the future of American democracy?
- ✦ Does a positive visioning ecosystem exist? Who's in it?
- ✦ Are positive visions of a future America breaking through in mass culture?
- ✦ What are the challenges to imagining better futures, and how can we overcome them?

Our interviews underscored many obstacles standing in the way of imagining and realizing better futures for American democracy. Here are some of our more notable findings:

- ✦ There was enthusiastic and emphatic agreement that positive visions of the future matter tremendously because they help us to imagine better alternatives, motivate us, and guide us to achieving positive societal outcomes. They also reinforce the idea that we have agency to shape our individual and collective futures and those of our descendants.
- ✦ Few of the people we interviewed saw governance as critical to achieving the better futures they articulated, or had thought about how to improve and reimagine democracy.
- ✦ The future-oriented community seldom connects with the democracy community.
- ✦ America lags in experimenting with new forms of future-oriented governance models and thinking.
- ✦ A cascade of obstacles (e.g., complex problems from the local to the planetary, conflict-driven media and political environments, dystopian narratives) currently stand in the way of positive visions of the future emerging at scale.
- ✦ Positive stories about the future and narratives of mutuality and abundance are barely breaking through in mass culture.
- ✦ The actors we interviewed are very disconnected from one another, but we noted the emergence of a few hubs of activity and connection.

We believe that focusing on the future is a critical objective for those of us concerned about the state and direction of American democracy. While our democracy faces significant threats that require a robust response, response alone is insufficient. We must also paint visions of better futures for American democracy in order to orient ourselves and inspire the broader public.

What's Next

In <u>WHAT'S NEXT</u>, we offer recommendations for further learning and action to energize the positive visioning already taking place. We encourage more doers, creatives, and thinkers to frame their work in terms of building better futures, and work together on what our democracy could and should become. We advocate strengthening the narrative environment to allow those positive visions to flourish and spread, and generally promote bolder thinking and engagement about the future and democracy.

While we have a strong foundation on which to build – great ideas, visionary leaders, real-world experiments, powerful stories about better futures, and media campaigns – we need more infrastructure and connective tissue to gain traction and impact. Our three major recommendations are listed below:

Build the field: Invest in infrastructure and relationships
There are numerous ways to build and support an emerging field and to create connections between those broadly engaged in positive visioning and those working specifically on democracy issues. We recommend more networking, collaboration, and mapping, more productive chances to convene donors and working groups around the future of democracy, and greater use of futures thinking tools to change mindsets.

Model what's possible and fund experimentation
We want to explore how to adapt governance innovations from outside the U.S. that incorporate a futures orientation, a longer planning horizon, and an intergenerational fairness lens. We also see promise in funding innovative efforts to strengthen and invigorate democracy in the U.S., especially at the state and local level, by using technology, engaging youth, creatives, game designers, and speculative fiction writers, and tapping into collective imagination exercises.

Strengthen narrative systems & amplify positive, futures-oriented content
Our field needs to develop strategies that elevate and sustain narratives of abundance, interdependence, and mutuality and that amplify current bright spots for greater impact. Content also matters. We need more of it that's positive, inspiring, and hopeful about what we can build together. That means influencing which stories are told, by whom, and how.

In addition to these major recommendations, we also heard calls for greater investment in civic engagement infrastructure in rural America, in religious institutions, and in interfaith circles. Others talked about the importance of bridging, love, healing, and repair. Finally, we were reminded that to succeed at this work we need to make it fun and joyful.

An Invitation to Join Us

We hope this report provokes, intrigues, and inspires you. It is meant to. We plan to use it to ignite conversations about imagining what American democracy could become — bringing together people across the democracy field, philanthropy, and the futuring community, as well as many others. We look forward to your feedback and to imagining better futures for America alongside you.

Please reach out to us at <u>BetterFutures@ThirdPlateau.com</u> to learn how you can get involved.

KEY CONCEPTS

Abundance mindset
(in contrast to "Scarcity mindset")

The abundance mindset is an antidote to a winner-take-all mentality that assumes there is not enough go around and that life and society are a competition. Adopting an abundance mindset allows for more generous and equitable problem-solving.

Agency

Agency is the capacity of individuals to access the power and resources needed to fulfill their potential. Individual agency is when a person acts on their own behalf, proxy agency is when an individual acts on behalf of someone else, and collective agency occurs when people act together, such as a social movement.

Better futures
(see also "Positive visioning")

We use the term "better futures" in this report to refer to preferable or desirable futures, as opposed to possible, plausible, probable or undesirable futures. The concept of better futures implies a values-based or normative process of imagining futures that would be safe, equitable, sustainable, and free. A multiplicity of futures is inherent in the concept, as the future that eventually comes into being will be the product of co-creation and collective action.

Civic imagination

Civic imagination refers to the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; to see oneself as a civic agent capable of making change; and to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences are different from one's own.

Collective imagination

Collective imagination is a set of ideas and ideals that groups of people share. Typically it refers to concepts shared by an entire society or community, like a belief in basic human rights.

Collaborative imagination

Collaborative imagination is a way to model or experience the lives of others, thereby enhancing empathy, collective consciousness, and the ability to think through the effects of our actions on others. It also refers to imagination as a group effort, and to the belief that all ideas that change the world must first be shared with other people.

Collective action

Collective action is organized action taken together by a group of people who aspire to improve their conditions and achieve a common goal.

Crisis framing

Crisis framing is an approach that consistently presents situations as dire, threatening, or dangerous. It is sometimes seen as a way to prevent informed debate by generating urgency that leads people to swift action.

Democracy

Democracy is a form of governance based on the will of the people. Power is invested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through representation.

Dystopia

Dystopias are darkly imagined or predicted future states often characterized by rampant fear or suffering, oppressive governments, or environmental disasters, or are otherwise associated with catastrophe or apocalypse.

Ecosystem

Derived from the study of interconnected organisms, the term ecosystem is also used to describe complex or interconnected technological, political, and social systems. We use it in this report to describe the burgeoning set of interconnected players engaged in positive visioning.

Futures thinking
(see also "Strategic foresight")

Futures thinking is a creative process involving a set of tools and approaches to consider a range of potential futures. In considering the future, it uses divergent thinking and acknowledges uncertainty in order to inform better decision making in the present. This is in contrast to analytical thinking, which uses convergent thinking to predict the future. At its best, futures thinking enables people to determine the future they want and how they might achieve it.

Governance system

Governance systems are structures and processes for decision making, accountability, and control. They exist in a range of societal settings, including the public and private sectors. Democratic governance is a system of government where institutions function according to democratic processes and norms, both internally and in their interaction with other institutions.

Official Future

The Official Future is a concept originated by futurist Peter Schwartz that describes the way people look forward together and make sense of the world. It's also been described as an ideological glue that holds a collectivity together by defining a shared horizon of expectations.

Paradigm shift

The paradigm shift, a powerful concept developed by physicist Thomas Kuhn, describes a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions that faces resistance from those invested in the old approach until the transition to the new way of thinking becomes dominant.

Pluralism

Pluralism is a philosophy that recognizes and affirms diversity of backgrounds, belief systems, and lifestyles. It allows for different groups to maintain their identities while existing within a more dominant group. It has also been interpreted more expansively to mean a full embrace of difference, not merely coexistence, as a valuable source of creativity and prosperity.

Polarization

Political polarization refers to the divergence of political attitudes away from the center, towards ideological extremes. Affective polarization refers to the tendency for partisans to dislike, distrust, and even dehumanize those from the other party or the other "side."

Positive visioning
(see also "Better futures")

We use the term positive visioning in this report to describe the act of imagining/envisioning better or desirable futures.

Scarcity mindset and Zero-sum thinking
(in contrast to "Abundance mindset")

The scarcity mindset is animated by competition and shortage. It assumes that opportunities and resources are scarce and therefore should be hoarded and guarded. Zero-sum thinking is the most extreme expression of scarcity thinking – it assumes finite resources, so that when one person or group gains, it results in an equal loss for the other.

Strategic foresight
(see also "Futures thinking")

Strategic foresight is a structured and systematic way of gathering evidence about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. It uses a range of methodologies – such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analyzing megatrends, and developing multiple scenarios – to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future. Strategic foresight does not attempt to offer definitive answers about what the future will hold. The objective is not to "get the future right," but to expand and reframe the range of plausible developments that need to be taken into consideration.

Thanks to Jessica Clark for her assistance with this section.

INTRODUCTION: WHY, WHO, WHAT, AND HOW

Why Imagining Better Futures Is Crucial Now, and Always

It's a time of radical openness, threat and possibility

We live at a time of tremendous instability and change, a time ripe for disruption. Consequently, we need positive disruptors who dare to dream and hope for better, who look forward.

Futurist Ari Wallach believes that this period of extreme flux we find ourselves in is of great import. He writes, "On a grand, historic scale, there have been a handful of periods of dramatic transition that not only mark changes in our behaviors and environments, but that also reset the defaults of how we think and operate as human beings – windows like the Agricultural Revolution, the Middle Ages, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Age. Oh, and now. I call these periods of flux Intertidals."[2] According to Wallach, an intertidal occurs when "paradigm shifts are heightened and intertwined, when the degree of complexity and confusion in our lives is turned up to eleven, and, most important, the underlying ideas, narratives, and rules of what it means to be a human being are called into question."[3]

Wallach characterizes an intertidal zone as a place both of great danger and great creative potential that offers the opportunity for transformation. Intertidal moments, in which our long-held norms and narratives are thrown into question, can spur revolutionary human actions and thinking that can "navigate this moment of chaos and build societies that relish human and ecological flourishing,"[4] but that doesn't mean they will. There is no inevitability here.

Philosopher William MacAskill, who looks at the long arc of human history, also believes "we are living through a unique and precarious chapter in humanity's story. Out of the hundreds of thousands of years in humanity's past — and potentially billions of years in its future — we find ourselves living now, at a time of extraordinary change."[5] Precisely because of the unprecedented and accelerating pace of change, MacAskill exhorts us to view this intertidal moment as both an exceptional opportunity and a profound responsibility.

It bears emphasizing that during periods of immense change, when paradigms are shifting and people feel unmoored, we must think, prepare, and act accordingly. We must speak to and embrace the uncertainty, and think more boldly and more imaginatively.

Danielle Allen calls us to be "founders" in the 21st century, "to bring the same intentionality to redesigning and renovating our institutions ... now in the 21st century as was brought to bear in the 18th century."[6] Anthropologist Miriam Ticktin urges us to "create room in public discourse and practice not just for a counter or oppositional politics which reacts to a dominant form of

politics … but to enable alter-visions, or alternative political formations that exist alongside the current political order." [7] The reason we must heed these calls to think bigger, to reimagine what America can be, is that moments of disruption like these open up space for transformation.

In a provocative essay in *The American Interest*, Nils Gilman explains the critical role of the "Official Future," a kind of ideological glue that holds a collectivity together by defining a shared horizon of expectations. [8] Periods of "radical openness," like the inflection point we find ourselves in today in the United States, rarely last long. That's because "living with a radically open future is cognitively exhausting – people crave a sense of certainty about the future, which is precisely what the Official Future is meant to provide. This means there is unmet demand for political leadership that has the confidence and charisma to impose a compelling new vision for the future." [9] That leadership often comes in the form of an authoritarian who appeals to the public's desire for order and predictability by offering a coherent vision for the future. We have to have a more compelling and inspiring vision to offer the public, one they will choose over order and predictability, or a return to a mythical and idealized past.

In *How Democracies Revive*, [10] Lee Drutman cautions against assuming the future will look like the past, and argues that the future belongs to the disruptors, since disruption during intertidal periods is what enables transformation. He draws parallels between today and the Gilded Age, which eventually ushered in the Progressive Era. Looking at the lessons from that era, Drutman emphasizes the importance of two elements: innovation and experimentation at the local level to address local problems in new ways, and the existence of an overarching belief in a positive vision for the future that fueled a potent progressive movement for change. [11] Put simply, we need more experiments and a widely-shared belief that better futures lie ahead. If the democracy field does not get sufficiently imaginative about positive futures, and create a tide of positivity, the opponents of democracy will eventually rule the day.

> **"The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies."**
>
> – Joanna Macy, activist and author

Whether or not we are living in an intertidal moment, a growing body of evidence underscores the importance of articulating positive visions of the future now – in this moment of crisis and transformation – and always, as we explain below.

The perils of dystopian and crisis framing

Let's begin by discussing what happens in the absence of positive visioning, when critique dominates. Today, many Americans across the ideological spectrum believe that American democracy, and perhaps the American experiment itself, is in crisis. Many have lost trust in its ability to deliver on its promise for the American people and have lost trust in our essential institutions, including the government itself. They are trapped in a cycle of reaction and opposition, which entrenches polarization and shrinks the realm of possibility.

While there are many ideas for ways to strengthen our democracy, those interventions can themselves become victims of partisan polarization and inaction, fueling even more dissatisfaction and frustration, and compounding the feeling that solutions are elusive. State and local experimentation and innovation may hold the most promise, especially in our federal system, and may be the way our governance systems ultimately change. However, scaling

them takes time, and many feel a great sense of urgency about the precarious state of our democracy.[12] In addition, many of these structural innovations are abstract and process-heavy, making it more difficult to connect them to people's daily lives or use them to inspire collective action.

Research conducted by the Frameworks Institute confirms the corrosive effect of crisis framing, or consistently presenting situations as threats or dangers. Rather than spurring people to action, it feeds fatalistic thinking and disengagement and erodes people's confidence in our civic and social institutions. What we need instead is to encourage "forward-looking, aspirational thinking about how to strengthen our social systems and public structures" and tap into "motivating and instructive stories about our collective capacity to come together, work together, and strategize our way out of even the biggest problems."[13]

If despair and nihilism set in, if we fail to create opportunities for the American public to imagine themselves in better futures together, then we will be thwarted in our efforts to realize those better futures. When people give up on the system, they frequently choose autocratic leaders – negative disruptors who don't feel beholden to rules or norms – instead.

Crisis framing compounds another acute challenge we face in America. Our media and political systems, and the incentives that underpin them, elevate the voices of a small number of politically-energized individuals on the right and left of the political spectrum – representing about one-fourth to one-third of the public combined – over others that are less extreme. They also elevate the primacy of division and conflict. This is reflected in increasingly ideologically incompatible media ecosystems and depictions of reality that make it harder for the American people to experience the same reality together and forge a common vision of the future. Rather than acknowledge sometimes contradictory or inconsistent views, our narrative and information environment amplifies false binaries and sensationalism, giving undue attention to what Amanda Ripley, in her book *High Conflict*, dubs "conflict entrepreneurs."[14] [15] This leaves the majority of the American public increasingly disengaged and disenchanted, creating a population More in Common refers to as the "Exhausted Majority"[16] and resulting in significant distortions in our perception of "others."[17]

> **"We are not helpless and there is nothing wrong with us except the strange belief that we are helpless and there's something wrong with us. All we need to do is to stop letting that belief paralyze our minds, hearts, and souls."**
> – Donella H. Meadows, environmental activist

At its best, imagining better futures can be a way to bring people together around shared aspirations and unlock abundance and possibility. But there are tensions and fault lines to navigate. The first is the narrative ocean we swim in, which is one of scarcity, individualism and competition, not collective care and wellbeing.[18] This environment makes it harder to imagine a brighter future for all of us, whatever "side" or tribe we align with or feel connected to.

Racism also undermines America's effort to build a truly multi-racial, multicultural democracy. Racial division and hierarchy have profoundly shaped American history, identity, institutions, and government spending priorities. Despite decades of legal, social, and cultural transformation, race continues to predict disparate outcomes and to drive people apart, preventing Americans from seeing their interdependence or unlocking at scale what Heather McGhee calls the "solidarity dividend" in her book *The Sum of Us*.[19] [20]

Racism, when combined with zero-sum thinking and destabilizing change, has fueled a potent ethno-nationalist backlash in America. Proponents of the Great Replacement Theory and others are weaponizing fear and anxiety about demographic change and loss of relative status, priming certain segments of the American public to fear what a demographically diverse future has in store for them.[21] The contention on the left that "demographics are destiny" has also added fuel to the fire. This backlash could undermine not only America's ability to evolve into a truly pluralistic democracy, but the survival of American democracy itself.

At the same time, marginalized populations in America – victims of systems of oppression and historical inequities, as well as those targeted because of their "otherness" such as immigrants, religious minorities, LGBTQUIA individuals, and people of reproductive age – are also struggling to see themselves in a positive future where they fully belong and have agency, mobility, and opportunity.

Thus, it's more imperative than ever that we provide stories and examples, real and imagined, to enable the American public to visualize and internalize what life could be like for us in better futures – futures where all people have agency and freedom, but are bound together through an appreciation of their shared fates and, especially, their common humanity.

But who will step into the breach with bold visions for better futures when things feel like they are falling apart? Who are the positive disruptors?

That's where imagination comes in.

Unlocking humanity's superpower

This brings us next to humanity's superpower, our ability to imagine the future and to organize others around that vision. Whether we dub mankind *Homo prospectus*[22] or *Homo imaginatus*,[23] a growing body of work at the intersection of anthropology, cognitive science, futures studies, history, literature, media studies, organizational behavior, philosophy, political theory, positive psychology, and social psychology emphasizes the importance of imagination as an essential human cognitive capacity. Philip Ball writes in *Homo imaginatus* that "Imagination isn't just a spillover from our problem-solving prowess. It might be the core of what human brains evolved to do."[24] This ability to dream up better futures, in the midst of bleakness and adversity, and to mobilize our fellow humans to turn those dreams into reality, is at the root of our defining movements and the key to human progress.

> **"To me the important thing is not to offer any specific hope of betterment but, by offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live. It is that inertia that allows the institutions of injustice to continue unquestioned."**
>
> – Ursula K Le Guin, author

Ed Finn, who directs the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University, calls imagination "the ignition system" for humanity in the 21st century. Finn sees the imagination as stimulating and anticipating possible futures, enabling collective consciousness and empathy, and making what seemed impossible possible.[25] Unlocking the imagination permits the formation of societal or collective futures, shaping how groups develop narratives around a common vision of better futures and organize themselves into social movements to make those

changes happen. He posits that to change a complex system, you need to push several levers at once, and that collective storytelling is a uniquely effective way of doing so by getting people to wrestle with the same story about the future at the same time from different vantage points.

In a similar vein, Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, collaborators at the University of Southern California's Civic Imagination Project, focus on the "civic imagination," which they define as "the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions," a capacity that "requires the ability to see oneself as a civic agent capable of making change, to feel solidarity with others whose perspectives and experiences are different than one's own, to join a larger collective with shared interests, and to bring imaginative dimensions to real-world spaces and places."[26] This approach links imagining better futures to the development of both individual agency and collective action.

Further supporting the necessity to engage in collective imagination efforts that go beyond critique, several other researchers have found that positive framing and aspirational thinking can foster engagement and motivation. Vivienne Badaan's review of the psychological literature found that collective action stems from the ability to imagine better societies[27] by increasing social hope and promoting the pursuit of those better futures.

In sum, to inspire ambitious and optimistic visions of the future at a time of great upheaval and transformation, we must rapidly foster collective imagination at scale. We must embrace the green shoots of progress and possibility all around us that already embody better futures (like the ones we share in the INSPIRATION section of this report), look for others, and view them as harbingers of new systems and new paradigms. We must think bigger and longer term to capitalize on the opportunities created by flux. We must move beyond reaction and preservation to collective imagination, and from that collective imagination to positive change.

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

– Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights leader

Who We Interviewed

The 64 people we interviewed for this project, listed alphabetically by first name:

Abdullah Antepli, Duke University
Adam Kruggel, People's Action
Adey Fisseha, Unbound Philanthropy
Alan Gershenfeld, E-Line Media
Amanda Alexander, Detroit Justice Center
Amanda Ripley, Good Conflict
Ari Wallach, Longpath
Benjamin Stokes, American University
Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Pop Culture
    Collaborative
Cat Tully, School of International Futures
Clement Bezold, Public Sector Foresight
    Network
David French, The Dispatch
David Hsu, Omidyar Network
Eboo Patel, Interfaith America
Ed Finn, Center for Science and the
    Imagination
Eli Pariser, New Public
Elizabeth Voorhees, Walt Disney Studios
Eric Ward, Western States Center
Gabrielle Strong, NDN Foundation
Gaby Pacheco, The Dream.US
Gail Christopher, National Collaborative for
    Health Equity
Gemma Mortensen, New Constellations
George Goehl, formerly People's Action
Gideon Lichfield, WIRED
Henry Jenkins, University of Southern
    California
Ishita Srivastava, Caring Across Generations
Jamie Hand, Creatives Rebuild NY
Jessica Clark, Dot Connector Studio
Jon Gruber, Einhorn Collaborative
Jose Antonio Vargas, Define American
Karthick Ramakrishnan, California 100
Katharine Henderson, Auburn Theological
    Seminary
Kristin Hansen, Civic Health Project

Layla Zaidane, Millennial Action Project
Leah Todd, Solutions Journalism Network
Lonny Avi Brooks, California State University
    East Bay
Malka Older, Arizona State University and
    sci-fi author
Mark Beam, Guild of Future Architects
Mark Gonzales, Department of the Future
May Lee, Guild of Future Architects
Matt Hawkins, One America Movement
Michael Johnston, Lubetzky Family
    Foundation
Miranda Massie, The Climate Museum
Nancy Donovan, Public Sector Foresight
    Network
Nealin Parker, Common Ground USA
Paola Mendoza, author and filmmaker
Rachel Peric, Welcoming America
Rebecca Cokley, Ford Foundation
Romain Vakilitabar, Pathos Labs and Pop
    Shift
Sam Heath, Equal Justice USA
Sangita Shresthova, University of Southern
    California
Sarah Ruger, Stand Together
Shayna Triebwasser, Fundamental Inc.
Stephen Menendian, Othering and
    Belonging Institute
Stuart Candy, Carnegie Mellon University
Theodore Johnson, Brennan Center for
    Justice
Tim Dixon, More in Common
Tracy Van Slyke, Pop Culture Collaborative
Uma Viswanathan, New Pluralists
Valarie Kaur, Revolutionary Love Project
Whitney Coe, Center for Rural Strategies
Yascha Mounk, Johns Hopkins University
Yehuda Kurtzer, Shalom Hartman Institute
Yuval Levin, American Enterprise Institute

What We Asked

In our interviews, we sought answers to the following key questions:

Why does positive visioning matter and how can it help shape the future of American democracy?

We asked interviewees if it was important to have positive visions of the future, what a positive vision of the future looked like and meant to them, what an "inclusive" future would look like and who was included in it, and how their work involved thinking about the future. We then asked them to consider what governance systems need to accompany and facilitate the emergence of those better futures and whether an inclusive, high functioning multiracial democracy could be such a governance system.

Does a positive visioning ecosystem exist and who's in it?

We were curious to understand whether there was an organized field of positive futures-oriented work to tap into, one that could connect people working on democracy issues for greater impact. We asked what individuals, organizations, collaborations, or initiatives were driven by positive visions about the future and if they saw themselves and their organizations as part of a positive visioning ecosystem. We also asked them to share any examples – real or imagined – of what better futures could resemble to add to our compendium of illustrative examples. Finally, we asked them how to strengthen connections between future-oriented actors across different sectors.

Are positive visions of a future America breaking through and, if so, to whom?

This open-ended question was both about the dominant narrative environment and the ability of positive content and bright spots to break through. Implicitly, it was also a question about reaching particular audiences with targeted content and whether it was possible for a range of audiences to align around shared visions at a time of acute polarization and demonization of perceived opponents.

What are the challenges to imagining better futures and how can we overcome them?

We concluded by asking interviewees to identify the headwinds confronting those seeking to imagine and bring about better futures, and solicited their recommendations for strategies to address the challenges they had identified. We asked them to share what investments, partnerships, incentives, and narratives could strengthen this ecosystem and the ability of positive visioning to have a greater impact on our society and governance systems.

How We Did It

The research that undergirds this report is based on structured hour-long recorded interviews on Zoom with key sources; secondary research into the interviewees' particular projects and visions; and examinations of writing on and examples of positive visioning about the future.

We began with an initial set of interview prospects with unique and inspirational visions of what better futures do or could look like. The 64 interviewees were chosen to represent diverse skills, areas of expertise, disciplines, identities, political leanings, and geographies.

Based on those interviews, recommendations from interviewees, and secondary research, we identified additional interview prospects to round out our sample. We deliberately cast a wide net, including self-described futurists and proponents of tapping collective imagination about the future as well as individuals who do not describe their work as explicitly future-oriented.

We sought a mix of doers/activists, thinkers/thought leaders, creatives and artists, content shapers, funders, spiritual and religious leaders, gamers, designers/architects, as well as futurists and future-oriented practitioners. Responses to our outreach were generally quite positive, with a very high percentage of prospects agreeing to be interviewed. Nevertheless, there were some gaps. We were not able to interview as many architects/designers and creatives as we had hoped; we tried to represent those perspectives through other forms of research. Additionally, we achieved less ideological diversity than desired; our interviews skewed more progressive than we'd hoped. However, we chose not to interview proponents of futures that did not fully value human dignity, such as those articulating visions of a Christian ethno-nationalist state.

We administered a standard interview protocol to all 64 interviewees and analyzed their transcribed interviews and the detailed notes we took during each interview. In preparation for each interview we sent interviewees in advance a short concept note about the nature of our inquiry and the basic questions we were planning to ask. Even so, we found it challenging to tackle such an expansive set of questions in one hour.

We approached our research inquiry with thematic data analysis, a helpful method when exploring in-depth qualitative data. We used inductive (information emerging from the data) and deductive (information we searched for in the data) approaches to data analysis that explored both explicit and implicit patterns in the interviews.[28] We then clustered their statements into key ideas and further refined them into overarching themes, which enabled us to lift patterns from our in-depth interviews and organize them around our key questions. While these themes are reflected in our findings, we largely refrained from any analysis of meaning and implications beyond sharing what emerged in the data. We chose instead to present illustrative quotes from the interviews throughout this report. All quotes from interviewees were verified for use.

The interviews sharpened our understanding of the positive visioning ecosystem, but provided more of an impressionist snapshot than a robust and comprehensive field scan. While some of the people and organizations we've placed in that ecosystem may not describe their work using future-oriented terminology or even see themselves working within that ecosystem, they are included here as we strive toward an expansive construction of this emerging field.

In the research phase preceding our interviews, we identified some illustrative examples of what better futures looked like in real life and in imagined depictions. These included examples of pluralist democracy, responsible and forward-looking stewardship, mutuality, and collective problem solving. We had hoped to crowdsource a large number of examples with the interviews, but they yielded fewer examples than anticipated. We supplemented the initial list with research.

Some of the terms we used in our standard questions, such as "democracy" and "inclusion," were open to interpretation. We did not define the terms for interviewees. Instead, we noted their interpretations and any reservations they had about how we phrased our questions or the terms we used.

Finally, we want to convey that this report – particularly the curation of examples it puts forth and the "field" it contours – is itself an exercise in imagination. It embodies just one possible construction, and a subjective one at that. But that's the point. Our hope is that we are expanding the boundaries of important work that already exists in numerous sectors, media, and geographies. This is work that we believe deserves more attention, resourcing, and connectivity – work that can spur further transformation.

FINDINGS:
WHAT WE HEARD

Why Positive Visions Are Needed Today

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Interviewees across the board were emphatic about the importance of articulating positive visions of the future, especially against the backdrop of the dystopian narratives, crisis framing, and critique so predominant today.

✦ Positive visions of the future matter because they help us imagine better alternatives, motivate us, and provide an essential guide to achieving positive societal outcomes. They also reinforce the idea that we all have agency and can shape our individual and collective futures and those of our descendants.

✦ Positive visions counterbalance the negativity that currently pervades American society, making them especially critical during this period of doubt, uncertainty, and rapid change.

Interviewees all expressed the importance of articulating positive visions of the future, and did so passionately. Their beliefs as to why imagining better futures is important fell into two main categories:

✦ It acts as a North Star providing a direction and purpose; and
✦ It provides hope and empowerment as a powerful antidote to despair, powerlessness, and inertia.

A North Star

We heard repeatedly that imagining better futures anchors us and provides guidance, direction, and purpose, especially when addressing complex challenges, and is a precondition for successfully building a better future world. By articulating and then visualizing our future success, we set meaningful and tangible aspirational goals, enabling us to organize our efforts to achieve a larger purpose. We heard that the lack of a positive vision keeps us from imagining possibilities and believing our best days are still ahead of us, instead leaving us paralyzed with diminished chances of bringing about change. With a North Star to guide and inspire us, we can

organize people to move collectively toward positive change. Some interviewees offered that participatory collective imagination processes are an excellent way to motivate and engage community members to dream bigger and take action in the pursuit of better futures.

> The future we paint has to look like a future people want to live in. Positive visions help manage the anxiety of change. Too many visions of the future are rooted in apocalyptic images, framed in ways that lead to fear rather than excitement. Calling for a future that looks like the status quo simply cannot compete against these apocalyptic narratives. – *Eric Ward, Western States Center*

> Building a shared imagination of what's possible is the most important thing we can do. We are in a crisis of imagination, and if we can't imagine a better future, it'll be near impossible for us to create a better reality. – *Romain Vakilitabar, Pathos Labs*

> Without a positive vision, we can't stumble into a positive outcome. – *Sam Heath, Equal Justice USA*

Hope and empowerment

Interviewees explained that the most powerful benefit of holding positive visions about the future is to prevent us from falling into despair, fatalism, and powerlessness. They shared that we face that risk today as we confront dystopian narratives, loss of trust in institutions, polarization, and social media-driven doom scrolling. Articulating positive visions is an antidote to these demotivating and disheartening trends as it provides joy and hope, essential to motivating people to sustained action. Imbued with the belief in the possibility of making a difference and ushering in a society that can deliver on promises for future generations, people inspired by positive visions can overcome cynicism, challenge assumptions, question the status quo, and pursue their aspirations through collective action.

> The biggest crisis now is that not enough people are empowered to imagine a better future. – *Ed Finn, Center for Science and the Imagination*

> Without positive visions, only reaction is possible. Reaction relegates you to a secondary character, never a lead. – *Mark Gonzales, Department of the Future*

> Positive visions matter a lot. Right now, pessimistic critique is prevalent on both sides of the ideological spectrum. With so much critique, there is no reason for people to fight for democracy, to improve it. In this way, pessimism can be self-fulfilling. – *Yascha Mounk, Johns Hopkins University*

Challenges to Imagining Better Futures

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Interviewees underscored the many challenges that make it difficult to imagine better futures, despite having articulated just how important those positive visions were.

✦ They reiterated the corrosive effects of hyper-partisanship and polarization, loss of trust in democratic institutions, significant constraints created by negative media narratives and incentives, and mis/disinformation.

✦ The combination of these mutually reinforcing negative factors, combined with a dominant scarcity mindset and deeply held American mythology around individualism, enhanced a sense of doom and powerlessness.

Even as they shared the importance of positive visions about the future, interviewees identified several major challenges preventing a more robust focus on better futures. The pervasiveness of these interconnected forces led many to feel a sense of frustration, even powerlessness. The most frequently cited factors, listed below, are consistent with our research findings.

✦ Partisanship and polarization;
✦ Loss of trust in democratic institutions;
✦ Dominance of negative media narratives; and
✦ Corrosive effects of scarcity, conflict, and individualism.

Partisanship and polarization

We heard that by sowing distrust, eroding norms, dehumanizing our perceived opponents, and reinforcing an us versus them mindset, polarization and acute partisanship challenge the very notion that better futures are possible for all of us, not just some of us. They weaken our collective resolve to work together and they tear at the foundation of our pluralistic democracy. They make us more susceptible to negative habits of mind and behavior (e.g., tribalism, cancel culture, nihilism, pessimism) and vulnerable to manipulation by malicious actors spreading mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories. These interlocking forces create a vicious cycle

that perpetuates polarization and partisanship, keeping us in trenches fighting never-ending skirmishes rather than thinking through possible solutions that would improve life for all of us.

> The question is how we hold ourselves together. How do we build a big enough "we" to move forward in this context? Polarization makes it harder to have big ideas for the future. – *George Goehl, organizer*

Loss of trust in democratic institutions

Interviewees shared their perceptions that Americans have developed a distrust of their fellow citizens, of government at all levels (but especially the federal government), and of democratic processes like elections. As a result, many Americans are now questioning the benefits of participating in the very systems and processes that uphold our democracy. The public's cynicism is also eroding social cohesion among Americans, a fundamental necessity for a stable pluralist democracy. Many of those we interviewed raised the alarm about these indicators of distrust in the country (such as political violence, instability, and lack of confidence in institutions) and each other (e.g., anti-democratic sentiments, discrimination and stereotyping, and increased self-interest), making it harder to bridge divides, mend our social fabric, and unite around common aspirations.

> Why aren't there more stories about good government and diverse groups of people solving problems together? Superhero narratives often posit a lone individual fighting large, faceless, corrupt systems. Government is one of the big systems it's easy to beat up on. – *Jessica Clark, Dot Connector Studio*

Dominance of negative media narratives

Many interviewees highlighted negative narratives and the narrative systems that support them as significant impediments to positive visioning. The media perpetuates and magnifies oppositional, us versus them narratives and dystopian visions of the future. It exploits audience attraction to fear and conflict in lieu of presenting uplifting narratives and stories. In promoting violence, scapegoating, and zero-sum messaging, these negative narratives drive distrust, hysteria, and pessimism, making win-win collective solutions elusive. Interviewees expressed frustration that they lack the tools at scale to counter these media tactics and the resulting content. At the most basic level, they shared that we need to experience what's possible – whether in fiction, virtual reality, or real life – to believe that it is indeed possible. But there just isn't enough aspirational content depicting a positive version of the future (e.g, showing the promise of pluralism, effective and functional democratic governance, people solving problems together) to compete with the content and messages constantly tearing those possibilities down.

> Antisocial content, what I call "toxic sludge," can be overwhelming. We need to increase the prosocial flow of content – tell better stories and showcase better role models. – *Kristin Hansen, Civic Health Project*

> What we know is that in conflict zones, creating good fictional content

about people who are different from each other is paramount. But the U.S. isn't doing enough of this and is a conflict zone. There isn't enough really great fictional content about navigating political divides. *– Amanda Ripley, journalist and author*

Journalism shapes narratives about how communities see themselves. It's important to lift up positive deviance. *– Leah Todd, Solutions Journalism Network*

Corrosive effects of scarcity, conflict, and individualism

According to interviewees, narratives infused with oppositional, zero-sum messages have a detrimental effect on our perceptions of what's possible and diminish our sense of agency as well as our motivation. These messages prey on our insecurities and fears about the future and adversely affect our thinking and behavior. Rather than spurring us to search for mutually beneficial solutions and collaboration, we remain suspicious and adversarial. The American proclivity towards scarcity thinking and its deeply rooted mythology around individualism were identified as the most problematic factors at work here. Scarcity framing posits that resources are finite and thus any group's gain comes at another's expense. This creates a psychological state of intolerance, hypervigilance, and resentment towards outsiders, and manifests as hostility towards "others" like refugees and immigrants, [29] as well as grievance narratives like the Great Replacement Theory. Relatedly, American mythology around individualism, the belief that the only way to advance in U.S. society is through personal effort, remains powerful. It hampers efforts to address some of our most pressing systemic issues by implying that the burden of solving monumental challenges (e.g., poverty, inequality, racial injustice, climate change) lies with individuals, private action, and markets rather than with government.

There has been a lack of socialization and imagination to solve big things, not an absence of policy solutions. So we are left with private action – on climate, on caregiving. We don't give enough thought to collective action. And we mythologize the hero rather than the movement. There is a persistent and unhelpful narrative around the rugged individual and heroism. *– Adey Fisseha, Unbound Philanthropy*

How can we create new mythology, with heroes who don't just win against an enemy but bring all sides together? Who face their shadows, find redemption, and earn back trust? *– Uma Viswanathan, New Pluralists*

This toxic brew of factors can certainly make it harder to imagine better futures at a time when those aspirations are crucial. The impact of this concatenation of negatives can be overwhelming, dulling and diminishing our hopes and dreams for the future. Some of this tentativeness came through in interviewees' articulations of their positive visions of the future, which we discuss in the following section.

Interviewees' Positive Visions of the Future

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Across the board, interviewees spoke passionately about their positive futures filled with immense opportunity and the celebration of differences of all kinds. Even though they spanned the ideological spectrum, many were aspiring to a form of fully realized pluralism.

✦ Nevertheless, many interviewees struggled to free themselves from the shackles of present challenges in articulating their positive visions, which were often framed as freedom from or the absence of something oppressive or negative.

✦ Several expressed a yearning for and the necessity of healing and repair as part of the journey to achieving better futures and a deep commitment to the planet and future generations.

Across our interviews, we heard a resounding affirmation of the need to have positive visions for the future and an inspiring range of individual expressions of what could come to be. Interviewees believed these variations were natural and expected. One expert even called the existence of this variety more "democratic," because it reflected multiple inputs from different types of people instead of a single, homogeneous idea. Some shared personal visions, focusing on their hopes for their children and grandchildren, or specific desires for greater belonging and inclusion of marginalized groups and identities. Others expressed more universal aspirations for all of humanity, now and into the future, and sometimes for all living creatures and the planet. Several focused on an end state, while others focused on paths to achieving better futures, including paths of healing and reconciliation.

Despite the variations in how interviewees expressed their visions of the future, three major themes, explored below, emerged as common threads across our conversations:

✦ A desire for a pluralist future rich with opportunity for fulfillment;
✦ The importance of pathways from past to present and future, like healing and reconciliation; and
✦ A deep commitment to the planet and future generations.

A fully realized pluralism

Many of our interviewees spoke passionately about positive futures filled with fulsome opportunities for themselves, their children, and future generations, and about the celebration of differences of all kinds. Some described their better future as a form of fully realized pluralism, while others focused on respect for humanity. Their aspirations were most often articulated as a desire for a total absence of supremacy, hierarchy, and discrimination, but also as full acceptance of a wide array of differences (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, class, creed, and culture) and a universal ability to thrive.

> In my positive future, people are born into prosperity, basic needs are met, and people's minds and bodies are honored. People are able to maximally express what it means to be human and can live in multiple realities (augmented and virtual) to learn from and honor their histories. They are able to collectively empathize with each other. – *Lonny Avi Brooks, California State University*

> The question before us is how to create a thriving multivariate society, where people can fully occupy their multiple identities. Now we're in a moment where the predominant identity is racial, but I would argue that in several years, it could be gender, culture, religion, generation or even one's level of genomic "enhancement." – *Ari Wallach, Longpath*

> When I think of an inclusive future I think of that as pluralism. It's about upholding and celebrating differences, not about sameness and conformity. – *Sarah Ruger, Stand Together*

> Pluralist culture will exist when a majority of the American populace is actively and intentionally engaged in the hard and delicate work of belonging together in just society. We would understand intrinsically that we are accountable to each other and there is no value in staying in our bubbles. Instead, we would embrace the complex work of forging authentic bonds across our differences — relationships that are anti-racist, anti-misogynist, anti-ablelist, and gender expansive. If we lived in such a culture, life would still be hard, but our systems and norms as a society would be structured to help people and our world thrive. – *Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Pop Culture Collaborative*

The fact that so many people expressed their yearning for community and belonging as a desire for freedom from exclusion from any other group, including one's in-group, is telling. It speaks to the many barriers people feel are holding them back from realizing their dreams and the pervasiveness of othering and discrimination in America.

> My hope for the future is that we are able to reach a thaw towards our fellow man and see our common humanity. After the thaw, we redouble our commitment to the social contract, not just to secure individual rights but to build strong communities. – *David French, The Dispatch*

> I imagine an America at home in its diversity, not afraid of change or of the future, making the most of the tools we have and doing so with confidence. – *Yuval Levin, American Enterprise Institute*

I aspire to a double freedom: groups are well treated and respected and citizens able to resist the pressures of their own identity groups. – *Yascha Mounk, Johns Hopkins University and author*

I wish to see a world where any person with any disability can have the American Dream accessible to them in their lifetime. – *Rebecca Cokley, Ford Foundation*

Alongside visions of an unfettered and hopeful future filled with opportunity were more sober aspirations like providing for people's basic needs (so they can achieve their dreams and potential, not simply survive) and avoiding the direst of outcomes, like ethnic cleansing and widespread violence.

People born today will have a future to lean into. We will avoid ethnic cleansing and our country will stay together. – *Eric Ward, Western States Center*

A world in which immigrants are truly welcome
Where black people aren't being killed
Where women aren't being raped
Where the planet exists
Where patriarchy has crumbled. – *Paola Mendoza, filmmaker/author*

Although the term "pluralism" expresses an aspiration across the ideological spectrum, that shared language may mask different meanings. In particular, pluralist belonging may mean a basic tolerance of difference for some and for others an active embrace of difference. Navigating the tension between these competing understandings of pluralism is one of the greatest challenges facing those seeking to build a better future in America.

Even groups that use the same language, like pluralism, may not mean the same thing by it. – *Jon Gruber, Einhorn Collaborative*

Realizing true pluralism in America requires imagining expansive ways of embracing all humans across lines of difference while avoiding the creation of new divisions along different axes. To do so will require rooting out divisive and dehumanizing ideologies, attitudes, and behaviors of all kinds.

The journey to achieving better futures

Some interviewees felt that reflection, healing, and justice were necessary steps to imagining and building stronger collective futures on a foundation of honesty, safety, and trust. In their view, to avoid repeating past mistakes and to eliminate any hierarchy of human value (e.g., the legacy of slavery, forced assimilation, ethnic cleansing), accountability and acknowledgment of past pain are essential. For them, the process is intrinsic to the vision's realization. How you reach the end state matters.

> In my positive vision of the future, we will have confronted the crises of inequality, climate, and democracy, have engaged honestly and done the necessary work of reparative justice and structural change, and brought along everyone we can, anyone willing to do that work with us. – *Miranda Massie, The Climate Museum*

> We need a prescription to eliminate racism: We need to "see" each other, elevate our interdependence and interconnectedness, jettison the idea of a hierarchy of human value, and embrace one another as equal human beings. We need "healing" to acknowledge the harm that racism has caused and still causes. This harm shows up in the erosion of our democracy, in our body politic, and in our own people. We've never done the work as a country to eradicate this belief system which gives permission for continued racial inequity. – *Gail Christopher, National Collaborative for Health Equity*

We also heard about other pathways to constructing a better world, including strengthening religious institutions to repair our broken American social fabric and create community; exercising moral courage; building power for marginalized groups through social movements; enacting policies to amplify human dignity, security, and equity; and building relationships of trust directly between individuals.

> It's a very tricky time for Christians because of the rise of White Christian Nationalism where there is a fusion of political fascism with Christian symbolism. It's important to lift up a vision of what a multi-racial multi-faith democracy where we all belong can be that is not based on grievance. With the decline of religiosity in America, we need to rely even more on a story of hope to animate us. People need moral imagination, local connection, and a sense of belonging. – *Reverend Katharine Henderson, Auburn Theological Seminary*

> I deny that future generations will necessarily make things better. This is deceptive and delusional. A lot of people have to work really hard on it for it to happen. But most of what we need to build better futures we have at our disposal. It's moral courage, the prophetic voice within our communities and political parties calling us out on our moral shortcomings. – *Imam Abdullah Antepli, Duke University*

> Legislation is good at doing some things but not good at making people like each other or connecting groups to each other across differences. Those are civic functions. Churches can play this role, so too can national and military service. – *Ted Johnson, Brennan Center for Justice and author*

Generational and planetary visions

Finally, for some of our interviewees, ideal futures spanned a much longer temporal arc and the survival and thriving of our planet, not just humanity. They view their work as long-term "ancestral" endeavors (e.g., changing harmful cultures and mindsets) for future generations. Indigenous and spiritual traditions figured prominently in future visions where humans live sustainable and regenerative lives, in balance with the natural world, and expand circles of concern to include animals and the environment.

Collective abundance is in direct opposition to extractive thinking which drives our economy, which drives capitalism, which drives the way we live. When we think about collective abundance, we center how we are living with the Earth and on Earth. Earth-based living, economics, and livelihoods are the underpinning of everything. *– Gabrielle Strong, NDN Foundation*

The field of future architecture's 100 year vision for shared prosperity is nested in the shared futures of its members who embrace "regenerative living" as first practiced by Indigenous peoples, and many others inspired by the beauty, design, and interconnectedness of all living things. Future Architecture includes paradigms, principles, and frameworks for applying this approach in the design of human systems. *– Mark Beam, Guild of Future Architects*

I really do believe that policy moves at the pace of culture, and culture moves at the pace of relationships, and relationships move at the pace of trust. There's a whole lot of work that has to happen at every level, and along the way. And that first piece around relationship building is the kind of thing that can take generations. *– Whitney Coe, Center for Rural Strategies*

I came to a realization that the immigrant rights work that I was doing was going to be the work of my lifetime. This is a very long, ancestral type of fight. What are the things that we can do today to make sure that we are setting everything up for the long game, not just for short-term wins? *– Gaby Pacheco, Dream.US*

How Governance Relates to These Positive Visions

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Most interviewees struggled to connect democracy and governance systems to the achievement of their positive visions for the future. When they did, they differed in their level of confidence in the American democratic experiment and the degree to which the current system could be reformed to function better in the future, underscoring the challenge of doing this work.

✦ Some expressed hope in local governance innovations, while others looked to tech and other ways to increase the participation and engagement of citizens.

✦ Others raised fundamental questions about whether our system was even fit to address the existential problems that America – indeed all of humanity – is now facing, and suggested more fundamental shifts in approach, including governance innovations placing greater emphasis on managing through disruptive change and safeguarding future generations.

We asked interviewees about the role that democracy and governance systems more broadly played in achieving the positive futures they had just expressed. To our surprise, they found it difficult to connect the realization of their positive visions to specific governance innovations or systems. While interviewees generally felt democracy was preferable to authoritarianism, almost all discussed American democracy's current precarity and its many flaws, ranging from the structural to the more intangible, like norms and trust. They expressed varying degrees of faith that our current system could be reformed, offering different ways to foster greater engagement and participation by the citizenry, become more inclusive and high functioning, and address 21st century problems. Few interviewees proposed revolutionary, alternative, or experimental modes of governance, although several questioned whether those might be inevitable given the enormity of change we are experiencing now in multiple arenas.

Interviewees approached these issues in two basic ways, largely shaped by their background and positionality. Some – often activists and those working at the grassroots or those working on structural democracy reforms – were focused on protecting the system, hoping to prevent a coup in 2024, for example, or a slide into illiberal democracy or elected authoritarianism. Others – usually the futurists, creatives, narrative change and technology professionals – were more genuinely focused on systemic transformation, not preservation of the status quo. However, the question remains whether these diverging paths can be braided into a powerful strategy that both protects democracy from authoritarianism in the short run and transforms and strengthens it for the long run.

We present below the main ways interviewees spoke about the connection between the realization of their aspirations and governance systems:
- ✦ Agnostic about future governance;
- ✦ Building trust in our existing governance system;
- ✦ Reforming our governance system;
- ✦ Community-based and tech-enabled governance experiments; and
- ✦ Transforming governance for a new era.

Agnostic about future governance

Although we asked about the role of governance in creating a functioning pluralistic society, several interviewees had no opinion and a few were agnostic, either because they felt it was not within their purview to comment on the ideal governance system, or because they did not perceive governance to be a relevant or key component in achieving their vision of the future. We heard that one possible explanation for this attitude is the persistent critique of government (especially of the federal government), launched by the right decades ago, which has eroded trust in its efficacy and helped starve it of resources.

> Positive futures often show people taking on more responsibility and having more agency. If this is so, what is the role of government in the future so people don't get saddled with doing more work without more resources? And how can that manifest when there is so much distrust in government, we can't even imagine what a better government in the future might look like?
> – Mark Gonzales, Department of the Future

But others' agnosticism stemmed from more profound uncertainty about what's actually going to work, given the rapidly changing information and technology landscape.

> The U.S. is at a crossroads today: it can lean towards China's type of surveillance state, where what's best for the country is determined centrally through the mining of data, or actual pluralism. I'm for pluralism but I'm agnostic about governance system specifics regarding the form representation takes. I believe we do need representation so different social views and needs are factored into decision making. – Gideon Lichfield, WIRED

Building trust in our existing governance system

The majority of the people we spoke with asserted that democracy was the best model for future governance, despite its many shortcomings. They felt the key to creating a pluralistic democracy was to restore faith in democratic governance. The lack of trust in institutions and elections has facilitated a cycle of violence, vengeance, and distrust that weakens democracy. It can also result in the election of authoritarian leaders to appease fears by prioritizing safety and order over freedom. One way offered to build this trust could be by recommitting to the "Great Experiment" at a moment when the U.S. and other ethnically and religiously diverse democracies are attempting to treat all of their diverse citizens as equals. [30]

I don't think that there's an example of a diverse democracy that works perfectly. Clearly there are serious problems and injustices in the United States today, but by comparison to most societies in the history of the world, I actually think that we're doing pretty well... [W]hen you compare it to other times and other places, you realize this is just a really, really hard thing we're trying to do. Yes, we're failing in certain respects, but we're succeeding in other respects. We're doing much better today than we did fifty years ago. We're doing vastly better today than we did a hundred years ago. That, I think, can give you the hope to build a vision for the kind of society you want to live in, and to make sure that our society doesn't fall apart, but actually thrives and succeeds. [31] – *Yascha Mounk, John Hopkins University and author*

Some interviewees felt that truly inclusive governance (reflecting representation of currently non-marginalized as well as marginalized communities) was an important condition for strengthening trust in our democracy. For that to be possible, they suggested, our representative bodies must reflect the diversity of our communities. Only by truly committing to building and upholding the most inclusive pillars of democracy could we fulfill the democratic promise for all.

The narrative change experts we spoke with contended that negative and pessimistic messages about democracy, promulgated by actors across the political spectrum, were further eroding trust in the system. They felt that democracy reform efforts should start by changing the stories we tell about the system to be more inclusive and better reflect American values, hopefully leading audiences to feel more invested in the system and have a greater sense of agency in reforming it. Several interviewees stressed the importance of leading with abundance and generosity narratives. Others noted the importance of developing a narrative that welcomed in white people, men, and rural Americans, and warned against conflating whiteness and white supremacy.

Frankly, our democracy isn't that great a system. It's a winner take all system that has lots of flaws. But the undermining of democracy is happening on both sides of the aisle, so trust in the system is eroding. It feels existential on both sides. The very fear that democracy is in peril has become a source of high conflict. Is there a way to reduce the false binary that exists now on ideological grounds? Can we tell stories about how to shore up democracy without undermining the rules and institutions that we still have in place? *– Amanda Ripley, Good Conflict and author*

We must socialize the idea that whiteness is not actually about white people, it's an ideology. You don't need to be white to be a white supremacist and whites are not necessarily supremacists. *– Jose Antonio Vargas, Define American founder and author*

Reforming our governance system

A number of interviewees believe the system can be fixed through structural reforms. They argued that by improving democratic processes and restoring confidence in them, we will strengthen democracy itself and better reflect the will of the people. They suggested improvements to the electoral system such as voting reforms (like ranked choice voting), primary reforms (like open primaries), moving to cross-party and multiparty systems, fighting gerrymandering (e.g., through independent redistricting commissions), campaign finance reforms (such as democracy vouchers), and increasing voter participation and engagement more broadly. Others focused outside elections, describing interventions such as restoring powers to Congress, containing political violence, and improving access to quality and factual information by combating dis/misinformation.

Community-based and tech-enabled governance experiments

Various interviewees across fields and sectors, especially futurists and technologists, questioned whether democracy and the federal government were the appropriate avenues for pursuing a pluralistic future. Some cautioned about thinking too much about federal level reforms rather than changes that should happen closer to home, at the local level.[32] These interviewees instead supported collective or community-based forms of governance built around participatory principles and group-based decision-making. Interviewees referenced smaller-scale activities such as participatory budgeting and grantmaking, collective decision-making like liquid democracy,[33] and other forms of community engagement as promising examples of reform. Many of these experiments are tech-enabled, self-organized, co-designed, and co-governed.[34] To these experts, collective governance of this sort is more democratic, immediate, and effective than the current American system.[35]

> There are lots of democratic experiments happening locally. There is an increasing disparity between national sclerosis and local innovation. There is also increasing division between what some localities are doing and national policy. – *Gideon Lichfield, WIRED*
>
> Democracy is not about efficiency. Authoritarian systems are actually faster. In democratic systems, the push is for equity through engagement and participation. But we are only truly engaged when we feel like it matters – that our voice matters and that we have agency. Games may be our most powerful form of media for cultivating an amplified sense of agency. More than ever, we need to borrow from the science of game design to create stories and experiences that cultivate agency in the gut. – *Benjamin Stokes, American University*

Transforming governance for a new era

A few interviewees who specialize in governance systems for the future questioned whether our democracy was up to the task of governing effectively at all. They believe the system needs a major reboot to increase inclusion and create new forms of participation and ways of addressing 21st century problems. They posit that intertidal moments, critical moments of change like these, require us collectively to imagine something beyond what's been done before to meet the challenges of the future.

Representative democracy has run its course and is no longer fit for purpose. The old paradigm is coming into conflict with new realities. Decision makers and incumbents are stuck in a critique doom loop. They need to open the way for others to imagine alternative visions and models of democracy. *– Cat Tully, School of International Futures*

We are at a crossroads moment in human history that will require us to rethink our base assumptions around how democracies can and must work. We need democracies to be both increasingly responsive to emerging issues while at the same time more heavily weighing our moral obligations to future generations. Our current form is ill-suited to tackle major systemic issues, specifically around climate change, AI, nuclear proliferation, and genetic engineering. There are more than a few folks who think that liberal democracy is ill-suited to tackle these existential planetary and generational challenges, and that we'd be better off in an authoritarian governance structure, at least for the next 100 years, while we sort these things out. It is incumbent upon us to prove those folks wrong. *– Ari Wallach, futurist*

On Governance for the Future

The powerful concept of a "Ministry for the Future" plays a central role in addressing global climate change in Kim Stanley Robinson's recent work of climate fiction by the same name. But few may know that this aspirational governance approach is based on models that already exist. In the section below, we introduce our readers to some bold innovations in futures-oriented governance. These innovations hold promise for shifting how we frame and debate certain hot button issues, lengthening our time horizon, and reinvigorating – perhaps even reinventing – democratic processes and institutions in America.

The future is already here

One of the most important trends we uncovered is the significant progress being made outside the United States in planning for, analyzing, and governing with a future-focused orientation. Although the U.S. was a global leader in this work in the 1970s,[36] its early innovations were never institutionalized. Now, the leading-edge initiatives to make societies future-ready are being spearheaded in Western Europe, parts of Asia, and in intergovernmental entities such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Still in its infancy, this area is dynamic, characterized by extensive experimentation and iteration. We expect it will continue to evolve rapidly, particularly as intergovernmental organizations, nations, subnational governments, civil society actors, and social movements respond to collective problems in new ways. While it's too soon to know exactly what models and tools will work best in which types of situations, we know that a lot of experiments are using the pivotal concept of intergenerational fairness as well as foresight tools and techniques to widen horizons, challenge assumptions, consider different possible futures, and use stress test approaches.

Below we highlight four innovations that bring futures thinking into governance.

New governance structures designed to bring about desirable futures and incorporate the interests of future generations, not just current ones.

New frameworks to assess how policies will affect future generations over the long term.

Proxies to represent the interests of future generation stakeholders.

Skills to help policy makers, government officials and civil society actors think about, imagine, and plan for a range of possible futures.

Although American exceptionalism and our federalist system will undoubtedly mean that these future-focused governance ideas will resonate differently in America, there is much to be learned from these innovations. They hold the potential to unlock different ways of governing, framing policy conversations, and weighing resource allocations; to spur a new sense of responsibility to future generations and the planet; and to manage risk and opportunity better in a time of great uncertainty and rapid change.

New governance structures

Data points across the globe evince a growing trend: the emergence of Future Generation Organizations (FGOs)[37] concerned about future generations and looking to reflect those concerns in policy, governance, and budgeting. These experiments are largely taking place at the national and supra-national levels.

Beginning mostly after 2000, experiments with FGOs – including councils and commissioners of future generations – began to emerge, notably in Israel,[38] Hungary,[39] Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This follows Singapore's early investments[40] beginning in the 1980s in strategic planning and horizon scanning, and Finland's establishment of the Committee for the Future in Parliament in 1993.[41]

Building on these early foundations, Wales established the first major futures-oriented systemic intervention in governance: the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, serving as the "guardian of the interests of future generations in Wales." From this perch, the Commissioner advises the government and other public bodies in Wales on how to deliver social, economic, and cultural wellbeing for future generations, embedding concern for future generations and foresight approaches into the government.

"If we don't address tomorrow's … problems today, we would be left with today's problems tomorrow, unsolved, and tomorrow's problems, if left for the future, will just get larger."

– Tharman Shanmugaratam, Deputy Prime Minister and MInister of Finance, Singapore[42]

Scotland has done (and the United Kingdom is trying to do) something similar, adding responsibilities to existing positions or creating new ones with a future generations focus to combat short-term thinking in politics.[43] One of these major initiatives supports passage in the U.K. of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill,[44] modeled on the law passed in Wales. At the continental level, in response to growing interest in futures planning and foresight, Europe has now established a network of European Ministers for the Future[45] for politicians and senior officials to institutionalize these new capacities across member states.

Globally, in fall 2021, U.N. Secretary General Guterres proposed a bold new vision – *Our Common Agenda* – to address a wide range of vexing, existential global challenges. Among the action steps laid out in *Our Common Agenda* are the establishment of a U.N. Special Envoy to ensure that policy and budget decisions take into account their impact on future generations, the elevation of the U.N.'s Youth Office, the creation of a Futures Lab to better predict policy impact over time, and the repurposing of the Trusteeship Council as an intergovernmental platform for the interests of succeeding generations.[46]

We expect more FGOs to be created in the coming years and to see them flex new powers as they settle into their roles as ombudspeople for future generations.

New policy frameworks with an intergenerational lens

The School of International Futures (SOIF) has developed a Framework for Assessing Intergenerational Fairness. [48] This policy innovation lengthens the time horizon and the way policymakers think about societal impact. The goal of such a framework is to uncover instances of unfairness. SOIF defines a policy as unfair when it:

"Disadvantages people at any particular life stage.
Disadvantages people at any period in time, present or future.
Increases the chances of inequality being passed on through time.
Restricts the choices of people in the future.
Moves society further away from its vision for the future." [49]

The policy assessment tool looks for unfairness caused by the policy in alternative future scenarios, considering each of the five aspects of unfairness captured in the definition above.

A number of countries and intergovernmental organizations such as the OECD [50] are already making commitments to hold themselves accountable for their impacts on future generations In contrast to the short-term election-cycle driven approach so common in the U.S.

SOIF is working with countries and intergovernmental organizations to operationalize its framework. Early adopters include Portugal, whose president wants to focus on championing intergenerational solidarity, and the U.K., which is exploring another version of the framework, called Future Check. [51][52][53] There are also efforts to include intergenerational fairness considerations in the European Union's Green Deal. [54]

SOIF director Cat Tully hopes "to inspire leaders to stress-test their plans for all generations: in order to avoid mortgaging our children's future and in order to harness the wisdom and legacy of the aged in our communities. We aim to make it easy for citizens to hold decisionmakers to account for the long-term consequences of their plans. And we seek to inspire collaborative exchanges where human creativity and energy can address temporal distributional problems before they arise." [55]

> "[T]he choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown, or a breakthrough to a greener, better, safer future. The choice is ours to make; but we will not have this chance again." [47]
>
> – U.N. Secretary General Guterres in *Our Common Agenda*

Proxies to simulate future generation stakeholders

Over the last ten years, a new multidisciplinary movement led by Tatsuyoshi Saijo in Japan called "future design" [56] is using human proxies to represent the interests of future generations in order to ensure intergenerational fairness and solve tough long term problems.

The key insight gained from real life experiments where individuals were playing the role of members of future generations is that they learned to think like an imaginary future person, with bolder ideas and a resolve to tackle tough challenges rather than defer them. By contrast, the citizens who represented current generations tended to think in terms of extensions of the status quo and took today's constraints and challenges as givens. Figuring out how to give voice to the unrepresented is an important new area of work that reinforces the other futures-oriented innovations we discuss in this section, and could also enhance innovations in deliberative and participatory democracy.

Using proxies to represent future generations underscores a more fundamental deficiency that needs to be addressed: accurately and fully reflecting the interests of today's youth, whose voices have not been adequately weighted. [57]

Stronger foresight capacity

In response to the pace of change and the degree of complexity of 21st century problems, several national governments and international organizations (e.g., UNESCO [58], OECD [59], United Nations Development Program, and the European Union) have focused on training and improving their staff's foresight capacity. They are providing more of their employees with the tools they need to anticipate multiple future scenarios, stress test current policy and planning approaches, imagine desired futures, and increase the likelihood these can be realized. [60] For more information on futures thinking and foresight techniques, refer to page 63.

"We must transform from thinking in linearity, to thinking in complexity and uncertainty. We must design our strategies and interventions ... to be anticipatory and to change quickly in the face of complex changes and disruptions." [61]

– Haoliang Xu, U.N. Assistant Secretary-General

For example, Policy Horizons Canada [62] is a federal government organization that conducts foresight with a mandate to help the Canadian government develop robust future-oriented policy that can be more resilient in the face of disruptive change and build foresight literacy [63] and capacity across the Canadian public service sector. In Finland, the government produces a futures-oriented report every electoral cycle and incorporates foresight into its planning. [64]

By contrast, the United States has no centralized foresight capability [65] and there is no national mechanism to bring foresight and policy into an effective relationship. [66] Instead, there are loose, voluntary networks of individuals trained in foresight across different agencies of the federal government (such as the Federal Foresight Community of Interest and the Public Sector Foresight Network), and there are pockets of foresight expertise in certain federal offices and agencies (e.g., Air Force, Coast Guard, Forest Service, General Accounting Office, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Office of Management and Budget, and Office of the Director of National Intelligence [67]). [68] Further, at the state and local level, we are not aware of any sustained offices or roles with an explicit and purposeful use of foresight techniques or future-focused orientation, although Hawaii engaged in leading-edge work in the 1970s and in the 2010s. [69] It's possible that new initiatives could lead to socialization and eventual institutionalization of these approaches and capacities. Two potential efforts include California 100, [70] a future-forward planning and policy initiative that could make the case for state level institutionalization and work with early adopters like the California Strategic Growth Council; and the Future Caucuses established in Congress and several states by Millennial Action Project, [71] which could begin to normalize use of foresight techniques and longer time horizons by younger generation legislators.

Assessment: Innovative Models Exist, but the U.S. Lags

For those concerned about the U.S., the news is mixed. International and local models already exist to face uncertainty, engage the public in imagining and shaping desirable futures, and ensure fairness for future generations. However, there is a lack of political will and sense of urgency to create these capacities in the U.S., which now lags behind many other countries in operationalizing futures skills, frameworks, and governance structures.

We hope this report will spur more interest in applying these approaches in the U.S. context.

Special thanks to Clem Bezold and Cat Tully for their assistance with this section.

"**Future-forward leadership means leading into a future when you will no longer lead AND changing things before they're completely broken.**"

– Cat Tully, School of International Futures

On the Positive Visioning Ecosystem

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Interviewees characterized the state of the positive visioning ecosystem variously as emergent, fragmented, niche, and elitist. Most of them believe it exists, although at an extremely early stage of development.

✦ Many noted that in this emergent phase, a number of hubs or nodes of activity play an important role.

✦ These positive visioning hubs are building communities of people with shared vision and interests in interdisciplinary ways, but the hubs don't often connect with one another.

Interviewees largely agreed that the landscape of positive visioning work was not fully formed. They described the ecosystem as nascent and unstructured, with a few dedicated hubs focused on this work, and "a wide array of bright spots" that could live within such an ecosystem. We discuss two main features of the ecosystem below:

✦ Emergent and fragmented, but with potential; and
✦ Showing early community building around dedicated hubs.

An emergent and fragmented ecosystem with potential

The vast majority of our interviewees felt the positive visioning field was barely emergent and described it as highly fragmented. Moreover, its lack of definition and agreed upon boundaries make it difficult to populate and popularize. It is splintered across ideology, geography, issue, platform, language and time horizon, and likely other factors as well. It's been described by USC's Henry Jenkins as "lots of free floating particles."

> The ecosystem doesn't really exist. People are thinking in different ways and using different language, or using the same words but meaning very different things. Let's ask ourselves, would having more of a common language help the ecosystem take shape? – *Tim Dixon, More in Common*

The positive visioning field is not yet coherent. There are lots of ways it can cohere … or not. – *Eli Pariser, New Public*

With so much doom-and-gloom paralysis in the United States today, it is important to build a well-coordinated ecosystem, which doesn't yet exist and, ultimately, a movement that inspires and mobilizes civil society, government and business. We'll need to develop an affirmative vision for the future, and strategies and commitments to get there collectively and collaboratively. – *Karthick Ramakrishnan, California 100*

Generally, interviewees confirmed that there is no central coordinating body or clearinghouse of resources for those broadly interested in positive visioning and futures thinking and how those connect to democracy and governance. However, foresight practitioners, a subset of whom work on normative futuring, have initiated early efforts to compile resources.

The field working to realize pluralist democracy doesn't exist yet. There are clusters of people thinking about our pluralist future, artists and other creators working to shape imagination, and agnostic futurists and researchers. And then, there are those who are living in the future already, like Afrofuturists. There are the makings of a powerful, forceful field – but we are not there yet. – *Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Pop Culture Collaborative*

Several interviewees described the futurist field as elitist and in need of democratization: Its techniques need to be shared more broadly and in a less costly fashion, and it needs to be less top down and more participatory in order to support the development of collective imagination fueling social movements for change. A small core of professional futurists and foresight practitioners whom we interviewed knew of each other but rarely shared each other's work. Few are well-connected to non-futurists. Many work primarily as consultants and develop proprietary resources.

It's not an ecosystem yet. It's not particularly visible to people who aren't in it. It's really a community for those in the know. – *Adey Fisseha, Unbound Philanthropy*

Discussions are happening in elite spaces. Those can be culture makers and influencers but institutions of mass political communication have not been penetrated. – *David French, The Dispatch*

The future building, change-making, impact investment/philanthropy, and social good fields all have a shared challenge: are we inviting people to imagine a better future or creating a professional consulting field? Participatory design, shared risk and return, collective genius: these are recognized frameworks, not simply rhetoric. The task at hand then is to democratize these fields, to be expansive in their delineation. – *Mark Gonzales, Department of the Future*

Some early community building around hubs

Several interviewees also described the ecosystem as existing in loosely connected pockets, focused on organizing a specific group (like Afrofuturists, Indigenous rights activists, or foresight practitioners), movements or campaigns (like the Movement for Black Lives, abolitionists, Dreamers, or the care economy), academics (like complex systems thinkers), or more diverse communities with a particular orientation (like the Guild of Future Architects' "architects," New Pluralists' Field Builders, or the School of International Futures' network of Future Generation Foresight Practitioners). These communities represent different types of work that build towards positive visions, but don't often intersect.

> There are lots of pockets of activity. And I think there's an opportunity to help these actors see themselves as part of a shared ecosystem with a shared vision. – *Jon Gruber, Einhorn Collaborative*

Some communities have also arisen in the narrative space, such as the grantees and partners of the Pop Culture Collaborative and the partners, fellows, and science fiction writers working with the Center for Science and the Imagination at Arizona State University.

All these hubs play an important role in fostering connectivity within their communities and in elevating the visibility of this work. Interviewees confirmed the limited extent of collaboration across network hubs at this juncture, but believed there would be benefits from more intentional collaboration in the future.

Aside from these particular organizational cohorts, some connectivity and field building is taking place in the futures world through future-oriented conferences and events as well as looser communities of practice sponsored by the Institute for the Future and other consultancies. A list of these varied opportunities for learning and engagement can be found on page 62 of this report.

One interviewee provocatively suggested that the ecosystem would emerge only when it was needed, but that there was important work to do to prepare for that time; another suggested it would emerge when it asserted a role for itself.

> The positive visioning ecosystem will be triggered into being by events. But we need to do the pre-work so groups can rise to the challenge when the time comes. – *Nealin Parker, Common Ground USA*

> The ecosystem includes folks with a commitment to inclusion and multiracial democracy. This broad civil society infrastructure exists but doesn't yet see itself in this way. It needs to. It's time for it to claim its new mantle. – *Eric Ward, Western States Center*

On the Ecosystem

Going into this project, we expected to find more coherence and organization among the actors imagining better futures, and more connectivity between the positive visioning/futures space and the pro-democracy space. We were surprised by how little collaboration is taking place, and how little amplification of good content and sharing of good examples is happening. While we know that there are positive visionaries and doers in a wide range of disciplines and sectors, using a mix of platforms, media, and forms of expression and activity, many of these actors may not think of themselves as inhabiting the same ecosystem (even if we do). That is one of the key challenges in bringing greater overall coherence, heft, and impact to this work.

When we asked interviewees for examples of people and organizations who belong in this ecosystem, many struggled to respond because they hadn't conceptualized the existence of this ecosystem in the first place. Those who provided suggestions tended to do so in disciplines or issue areas they were already familiar with, or spoke only in generalities about who belongs in this ecosystem (e.g., game designers, speculative fiction writers, spiritual leaders). A few shared names of their grantees, or examples of work to improve communities, solve problems, or revitalize democratic processes.

Future visionaries tend to be more concentrated in activist, academic, and creative circles – particularly in the art, design, gaming, literature, technology, entertainment, journalism, and media industries – and in activist social and spiritual movements.

But individuals and institutions with a positive visioning bent and approach exist in all disciplines and all sectors of society. They share a certain mindset.

We believe, for example, that educators and institutions strengthening students' capacity for positive visioning belong in this ecosystem.

So do funders who adopt a bold, long-term orientation in their work. [72]

So do journalists telling stories about how people solve problems, rather than stories of conflict and paralysis.

So do speculative and science fiction writers, game designers, and worldbuilders who bring better tomorrows to life, not just apocalyptic ones.

So do spiritual leaders building interfaith bridges and telling uplifting stories inspired by their varied faiths about the dignity of all people.

So do innovators promoting inclusion, belonging, sustainability, participation, and reinvigorated expressions of democracy in local communities.

All of them – and others – have a role to play in modeling how to build better futures together.

We've collected numerous examples like these and more to construct one possible positive visioning ecosystem from our own imaginations (and a lot of research). You can explore it in the INSPIRATION section.

Are Positive Visions Breaking Through in Mass Culture?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

✦ Unsurprisingly, given the emergent state of the positive visioning ecosystem, interviewees did not believe that positive visions of the future were breaking through to broader audiences or in pop culture and mass media more broadly.

✦ There was widespread agreement that the current narrative system that dominates in America does not support the emergence and scaling of positive visions and content.

✦ Interviewees agreed that the emerging positive visioning field currently is unable to provide a robust pipeline of visionary content that speaks to our future aspirations, sustain amplification of the aspirational content that does exist, or upend existing incentive structures.

Interviewees acknowledged that while many organizations and individuals across the nascent ecosystem were engaging in positive work to develop and explore better futures in a range of media (journalism, entertainment, art, social media, gaming) using different technologies and platforms, their efforts struggled to scale and coalesce into a unified message of hope and inspiration. More disturbingly, they felt that, for the most part, positive visions of the future were neither widespread nor persistent. The main reasons they gave for why positive visions of the future are not breaking through in mass culture are:

✦ The current narrative environment is biased against positive stories;
✦ Champions are few and their efforts uncoordinated.

The current narrative environment is biased against positive stories

As previously discussed in the challenges section, interviewees noted how a set of incentives, practices, and dynamics reinforce negativity, dystopia, and division, thus preventing content depicting more abundant collective futures from penetrating the media environment. Our crowded and chaotic media environment is rife with dehumanizing stereotypes and content, stories normalizing conflict and division, and dark depictions of the future. The overwhelming negativity in the media ecosystem drowns out stories of positive futures before they can gain momentum. While examples of positive visioning occasionally reach critical mass, their impact is often short-lived.

> As human beings, we don't move through our days thinking, "Narrative. Narrative. Narratives all around me." And yet, we are making decisions – who belongs, who doesn't, who has value, who does not – because of the narrative oceans of stories, narratives, ideas, and cultural norms that we are immersed in every day. In our current world, some of these oceans are toxic, distorting our sense of self and our faith in our ability to see each other across our divides. We believe that social justice movements and the donors who support them cannot realize the just world we all seek until we commit to transforming the narrative oceans in which we all swim, replacing harmful narratives with new ones that make a just and pluralist future feel not only possible, but preferable. – *Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Pop Culture Collaborative*

Some interviewees noted a chronic underinvestment in artists and creatives, often the harbingers of change, and in communities struggling to overcome oppression, who then experience difficulty sharing their stories. Still others suggested that efforts to imagine better futures that challenged the status quo were also stymied because their success was viewed as a threat.

> Social justice and narrative change movements have created powerful transformations. But with societal transformations, there is always backlash, often orchestrated. We need resourced and robust narrative networks in place to contend for the big narrative ideas in key moments, and to sustain narrative environments over the long-term. Otherwise, all progress will dissipate. – *Tracy Van Slyke, Pop Culture Collaborative*

As a result, many activists, creatives, and influencers are themselves immersed in our pervasive culture of reaction and resistance, and spend the bulk of their energy and creative output in oppositional trench warfare, responding to the latest salvo from the other side rather than bringing to life the next frontier. They warn against dire outcomes, and try to hold the line against further erosion and setbacks. This reactive approach is a more short-term orientation and is emblematic of a highly polarized society struggling to move beyond opposition and align around what could come next.

But there is one setting where interviewees believe positive stories can take root and gain traction: the local level. Veteran organizer George Goehl sums it all up when he says, "be close and do things." Locally, there are still proximate relationships, more trust in institutions and in the news media, and a sense of shared reality. The local is also where it's easier for innovations and experiments to take root and where news stories can still resonate broadly with their audiences.

Champions are few and their efforts uncoordinated

Interviewees also observed the paucity of champions amplifying positive content so it can break through and gain traction. In the ecosystem section of these findings, we outlined the many challenges facing this emergent and highly diverse ecosystem without a mantle, brand, or shared language.

Positive content's inability to scale is partly a pipeline and volume issue (we need more prosocial, visionary content in all media), partly a narrative systems and incentives issue (we have a societal preference and set of incentives for negative, conflict-driven content), and partly a failure of amplification (we don't do enough to support the good content that exists). Weak amplification is a direct result of the lack of coherence, self-awareness, and heft of this new ecosystem, but also of scarcity thinking that dulls the impact of this sector's activity.

> Positive visions aren't breaking through because it's nobody's job, it's super hard, and there is inadequate investment in how to talk about it. There isn't a sector or center of gravity and there's been a chronic underinvestment in content and communications. *– Eli Pariser, New Public*

> We need to take more shots at replicable unified brand efforts in local communities across the country. Are there positive future handles/campaigns that can be spread? We need to take more and bigger risks. *– George Goehl, organizer*

The bridge builders, activists, journalists, philanthropists, creatives, pro-democracy actors, anti-hate groups, gamers, and technologists all working to imagine and realize better futures do not see each other as part of the same movement and may not even be aware of the content being produced by its different component parts. Further compounding this problem are resource constraints – even if the players knew about and could share each other's work and content, they might still choose not to because they lack the bandwidth or are competing for scarce resources. An abundance-driven approach might succeed in transforming them into colleagues and collaborators.

> For positive messages to break through, we need to move beyond the scarcity mindset and resource constraints that prevent groups from amplifying each other's good work. *– Eric Ward, Western States Center*

> We need to change the model to promote collaboration and collective impact. The incentives are wrong now and make organizations less likely to cooperate and lift up each other's work. Zero sum funding incentives aren't helping. We need to foster more cross sectional approaches and more cross pollination. *– Romain Vakilitabar, Pathos Labs*

In the next section, we take stock of these findings and discuss their implications for philanthropy and civil society.

WHAT'S NEXT: FORGING PATHS TOWARDS BETTER FUTURES

Earlier in this report, we shared secondary research on the reasons why positive imagination about the future matters, as well as detailed findings from our interviews. A few of our interview findings especially stood out to us:

✦ There was enthusiastic and emphatic agreement that positive visions of the future matter tremendously because they help us to imagine better alternatives, motivate us, and guide us to achieving positive societal outcomes. They also reinforce the idea that we all have agency and can shape our individual and collective futures and those of our descendants.

✦ Few of the people we interviewed saw governance as critical to achieving the better futures they articulated or had thought about how to improve and reimagine democracy.

✦ The future-oriented community and the democracy community seldom connect with one another.

✦ The U.S. lags in imagining and experimenting with new forms of future-oriented governance models and thinking.

✦ A cascade of obstacles (e.g., complex problems from the local to the planetary, conflict-driven media and political environments) currently stands in the way of positive visions of the future emerging at scale.

✦ Positive stories about the future and narratives of mutuality and abundance are barely breaking through in mass culture.

✦ The actors we interviewed are very disconnected from one another, but we noted the emergence of a few hubs of activity and connection.

These findings suggest that there are many gaps to fill for American society to be ready to usher in democracy's next chapter. Our research also shows that in intertidal moments like these, avoiding worst case scenarios is necessary but not sufficient. We need to turbocharge new thinking, strategies, and governance approaches to ensure we have models to build on when the opportunity arises. We know that antidemocratic forces are perfecting their strategies and advancing their own visions for America's future.

So in this section, we pivot from observation to action.

We present a few strategies to energize the positive visioning already taking place; encourage more doers, creatives, and thinkers to frame their work in terms of building better futures and work together on what our democracy could and should become; strengthen the narrative environment to allow those positive visions to flourish and spread; and generally promote bolder thinking and engagement about the future and democracy.

In providing these recommendations, we are humbled by what we heard in our interviews. There are many obstacles that complicate this effort. A dominant dystopian narrative and media environment distorts the stories we tell ourselves about what's possible and makes it harder for positive content to pop. High levels of affective polarization dehumanize our purported "opponents" and make it difficult to perceive a shared reality and invest in a shared future. Persistent racism and bigotry, and a failure to properly address and heal past wounds, impede this

work. Fatigue and despair after years of disappointments and setbacks have led many Americans to disengage and cede the making of the future to others. The rise of authoritarian threats to our democracy is another barrier, as are insufficient future-forward leadership and too few ideas to galvanize a movement that will reinvigorate our democratic system and our belief in it.

Despite these headwinds, we have a strong foundation on which to build. There are great ideas and visionary leaders out there, as well as communities of practice of "future architects" from varied disciplines, media, faith traditions, issue areas, and geographies. There are real-world experiments that show how to be more inclusive, empathetic and supportive of difference, how to be better stewards of our planet's future, how to be in solidarity and community with others, and how to embed equitable considerations for future generations and for the planet into planning and policymaking. We also have powerful stories to tell about what better futures are possible in fiction, in art, in design and planning, in print, film, video and games, on social media, and in campaigns to change norms and behaviors. These stories show people a future they can believe in, model collective problem solving, and visualize aspirational futures worth creating together.

But all these bright spots are still only spots. We need to identify more of them and connect them to one another, transform the narrative environment, develop more inspiring content, and create more democratic innovations to power good change.

None of this can happen without a mindset shift. Here are some ways to think and act like better futures lie ahead:

Avoid the oppositional trap and move beyond reaction to imagination
Imagine a better life for yourself, your family and your community
Look ahead and around the corner; it's not business as usual
Focus less on immediate results and think longer term
Act like a responsible ancestor, not a descendant
Include youth voices; they are the future
Expand your futures literacy and skills
Embrace uncertainty and risk
Exhibit moral courage
Lean into change
Think globally
Do it!

Our initial set of three major recommendations for philanthropy is set forth below:

Build the Field: Invest in Infrastructure and Relationships

We heard the promise of greater connectivity and coherence in this loose ecosystem as well as support for collaboration and mutual amplification. There are numerous ways to build and support an emerging field and to create connections between those broadly engaged in positive visioning and those working specifically on democracy issues.

✦ **Network, collaborate and map.** Build and support networks and communities of practice like the hubs we have already identified, and connect them to one another and to others working in related spaces like democracy and civic engagement. Create collaboration and clearinghouse capacity to give this ecosystem a clearer sense of identity and shared purpose, and an infrastructure for amplification. Do more mapping to identify who is engaging or could engage in this work.

✦ **Convene people.** Related to the pursuit of tighter networking and collaboration above, fund strategic gatherings to build relationships. Convene donors through working groups and donor tables to evolve how philanthropy thinks about the future and democracy. Create opportunities to invest together in promising, hopeful work.

✦ **Build and share futures thinking tools.** Support the acquisition of futures thinking skills by a growing body of actors in this budding field, including philanthropy. Develop and disseminate curricula for futures literacy and make them widely available and affordable. Invest in building foresight capacity among key organizations and leaders. Compensate people for their participation in this learning.

Model What's Possible and Fund Experimentation

There is potential to build on governance innovations from other countries and adapt them to the U.S. context, and to engage and excite people about imagining better futures for American democracy.

✦ **Fund governance innovations with a futures focus in the U.S.** Adapt foreign innovations in futures governance described on pages 37-41 to lengthen policy and budgetary time horizons, consider impacts on future generations, and develop more foresight and futures skills for the U.S. context. This could take the form of funding the creation of "commissioners for the future" or intergenerational fairness criteria to assess policy impacts at the federal, state and local levels, or exploring the application of the use of future generation proxies to better understand policy tradeoffs and how best to give a voice to future generations. Gamify societal problem solving to help make solutions achievable and build an ongoing positive feedback loop (e.g., trash collection, recycling and upcycling, mutual aid, and neighborhood gifting programs). Support place-specific futuring to imagine what better futures can look like locally, and increase engagement and problem-solving capacities.

✦ **Fund innovations to strengthen and invigorate democracy in the U.S.** Invest in innovations, particularly at the state and local level, to increase participation, use technology, and involve younger generations in democratic processes that build their sense of agency and trust. Identify opportunities to engage segments of the public in collective imagination exercises about better futures for their specific communities or in particular issue areas. Craft models for better democratic futures by supporting initiatives that engage artists, game designers, and speculative fiction writers in reimagining democracy.

Strengthen Narrative Systems & Amplify Positive and Futures-oriented Content

We need more and better content that tells inspiring stories about better futures, and stronger infrastructure to support greater impact for that content. The two strategies below need to be designed in tandem.

✦ **Build narrative infrastructure.** Working with narrative change funders and experts, develop strategies to elevate and sustain narratives of abundance, interdependence, and mutuality. Fund capacity in one or more organizations to amplify current bright spots to create more impact and virality for aspirational content that depicts better futures for America and democracy. Support or create major media platforms that focus only on positive visions of the future. Invest in journalism that lifts up solutions and complexity, builds trust, and is rooted in place. Adopt asset framing that defines people by their dreams and aspirations. Train organizations to use messages and messengers that inspire action, informed by cognitive science and research. Identify and appeal to fandoms and subcultures. Shape a new American myth that softens individualism and elevates solidarity.

✦ **Create more aspirational content.** Stories are absolutely key to putting forth aspirational visions for the future. We need more of them, in a range of media, and we need them to be mutually reinforcing for greater impact. This strategy would support the incubation, creation, and dissemination of high-quality content using a number of approaches:

  ✦ **Expand storytelling.** Tell inspiring speculative and science fiction stories of better futures, including better forms of democratic governance and more sustainable futures. Tell respectful stories about how change happens, including those of diverse people solving problems together. Tell affirming stories that center on human connection, caring, and compassion, and stories that are values-driven, not politics-driven.

  ✦ **Influence the media.** Influence the gatekeepers and creatives who shape stories and pipelines in all media – the arts, entertainment, gaming, and social media – to tell affirming stories about better futures.

✦ **Shape literary trends.** Elevate optimistic and positive literary genres to compete with and disrupt dystopian narratives of conflict and hopelessness.

✦ **Improve representation.** Give greater voice to youth and to marginalized voices of all types (including BIPOC). Lift up positive deviants of all types. Make sure to include white people and men, the main targets of grievance rhetoric.

✦ **Build public engagement.** Involve audiences and communities in telling their own stories, using social media and other means to amplify them. Build on fandoms.

In addition to these major recommendations, we also heard calls from interviewees for greater investment in civic engagement infrastructure in rural America, in religious institutions, and in interfaith circles. Others talked about the importance of bridging, love, healing, and repair. Finally, we were reminded that to succeed at this work we need to make it fun and spread joy.

The Future of the Better Futures Project

This report was designed to provoke and inspire you.

Now we plan to use it to ignite conversations about imagining what American democracy could be – bringing together people across the democracy field, philanthropy, and the futuring community, as well as many others.

We have come to believe through our research and interviews that focusing on the future is a critical objective for those of us concerned about the state and direction of American democracy. While our democracy faces significant threats that require a strong response, response alone is insufficient. We must also paint a vision – or, more realistically, multiple visions – of better futures for American democracy to orient ourselves and the broader public, to be our North Star.

Over the coming weeks and months, we will host discussions large and small to explore the themes in this report and begin determining how we might catalyze implementation of our recommendations. We look forward to talking to many of you about these ideas and to hearing your thoughts and questions. Most crucially, we want to imagine better futures for America alongside you.

We hope you will be the future of the Better Futures Project. Join us!

INSPIRATION: WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT BETTER FUTURES?

Shaping a positive visioning ecosystem is itself an exercise in imagination. In this section we illustrate what better futures could look like in real life and in the imagination, informed by the interviews and our research. The resources shared below have been grouped into themes. We hope they inspire you, open up space for expansive thinking, and spur you to share your sources of inspiration with us.

Write to us at **BetterFutures@ThirdPlateau.com** with your suggestions.

Want to See What It Looks Like in Real Life?

Designing, planning, and building for inclusion, wellbeing, and connection

The **Cleveland Model** is a community economic development strategy that leverages the purchasing power of anchor institutions like hospitals and universities to build wealth and cooperative business ownership in low-income neighborhoods.

The **Curry Stone Design Prize** honors ways to design for a better world.

Designing Justice+Designing Spaces is a non profit architecture and real estate development firm that uses design and place-based solutions to end mass incarceration and help our society make the shift from a punitive to a restorative justice system. Using the philosophy of restorative justice, DJDS designs physical spaces where the environmental design supports the programs which occur within the space.

Co-housing development projects like **Entrepatios Las Carolinas** in Madrid prioritize accessibility and sustainability, using bioclimatic architecture and high energy efficiency.

Evanston, Illinois' City Reparations Program is the first in the country. In the summer of 2019, the Evanston City Council took action to address the historical wealth and opportunity gaps that African American/Black residents of Evanston experienced. The first initiative is a housing program.

Frome, a small town in England, has implemented the approach of the Frome Medical Practice to address loneliness and social isolation as part of a holistic approach to wellbeing. Creating community connection is now seen as a vital strategy in improving health outcomes and community vibrancy. The U.K. has now appointed a minister for loneliness.

Hogeweyk Dementia Village is a new approach to dementia care that integrates people with dementia more fully into societal life. It is a deinstitutionalized experience that replicates as many aspects of normal life as possible.

The **Legacy Museum** and the **National Memorial for Peace and Justice** are important new installations by the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, that tell the story of slavery and incarceration in a new light.

NDN Fund, an emerging Native Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), is the lending arm of the NDN Collective, providing financing for pre-development, bridge, and large-scale Indigenous regenerative development projects that dramatically scale up investment and shift all decision-making power to Indigenous peoples.

A number of **restaurants** are designed to welcome diners and workers with a range of disabilities. **Contento** in New York City is designed to accommodate patrons using wheelchairs. **Starbucks and Mozzeria** serve and employ the deaf near Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.

The **Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom** is an interfaith group of Muslim and Jewish women and teens who are building a community of shared hope and understanding across identities that have often been in conflict.

The **Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration (SEED)** is the nation's first mayor-led guaranteed income initiative. Begun in 2019, SEED provided 125 residents with $500 a month for two years, with no strings attached. They found that people who received the cash benefit worked more and invested in new businesses.

Welcoming America has developed Welcoming Plans and a **Welcoming Standard** to build strong 21st century communities that connect and include people of all backgrounds. They have now certified several communities across the United States who meet the standard.

Educating future generations

Arizona State University's College of Global Futures, School for the Future of Innovation in Society, Center for Science and the Imagination and courses by Ed Finn.

Wendy Petersen Boring, Willamette University, has incorporated the Guild of Future Architects' methodological approach in her Climate, Race, Economy: New Systems Thinking class.

Stuart Candy, Carnegie Mellon University School of Design, teaches an experiential futures class.

Center for Humane Technology's online course.

Futures Thinking Playbook for middle school teachers and students.

MIT Media Lab's Dreaming Through Code designs learning workshops for local organizations introducing children to technology.

Museum of Children's Art's Community Futures School in Oakland, California, uses Afrofuturism and futures literacy as part of a community-building toolkit to imagine and implement an antiracist society.

Benjamin Stokes, American University School of Communications and Playful City Lab.

UC San Diego's Speculative design major in the School of Visual Arts.

University of Hawaii's Research Center for Futures Studies.

University of Houston's Masters in Foresight Studies and Future Studies program.

University of Southern California's Civic Paths and Civic Imagination Project.

Governance, policymaking, and civic participation

The **All Party Parliamentary Group for Future Generations** seeks to combat short term thinking across political parties in the United Kingdom to bring concern for future generations into current policy making.

A Message from the Future is a short film visualizing an America with the Green New Deal. *The Intercept* and Naomi Klein produced the film, which is narrated by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and illustrated by Molly Crabapple.

California 100 is a statewide initiative focused on inspiring a vision and strategy for California's next century that is innovative, sustainable, and equitable.

The **Democracy Voucher Program** in Seattle provides each eligible resident with cash vouchers that can be used to support candidates running for office. It democratizes the financing of elections, encourages greater civic engagement, and increases voter turnout and participation.

The **Future Generations Commissioner for Wales** is tasked by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act of 2015 to be the "guardian of the interests of future generations in Wales." The Commissioner advises the government and other public bodies in Wales on how to deliver social, economic, and cultural well-being for future generations.

Millennial Action Project brings young leaders together across partisan lines through their binding generational identity to imagine better futures for their states and their country through state and Congressional Future Caucuses.

ACLU's **Mobile Justice App** empowers users during encounters with public officials and law enforcement to record those encounters, report any abuse, and learn about their rights.

Paris' Citizen Assembly, established in 2021, plays a variety of roles including deciding on the theme of the city's 100 million euro participatory budgeting effort, as well as some agenda setting and policy evaluation.

The **People's Forum** is a movement incubator to build unity across historic lines of division at home and abroad. This accessible educational and cultural space nurtures the next generation of visionaries and organizers who seek to build a better world through collective action.

Policy Horizons Canada is a federal government organization that conducts foresight to help the Canadian government develop robust future-oriented policy that can be more resilient in the face of disruptive change.

Portsmouth Listens over two decades has used structured small group conversations to engage residents of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in communitywide dialogues on topics like school redistricting and sustainability, enabling them to plan and reach consensus on a number of important issues facing the community.

The **Solferino Institute** was created by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. It is part of IFRC's efforts to institutionalize foresight within its network to better respond to future crises and shape the future of humanitarian response.

Promoting environmental sustainability and planetary health

Buy Nothing Project fosters hyper local community-based gifting networks. Its members give and receive, share and lend, making their communities more connected, resilient, sustainable, and equitable. It's a way to reduce waste and build community at the same time.

Brazil's **Museum of Tomorrow** examines the past, considers current trends, and explores future scenarios for the next 50 years. The exhibits encourage visitors to reflect on the Anthropocene era and their role in shaping the future.

Nouveaux Voisins reimagines lawns as habitats for local biodiversity. They seek to transform lawn "culture" by shifting individual and collective landscaping norms to meet the needs of diverse species and people.

The **One Health Initiative** seeks to promote, improve, and defend the health and well-being of all species by enhancing cooperation and collaboration between physicians, veterinarians, and other scientific health and environmental professionals, and by promoting strengths in leadership and management to achieve these goals.

Repair Cafe is a global volunteer-based movement of more than 2,000 local efforts that brings regular people, their items needing repair, and volunteer repair experts together to change attitudes towards sustainability and reduce waste.

A successful decades-long international effort to **repair damage to the ozone layer** holds lessons for solving other collective environmental challenges.

The Austrian government's **Reparatur Bonus** program pays individuals to repair their electrical and electronic devices to reduce E-waste. It's an expansion of a 2020 Vienna pilot.

Want to Binge?

Bridge Entertainment Labs and the **Pop Culture Collaborative** have great resources about the media and narrative environment and the role of pop culture.

Below are a range of media to experience that depict better futures:

Documentaries

Crip Camp, a documentary about the disabled community

Stand Up for Racial Justice's documentary on deep canvassing

Center for Humane Technology's **The Social Dilemma** on the adverse impacts of social media

Film and TV

A Brief History of the Future, **Blackish**, **Black Panther**, **Bridgerton**, **Don't Look Up**, **Falcon and the Winter Soldier**, **The Future Of**, **Home Sweet Home**, **Ms. Marvel**, **Reunited States of America**, **Star Trek**, **The Antidote**, **The Good Place**, **X Men**

Journalism and media resources

Afrofuturist Podcast

Atlas of the Future

BBC Future

Detroit Justice Center's Freedom Dreams podcast

Equal Justice Initiative's educational videos

Fast Company articles by Adele Peters and 2022 best ideas

Good News Dog

NDN Collective's stories, blogs and multimedia from an Indigenous perspective

Noema Magazine, especially its future of democracy articles

Progress Network's *What Could Go Right* podcast

Reasons To Be Cheerful
We Are Not Divided

Solutions Journalism Network and its Story Tracker

The Good News Movement

Upworthy

VOX Reparations Could Heal America

Art, museum exhibits, and music festivals

Bata Shoe Museum's Future Now

Monica Jahan Bose Storytelling with Saris

Brooklyn Museum's Wangechi Mutu, A Fantastic Journey and Kehinde Wiley's New Republic

Carnegie Hall's Afrofuturism Festival

Cooper Hewitt Museum's By the People: Designing a Better America

Futurium, a museum in Berlin about imagining the future

Institute of American Indian Arts Indigenous Futurisms: Transcending Past/Present/Future

Nettrice Gaskins

Metropolitan Museum's Before Yesterday We Could Fly, Afrofuturist Period Room

Movement for Black Lives' MLK artist series

MOMA PS1's Nicole Fleetwood, Marking Time

Museum of Tomorrow in Brazil

Smithsonian Museum's Futures

Lauren Williams

Norm changing campaigns

Belonging Begins with Us

Heineken bridging divides ad

Love Has No Labels

Pledge to Listen

Starts with Us

Want to Connect?

Conferences, communities of learning and practice

The events and learning communities below provide a useful on-ramp for those trying to plug into the space and find others to journey with.

Anticipation, Arizona State University

Association of Professional Futurists

Auburn Seminary

Building Belonging

Center for Humane Technology

Citizen University

Design Futures Initiative
Chapters
Primer Conference

Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute

Federal Foresight Community of Interest

Fixing the Future Festival

Future of Black America Conference

Greater Good Science Center

Guild of Future Architects

House of Beautiful Business

Interfaith America

Long Now Foundation

Next Generation Foresight Practitioners

New Pluralists

Othering and Belonging Institute

Progress Network

Public Sector Foresight Network

RadicalxChange

Starts With Us

Unfinished
Unfinished Live event

We Govern

Weave: The Social Fabric Project

World Futures Studies Federation

Want to Dive Deeper?

Foresight and futures thinking tools and practitioners

Below are some leading foresight practitioners and thinkers, as well as select reports, journals, guides, tools, and frameworks to review and adapt for your purposes. Many also offer consulting services.

Aerospace Corporation

Federal Foresight Community of Interest
FFCOI has a useful listserv and newsletters.

Future Today Institute
Foresight Frameworks and Tools

Trista Harris
Future Good

Institute for the Future
Institute for the Future Equitable Futures Toolkit

Kedge
The Futures School

NESTA
Top Ten Toolkits

New America
Strategic Foresight in US Agencies: An Analysis of Long-term Anticipatory Thinking in the Federal Government

School of International Futures
Features of effective systemic foresight in governments around the world

Singapore's Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office
Conversations for the Future: Volume 1 - Singapore's Experiences with Strategic Planning (1988-2011)

The Millenium Project

The Voroscope
The Futures Cone
A primer on Futures Studies

UNESCO
Futures Literacy
Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century

World Futures Studies Federation
Review of the main publications focused on futures studies and foresight

Manifestos, Essays, Explainers, Speculation, and Speculative Fiction

Below is a thematically curated list of futurist manifestos, futurist explainers, and speculative fiction.

On abolitionism

Black Lives Matter
Imagining Abolition

Ruth Wilson Gilmore
Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley

Project Nia
Practicing Abolition, Creating Community

On Afrofuturism

Black Futures, edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham

adrienne maree brown
Murmurations: Returning to the Whole
Octavia's Brood
Octavia's Parables podcast

Work by **Octavia Butler**

Carnegie Hall's *Afrofuturism glossary*

FIX Solution Lab's *From Afrofuturism to Ecotopia: A climate-fiction glossary*

Work by **Nicole Fleetwood**

Work by **Saidiya Hartman**

Intelligent Mischief resources

Movement for Black Lives
Black Futures Month

WIRED
Welcome to Janelle Monae's Dreamworld

On design

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

reSITES
How we will live together

Studio Gang

On future generations and youth

California 100
Mega Scenarios: A Toolkit for the Future of California

Detroit Justice Center
Restorative Justice Youth Design Summit

Tatsuyoshi Saijo
Future Design: Bequeathing Sustainable Natural Environments and Sustainable Societies to Future Generations

Roman Krznaric
Why we need to reinvent democracy for the long-term

Keiichiro Kobayashi
How to represent the interests of future generations now

School of International Futures
Next Generation Foresight Practitioners
Intergenerational Fairness Observatory and Framework
Framework for Intergenerational Fairness: Specialist Report
Building a Coalition for Intergenerational Fairness in the European Green Deal

United Nations
Our Common Agenda
Young UN

On imagination

Philip Ball
Homo imaginatus

Center for Science and the Imagination
Annual Report 20-21
Hieroglyph: Stories and Visions for a Better Future

Ed Finn and Ruth Wylie
Collaborative imagination: A methodological approach

Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro and Sangita Shresthova, editors
Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change
Practicing Futures: A Civic Imagination Handbook

Jane McGonigal
Imaginable: How to See the Future Coming and Feel Ready for Anything – Even Things That Seem Impossible Today

Gemma Mortensen
The Journey
Reflections, Imbolc 2022

Geoff Mulgan
The Imaginary Crisis (and how we might quicken social and public imagination)

Omidyar Network, Guild of Future Architects, and Dot Connector Studio
Portals to Beautiful Futures: Trends to Watch in 2021 and Beyond

Kathy Peach
New platforms for public imagination

Cassie Robinson
Change Happens if Our Collective Imagination Changes

Brian Stout
Building Belonging: an intentional "future dojo"

On Indigenous thought and speculative fiction

Cherie Dimaline's speculative fiction

Sherri Mitchell
Indigenous Wisdom & The Seed of Life, podcast episode, No Place Like Home
Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change

NDN Collective
Equity Manifesto
Indigenous Regenerative Economic Principles

Rebecca Roanhorse's speculative fiction

On media, culture change, and narrative

Bridge Entertainment Labs
Can Entertainment Save America?

Helicon Collaborative
Farther, Faster, Together: How Arts and Culture Can Accelerate Environmental Progress

Horizons Project
Our Relationship to The Future: Narratives, Imagination Skills and Futures Literacy

Ezra Klein
I Didn't Want it to Be True, but the Medium Really is the Message

More in Common
The Endless Sea: Imagining a Story of Tomorrow

Pop Culture Collaborative
From Stories to Systems
#Making Justice Pop: The Story of the Pop Culture Collaborative's Impact at FIve Years
To Change the World, Transform Narrative Oceans
Why I Wish I'd Never Watched the Handmaid's Tale

Kamal Sinclair and Jessica Clark
Making a New Reality: A toolkit for inclusive media futures

Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project
Reframing the Prevailing American Narrative for 2052

This Is Signals
Through the Looking Glass: 2022 Narrative Predictions

On reimagining governance

Danielle Allen
Introducing Power-Sharing Liberalism

Berggruen Institute
Noema's articles on the future of democracy

David Bollier
Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm
The Commons: Reclaiming our Humanity

California 100
The Future of Governance, Media and Civil Society

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy

Claudia Chwalisz
A Movement That's Quietly Reshaping Democracy For The Better

Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship
Our Common Purpose

Nils Gilman
The Official Future Is Dead! Long Live the Official Future!

Nils Gilman and Jonathan Blake
Governing in the Planetary Age

NESTA
Our futures: by the people, for the people
Democracy Pioneers: Exploring possible futures for better local civic participation and democracy in the UK

Niskanen Center and
How Democracy Revives

Beth Simone Noveck and
The Governance Lab

Barack Obama
Remarks at the 2022 Copenhagen Democracy Summit

OECD
Eight Ways to Institutionalize Deliberative Democracy

john a. powell
Bridging or Breaking? The Stories We Tell Will Create the Future We Inhabit

Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement
What Could We Imagine? The U.S. as a Country That Comes Together After DIvisive Elections

Miriam Ticktin
Borders: A Story of Political Imagination

On solarpunk and hopepunk

Cara Buckley
'OK Doomer' and the Climate Advocates Who Say It's Not Too Late

Wikipedia entry on **hopepunk**

Kim Stanley Robinson
Ministry for the Future

David Robson
The sci-fi genre offering radical hope for living better

Article on **solarpunk**

Jay Springett
Solarpunk: A Narrative Strategy, a Memetic Engine

On thinking like an ancestor and the very long run

The FIX
Imagine 2200: Climate Fiction for Future Ancestors

Roman Krznaric
The Good Ancestor

William MacAskill
The Case for Longtermism, adapted from *What We Owe the Future*

Ari Wallach
Ted Talk
Longpath: Becoming the Great Ancestors Our Future Needs

Want to Play?

Below are some games to help visualize better futures and expand the imagination, as well as some writing and videos about games and the positive role they can play.

AfroRithms from the Future is a collaborative storytelling game that centers Black and BIPOC perspectives. You are travelers of the multiverse exploring possible futures and creating exciting new artifacts to send back out to all other parallel worlds.

Candy Land is a board game, originally designed for children with polio.

Center for Science and the Imagination
Skill Tree examines and celebrates how video games envision possible futures, build rich and thought-provoking worlds, and engage people as active participants in unfolding and interpreting stories.

Center for Story-Based Strategy
Manifestations of our radical imagination

experimental.design and Alex McDowell
Portfolio of worldbuilding projects

Future Today Institute
Decode the Future game helps you practice scenarios thinking as you rehearse uncertainty.

The Joint Research Center
Scenario Exploration System is a board game developed to help people explore a particular issue using alternative scenarios.

Never Alone is the first video game developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people. This *New Yorker article* describes the game.

NESTA
Our Futures can be played by anyone wanting to dream up new, more engaging ways to involve large groups of people in thinking about the future.

Opening Knowledge across Research and Entertainment
Playing with Videogame Culture examines the potential for video games to anchor a national public engagement initiative focused on climate change.

Solarpunk Surf Club
Solarpunk Futures is a utopian storytelling game that invites players to envision a brighter day and then imagine how we got there.

Benjamin Stokes
Locally Played: Real-World Games for Stronger Places and Communities

The Thing from the Future is an imagination game that challenges players to collaboratively and competitively describe objects from a range of alternative futures.

2030: Artifacts from the Future of America's Cities brought together mayors, futurists, and artists at the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas. Organized by the Institute for the Future's Governance Futures Lab, Civic I/O, and Carnegie Mellon University's Situation Lab, the project created original posters that might appear in various U.S. cities in the year 2030.

ENDNOTES

1. Clem Bezold, "The history and future of anticipatory democracy and foresight," *World futures review 11*, no. 3 (2019): 273-282, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1946756718810768

2. Ari Wallach, *Longpath: Becoming the Great Ancestors Our Future Needs – An Antidote for Short-Termism*, HarperOne, 2022, p. 23.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 25-6.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

5. William MacAskill, "The Case for Longtermism,." *The New York Times*, August 5, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/05/opinion/the-case-for-longtermism.html.

6. "Introducing Power-Sharing Liberalism," *RadicalxChange,* August 15, 2022, https://www.radicalxchange.org/media/blog/introducing-power-sharing-liberalism/.

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"DARKNESS CANNOT DRIVE OUT DARKNESS; ONLY LIGHT CAN DO THAT."

– Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights leader

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