

IMPORTANT WORK TO PROTECT DEMOCRACIES IS HAPPENING LOCALLY

A HEARTLANDS TRANSFORMATION REPORT

Report by Tamara Ehs and Arnaz Mahbub | June 2026

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Across North America and Europe, democracy is being tested in serious ways. Anti-democratic leaders and movements are trying to weaken democratic rules, limit rights, and divide people against each other. These challenges are often discussed at the national level, through elections, presidents, prime ministers, political parties, and governments. But the virtual discussion “Local Leaders Build Engaged Citizenry and Resilient Democracies” showed that some of the most important work to protect democracy is happening locally. Cities, schools, community colleges, civic organizations, local leaders, and ordinary citizens are helping people feel connected to public life again.

The recent transatlantic discussion – hosted by the Jefferson Educational Society as part of the Heartlands Transformation Network – and available for viewing here – featured:

- Tamara Ehs, a researcher and consultant from Austria who works on democratic innovation in Austria, Germany, and at the European Union level;
- Volker Rein, coordinator of the Bonn, Germany Network for Common Good and Democracy and member of the Education for Democracy senior expert network;
- Ryan Kostanecki, professor at Macomb Community College in Michigan and a leader in local civic engagement work; and,
- Ben Spегgen, vice president of the Jefferson Educational Society in Erie, Pennsylvania.

The conversation was moderated by John Austin, senior fellow at the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College.

The organizing theme of the discussion was that democracy cannot depend only on national leaders or elections every few years. Democracy has to be built in everyday life. It depends on whether people trust each other, understand how government works, feel included in public decisions, and believe they have a real role in their communities. Democracy has to deliver on its promises. This means that every voice is heard and counts equally, regardless of whether you are rich or poor, old or young, or what your educational background is. This promise must be fulfilled in everyday life; and it is at the local level that we are closest to the people.

When people feel ignored, hopeless, or left behind, anti-democratic movements become more appealing. The most important insights from the event centered on democratic “frontsliding,” building networks of action, connecting democracy to economic conditions, strengthening civic education, organizing young people and communities, and creating safe spaces for civic engagement.

Democratic ‘Frontsliding’

Usually, people talk about democratic backsliding, which means democracy being actively undermined and becoming weaker. Frontsliding means taking active steps to make democracy stronger before it is too late but also describes the efforts when reversing backsliding by a piecemeal restoration of democratic institutions and practices during or after a period of democratic erosion. It is taking steps to make democracy more resilient, which means not just waiting for democracy to be attacked and then reacting, but actively building stronger democratic habits, institutions, and communities. Resilient democracy is not only about surviving a crisis. It is about preparing people and institutions to respond when democracy is under pressure. This concept, first introduced into the discussion by Christophe Hillion, can be practiced especially by cities – as they are often democratic enclaves in authoritarian-turning nation states.

Recent events in Budapest, Hungary, provided a strong example of democratic frontsliding in action. Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz government, Hungary had moved in a more illiberal direction, with democratic rights, independent institutions, and freedoms under pressure. Budapest, however, became a place where local leaders and citizens pushed back. The Budapest Pride parade in 2025 became an especially important example. The national government had supported restrictions that threatened LGBTQ+ public expression and were used in an effort to stop the parade. In response, Budapest's local leadership and citizens continued to defend the event as a statement of rights, freedom, and democratic participation. The parade became more than one public gathering. It became a symbol of people standing up against fear and repression. It also showed how local action can help people feel safer and more confident about resisting anti-democratic politics. Moreover, it became a strong symbol of European solidarity and the EU's fundamental values in action: European cities — mayors and citizens — stood together, participants from 30 countries and around 70 members of the European Parliament attended the parade.

Build Networks

Events in Budapest have also illustrated that local leaders do not have to act alone. Cities, civic groups, educators, and community organizations can learn from each other and support one another. Networks matter because they help local leaders share ideas, borrow successful strategies, and stand together when democratic values are under attack. One example is the European Capital of Democracy initiative, which highlights cities that are developing strong democratic innovations and public participation. Another is the Pact of Free Cities, a network created to emphasize the role of cities in protecting democracy and open society in 2019. These networks help cities cooperate across borders and show that local democracy is not only a local issue. It can become part of a wider international effort.

The Heartlands Transformation Network follows a similar purpose. It connects communities in rural and former industrial regions across North America and Europe. Many of these places are dealing with economic decline, polarization, resentment, and loss of trust. By bringing leaders and practitioners together, the network helps communities share ways to rebuild economic opportunity, civic pride, and democratic confidence. This matters because democracy is not only threatened by political extremism. It is also weakened when people think that they are alone in feeling their communities have no future.

Democracy Linked to Economic Condition

The discussion made clear that democracy is tied to people's economic lives. When people cannot afford housing, worry about the cost of living, lose confidence in the future, or feel that their community has been forgotten, democratic promises can start to feel empty. If democratic systems do not seem to improve people's daily lives, anti-democratic leaders can take advantage of that frustration. They can promise control, blame outsiders, and offer nostalgia for a past that may not have been as good as they claim. Because of this, defending democracy cannot only mean saying "no" to extremism or opposing a specific party or politician. It also has to mean offering a positive vision of what democracy can do for people. Democracy must show that it can help communities solve real problems. People need to believe that democratic institutions can respond to housing, jobs, education, healthcare, and the future of their communities. To achieve this, we must work together to develop a political vision and imagine a positive future. For the vision of a bright future is a democratic asset, whereas fear of the future only serves to empower autocrats. To achieve this, we need positive examples that already offer a glimpse, on a small scale and at a local level, of a possible future: "an explosion of the not-yet in the now, a world that we say is possible," as the political scientist John Holloway once put it. That is where the potential

for transformation lies.

Education is Key

The power and importance of robust civic education also cannot be underemphasized. Democracy does not happen automatically. People have to learn how to participate in it, how to understand public issues, how to disagree without dehumanizing each other, and how to see themselves as part of a larger community. In Bonn, Germany's Volker Rein's lamented that today's schools, universities, vocational programs, and training systems often focus too much on preparing people for the labor market and not enough on preparing them to be citizens. Work is important, but education should also help people understand society, government, and their own responsibilities. If education only teaches people how to fit into the economy, it leaves out a major part of democratic life.

A stronger approach would connect education to civic agency. Service learning, project-based learning, workplace programs, and community education can help people practice democracy in real life, not just read about it. In Germany, one promising effort is the work to promote democracy in vocational education and training. This matters because civic education should not only happen in traditional classrooms. It should also happen in workplaces, training programs, local institutions, community colleges, and public spaces. People should be able to develop democratic skills wherever they learn, work, and participate. For if democracy is reduced solely to the moment of casting a vote at the ballot box every few years, it all too easily becomes a means of venting all that pent-up anger. On the contrary, democracy must be understood as a process. As far back as 100 years ago, the American philosopher John Dewey spoke of "democracy as a way of life."

Organize

The discussion also emphasized the importance of organizing and mobilizing people, especially young people. In Macomb County, Michigan, Ryan Kostanecki described how community colleges and local organizations can help students become more involved in civic life. This is important because young people are more likely to participate when they are invited early and shown that politics affects their daily lives. Early voter registration and civic engagement programs can help build habits of participation before people become disconnected from politics.

The conversation also challenged the idea of "off-year" elections. Local elections are not less important just because they do not involve the presidency. They affect schools, housing, public services, local government, and community priorities. In Erie, Pennsylvania, and Macomb County, Michigan, local elections show how democratic habits are built or lost. If people only pay attention to national politics, they miss many of the places where democracy is actually shaped. A viewer of the discussion from Ghana also raised an important question about how people can better anticipate democratic "flipping," or sudden political shifts. That question pointed to an important lesson: sometimes people outside a country can recognize democratic backsliding more clearly than people living inside it. This makes local awareness, civic education, and early organizing even more important.

Create Safe Spaces for Civic Engagement

Another major lesson came from the work of the Erie, Pennsylvania's Jefferson Educational Society (JES), which organizes civic education and leadership development programs. In a time when many people are divided or isolated, communities need trusted spaces where people can gather, listen, and learn without

feeling attacked or pushed into one political side. The JES' nonpartisan approach helps build trust because it focuses on honest conversation, civic learning, and hearing from different voices. Its Civic Leadership Academy teaches residents how local and state government work. The goal is not necessarily to push everyone to run for office, but to help people become more informed and active citizens. When people understand how decisions are made, they are better prepared to participate in public life.

Erie's recent opening of its first community college also matters in this larger picture. Community colleges can become important spaces for civic participation because they reach people who may not be connected to traditional political institutions. They can help students understand public issues, participate in local democracy, and see themselves as part of the future of their community. In this way, institutions like community colleges can do more than provide education for jobs. They can also help rebuild civic confidence and democratic participation.

Overall, the discussion showed that democracy is not protected by one person, one election, or one institution. It is built through many small but important efforts: local leadership, civic education, community networks, youth engagement, economic hope, and public spaces for conversation. Budapest, Erie, Macomb County, and Germany are different places, but they are all dealing with similar questions about trust, participation, education, and belonging. The biggest takeaway is that democracy becomes stronger when people are invited into public life and given real ways to take part. Resilient democracy is not just an idea. It is something people are actively building through local leadership, education, and sustained civic engagement.

About the Authors

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About the Initiative

The [Heartlands Transformation Network](#) is a transatlantic collaborative partnership dedicated to closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity. The initiative works to return community pride and optimism about the future, and diminish the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist, and ethnonationalist political movements that threaten our democracies. The initiative, its learning exchanges, convenings, events, study tours, presentations, publications, and other learning products are conducted with partners including the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College; the Brookings Institution; the Georgetown University BMW Center for German and European Studies; the Jefferson Educational Society; the Ruhrkonferenz of North-Rhine Westphalia; Policy Manchester at the University of Manchester, UK; the University Allianz Ruhr; the German Consulate General in Chicago; the University of Michigan; the European Commission Directorate of Regional and Urban Policy; and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, among others.