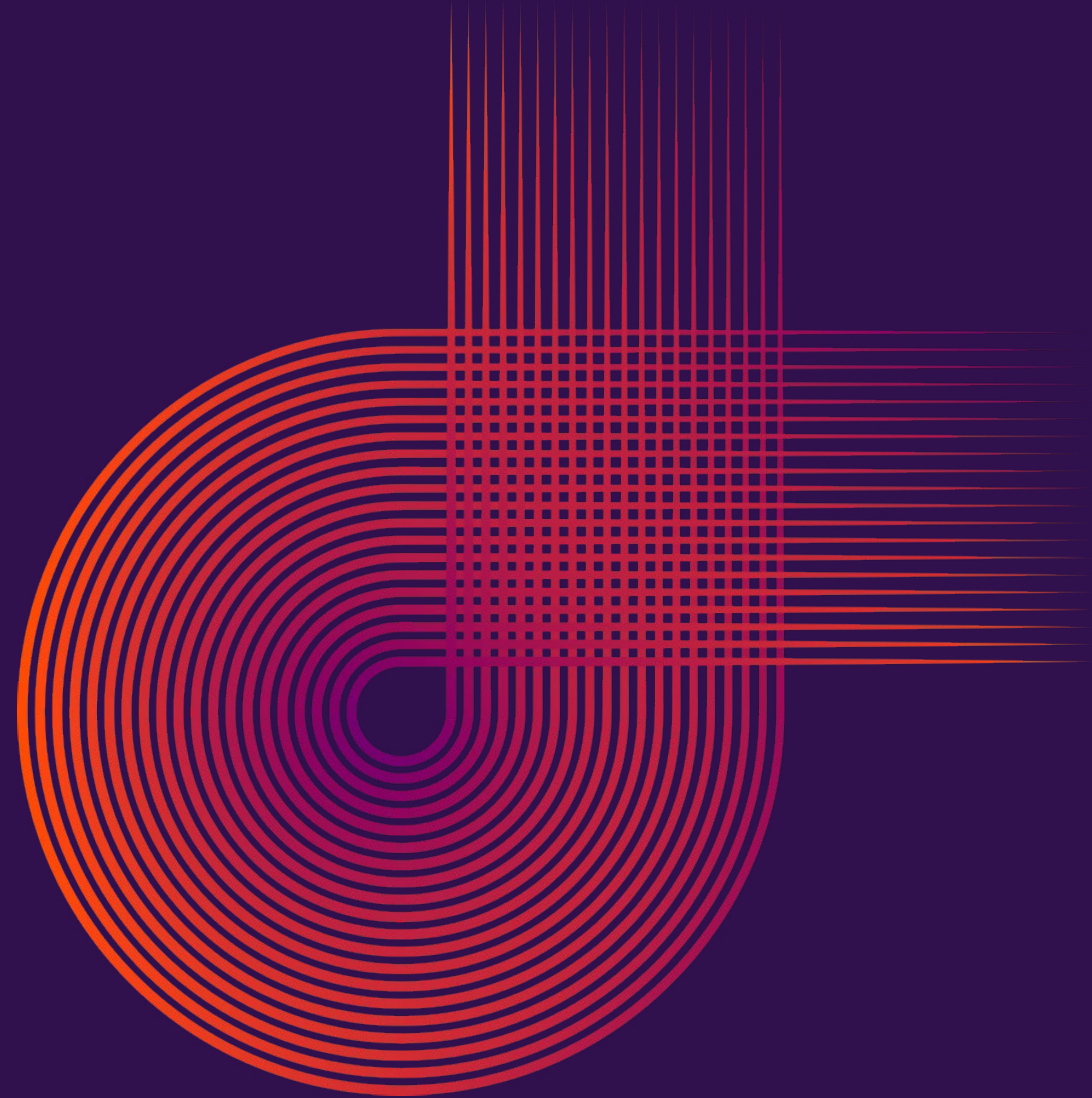


# **FOUR POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR U.S. DEMOCRACY**

**SCENARIOS FOR STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS**



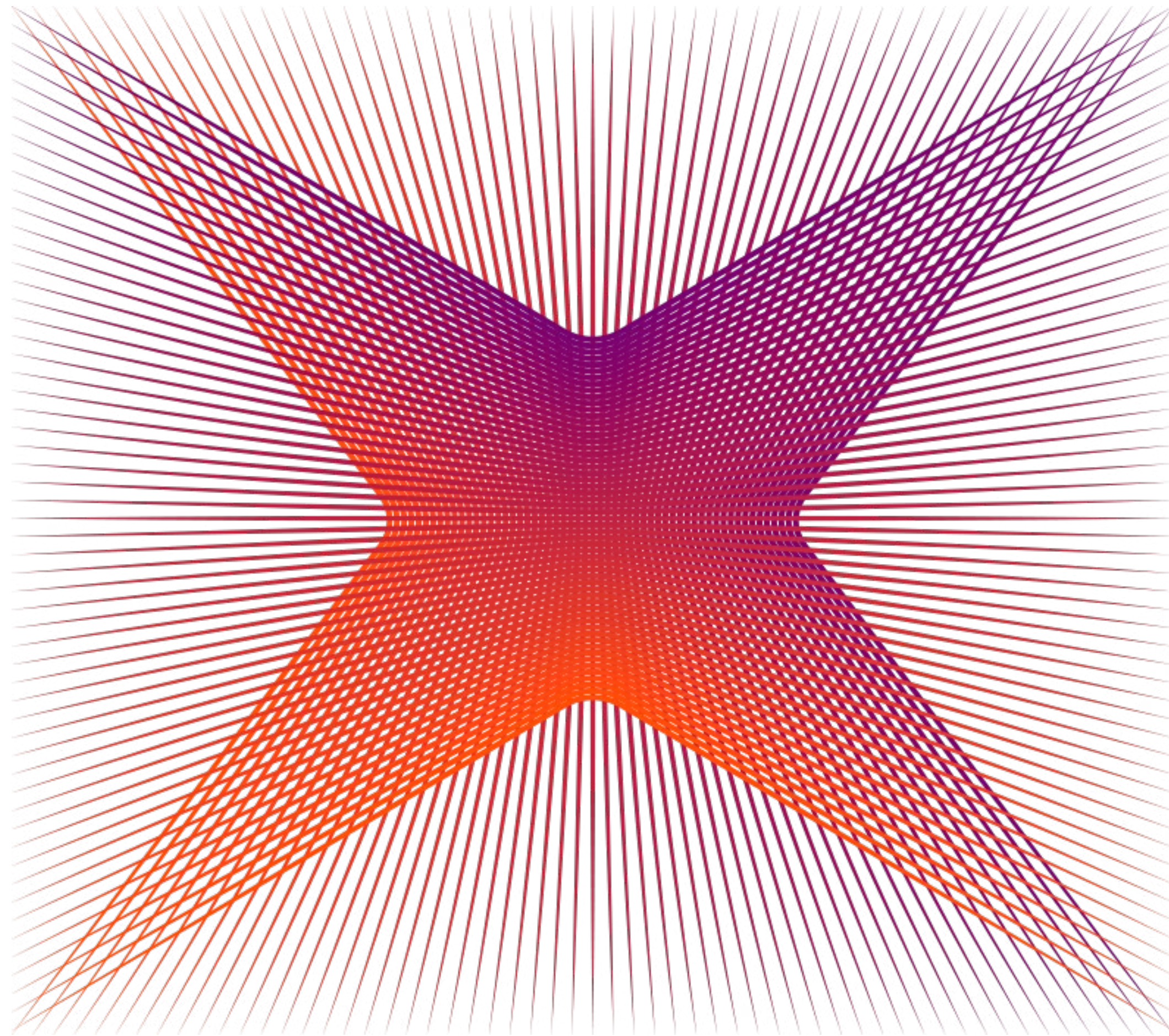


# CONTENTS



<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>WHAT SCENARIOS ARE AND HOW THESE IMAGINED FUTURES CAN BE USED</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>THE FUTURE OF U.S. DEMOCRACY: SIX KEY STRUCTURAL CERTAINTIES AND THEIR RELATED UNCERTAINTIES</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>COMPARISON OF THE SCENARIOS</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THE SCENARIOS</b>	
Polarization	<b>12</b>
Corporatism	<b>19</b>
Reform	<b>26</b>
Transformation	<b>32</b>
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>	<b>38</b>





# FOREWORD

Our democracy is at a crossroads. We have the opportunity to build stronger movements to reinforce democratic principles and practices and, in the process, build the inclusive democracy we have never had. The only alternative is to continue our steady march toward oligarchic and corporate control. We can create systems that are fair and equitable and that enable us to respond effectively to crises as they arise, or we can continue to watch our democratic institutions fail to meet the challenges of our era.

The need for an inclusive, representative democracy has never been clearer. As our nation struggles with multiple crises – from COVID-19 to climate change to the rise of white nationalism – our democracy continues to face unprecedented assaults. Corporate and oligarchic actors are driving attempts to undermine democratic institutions in order to consolidate political power in the service of wealthy economic interests, to the detriment of communities of color and working-class communities. As we write this, those actors are fighting to limit voting rights, restrict the right to protest, weaken the power of courts to protect rights, and use political



## FOREWORD

contributions to influence electoral and judicial outcomes. We see the effects of this effort in the record-breaking campaign spending of the 2020 election, the long lines at polling stations, the surge in state legislative efforts to criminalize protest, gerrymandered districts, and the increased politicization of the courts.

These threats to democratic governance are not new. What we are experiencing today is rooted in our nation's history of systemic racism and political inequality – burdens that have been carried most prominently over the years by working class Black communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color. This history includes:

- Gross political and power inequity driving and reinforcing gross economic, racial, and social inequality;
- A resulting erosion of trust and disengagement or rage exploited and reinforced by billions of dollars invested in elections centered on toxic, divisive, hyper-partisan, and low-/dis-information campaigns;
- Such election campaigns failing to create any kind of mandate, consensus, or will to govern responsibly, which drives another cycle of non-responsive and unrepresentative government, feeding continued

concentrations of political and economic power, and reinforcing alienation, civic distrust, a sense of manipulation, and loss of belief in democratic norms;

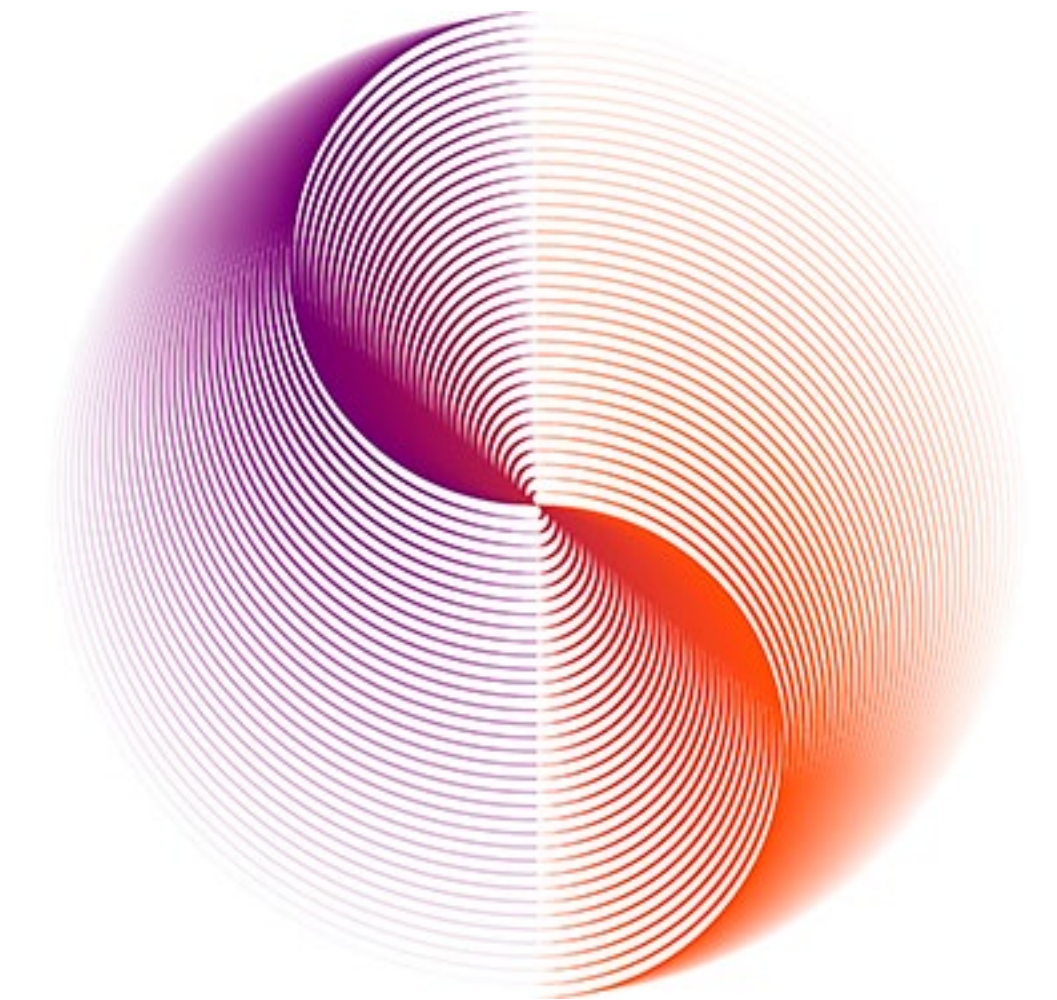
- Widespread consideration, activation, and acceptance of alternatives to democracy, such as populism, authoritarianism, oligarchy, conspiracy theories, and white nationalism.

And so the cycle continues.

To mitigate the influence of wealthy interests on our democracy and build power for underrepresented communities – for the betterment of us all – we must break the link between the accumulation of wealth and political influence.

In late 2020, the Piper Fund identified several barriers that were hampering the field from achieving this broader change. These barriers include:

- ▶ Lack of a clearly articulated, coordinated, long-term strategy;
- ▶ Funding silos resulting in separate and uncoordinated efforts within democracy fields;
- ▶ Inconsistent and insufficient resources to support transformational efforts focused on democratic systems.





## FOREWORD

Piper saw the need to step back from the urgent and taxing daily battles in order to survey the larger landscape with a longer-term perspective – where these battles come from in the past and where they might go in the future. Piper also saw the need, as a field, to break out of our silos to explore and identify the potential futures we may face as a nation, to understand the structural gaps that limit our progress, and to build strategic alignment around how to collectively proceed.

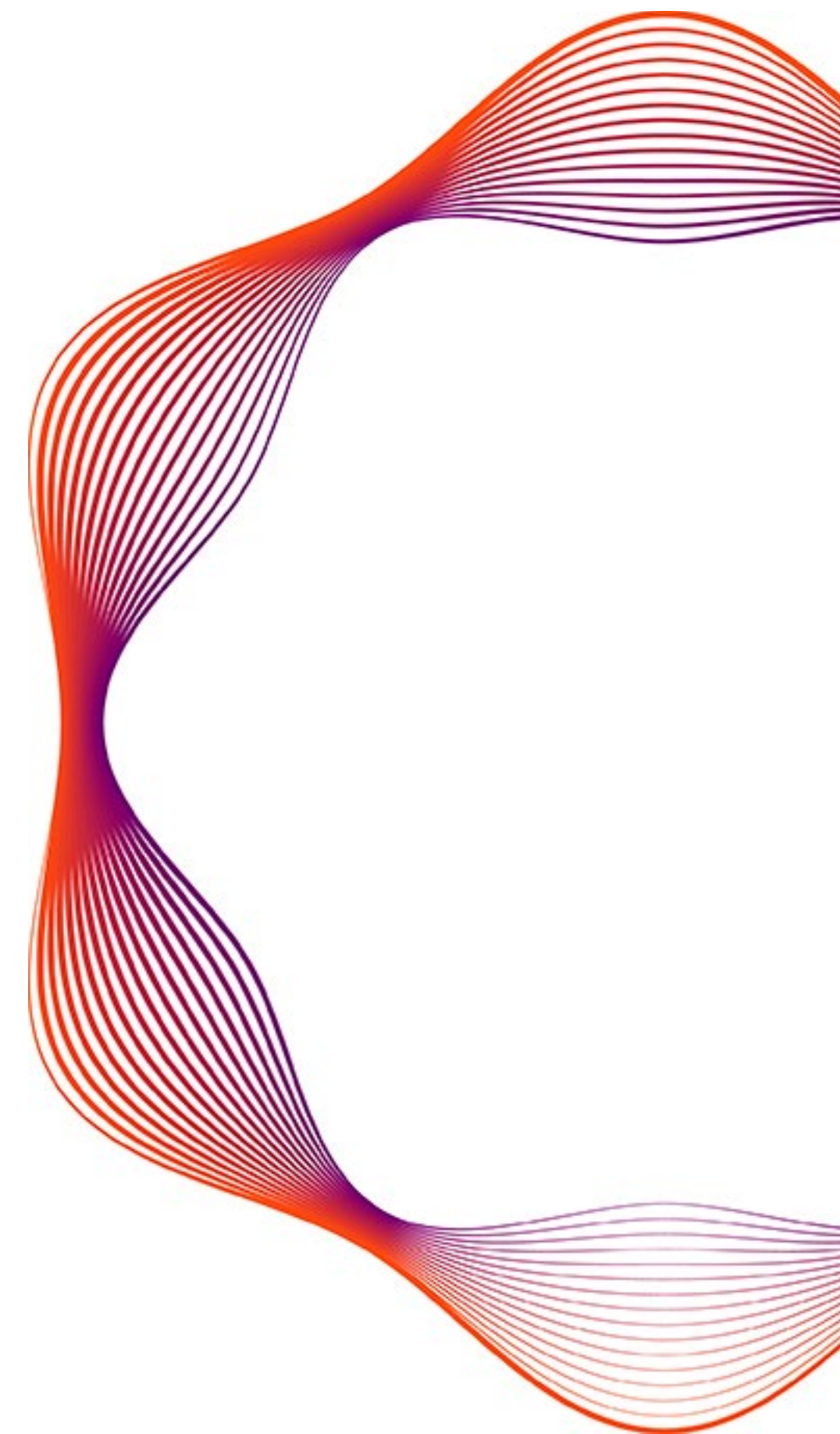
This scenario report is the outcome of phase one of this work. Working with Reos Partners, we convened dozens of experts with varied perspectives this spring and summer to form a “Scenario Team” to envision the possible futures ahead. The imagined futures in this report draw from those conversations. The following scenarios do not reflect the opinions or hopes of any one person or organization, but rather draw from varied and often conflicting opinions across approaches and disciplines.

We hope that these scenarios will prove useful not only for the participants in this process but also for others looking to step back from our day-to-day work to see the big picture and consider what more we might need to build to create a true democracy. Following this scenario planning process, we intend to continue to learn together and to build a cohesive set of strategies to move our work forward together.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to all of the members of the Scenario Team, who approached this work with openness, curiosity, and a great deal of expertise, and to the Reos Team for their expert guidance throughout this process.

**MELISSA SPATZ**, Director, Piper Fund

**ESTEVAN MUÑOZ-HOWARD**, Senior Program Officer, Piper Fund



# WHAT SCENARIOS ARE AND HOW THESE IMAGINED FUTURES CAN BE USED

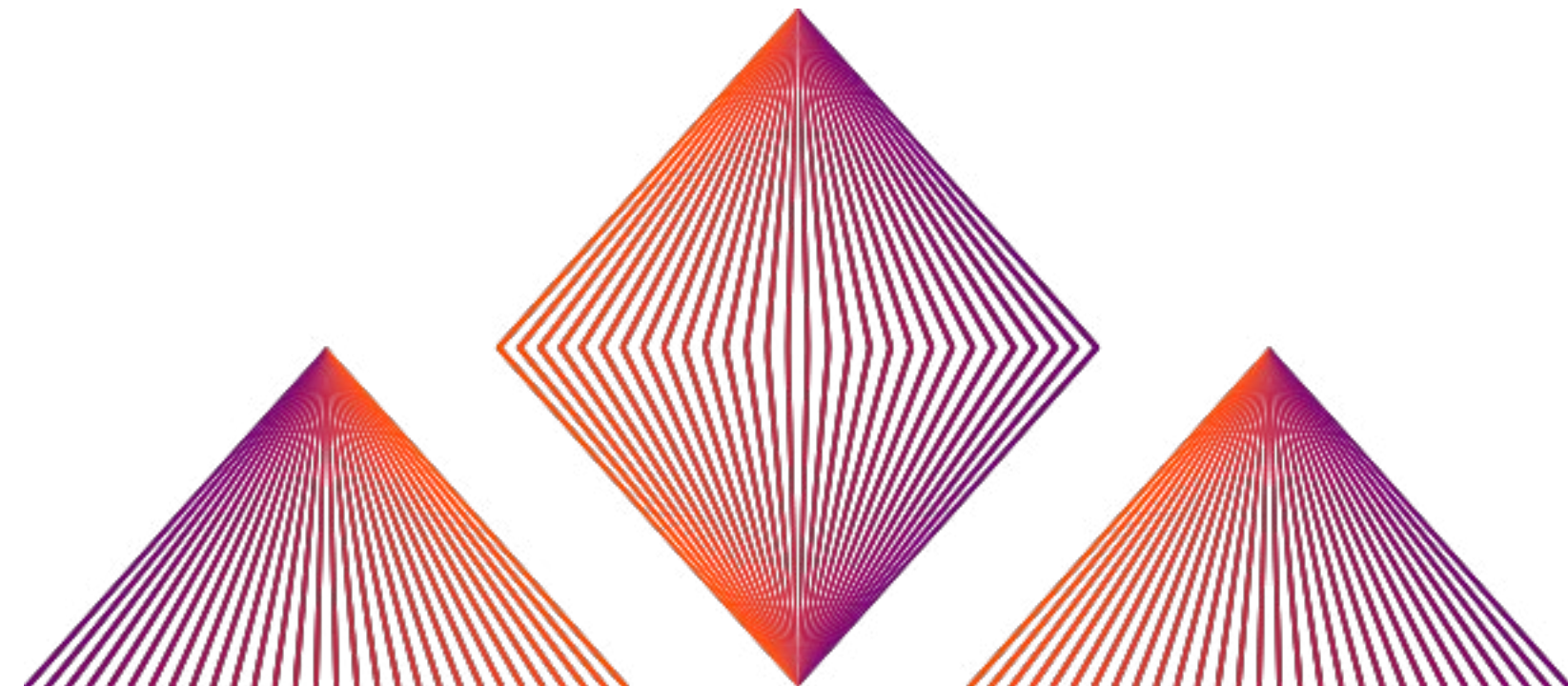
Scenarios are sets of a few different stories about what could happen in the future – not what *will* happen (forecasts) or what *should* happen (policy recommendations) but what *could* happen. The purpose of this scenario report is to help people working to strengthen U.S. democracy make more effective and resilient strategies and plans.

For the construction of these “Four Possible Futures for U.S. Democracy” members of the Scenario Team were interviewed to create a detailed overview of their thinking about the state of U.S. democracy now, including what needs to happen, the constraints working against change, and what we can learn from history. From these reflections, the team distilled six key structural *certainities* – what we can expect to continue for the next twenty years, no matter what scenario might unfold.

The four stories that the team created to explore the *uncertainties* around these six pillars are each based on sites of struggle where the efforts to strengthen U.S. democracy and racial justice play out: politics and the culture wars (**Polarization**); the economy and the private sector (**Corporatism**); courts, legislatures, and other structures of democracy (**Reform**); and culture, communities, and inclusive democracy (**Transformation**). Each of these scenarios explores a different set of challenges to democracy and possible responses to these challenges.

And each is also related to an aspect of the challenges posed by racism and money in politics.

In every scenario, different pro-democracy and other actors respond to the context with different moves and attempt different solutions. For pro-democracy forces, each scenario presents struggles and throws up different specific threats and opportunities. In none of the stories do the pro-democracy forces definitively win or lose.





## WHAT SCENARIOS ARE AND HOW THESE IMAGINED FUTURES CAN BE USED

In order to support the pro-democracy field to design resilient strategies and plans, the scenarios must meet four criteria:

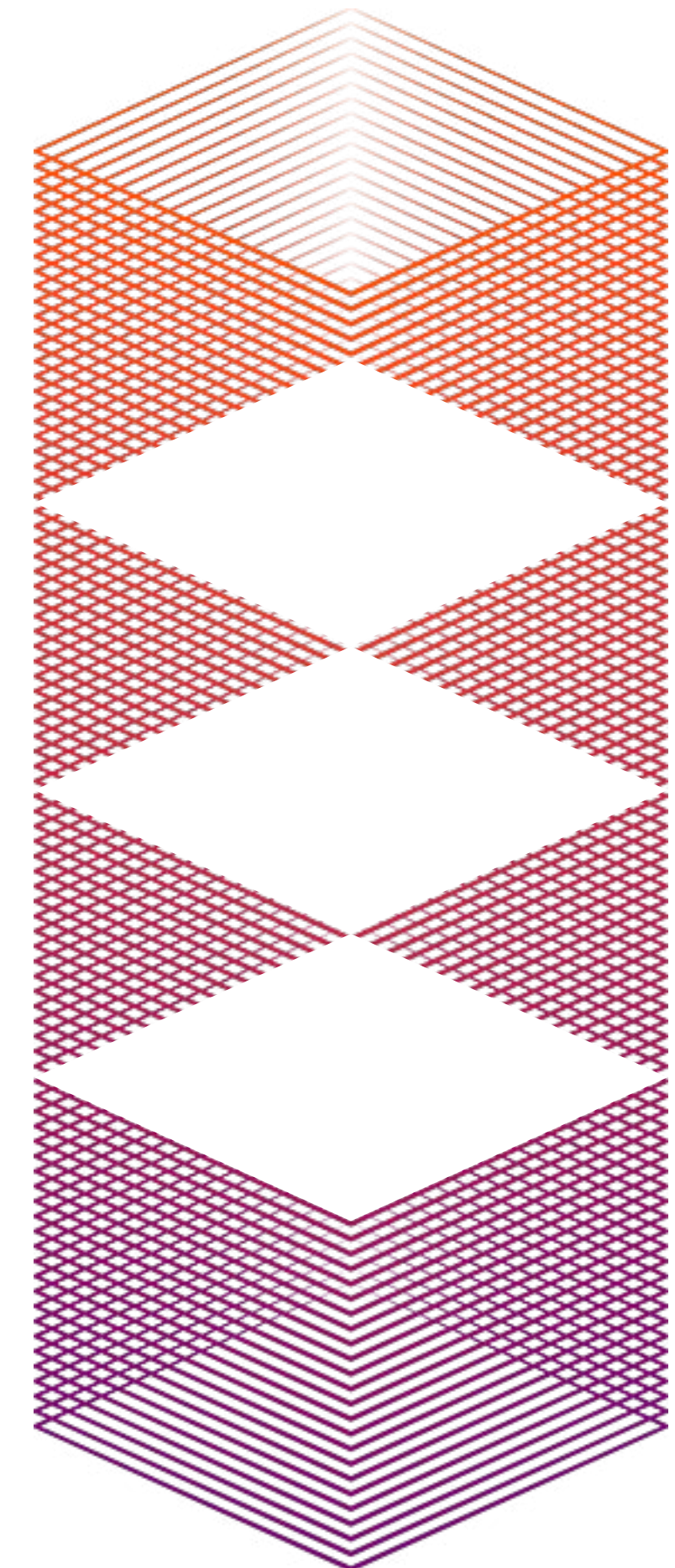
- They must be logical and plausible. The scenarios are not designed to predict the future.
- They must be clear and distinct from one another, and they must be easily understood and memorable.
- They must be relevant, connecting to issues that the readers recognize as important.
- And above all they must challenge our usual understanding and conventional wisdom. The scenarios must stretch the thinking of the readers beyond what is familiar and comfortable.

The scenarios provide a common framework and language to support an open and constructive search for answers to core questions of strategy and action:

- What opportunities and threats could we be facing in each scenario?
- What are our options?
- What shall we do to better understand and respond to these challenges?

The role of scenarios in strategic planning is to stress test existing strategic options and to generate new ones. And because scenarios are stories of several different, plausible futures, they support informed and open debate without committing anyone to any particular policy position. Scenarios enable us to explore various possible outcomes without requiring us to predict or control the future, allowing planners to work with and influence their own desired outcomes based upon plausible, although not predictive, futures.

More specifically, scenarios are used to support the formation of policy and strategy through the use of scenario-based dialogues. The purpose of such dialogues is not to redo the construction of the scenarios, but rather to use the scenarios as they are written to discover what can and should be done. The most fruitful dialogues of this kind involve a representative group of interested and influential actors from all across the whole system in question. (This system can be a government, city, sector, community, nation, or region, for example.) Diversity can be valuable in these dialogues, structured to include not just friends and colleagues but also strangers and opponents.





## WHAT SCENARIOS ARE AND HOW THESE IMAGINED FUTURES CAN BE USED

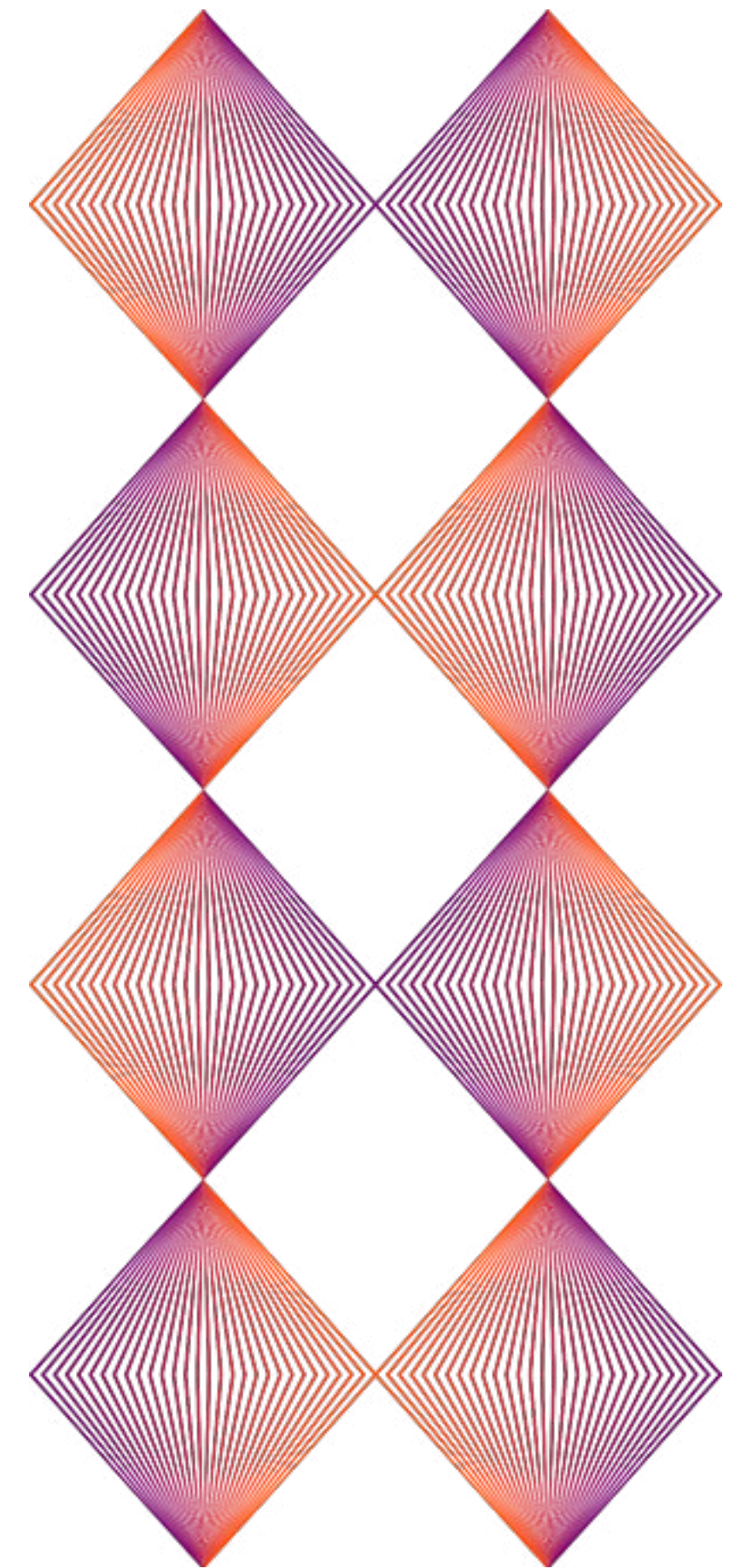
There are four key steps for this kind of scenario-based dialogue. First, the scenarios are presented through text, slides, storytelling, or video. Second, for each scenario the group using the scenario addresses the question, *“If this scenario occurred, what would it mean for us?”* and works out the opportunities and challenges the scenario poses. Third, the group deals with the question, *“If this scenario occurred, what could we do? What options would we have?”* Finally, the group steps back to the present and considers the question, *“Given these multiple possible futures, what shall we do next?”*

Each scenario in these imagined futures for U.S. democracy starts with an explanation of the fundamental tensions and questions upon which the scenario is built:

- **POLARIZATION** – left versus right;
- **CORPORATISM** – the subversion of democracy by monied interests;
- **REFORM** – how far incremental reforms can go in building a just democracy and addressing racism;
- **TRANSFORMATION** – how racial justice can arise from community action.

The polarization of opinion around these battles – a polarization both intentionally and unintentionally exacerbated by siloed media misinformation and disinformation – is the source of many of the conflicts and challenges facing democracy all over the world, not just in the U.S.

Perhaps the most important discussion of all would be framed around a consideration of all four scenarios as directions in which solutions have to be pursued *at the same time and together*. *What alliances would need to be built? How could we redefine what it is to be American and what we even mean by “democracy”? How could Americans construct a new infrastructure for strengthening and building democracy “in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity”?*





# THE FUTURE OF U.S. DEMOCRACY:

## SIX KEY STRUCTURAL CERTAINTIES AND THEIR RELATED UNCERTAINTIES FOR THESE SCENARIOS



### 1. INSTITUTIONAL/SYSTEMIC RACISM WILL CONTINUE TO IMPACT WHO HOLDS POWER AND INFLUENCE AND HOW MONEY FLOWS

- ▶ Will the pending majority of Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color influence politics? If so, how? Will it, for example, break along a variety of political perspectives and preferences, making parties more diverse?
- ▶ What factors will determine whether a majority of Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color within a state will be able to drive any significant change in that state?
- ▶ Will power – cultural, economic, social, and political – continue to be held by the wealthy, white males who have traditionally dominated most of American life, or will it be shared with underrepresented communities? And, if so, will the same power structures be replicated, or will they change? And if they change, how much and how quickly?

### 2. MONEYED INTERESTS WILL CONTINUE TO SEEK CONTROL OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

- ▶ To what extent will legislation and the courts control the sources of money, the transparency around movement of money, and the amount of money affecting U.S. elections?
- ▶ Will we address – and develop countervailing strategies to combat – practices that result in politicians being more beholden to business interests and the wealthy than to working people?
- ▶ Will the increasingly widespread, cross-partisan anger about the power and influence of wealthy donors, shadowy money conduits, and big corporations drive change at the state and federal level to curb and regulate money within the political system?



SIX KEY STRUCTURAL CERTAINTIES AND THEIR RELATED UNCERTAINTIES FOR THESE SCENARIOS

3. COURT DECISIONS AT BOTH THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL WILL CONTINUE TO BE KEY TO THE ABILITY TO COMBAT EXISTING POWER STRUCTURES AND ADVANCE CHANGE

- ▶ Will the Supreme Court become even more powerful?
- ▶ Will state and federal courts obstruct change? Advance change? Maintain the status quo?
- ▶ Will reform efforts shift the composition of the Supreme Court and state supreme courts?
- ▶ Will the Supreme Court’s continued ideological shift clarify and strengthen grassroots and other political strategies, decreasing reliance on or preferences for elite strategies (lawyers and judges)?
- ▶ To what extent will federal and state courts become more politicized?
- ▶ Will the Supreme Court and the consequences of its decision exacerbate reactions sufficient to challenge or balance the Court, as in prior eras of crisis and reform, by constitutional amendment and otherwise?

4. TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION WILL CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE THE PUBLIC’S UNDERSTANDING OF AND TRUST IN OUR DEMOCRACY

- ▶ Will democracy reformers develop and invest in a set of effective counter strategies against misinformation and disinformation – whether legislative, judicial, or public political education strategies?
- ▶ Will local media be revitalized? And if so, will it provide the public with reliable community news sources?
- ▶ Will social media platforms become – through law, regulation, public pressure, or internal reforms – more responsible actors, promoting a healthier democratic discourse?

5. WE WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE A CAPITALIST ECONOMIC SYSTEM

- ▶ Will the current form of U.S. capitalism (oriented to short-term gains, financialized, extractive, monopolized, focused on individual ownership) remain the same?
- ▶ To what extent and in what varied ways will climate change impact the economy, including funding and focus?
- ▶ Will players in our economic system use their economic resources to block government from providing needed public goods?
- ▶ Will our economic system change to reduce inequality?
- ▶ Will we be able to shift popular conceptions of what a capitalist economic system can and should provide to protect working class people, especially Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color?
- ▶ Will shifts in political power, the growing influence of employees, or curbs on money going into the political process, enable a more just capitalistic system and reduce market concentration?




6. WE WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION

- ▶ Will polarization increase or decrease?
- ▶ Will polarization lead to an increase in violence by white nationalist actors?
- ▶ To what extent will polarization result in legislative gridlock, disabling our political system?
- ▶ How will polarization affect the education curriculum in schools related to inclusion and the understanding of the U.S. democratic system?
- ▶ Will we continue to have a two-party system, or will the parties evolve or the growing number of independents affect the traditional party system?
- ▶ Is it possible to think strategically about polarization – that is, is there some way to leverage the status quo to strengthen democracy?
- ▶ In what ways can polarization in many things (policies, politics) co-exist with unity and consensus on other things (democracy, community, rule of law)?



# COMPARISON OF THE SCENARIOS

The future may well include a combination of all four of these scenarios and of others, but in order to see – and discuss – these complex dynamics more clearly, we differentiate them into distinctly different scenarios.

	 <b>1. POLARIZATION</b>	 <b>2. CORPORATISM</b>	 <b>3. REFORM</b>	 <b>4. TRANSFORMATION</b>
Focus	Culture and politics	Capitalism and moneyed interests	Democratic structures and processes	Communities and culture
Primary objective of groups in the democracy space	Win power to make changes	Remove the power of money and oligarchic control from politics	Ensure better functioning of U.S. democratic system	Ensure racial equity and economic justice
Primary tension in U.S. democracy	Conservatives vs. progressives	Traditional capitalism vs. social capitalism	Proponents of reformism vs. skeptics of reformism	A movement to build a more just democracy vs. its opponents
Strategy for breaking the oligarchic control of democracy	Winning elections	Increasing influence through employee pressure, alliances, and public education	Passing laws and winning court cases	Organizing communities
Site of struggle	Politics at all levels, including federal, state, local, schools, and media	Corporate leaders, employees, consumers, public policy, public opinion	Courts, legislatures, and other democratic institutions	Grassroots organization and community transformation through direct action



SCENARIO 1

# POLARIZATION

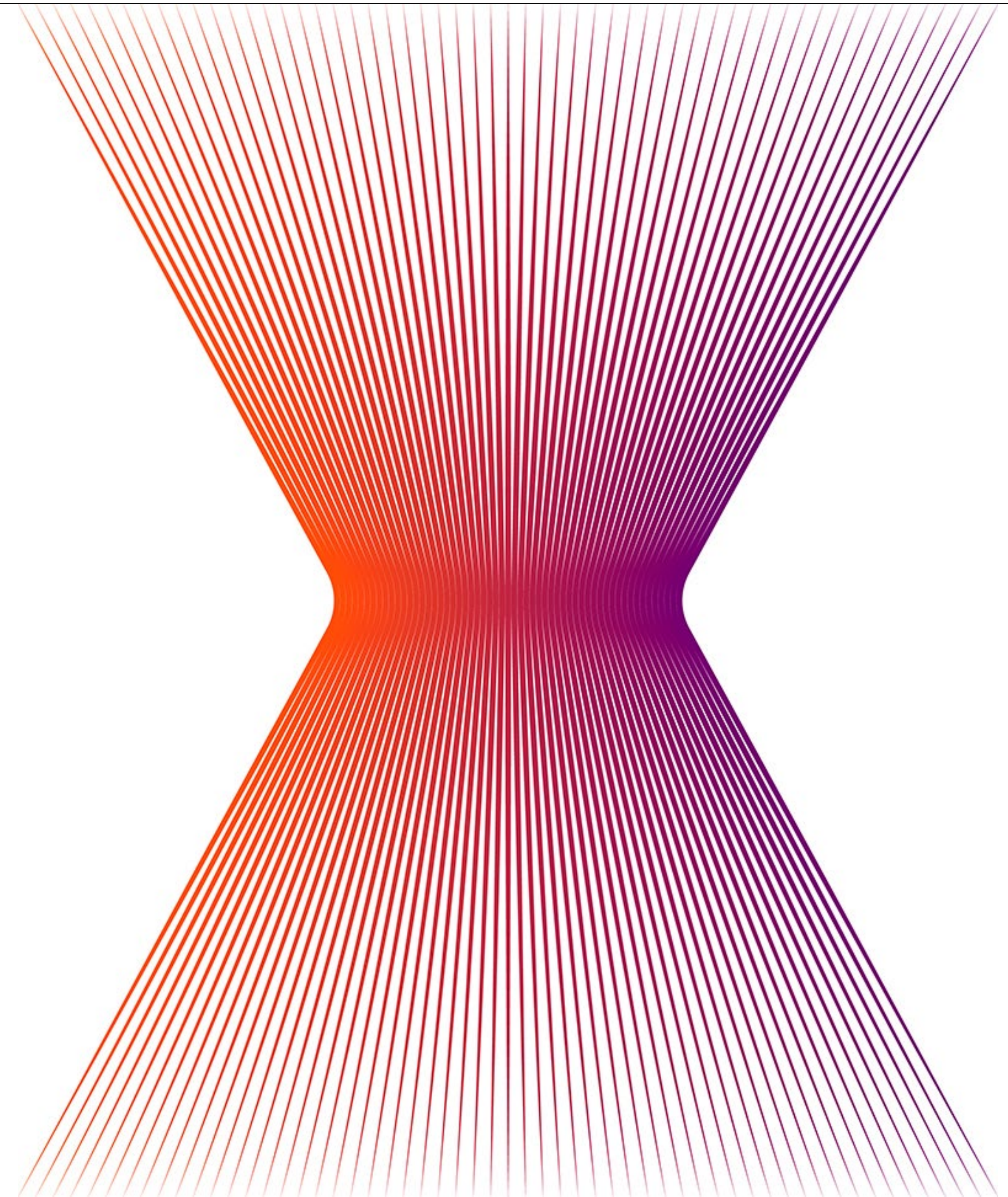


## SCENARIO 1

# POLARIZATION

The extreme polarization of races, parties, and regions has led to a series of intense conflicts fueled by resentment, information siloes, and the misinformation and conspiracy theories that proliferate on social media. Progressives fight for significant reforms, especially in relation to structural racism, while many conservatives see these reform attempts as direct threats to the traditional culture and values of America, as they define them. All issues, no matter how benign or likely to generate consensus in the past, now become fuel for a non-stop culture war. *The question this scenario explores is:*

**When we have extreme polarization and the breaking of democratic norms, what is the pathway to strengthening democracy?**

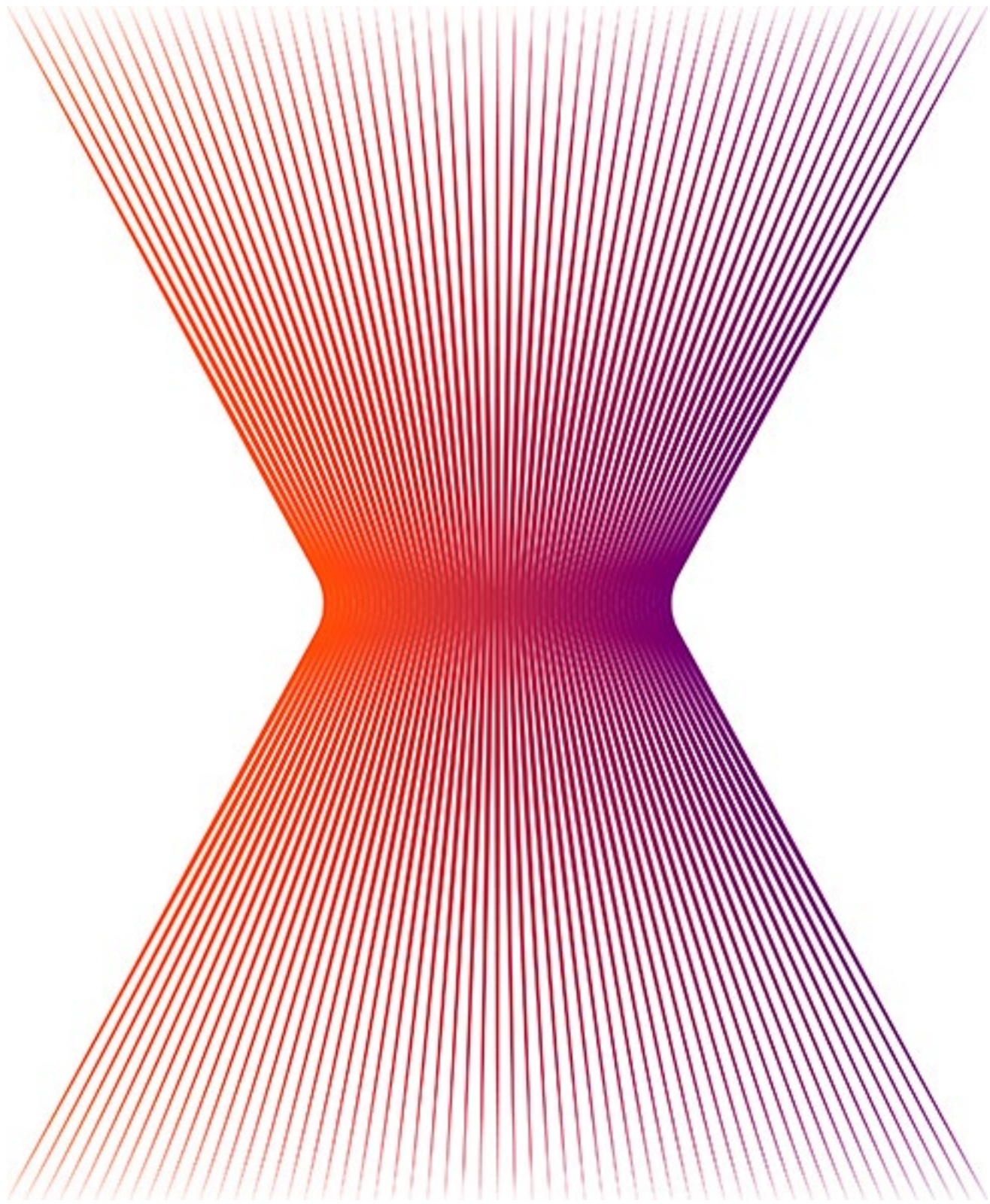




SCENARIO 1: POLARIZATION

FROM A RIGHT-WING VIEWPOINT

Many conservatives believe that what’s precious about America – what makes America truly great – is liberty. America is the land of the free. Many on the far right think that left-leaning and out-of-touch academics and other elitists scorn the values of hard work, law and order, individual freedom, and love of country. These extremists often argue that the left supports unlimited immigration of people who don’t share American heritage, language, values, and support of the free market. They feel that Americans have a patriotic obligation to fight laws designed to restrict individual freedom to own guns. Some argue that guns are especially important during these times, when people are pulling down statues of historical figures and marching to defund the police. Right-wing Americans attend school board meetings to protest curricula that they believe teach their children to be ashamed of the history of their country. They target judges whom they deem to be “activists” and whom they see as set on limiting their freedom. They argue that the future of America is threatened by a culture that is making it difficult for individuals to reflect their religious values in public life. They are willing to accept economic inequality because they feel it is far better for America than socialism, which they believe makes decisions about what’s good for the whole, sacrificing the liberty of individuals to say what they want, keep what they earn, and protect their own way of life.



FROM A LEFT-WING VIEWPOINT

For those progressives who believe that democracy in America is an ongoing project, the Declaration of Independence functions as an aspirational document at best. Its ideals were originally applied only to a few – specifically, white men of property – and to this day, there is not equal access to democracy. They believe that structural racism has meant that economic opportunity has never been available to everyone. If the U.S. is to become a true democracy and a “more perfect union,” then schoolchildren must be taught the real history of the country, not simply patriotic myths. They argue that individual liberty is a precious right – but not at the expense of the good of the community. A close look at “rugged individualism” reveals deep dependence on goods the community has provided, including safety, clean water, public education, and other aspects of material and social infrastructure – the “self-made man” is a myth. They believe that individuals must be prepared to support the good of the society that has enabled them to flourish, even if that means accepting government laws and regulations (such as regulation of guns) or government mandates (masks, vaccines) that work for the good of the whole community. They believe that the government should spend whatever it takes to make these material and social goods equally available to all. And they fear that the conservative movement has become dominated by extremists.



SCENARIO 1: POLARIZATION

KEY ADVANTAGES OF THE CONSERVATIVES

- ▶ “Stories” of ourselves, including stories of our past, that are about unity, national aspiration and accomplishment, a sense of living in high ideals, pride, and exceptionalism are more welcome and politically effective for most people than stories of our failure, loss, tragedy, hypocrisy, sin, evil, and violence – even if both are true.
- ▶ At least in the short-term, it’s more effective to unite a community around a shared story of the past than competing visions of the future, including whether to focus on racial justice; it’s easier to arouse action around fear of loss of a past greatness than a vision of a more just future.
- ▶ To the extent this point of view is a continuation of the status quo, inertia is on its side.
- ▶ There’s power at the state and local level, which conservatives often take advantage of, but which progressives often ignore.
- ▶ In our federal system, sparsely populated red states have equal representation in the Senate as densely populated blue states – giving disproportionate power to conservative voters. The electoral college also gives more weight to small, rural, conservative states.
- ▶ Many conservatives are willing to pass measures to silence and diminish the voices of Black People, Indigenous People, People, People of Color, and other democratic constituencies to hold on to their power.
- ▶ Conservatives seem to play a harder-edged brand of politics than liberals.

KEY ADVANTAGES OF THE PROGRESSIVES

- ▶ Growing urbanization and diversity increase the need to address inclusion and equity.
- ▶ In the most recent presidential election, young people, Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Color voted for more progressive candidates.
- ▶ There is growing cultural awareness that structural racism exists and must be addressed.
- ▶ Told right, the story of high ideals, the fall, deep sin, but glorious redemption and the promised land, can be strongly attractive to most Americans. It has proved to be more powerful than a brittle story of “*We are the best, and let’s not change.*” In their hearts most Americans know the story of sin, violence, and racism is true but want to hear it and address it in ways that make Americans feel “good” about themselves.



## SCENARIO 1: POLARIZATION

## POLARIZATION

# THE STORY

The polarization of races, parties, religions, and regions becomes even more extreme, in effect, creating tension and conflict, including between urban and rural, college educated and non-college educated, and left and right. Although these sides are not literally taking up arms against each other, they are culturally, politically, and economically splitting further apart, with no apparent common ground. Supermajority requirements in Congress mean that politics at the national level are in total gridlock. All legislation is treated as a battle in a political war, and fanatic devotion to one side is seen as a winning strategy by both. At the local level, this political war sometimes even turns violent, with white nationalist groups targeting Black and Indigenous communities and their leaders, other People of Color, and religious minorities. This increasing violence is often fueled by misinformation and is sometimes tacitly supported by local police departments and members of the police force.

## TWO AMERICAS

Gerrymandering and the capture of politics by well-funded insiders means that cultural and political polarization increases at both the federal and the state level. Cities get bluer, and rural areas get redder. Even education varies between conservatives and progressives, with most red areas teaching a Eurocentric view of American history and many blue areas teaching a history that includes non-white perspectives of America's past and present. Blue states have a stronger social safety net, including access to healthcare, higher wages, and higher taxes; red states have looser regulations and no state income tax. But class divisions based on inequality persist in both red and blue states. And sometimes even within states, there are conflicts between red state governments and blue city governments.

Voter suppression laws as well as laws criminalizing protest spread from states that are pioneering them to other states, making it harder for People of Color and working people to have much political influence and disproportionately affecting Black communities.

## LOSS OF TRUST AND POWER

Consumers of news and information exist in separate siloes, so it's difficult to get agreement on facts, much less on policies. One thing people in both blue and red states agree on, however, is the ineffectiveness of government and a more generalized loss of trust in democratic institutions. The judiciary is seen as highly politicized, both national and state legislatures seem not to get anything done, and presidents increasingly come from the celebrity class rather than from public servants experienced in politics.

Moneyed interests fill the vacuum left by defunded and weakened democratic institutions. Corporations can usually manage to get the bills passed that they care about most, regardless of the effects on communities, citizens, or the environment. Responsible companies, not the U.S. government, have long been the source of health and retirement security for their employees. Now, in many instances, they also sell dependable utilities and private security for those who can afford them in areas of inadequate government services. The growth of its already ubiquitous influence gives capital



SCENARIO 1: POLARIZATION

the upper hand in its increasingly bitter conflicts with labor and means that wealthy communities have their basic needs met while poor communities do not.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND AUTHORITARIANS

Climate change throughout the world, including in the U.S., results in massive dislocations of populations, especially Black communities, Indigenous communities, and communities of color who are attempting to escape fire, drought, hurricanes, extreme weather, and flooding. In the late 2020s, rumors of a new pandemic begin to spread, and hoarding exacerbates food shortages caused by drought and the drying up of aquifers in those parts of the U.S. where most food is grown.

Authoritarian leaders who promise to “fix this mess” or offer greatness are elected all over the world – including in the U.S. Democratic norms are ignored, and recurrent accusations of rigged and fraudulent elections, as well as intentional cyber breaches and the uncontrolled and often deliberate disinformation rampant in social media allow leaders to claim they

won and stay in power while election outcomes remain unsure and contested. Nationalist demagogues in many countries refuse to admit climate refugees. The left and those with an inclusive, pluralistic view of society struggle to mount a unified opposition.

The extreme polarization of this world provides many opportunities for international adversaries to interfere with U.S. elections on behalf of candidates they feel will be less effective in promoting U.S. interests abroad, expressing U.S. leadership, or working with U.S. allies.

TOO LATE – OR JUST IN TIME?

Faced with this reality, progressive activists take greater risks in their actions – often operating with little financial support, they engage in civil disobedience, risking arrest to stand up to authoritarianism. Young people are often on the front lines of these demonstrations, organizing their communities and calling for structural change. Many vote and encourage each other to run for office and get involved in the political process in other ways. There is a

push for electing and appointing progressive judges akin to the progressive prosecutor movement.

By the late 2030s, it appears that after the profound population dislocations caused by rising sea levels and increased flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, and other extreme weather events, the mostly blue coastal political class has spread through the country, including in formerly red states. If progressives can act together effectively in red states, the political culture of many formerly red states might at least turn purple. But will they? When we have extreme polarization, and the breaking of democratic norms, what is the pathway to strengthening democracy? ■

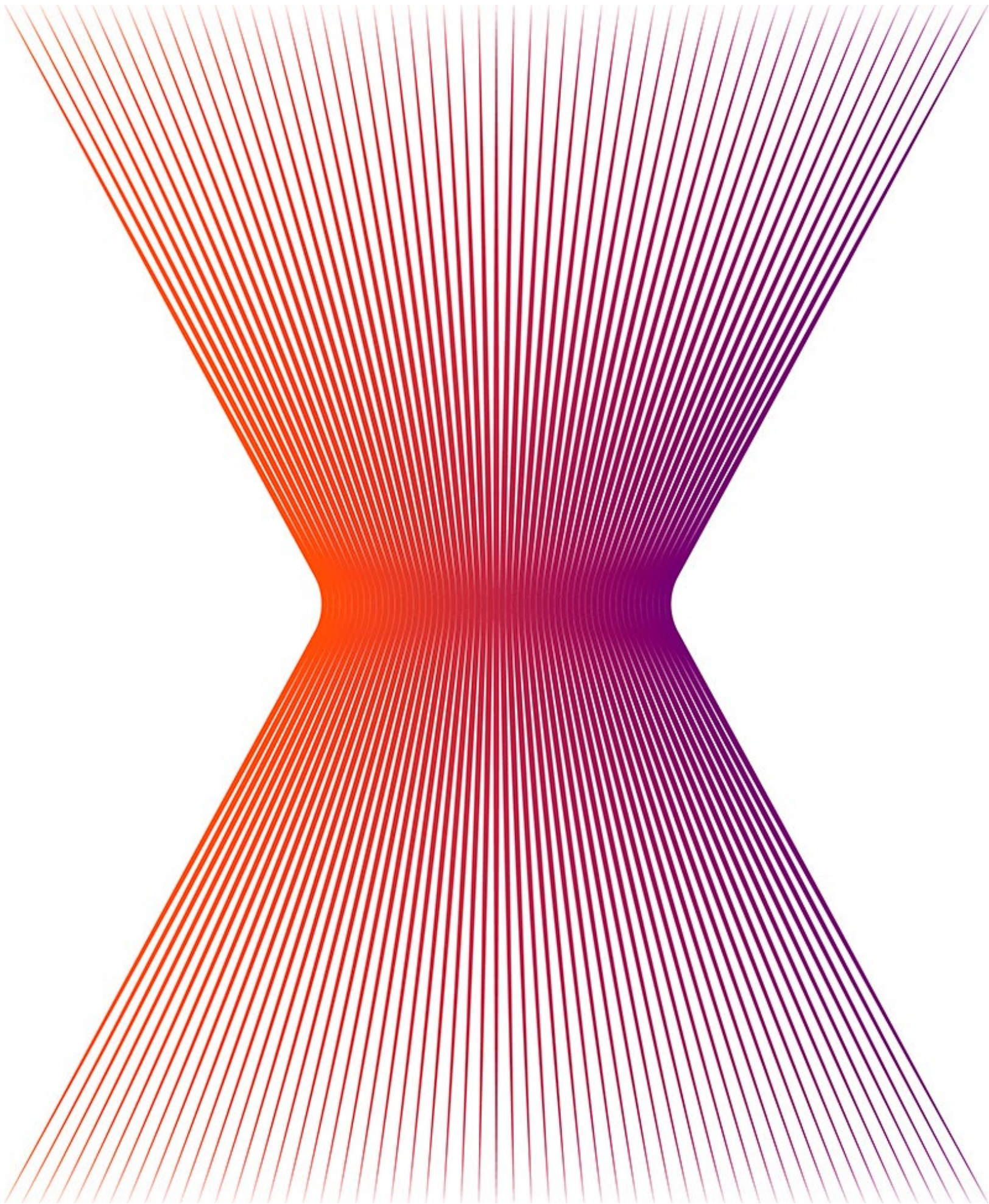


SCENARIO 1: POLARIZATION

**USING POLARIZATION AS  
A PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSION**

*Examples of possible questions*

- Studies have claimed that increasing polarization is the path we’re currently on – is it? How can we intervene to change this trajectory?
- Would “winning” for progressives in this scenario require a progressive populist, perhaps one with a celebrity profile that transcends partisanship and racial lines? Or does “winning” mean depolarizing the public?
- Should the democracy field adopt new and bolder strategies? What would need to shift in the way those in the democracy field conceptualize their work in order to respond to or avoid this scenario?
- Is it possible to think strategically about polarization – that is, is there some way to use it to the advantage of progressive politics in order to strengthen democracy?
- Have we looked hard enough at the forces driving polarization, including legal and structural forces? Are progressives sure they know the enemy? Are there different stories, strategies, and alliances if progressives did know the enemy that would be better and that would move beyond partisan politics?





SCENARIO 2

# CORPORATISM

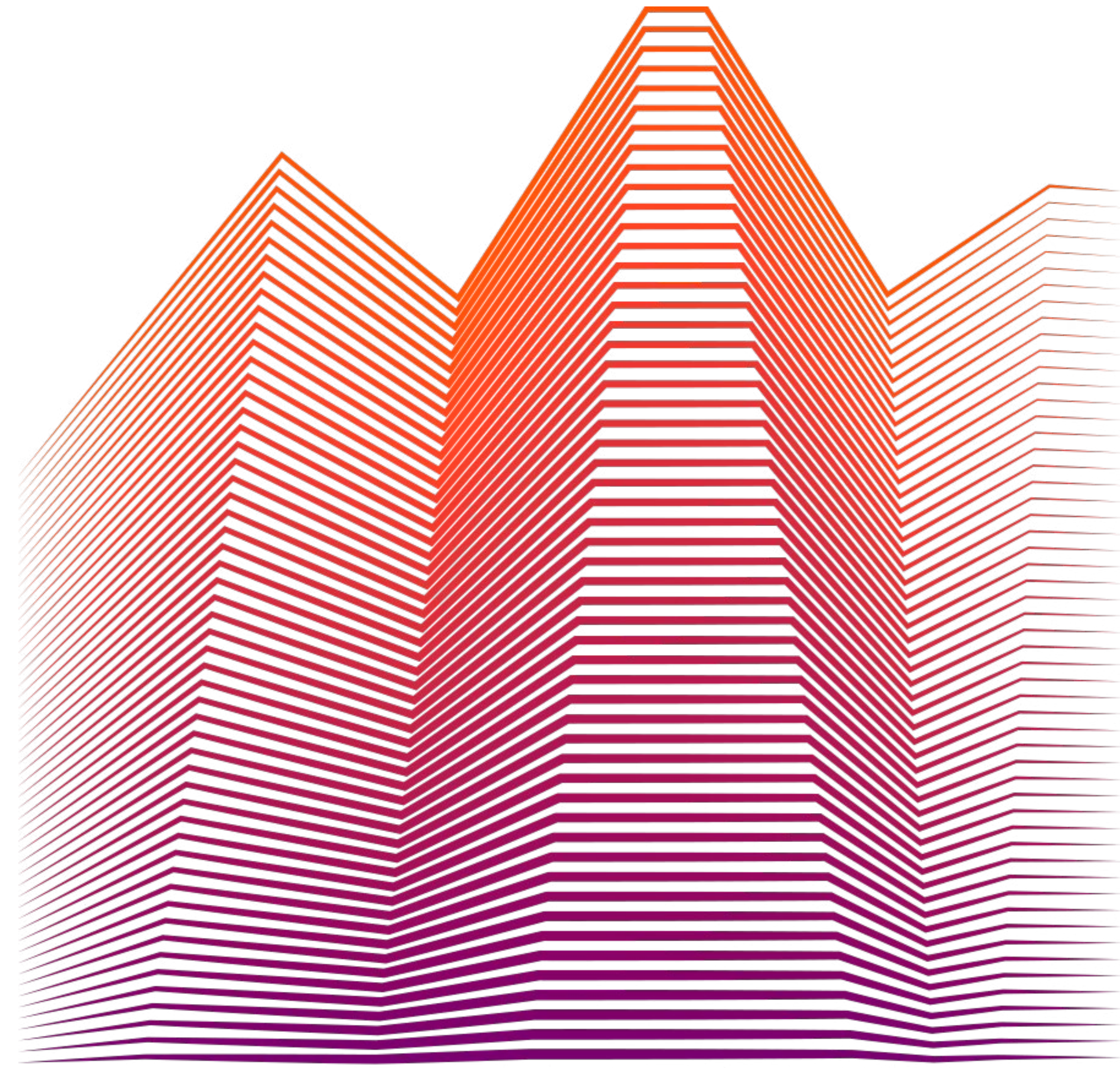


## SCENARIO 2

# CORPORATISM

In this scenario, the central threat is the power of corporations and oligarchs over U.S. democracy. Economic interests have always been entwined with the development of U.S. democracy. Many immigrants to this country came in the pursuit of economic opportunity, where children could be better off than their parents. Even America's original sins, genocide and slavery, were rooted in colonialism and racial capitalism, as was the Civil War. And now, many people feel that economic institutions and moneyed interests have helped build systems that give them more power than voters to influence government policy, so that the rich are benefiting at the expense of the poor. *The question this scenario explores is:*

**Can a true democracy exist under the current form of capitalism, or must capitalism be reformed – or even transformed – for democracy to flourish?**

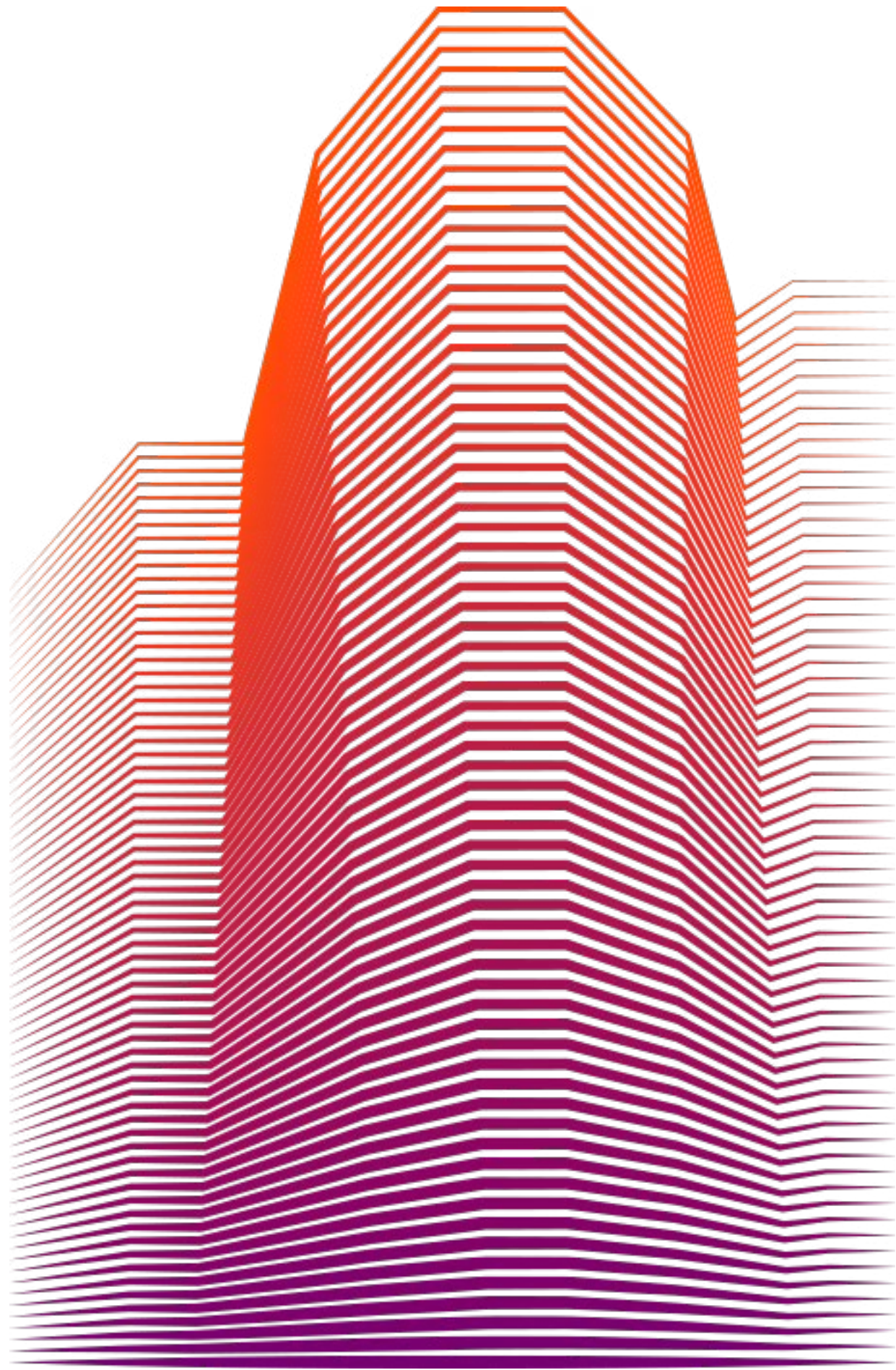




SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

FROM A TRADITIONAL CAPITALIST VIEWPOINT

Proponents of economic opportunity believe that the legitimacy and attractiveness of America lie in its prosperity not just in its ideals and that this prosperity is based on capitalism. From this point of view, Adam Smith is as much of a founding father as Thomas Jefferson. But many in business think that most Americans don’t understand how the economy works, much less what it takes to build a business or sustain the free exchange of goods, services, and financial capital to keep the free market healthy. And because they don’t understand, voters are always willing to kill the goose that lays the golden egg by raising taxes, supporting endangered species instead of jobs, and piling on regulations designed by bureaucrats who’ve never met a payroll or competed for survival. Traditional capitalists don’t think that capitalism is perfect – but the drive to have a better economic life is one of the main reasons the U.S. is the source of so much innovation, including the important contributions of immigrants who come to the U.S. in pursuit of education and economic opportunity. Most companies aren’t engaged in cultural politics, whether it’s defending prayer in schools or addressing structural racism. “That’s not our job,” they would say. But they do feel a moral and legal obligation to stockholders to prevent bad things from happening so that America’s economy continues to thrive. That’s why they support the selection of business-friendly judges and the election of politicians who will protect the economy and free enterprise so that, as they see it, almost any American can succeed or at least have a better life.



FROM A SOCIAL CAPITALIST VIEWPOINT

Social capitalists believe that the argument that anyone can make it in America has never been true. The American form of short-term, financialized, extractive, racial capitalism – like any economic system – is not a biological inevitability but a human construction. It can be constructed differently. After all, many democracies around the world manage to provide childcare, universal healthcare, and other components of a robust social safety net without going bankrupt. In the U.S., many worker advances, such as the forty-hour work week and child labor laws, have been the results of labor movement efforts. However, as worker productivity has increased, pay and benefits have not kept pace. This untethering of productivity and income has occurred simultaneously with a decline in the percentage of workers represented by unions. Social capitalists argue that inequality in this country is growing so quickly that we are sliding down the scale compared to other democracies when it comes to well-being, including educational outcomes, health outcomes, and even such basics as infant mortality and life expectancy. We are also falling behind other democracies in social and economic mobility. From this point of view, if everyone had equal access to the vote, and workers had more freedom to organize without threats and retaliation, policies strengthening the social safety net would be voted in. Fix democracy and empower workers, the social capitalists would say, and they would win on the other issues they care about.



SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

TRADITIONAL CAPITALISM ADVANTAGES

- ▶ Traditional capitalism benefits from a narrative that is simple, values-led, and tied to the American story of individual liberty, whereas progressives are still churning on how to define the progressive alternative.
- ▶ Americans believe we have always been a capitalist country, and that capitalism is good for everyone.
- ▶ The American dream is that if you work hard and play by the rules, you can come from nothing and earn riches; the fact that this is less true in America than many other countries does not pierce this omnipresent narrative.
- ▶ A dynamic, rapidly adaptive (even though it is extractive) economy can accelerate invention and commercialization and (short-term) national wealth and power, even when prosperity is not shared.
- ▶ Money talks, often through PACs or financial intermediaries, which distribute contributions from employees and corporate treasuries and behind closed doors (the power of “dark” money); investing in politicians and judges pays enormous dividends.
- ▶ A core feature of the American system is that lobbyists influence bills and reward those legislators who carry them.
- ▶ Libertarian capitalists are much better funded and have built much more infrastructure than progressives are able to build with characteristic year-to-year, project-specific funding.
- ▶ A focus on stock price or profits offers a simple way of measuring success; the alternative – to measure the success of human factors, relationships, and other intangible and qualitative goals – is complicated and raises risks such as being accused of subjective bias, ‘wokeness’, or other missteps that objective measures avoid.

SOCIAL CAPITALISM ADVANTAGES

- ▶ Most people are poor and sinking financially.
- ▶ A story of shared prosperity that moderates excesses of unregulated capitalism to balance innovation and dynamism with stability, prosperity, and strong communities.
- ▶ Growing public criticism of money in politics.
- ▶ Growing cynicism about “greenwash” and other initiatives, which are seen to be mainly PR, leading to decreasing trust in traditional capitalism.
- ▶ Growing power of employees who are connected by social media and business-based networks and white-collar workers, who are growing more receptive to organizing efforts.
- ▶ Vulnerability of corporations to negative publicity based on growing public emphasis on corporate social responsibility.
- ▶ Growing recognition that more people need to be given a stake in the system – or otherwise, they may become vulnerable to populism.
- ▶ Younger people are demanding more from their employers, including political responsibility. They seek economic activity and business decisions that are in sync with their values, including racial justice, sustainability, and shared prosperity. Many are open to new forms of capitalism, such as democratic socialism.
- ▶ A growing number of next generation high-net-worth individuals identify as socialists and want to use their wealth to disrupt the status quo.
- ▶ Both individual and institutional investors are calling for change in the domain of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance).
- ▶ American generations that had their politics defined by Cold War opposition to communism are becoming a smaller portion of the electorate.



SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

CORPORATISM

THE STORY

By the mid 2020s, the corrosive influence of money on politics has not really changed, no matter which party is in power. The Supreme Court has continued to circumscribe the ability to regulate money in elections with the undermining of disclosure laws that shine light on corporate money in politics and rulings based on the precedent that money is speech. Businesses and other special interests argue that communication costs money, especially in a country as large and diverse as the U.S. Corporations need to spend money to assure access to decision-makers, which is why they usually hedge their bets by donating to politicians of both parties. The First Amendment protects associations as well as individuals, including unions and companies, which are associations of people. The definition of “electoral” is slippery, in this view, so any attempt to control any aspect of speech – including the money that supports it – is bound to threaten First Amendment rights.

As the light of citizen-driven reform and renewal dims, U.S. democracy is rapidly devolving into an oligarchy. The vision and ambition of reformers shrink to accommodate to the new corporatist reality. Instead of advocating and seeking change through politics and their fellow citizens, reformers turn to advocating for or against economic power and corporations.

**By 2030, three initiatives are attempting to change the status quo.**

**1. PROTEST MOVEMENTS**

In the early 2020s, progressive non-profits and activists work together to call attention to those corporations that:

- supported BLM and then gave money to legislators that supported the suppression of voting rights;
- contributed to the political campaigns of elected officials who refused to certify the 2020 presidential election;

- contributed to the political campaigns of those who persisted in casting doubt on the outcome of that election.

Under this pressure, companies begin to withdraw their support from these candidates, fearful that even if calls to boycott their products don’t gain much traction, the public attention to the protests against them might damage their brands.

Others, however, conclude that a particular project they want an official to support is worth the risk and hide their support through the long-used strategy of contributing indirectly through layers of PACs and nonprofit intermediaries that bundle money from corporate treasuries to get around campaign finance laws.

Some of the companies who had originally agreed not to support lawmakers who refused to certify election results quietly return to supporting those who seem most business friendly, no matter what their position in relation to other policies or to partisan politics. It’s not that these companies don’t value the stability



SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

and rule of law that are the hallmarks of democratic states; it’s just that business interests dominate other considerations, including, for example, whether the lawmaker supports voter suppression measures or addresses climate change or supports public goods.

One reason it’s tempting to revert to supporting – directly or indirectly – lawmakers who have supported anti-democratic legislation is that by 2024, with funder attention on voter turnout for the upcoming election, and without any long-term funding to support ongoing research and communication, boycott movements begin to weaken. The movement is never institutionalized, and the activists who supported the boycotts move on to other issues.

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**2. WORKER ORGANIZATIONS  
AND EMPLOYEE PRESSURE**

By the late 2020s, white-collar workers are recognizing the need for more power in the workplace, organizing their colleagues through legacy unions and creating new organizations for collective action. Blue-collar

workers are pushing back against intimidation and disinformation efforts by their employers. A stronger, more pro-labor regime at the National Labor Relations Board is taking a tougher stand against illegal interference with protected concerted activities.

At the same time, the competition for highly skilled workers leads to salaried employees demanding more of their employers – including that companies work to mitigate climate change and that they support particular policy reforms. Companies are aware of examples of employee activism, including the Google walkout in relation to the Me Too movement and Amazon workers using their shares to demand action on climate. More and more have joined the Civic Alliance to encourage their employees to register and vote.

Employee pressure for employers to take progressive action continues to increase, with one example being the Green Supply Chain Index initiative. In the late 2020s, a collaboration involving climate activists, big tech software engineers, prominent labor leaders, and employees of Fortune 500 manufacturing companies

begins to use social media to publicize corporations’ standings in the Green Supply Chain Index (“GSCI”) as well as other rankings of friendliness to worker organizing efforts, labor-management cohesion, leadership diversity, environmental citizenship, and campaign contributions to lawmakers depending on how they score on a democracy index. The initiative then expands beyond manufacturing into other sectors of the economy. Corporate accountability becomes important in news media coverage, and consumers become much savvier about the reputation of businesses and brands in part because companies that score high on the GSCI proudly advertise that fact.

These various publicity campaigns succeed even when boycott efforts wither away, in part because they are privately funded and because publicity is supported through grants to individual content creators and doesn’t require coordination of activists to be maintained. In addition, unions routinely demand the inclusion of GSCI provisions in new labor contracts.



## SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

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**3. CORPORATE LEADERS AND THE LICENSE TO OPERATE**

The GSCI initiative, activist shareholders, and others make it clear that some businesses are better corporate citizens than others. But whether they score high or low on the GSCI, all corporate leaders recognize the growing influence of social capitalists and others, who are winning office in greater numbers, and who do not hesitate to call for significant reforms in American capitalism. Business leaders know that they have to maintain their society's license to operate.

In addition, more and more investors, including foundations and retirement funds, restrict their investments to companies with a better track record on the issues they care most about. Under political pressure, some of the most enlightened ones begin to work on the design of the business model itself, to assure it is aligned with the long-term health of the company, its employees, and the wider society.

Growing pressure against the legitimacy of capitalism from within the U.S. is matched by pressure from

the outside as well. A number of EU and Asian countries begin to place tariffs and other "sanctions" on American goods that fail to embed the real costs of environmental justice or humane labor conditions or equitable pay and taxation. In addition, unlike the U.S., these countries have imposed their own disclosure rules on social media platforms, resulting in the internet being divided into three different regulatory zones (China, EU, and the U.S.). Climate change has further weakened the dominance of the U.S. economy, with food prices rising because of crop-destroying droughts. Political dissatisfaction grows.

A new generation of leaders, both in business and politics, begins to look on these developments with alarm, feeling that an economy integrated into the global economic system is likely to be more prosperous and that only deep reform will allow this to happen. They feel strongly that their businesses must pay more attention to externalities in order to earn society's support and license them to operate. The pull of opportunities in the global marketplace and the push and organizational skill

of these newly energized reformers resonate with those voters who seek an end to what they see as "government by oligarchs." These voters support tax reform and regulations to close loopholes offered by business-friendly legislators. Legislative reforms seem as if they might help to address some of the structural inequality that has plagued the economic system for years. These reforms are also important because as stakeholder pressure increases on large, public, high-profile companies, the "dirty" assets get spun off into private ownership with little visibility and relatively few accountability mechanisms.

By the late 2030s, a growing number of people are united across political divides in their desire to support small businesses and businesses with socially motivated charters and products and to no longer allow moneyed interests to externalize the costs of doing business on community health or the health of the environment. Building on the work of organizations focused on shareholder accountability, these young people swell the ranks of those inclined to start their own businesses, rebuild local communities, support



SCENARIO 2: CORPORATISM

sustainable agriculture, and invest their money in new socially beneficial ways. They turn away from the troubled public markets to invest directly in higher-impact enterprises and clean tech. They are also much more confident and competent in wielding effective levers to undercut the power of money in politics. They understand that the prosperity associated with the American economy depends on private investment and innovation – but investment and innovation can’t be decoupled from the interdependence of government, business, and the community license to operate. Will these reformers succeed? Can a true democracy exist under the current form of capitalism, or must capitalism be reformed – or even transformed – for democracy to flourish? ■

**USING CORPORATISM AS  
A PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSION**

*Examples of possible questions*

- In this scenario, what would be needed to hold corporations accountable to stakeholders, not just to shareholders?
- What is the minimum change necessary to make a real difference in the way capitalism works?
- To what extent can progressives influence those corporate leaders who are sympathetic to reforming certain aspects of capitalism and work against those that aren’t?
- In addition to other kinds of reform efforts, what would it look like for people to work through enlightened corporate leaders, employees, and customers rather than legislators?
- How could progressives address – and develop countervailing strategies to combat – the system that encourages politicians to be more responsive to corporations and the wealthy than to working people?
- Could engaging workers and customers without corporate leaders be a more successful strategy?
- Are unions, as currently configured and led, up to meeting this challenge, especially in the wake of anti-union efforts? How would their organizing strategies need to change to win in this scenario? What other forms of employee voice are emerging in governance and operations that serve as models?
- What infrastructure and new strategies would be required to remove oligarchs from controlling government?



SCENARIO 3

# REFORM

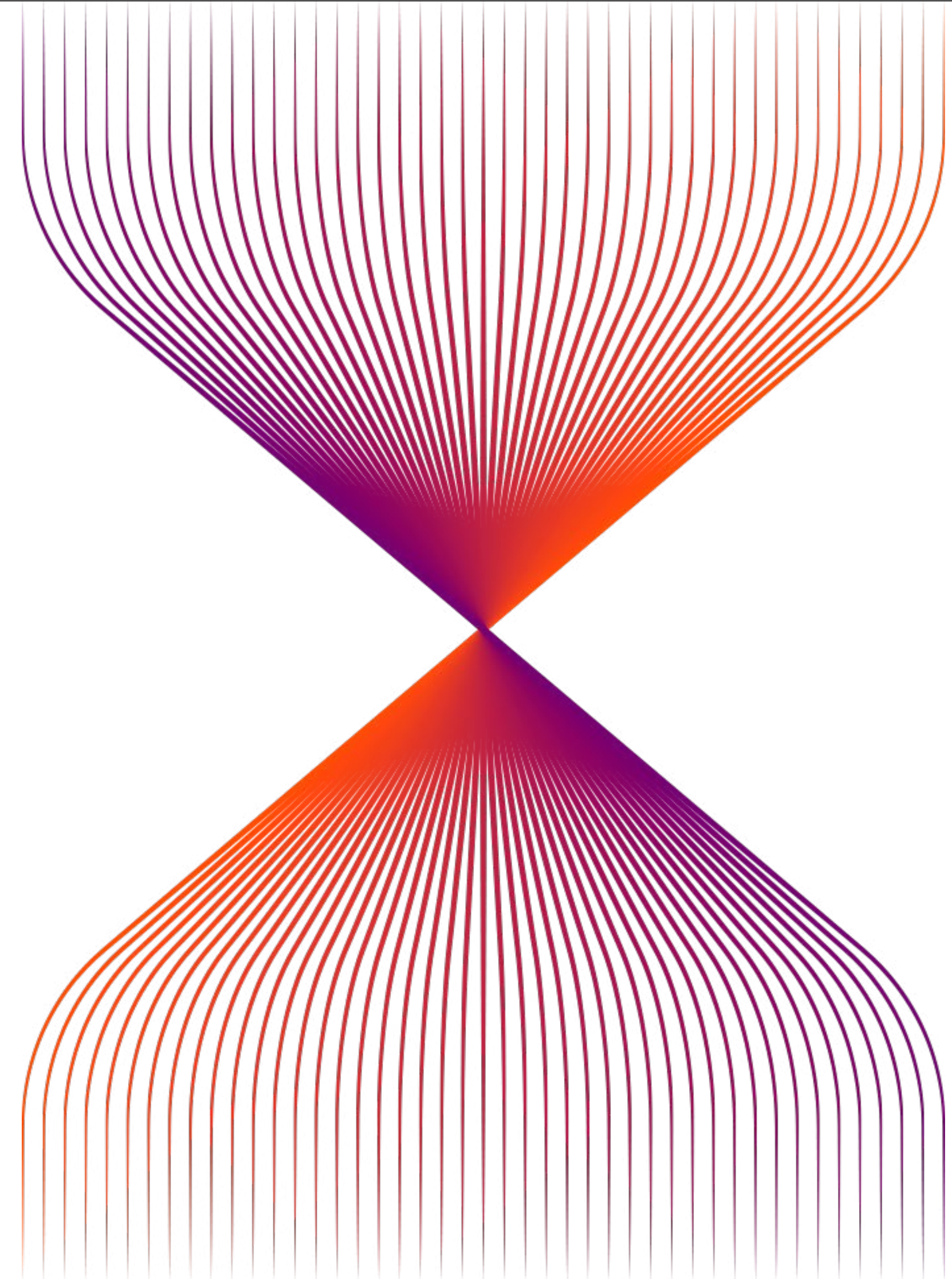


## SCENARIO 3

# REFORM

In this scenario, the key struggle is between incremental reformers at the state and national level who are working through courts and legislatures to strengthen U.S. democracy versus anti-democratic forces that have built state and national infrastructure to stifle the will of the majority. What distinguishes “reformers” from “transformers” is that reformers work incrementally and top-down through established structures to give a greater voice to the majority of voters; “transformers” work bottom-up through communities and culture to change specific policies to achieve specific outcomes. *The question this scenario explores is:*

**Can incremental reforms save U.S. democracy while at the same time helping to build a truly inclusive democracy that deepens the engagement of underrepresented communities and centers anti-racism?**





SCENARIO 3: REFORM

While reformers working through democratic institutions recognize that not all issues, particularly racism and issues of fairness and equality, can be solved quickly through incremental, structural, top-down reform, they believe that if democracy itself is reformed and strengthened, these issues will ultimately be addressed. Some reformers argue that the problems facing democracy, including underrepresented communities, are the result of money in politics and the suppression of majority will that allows a minority (in this case, a white minority) to win elections. Therefore, if reforms to encourage greater transparency and to address representation are passed, even if they don't immediately deepen the engagement of underrepresented communities, democracy can be saved. Other reformers argue that in such a polarized environment, only focused, incremental reforms have a chance of actually succeeding, so pursuing such reforms is the only realistic path to building a more informed and engaged polity.

But those progressives further on the left feel alienated. They argue that while moderate top-down reforms may appear to be successful, they can't succeed in building a democracy that works for everyone. And while incrementalism may save the superficial practice of democracy, without a transformational approach, racial disparities will continue: the U.S. will have built functional democracy for white people and the well-educated but not for low-income Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color.

ADVANTAGES OF THE REFORMIST APPROACH

- ▶ Attracts funding from wealthy individuals and well-endowed foundations as well as narrowly focused corporate support.
- ▶ Pragmatic, moderate, incremental approach is more likely to attract bipartisan support.
- ▶ May be all that is possible in the country at the current time.
- ▶ Gives coalition allies and movement members small wins that keep them engaged while simultaneously working toward larger change.
- ▶ Allows the possibility of pursuing incremental reform while also pursuing larger, more transformational change – the two need not be mutually exclusive.
- ▶ Creates a safety valve for possible partisan violence.

CRITICISMS OF THE REFORMIST APPROACH

- ▶ Mostly highly educated elites drive these reforms – the emphasis on legal, legislative, and constitutional matters neglects input from communities affected by race and inequality or from those with only a high school education.
- ▶ Despite being incremental or modest, reforms pursued under this approach still do not attract support from the modern Republican Party.
- ▶ If incremental change is won, it may be a release valve for democratic tensions and blunt energy and momentum for larger-scale change.
- ▶ Incremental reform may be inadequate to address structural racism and may prove to be inadequate to stop the chipping away at democracy, too.



SCENARIO 3: REFORM

REFORM

THE STORY

Democracy reformers are disappointed that the big political reforms, especially those having to do with money in politics, have failed at the federal level. They see that voter suppression has increased as a result of restrictive new laws being passed in the states, and that until gerrymandering ends, unrepresentative minorities will block progress.

THE ERA OF SMALL WINS

But some of these state- and national-level reformers don't give up. They recognize that many people on the right are also worried about increased polarization and the threat of violence around elections. These pragmatics disaggregate some of the larger reform bills and work to pass those pieces that might attract bipartisan support, notably infrastructure bills intended, in part, to help poor families. Moderates on both sides also feel it's to their mutual advantage to support

ranked choice voting in some cases and open primaries in others simply to avoid the extremes on the left as well as the right when it comes to electing representatives. And redistricting reform gathers increasing popular support. More aggressive reforms are passed and won in blue states and in blue cities in red states.

Even though Republicans continue to win elections throughout the 2020s, the changes in primary rules start affecting the composition of the Senate, with more moderates being elected throughout the country. The filibuster is not overturned, but its practice returns to the earlier days of standing and speaking for hours on end, with the merciless spotlight on anyone who is filibustering against a popular position. Efforts to politicize state courts and weaken their independence lose momentum in the face of bipartisan opposition, and these courts serve as a check against efforts to overturn election results or undermine voting rights.

While largely a symbolic gesture, the passage of a bipartisan bill mandating civics education in order for states to receive federal funding is celebrated.

The content of this education is strictly limited to Constitutional design and legislative procedure, steering clear of controversial history curricula.

A STATE-BASED STRATEGY

With big democratic reform bills stalled at the national level, reformers focus on incremental victories at the state and local level. Wins come easiest in blue states and in blue cities in red states, but happen occasionally in purple and red states. But even though the focus is on incremental reforms, overall strategy and tactics are shared nationally, and gradually a network is formed that increases effectiveness through shared best practice and coordinated fundraising. Moneyed interests don't see many of these efforts as threatening their power, so some of the reforms – notably, civic education, anti-trust in relation to social media companies, and ranked choice voting – attract funding from wealthy individuals and well-endowed foundations, and in some cases win narrowly focused corporate support as well.



SCENARIO 3: REFORM

Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court continues to issue rulings limiting disclosure of campaign spending, and striking down key provisions of campaign finance reform laws. Voter turnout begins to dip, with the strongest decreases among young people and Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color, who not only face barriers to voting, but who also don't see themselves as connected to or inspired by a pragmatist reform movement.

Critics point out that mostly highly educated elites drive these reforms and that the emphasis on legal, legislative, and constitutional matters neglects input from communities affected by race and inequality or from those with only a high school education. The pragmatic reformers point to their coordinated successes at the state level and at the

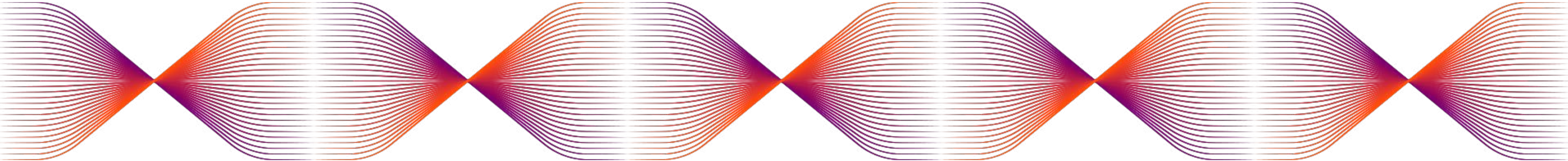
new tone of relative moderation in right-wing politics as proof of success. They also point out that progress is being made, state by state, in the long-term process of attempting to pass a Constitutional amendment allowing control of money in elections.

When criticized by those who point out that racists are still being elected to powerful positions, reformers argue that to strengthen democracy is not necessarily to strengthen the left but to enable the voice of the majority to be heard. And if moneyed interests still speak more loudly than the majority, the next step is at least to make the voice of the people a little louder. This, they say, will be the work ahead. But can gradual reforms save U.S. democracy while at the same time helping to build a truly inclusive democracy? ■

**USING REFORM AS A  
PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSION**

*Examples of possible questions*

- Is this pragmatic, incremental approach likely to succeed in its aims?
- And, if so, what does “success” look like?
- Is there a way to center anti-racism in a reformist agenda?
- If democracy reforms still produce racist outcomes (through voting, for example), what’s the next step for anti-racists?





SCENARIO 4

# TRANSFORMATION



## SCENARIO 4

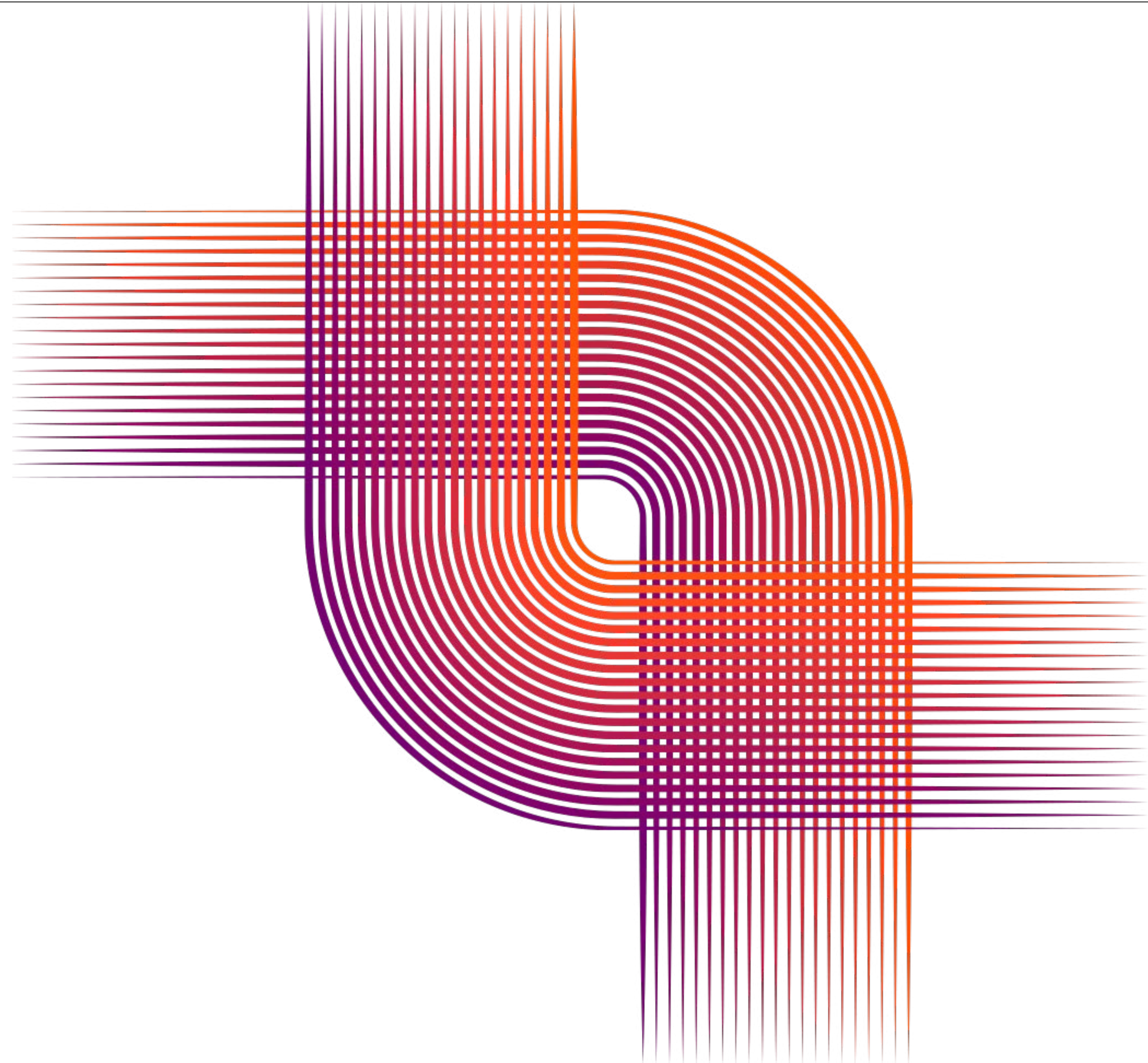
# TRANS- FORMATION

In this scenario, the key issue of U.S. democracy in our time is building an inclusive democracy.

*The challenge this scenario poses is:*

**Can a bottom-up shift throughout American culture lead to democracy that works for all? And if it does, can it ensure racial justice and equity?**

The most powerful anti-democratic force in the U.S. is the long history of white supremacy. Structural racism must be faced at last in order to build a more just future.





SCENARIO 4: TRANSFORMATION

THE MOVEMENT TO BUILD  
A MORE JUST DEMOCRACY  
– A PERSPECTIVE

Many people believe that the United States has never had a true democracy; due to historic and current voter suppression, Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color have never been allowed full participation. Moneyed interests continue to fuel voter suppression efforts, restriction of protest rights, assaults on judicial independence, unfair districts, and more – all of which prevents the U.S. from having a truly inclusive democracy. Unless the influence of corporations and oligarchs is lessened, voter suppression will increase, structural racism will not be addressed, the social safety net will fray even further, the gap between rich and poor will widen, the middle class will fall further behind, and climate change

will lead to disaster. Americans must work together on every front and at every level to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

THE OPPOSITION – A PERSPECTIVE

Opponents of racial justice organizers believe that the growing majority of Black and Indigenous communities and communities of color threatens the historical supremacy of white culture and privilege. White nationalists are often joined by conservative allies who fear that change to the system of privilege will result in economic loss and cultural change. And often, too, right-wing politicians use a culture war or white grievance message to convince poor white communities to join them in this fear of loss even though the economic interests of poorer communities would logically align with the reformers.

KEY STRENGTHS OF  
THIS MOVEMENT

- ▶ Reformers can use social media both to galvanize and organize.
- ▶ Awareness of injustice, inequality, and climate change is growing globally, strengthening the possibility of a shift towards transformation.
- ▶ The young are more progressive than the old, promising a brighter future.
- ▶ The growing majority of Black and Indigenous People and People of Color largely supports a more just democracy.
- ▶ Culture itself is a strength for this movement because in many respects it's far ahead of politics.

KEY CHALLENGES TO  
THIS MOVEMENT

- ▶ Power is seldom given, but must be taken or won.
- ▶ There is a human tendency to focus on getting a bigger piece of the pie rather than growing the pie for all – a “Your gain is my loss” mentality.
- ▶ The United States as a nation has a scant history of successful, nation-changing movements and is governed by democratic institutions meant to operate incrementally.
- ▶ Transforming U.S. democracy requires new ways of thinking and deeper collaboration.
- ▶ Limited financial resources are available for transformative initiatives, and opposed interests have massive financial stakes to motivate their opposition.



SCENARIO 4: TRANSFORMATION

TRANSFORMATION

THE STORY

The power of the global Black Lives Matter movement raised awareness of the structural racism built into cultures all over the world. Alongside the Me Too movement, the protests at Standing Rock, and the rising awareness of climate change, it demonstrated that the time has come not just for reform but for radical transformation. This, organizers believe, will require significant changes in U.S democracy. The long history of dominance – white over Black, male over female, rich over poor, colonizers over colonized, documented over undocumented, cis heterosexual over trans queer, humans over the natural world – must come to an end. But as often happens, the cultural successes of the movements are followed by backlash.

STOP-START

The mid-2020s offer growing prosperity and hope for democratic reform. But the investments of moneyed

interests lead to a better organized, more effective, and even better financed resurgence of the Right. Some state courts, like the Supreme Court, seem unsupportive of civil rights legislation and race-conscious remedies. Polarization grows and becomes more bitter – and, in many places, more violent. Some of the resistance from the Right consists of barely veiled, and sometimes overt, white nationalism.

In addition, climate change has further weakened the U.S. economy, with food prices rising because of crop-destroying droughts and because of displacement of work forces due to extreme weather and unlivable conditions in some parts of the country. Political dissatisfaction grows.

Again and again, reformers introduce legislation to change the status quo – and nothing seems to happen. The process of change seems stuck, and neither party maintains the loyalties of its followers. Voters mostly identify as Independents. Gradually, intense polarization gives way to a kind of apathy, exacerbated by economic challenges and voter suppression.

GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ACTION

With reform efforts stalled at the national level, progressives turn their attention to the local level and attempt to build diverse nonpartisan coalitions to get things done. Local wins gain publicity through social media and inspire action in other communities.

Some communities attempt to rebuild local media ecosystems, experimenting with models such as a bilateral arrangement in which one part of the enterprise is structured as a business and the other as a charity, with reporters paid from a local news foundation set up for the purpose.

The bottom-up grassroots focus of community action groups produces clear results on the local level that everyone can see, from ensuring clean water in low-income neighborhoods, particularly in Black communities and communities of color, to fighting pipelines through indigenous lands. The disillusionment with national party politics that has led to a growth of self-identified Independents



SCENARIO 4: TRANSFORMATION

has also made it easier to ignore the culture wars and simply focus on what needs to be done. And arts and entertainment are harnessed to allow productive dialogue around the American story – what it has been and how it needs to change.

A by-product of grassroots organization and working together is that neighbors get to know and trust each other on a personal level. The Green New Deal may be stalled at the national level; but individual communities establish their own versions of “greening” their energy sources and incentivizing green building standards, electric cars, and other climate-friendly initiatives, finding innovative solutions to potential roadblocks put up by conservative federal and state courts.

All of these changes are supported by cleaner forms of energy having become cheaper than traditional energy sources as well as the influence of comprehensive environmental regulations having demonstrated success in lowering greenhouse gas emissions in many parts of the world.

SCALING UP AND OUT

In the 2030s, civic-minded and tech-savvy young entrepreneurs collaborate nationwide to build digital dashboards to measure and compare progress in communities. Ideas for best practice are shared quickly and widely, and model communities engage in friendly competition in their 21st-century equivalents of community “barn-building.” Some of these local projects have a national dimension and are turned into ideas for bills that have, in effect, already garnered support at the local level and so pass at the national level.

One of the most significant of these entrepreneurial collaborations is the building of support strategies for small-donor systems to be established for local elections. These become a way for more diverse candidate pools that focus on issues of institutional racism, wealth inequality, and environmental justice. Real progress is made on systemic solutions to housing, access to resources, public health, and community safety.

The need for racial justice is seen as obvious to the many who have worked together with members of diverse communities since the 2020s and studied the history of racial injustice in their schools. Even at the national level, arts and entertainment have steered the culture in a progressive direction, and educators are doing a better of teaching the kind of critical thinking skills that allow students to sort out facts from opinion in news and social media. These skills are becoming mainstream requirements in a world where jobs are global, and AI is commonplace. Under pressure, some social media platforms begin to do a better job of labeling misleading or baseless content and identifying their sources.

With most professional jobs allowing for remote participation in the workforce, left-leaning progressives are now scattered throughout suburbs and rural communities, turning election results in their direction. Since rank-choice voting has been adopted in many communities, a number of extremists have given way to centrists in legislatures. By the time of the 2030 census, district lines are drawn by



SCENARIO 4: TRANSFORMATION

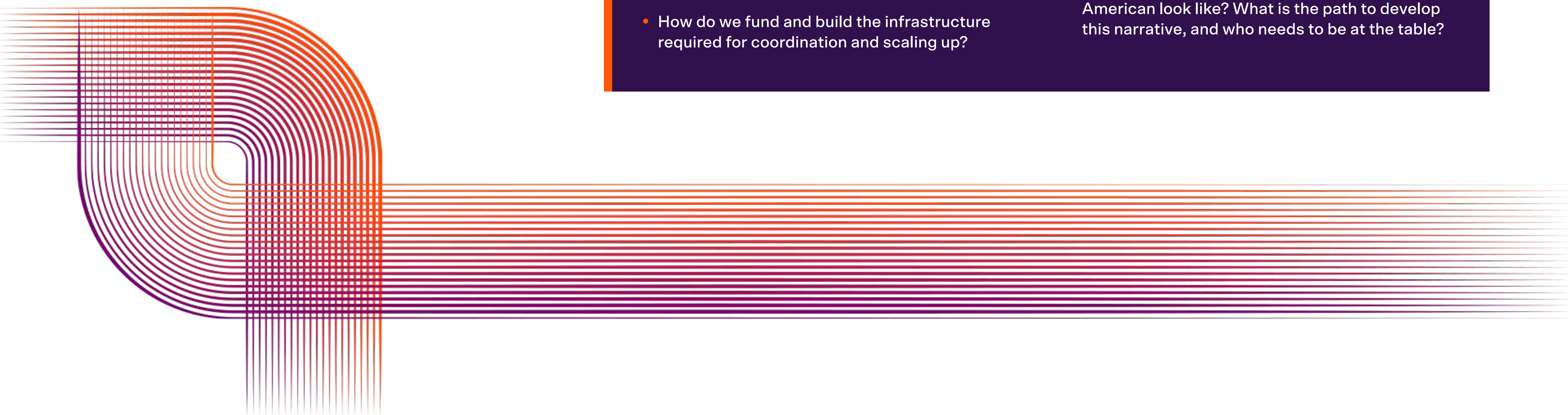
citizen committees, and the following decades see the election of representative legislators and the repeal of almost all the voter suppression laws.

By 2040, U.S. democracy is generally in better shape in many parts of the country than it was in 2020. But the question remains, can a bottom-up shift throughout American culture lead to an inclusive democracy? And if it does, can it ensure racial justice and equity? ■

**USING TRANSFORMATION AS  
A PLATFORM FOR DISCUSSION**

*Examples of possible questions*

- How do we develop the collective clarity required to coordinate deep interventions?
- What are the implications for successful, bottom-up worker action in a world in which many jobs have been replaced by AI and robots?
- How do we fund and build the infrastructure required for coordination and scaling up?
- What are the challenging social, economic, and political issues that, if resolved in the near term and at the community level, would unleash new opportunity for freedom and democracy?
- What could a new story of what it means to be American look like? What is the path to develop this narrative, and who needs to be at the table?







**CONTRIBUTORS**



# CONTRIBUTORS

The Scenario Team is made up of organizational leaders who are representative (but not representatives) of the effort to make U.S. democracy more responsive to the public will and less responsive to money and entrenched power. As a team, they have a range of backgrounds and perspectives (sectoral, ideological, professional, geographical) that enable them together to grasp the challenges facing U.S. democracy as a whole. Groups represented in the project include leaders from civil society, law, philanthropy, environmental justice, and others.

Because these scenarios represent four different fictions of the future, almost every Scenario Team member disagrees with the plausibility of particular elements in one or more of the scenarios. As a consequence, this list of contributors represents not a consensus on any implicit policy recommendation or even any particular aspect of a fictional future, but simply the people themselves – a group of diverse, committed, and caring professionals who worked together in the hope that these scenarios might encourage a dialogue that would help the U.S. “form a more perfect union,” promote justice, and strengthen its democracy.

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