New Report Maps Four Alternative Futures for Civic Life in America in 2036

From artificially intelligent civic agents to a "guarded union" built on rules, Civic Life in America reminds us we still have the power to choose.



COLUMBUS, OH, UNITED STATES, September 22, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- As the United States marks its 250th year, the nonpartisan Civic Futures Institute today released a new report exploring how American civic life could change over the next decade — and how much power everyday Americans still have to shape it.

Civic Life in America: Alternative Futures in 2036 uses foresight methodology to sketch four sharply different paths American civic life could take by 2036 — from participation that becomes frictionless and AI-assisted, to communities that hollow out from the inside, to a country where every citizen has an AI agent working the halls of government on their behalf.

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>
> *Lisa Duty, Ph.D.*

"Most Americans can see what's wrong with civic life today, but fewer believe they have the power to change it," said Lisa Duty, Ph.D., founder of Civic Futures Institute and author of the report. "By exploring several alternative futures, we widen the aperture on what's possible — and help people see the choices hiding inside the forces already reshaping their communities."

The report draws on 38 expert interviews conducted between January and June 2026, alongside extensive secondary research, to explore how five converging forces — a widening gap between civic participation and trust, AI-mediated information and relationships, social connection, economic precarity, and political polarization — could push American civic life toward radically different destinations.

Four futures, one question: what future will you build?

Built on futurist Jim Dator's widely used "Four Futures" framework, the report presents four scenarios for 2036, while noting there are many alternative futures to be anticipated. None of the futures are all "good" or "bad," and each contains gains, losses, contradictions, and tradeoffs to be considered by the reader.

- Convenient America: Civic life becomes easier to enter, harder to belong to.
- The Hollow Republic: Civic life does not disappear — it hollows out.
- A Guarded Union: Civic life becomes more rule-bound, both protected and constrained.
- Agentic Nation: Civic life acquires a second layer of representation.

Change in American civic life is unfolding within a wider global democratic recession. In 2026, Freedom House reports that global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025 and rates the United States as Free, with a score of 81 out of 100. At home, just 17% of Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right most or all of the time, according to Pew Research Center — down from 73% in 1958. A record 45% identify as political independents.

The challenge is not simply left versus right. It is whether Americans can renew or reinvent the relationships, habits, associations, and governing capacity that make self-government workable.

Each of the report's four futures are anchored by a future forecast with vivid, human scenes of what daily civic life could feel like if a pattern took hold. The report doesn't offer predictions, but each alternative future presents signals—developments occurring today that suggest parts of that future may already be emerging.

"None of these futures is a best- or worst-case scenario," Duty said. "Each comes with real gains and real costs. The point isn't to predict a winner. It's to break the spell of any single future feeling inevitable."

The report concludes that agency does not require pretending everyone holds equal power. Our future begins with recognizing that power still exists, and we have a choice in what comes next.

Civic Life in America: Alternative Futures in 2036 was developed with support from the Ellis Family Fund and is available now at civicfutures.us.

Read the report

Lisa Duty
Civic Futures Institute
+1 614-806-0607

email us here
Visit us on social media:
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