



Theory of Change

PREFACE: WHY THIS DOCUMENT EXISTS

A theory of change lays out, step by step, why an organization believes its work will produce the change it seeks. It isn't a mission statement, a product roadmap, or a pitch deck, though it informs all three.

This document spells out that reasoning for SureVoter:

- Why American democracy is less productive than ever before
- Why this moment makes success more likely than previous efforts
- How SureVoter's technology and approach contribute to the solution
- How SureVoter's success provides a foundation for broader change

In practice, this document explains why SureVoter exists, names the problems we can (and can't) solve, serves as an internal compass for policy and product decisions, and gives prospective employees, volunteers, partners, and product users — citizens, candidates, officials, and agencies — a reason to believe.

PART I: THE DIAGNOSIS

1. Is The System Broken?

Most of us feel it. Citizens and representatives, on both ends of the political spectrum and everyone in between. The feeling that we've lost something. That little can be done about it. That no one is listening. A feeling sometimes accompanied by anger, and often by resignation, that has diminished our civic experience, our faith in democracy, and our hope for America's future.

The instinct is to call this a broken system. It isn't. In *The Politics Industry*, Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter offer a more uncomfortable diagnosis: the system isn't broken at all — it's producing exactly the outcomes its incentive structure rewards.

Gehl and Porter reframe American politics as an industry, and its two dominant parties as a duopoly — each protected by rules neither has any incentive to change. Like any durable industry, it has customers it serves well and customers it doesn't have to serve at all.

The question that organizes everything that follows isn't "why is the system broken?" but "who is this industry actually built to serve?" The answer, measured directly, is not the average citizen.

In 2014, political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page studied 1,779 policy decisions over twenty years and found something precise: what average citizens want has almost no measurable effect on policy, while organized interest groups and economic elites have substantial, measurable influence.¹ Strip out the preferences of organized interests, and the link between what most Americans want and what government does essentially disappears. That isn't a portrait of a broken democracy — it's a portrait of an industry serving its real customers, and average citizens aren't among them.

This is where the dynamic most of us feel takes hold, and it's useful to borrow the language of economic analysis to name it. We occupy a "trapped equilibrium" — a term economists use for a situation that persists, even when it's worse for nearly everyone inside it, because no single participant can exit alone without being punished for moving first. A liquidity trap. A poverty trap. Applied to American politics, it becomes a partisan trap.

The parties keep moving with the trap rather than against it. There are incentives to do so. For a party in power, changing course risks the coalition that put it there. For a party out of power, cooperating with the other side looks like surrender. For the people in the middle — the "exhausted majority" — the choices narrow to frustration or silence. This trap isn't sustained by conspiracy. Fear of loss perpetuates it.

Political economists Ethan Bueno de Mesquita and Wioletta Dziuda have formally modeled how a dynamic like this persists:² when voters grow pessimistic about common-interest reform, they reelect ideologically aligned incumbents over candidates who might compromise. Those incumbents have every incentive to keep delivering partisan wins, so

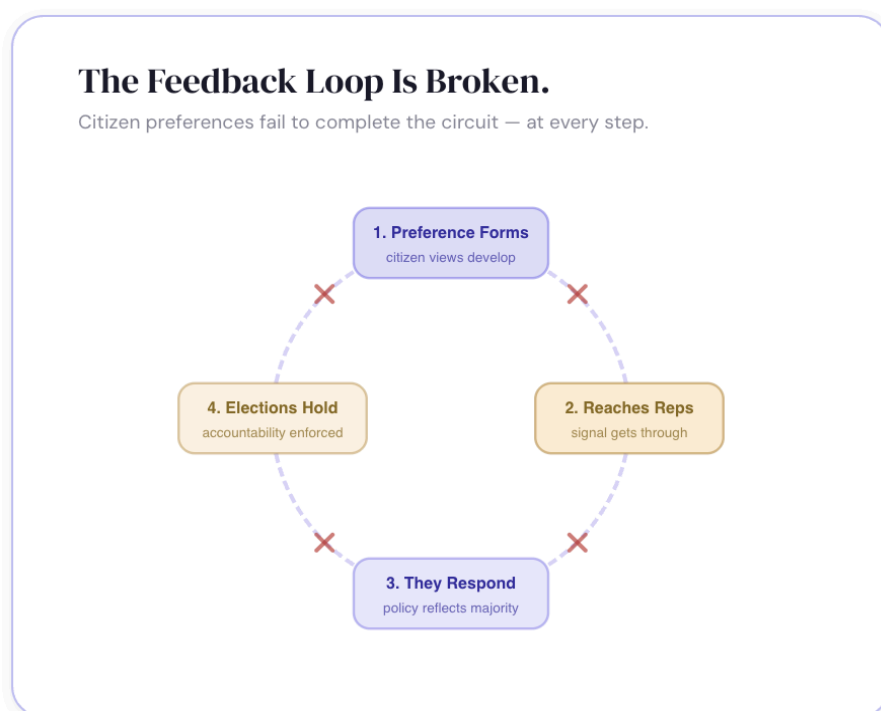
the pessimism remains unresolved and the trap reinforces itself. The industry frame describes the dynamics; the partisan trap explains why these dynamics are persistent. Neither requires a villain, which is precisely what makes the arrangement so durable.

There is a revealing irony here. Isolate the individuals inside the system — talk to them away from the incentives that bind them in public — and the disagreement largely evaporates. Almost everyone agrees the dysfunction is real. In our own discovery work at SureVoter, the officials we've spoken with, at every level, don't defend the current state of their chambers; sitting members describe, again and again, how dysfunctional the institution has become and how little room they feel they have to change it from the inside. That near-unanimity is among the clearest evidence that this is a trapped equilibrium, not a collection of bad actors. The people caught inside the trap see its walls as plainly as anyone. What they lack is a way out that doesn't punish them for moving first.

That is why the work of repair has to be deliberate, and why it has to begin now. The forces described in this document did not develop overnight, and they will not dissolve on their own. Restoring the connection between citizens and the people who represent them is not a partisan project — it's a precondition for the system functioning at all.

At its foundation, from your local school board to the presidency, democracy depends on a feedback loop that starts with its constituents:

1. A preference has to form.
2. It has to reach the people we've elected to hold power in trust.
3. They have to respond.
4. Then elections have to hold them accountable for that response.



As further described herein, this feedback loop is broken. The rest of this diagnosis shows how the politics industry — competing for the customers it actually answers to — has little incentive to repair it.

SureVoter intends to restore this loop. American democracy depends on it.

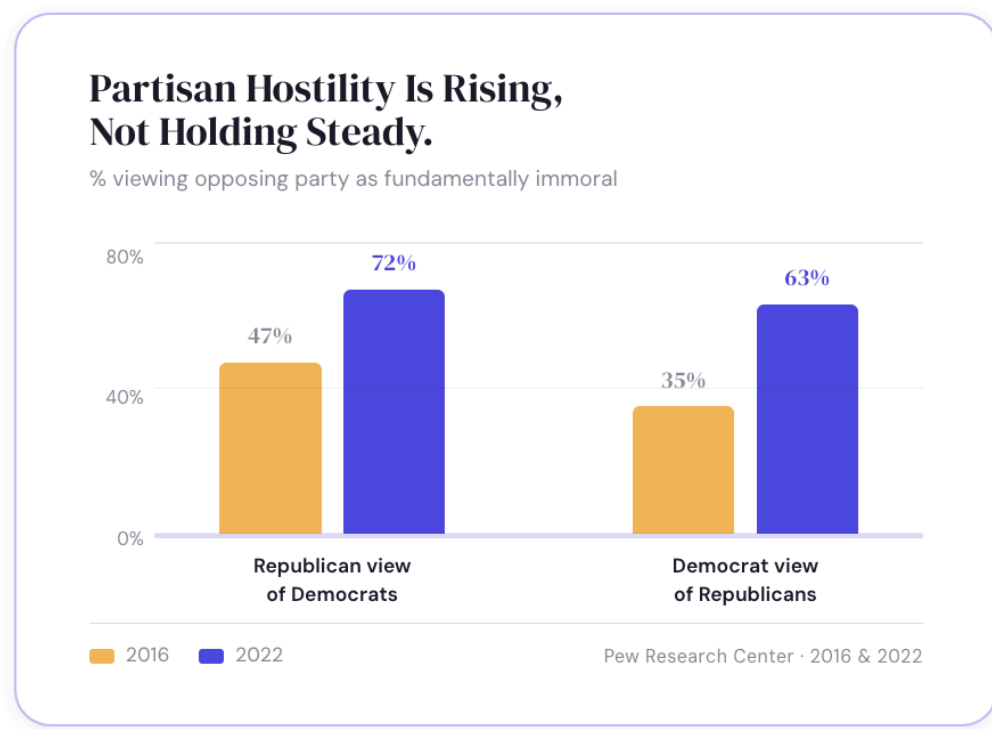
2. The Five Forces: How Partisanship Reinforces Itself

Michael Porter's classic Five Forces Framework asks five questions of any industry: How do existing competitors rival one another? How easily can new competitors enter? How much power do suppliers hold? How much power do customers hold? And what substitutes exist?

Gehl and Porter run American politics through this analysis and find an industry insulated, on every axis, from the pressure that would force it to serve the public. The evidence below maps directly onto each force.

2.1 Rivalry: The Parties Compete Fiercely, on the Wrong Dimension

The duopoly does compete — just not to solve problems for citizens. It competes on tribal identity. Political scientists call this "affective polarization": partisan hostility that operates independently of, and increasingly outpaces, actual policy disagreement.³ In 2016, Pew Research found 47 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats viewed the opposing party as fundamentally more immoral than other Americans; by 2022, those numbers had climbed to 72 and 63 percent.⁴ Polarization isn't holding steady — it's growing.



Something else has been shifting for decades: dislike of the opposing party has steadily overtaken affection for one's own as the stronger predictor of voting behavior, a trend four decades in the making.⁵ People are now more likely to vote "against" than "for." That shift cascades downstream — into what a primary electorate rewards, what a candidate feels they must say to survive, and what an official believes they can afford to do in office.

Rivalry this intense would normally be healthy for customers, but here it isn't, because the parties have divided the market rather than genuinely contested it. "Super landslide" counties, where one party wins more than 80 percent of the vote, grew from roughly 5 percent of U.S. counties in 2004 to 22 percent by 2020.⁶ Congressional districts show the same pattern: since the late 1990s, the share of competitive districts has fallen by more than half, as self-sorting and deliberate line-drawing push voters into districts where the outcome is decided before election day.⁷

In 2025, the Supreme Court allowed Texas to use a mid-decade map Republicans drew to win five additional House seats.⁸ California's response mirrored it: voters approved Proposition 50 in November 2025, a Democratic-drawn map designed to flip five Republican seats. Neither map's legality was seriously in doubt after 2019: in *Rucho v. Common Cause*, the Supreme Court held that partisan gerrymandering claims are political questions outside federal courts' jurisdiction⁹ — a case that, tellingly, arose from a Republican gerrymander in North Carolina and a Democratic one in Maryland, decided together in a single ruling. Whichever party controls a legislature uses the tool to divide the market — bipartisan even when any single instance isn't.¹⁰

2.2 Barriers to Entry: The Machinery That Blocks New Competition

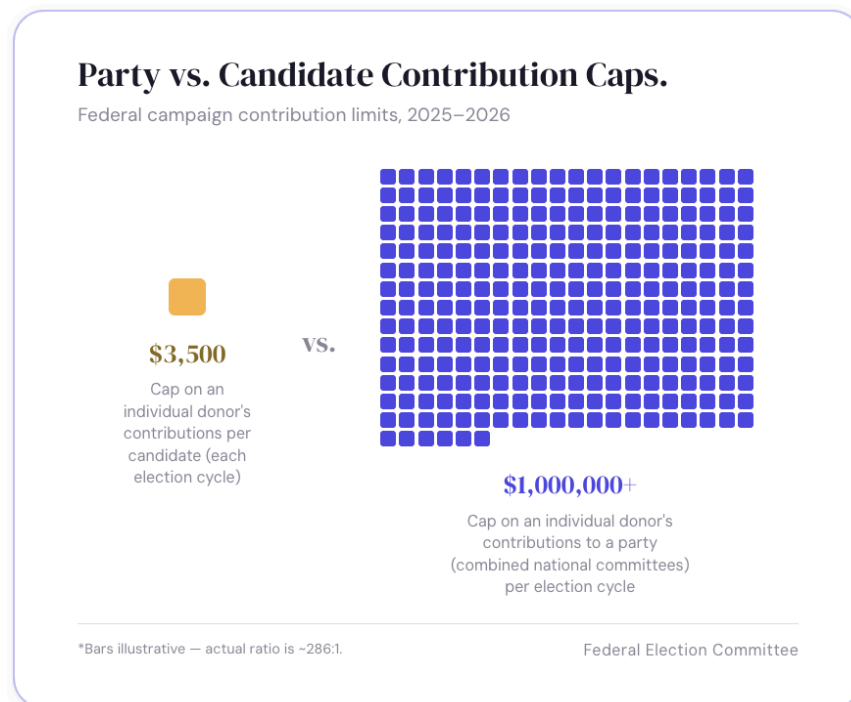
A functioning market lets underserved customers switch to a new provider. This one doesn't: the industry has erected barriers that block new competition at the source. Gehl and Porter locate the core of those barriers in two rules that keep the duopoly a duopoly, reinforced by a series of more conventional entry barriers familiar in any industry.

The totality of those barriers is best measured by one fact: no major new party has emerged in the U.S. since 1854, when anti-slavery Whigs broke away to found the Republican Party. Theodore Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" Party in 1912 and Ross Perot's Reform Party in the 1990s each elected only a handful of candidates and dissolved within a decade.¹¹ The most prominent current effort, the Forward Party, launched in 2021; as of early 2026 it holds no federal or statewide office, one state-legislative seat, and a scattering of local ones.¹² This holds despite record dissatisfaction with both parties: more Americans now identify as independents than with either.¹³ The barriers are effective.

Start with the two rules. The first is the partisan primary. In a closed, low-turnout primary, the electorate that shows up is smaller and more ideologically committed than the district as a whole, rewarding candidates who signal loyalty over compromise. Most Americans don't realize how unrepresentative that electorate can be: in 13 states, more than 18 million independent voters across 15 states are barred from primaries entirely, because the primary is closed to anyone not registered with a party.¹⁴

The second rule is plurality voting — winner-take-all elections in which a candidate wins with the largest share rather than a majority. This turns any serious independent or third-party challenger into a "spoiler," converting the barrier to entry into a mathematical trap: voting for the candidate you actually prefer can help elect the one you least prefer. Plurality voting is what makes "wasting your vote" a rational fear, and it's the single greatest structural protection the two parties enjoy.

These two rules sit atop the ordinary barriers any incumbent enjoys — economies of scale, brand recognition, donor relationships, institutional expertise, and privileged access to the suppliers and channels described in Sections 2.3 and 2.5. Election law piles on more: "sore-loser" laws in 48 states bar a primary loser from appearing on the general-election ballot as an independent or another party's nominee, closing off the path a defeated reformer might take.¹⁵ The campaign-finance rules are starker: a single donor can legally steer well over a million dollars to one party across an election cycle, while an individual candidate's contributions are capped at \$3,500 per election.¹⁶ The barriers are tangible.



There is also, uniquely, no independent referee: nearly every other industry answers to a regulator it doesn't control, while the politics industry writes its own rules of accountability. The Federal Election Commission — created in 1975 to enforce post-Watergate campaign-finance law — has six commissioners, no more than three per party, and requires four votes for any enforcement action, producing predictable 3–3 deadlock along party lines.¹⁷ The players officiate their own game.

Taken together, these barriers prevent the supply of alternatives. Danielle Thomsen's research shows polarization is driven as much by who chooses not to run as by who wins — moderates opt out because running has become too costly.¹⁸ Andrew Hall's related research

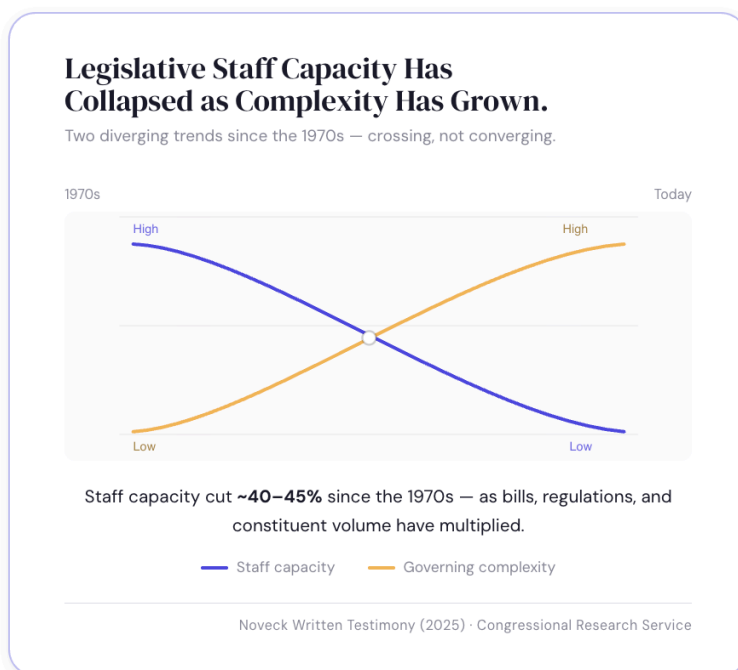
shows the cost of running deters moderates more than extremists.¹⁹ The would-be new entrant — a potential problem-solver, independent thinker, or compromiser — often never makes it onto the field.

Nor is this only a byproduct of separate self-interest: on who is allowed to compete, the two parties have a documented history of acting jointly. The Commission on Presidential Debates, created by the RNC and DNC in 1987 to replace the League of Women Voters after it refused to let the parties control candidate inclusion, is one example; legal scholars Issacharoff and Pildes describe this pattern of bipartisan cooperation on market-entry rules as a "partisan lockup" of the competitive process.

2.3 Supplier Power: The Industry's Suppliers Are Captured

The people and organizations that supply the industry — candidates, expertise, money, even legislation — are historically partisan as well. These suppliers are powerful for textbook reasons: they're concentrated, they provide inputs the industry can't function without, and the officials who depend on them have few alternatives. This starts with the candidate: a modern campaign requires a whole professional apparatus, and a candidate depends on the party for nearly all of it — legitimacy, the ballot line, donor networks, field operations, voter data, debate access, and specialized talent. A candidate outside the two parties doesn't just start behind; they often can't assemble a competitive operation at all, because the suppliers they'd need are already spoken for.

Into the resulting capacity vacuum step the industry's real idea-suppliers. Legislative staff has been cut roughly 40 to 45 percent since the 1970s even as governing has grown more complex, leaving members with less independent expertise than at any point in the modern era.²⁰ A USA Today/Arizona Republic investigation found that special interests wrote more than 10,000 bills introduced in state legislatures, often passed nearly word for word.²¹



Legal scholars Wendy Wagner and Will Walker have documented bills routinely passed by members who never had time to read them.²² Faced with reduced capacity, the buyer increasingly outsources to the supplier.

What makes this a force rather than a nuisance is that the supply chain profits from the industry's dysfunction. Gehl and Porter describe a political-industrial complex of consultants, pollsters, and lobbyists whose revenue rises with spending, conflict, and campaign length — the very things a healthier competition would shrink. The revolving door tightens the alignment: staffers who leave for lobbying become suppliers to the institution they just left, so an officeholder negotiating with them is often negotiating with a future employer.

Missing from this supply chain is the one input a healthy market would prize most: organized, continuous intelligence from the customer. Citizens supply votes — blunt, periodic, low in information — but nothing that competes with what donors, lobbyists, and consultants provide. No supplier speaks for the ordinary constituent.

2.4 Buyer Power: Who the Real Customers Are

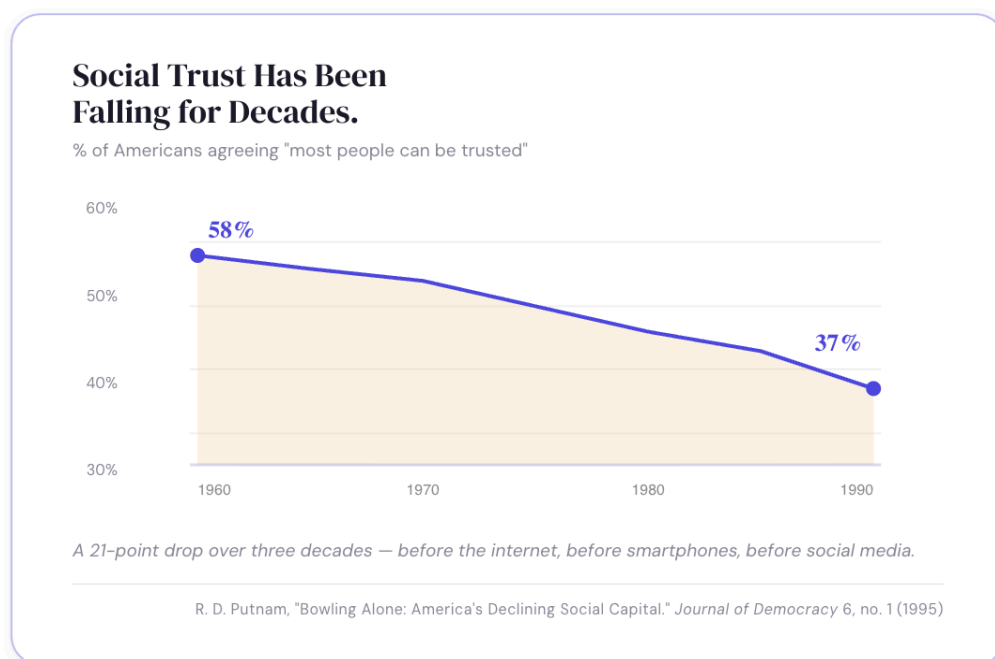
In a healthy market, the customers with the most unmet demand exert the most pressure. The politics industry inverts this: its power is distributed almost exactly opposite to what a normal market would predict. The segments that should dominate by sheer size are the weakest; the smallest, most concentrated segments set the terms.

Three segments hold real power, because each supplies something the industry can't win without. Primary voters come first: self-sorting and district-drawing have made the primary the decisive contest in most seats (Sections 2.1–2.2), so the electorate that chooses most officeholders is the small, older, ideologically committed slice that turns out for primaries. Organized interests come next, supplying mobilization and reliable turnout an individual citizen never can. Donors come third, mainly through independent expenditures — uncapped spending routed through groups that often never reveal their funders. That channel has exploded: outside spending in 2024 reached a record \$4.5 billion, more than half from groups that don't fully disclose their funding, including over \$1 billion from shell companies and dark-money groups.²³ The money skews older too: the median campaign donor is 66, well above the median voter, so the finance system amplifies an older, smaller sliver of the electorate.²⁴ These are the customers the industry answers to.

Now consider the segments a normal market would expect to dominate — the ones with almost no power at all. Average voters turn out mainly for general elections, arriving after the decisive choice has been made. Independents are the sharpest case: they outnumber the adherents of either party by most measures, yet closed primaries lock millions out of the contest that matters, sidelining the single largest bloc of Americans. Non-voters are the least powerful of all — even in the high-interest 2016 election, nearly 40 percent of eligible Americans didn't vote, ceding their power in the process.²⁵ The irony is exact: the people with the numbers to reshape the market are disproportionately the ones who abstain, are locked out, or arrive too late, while the smallest, most partisan segments set the terms.

That the average citizen is the industry's underserved customer shows even where agreement is overwhelming. A 2024 YouGov survey identified 109 policy proposals that majorities of both parties support (detailed further in Appendix D, Problem #29), yet a Yale study of major legislative fights spanning two decades found Congress passed such bills only 55 percent of the time. The demand exists; it simply carries no weight, because the customer expressing it has none — Gilens and Page's point, restated at the level of a single vote.

Over time, that customer has also become less demanding — removing the last pressure the industry might feel. In 1975, psychologist Martin Seligman documented what happens when people are repeatedly put in situations where nothing they do changes the outcome: they give up, concluding action doesn't produce results.²⁶ Decades of an unresponsive civic system have produced exactly this at scale — form-letter replies, ballot measures that pass without the policy changing, promises broken the moment someone takes office. Withdrawing is rational, and when multiplied across millions, it fuels collective disengagement. Albert Bandura names the flip side: people build "political self-efficacy" only when they see visible proof their actions produced a result.²⁷ Lowering the cost of participation is necessary but never sufficient alone. People need proof.



The collapse ran through the country's social fabric too. Robert Putnam documented social trust falling from 58 percent in 1960 to 37 percent by the early 1990s, alongside the hollowing-out of civic clubs and neighborhood groups — the everyday infrastructure people once used to coordinate.²⁸ Francis Fukuyama's work on trust explains why this matters: high-trust societies get things done at a fraction of the cost, and where trust disappears, power shifts to whoever can substitute for it — concentrated wealth, organized groups, and grievance-amplifying media.²⁹ The loss of social capital also removed a natural counterweight to partisanship: the neighbor or coworker across the aisle who once made

the opposing party feel like specific people rather than an abstraction. The industry's most important customer didn't just lose power. It stopped showing up to demand service.

2.5 The Channel and the Missing Substitute

Every industry reaches its customers through a channel — the layer that carries the product the last mile. The politics industry is no different: for most of the last century, that channel was the news media, which took what parties and government produced and sorted, verified, and redistributed it as a common record — a stabilizing, trusted intermediary letting people on both sides argue from the same facts.

That channel has since been diminished, deliberately, on a clear timeline. From 1949 until 1987, the FCC's Fairness Doctrine required broadcast license holders to air contrasting viewpoints on controversial issues. The FCC repealed the doctrine 4–0 in 1987, and congressional attempts to codify it were blocked by President Reagan's veto that year and a veto threat from President Bush in 1991.³⁰ Once the requirement was gone, nothing stopped a station from building its format around a single point of view — and talk radio, followed by cable news, did exactly that.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 — signed by President Clinton the year MSNBC and Fox News launched — loosened ownership restrictions further, making it commercially viable to build a national news network for a single ideological audience.³¹ The partisan media landscape that followed didn't just reflect the country's divisions; it organized them, years before social media added its own version of the same dynamic. It also changed what the divisions were about: research comparing 20 democracies finds the U.S. shows the largest increase in polarization specifically over cultural questions — identity, immigration, values.³² Economic disagreements can often be split down the middle; cultural ones can't. The channel didn't just highlight our differences. It reminded us daily of the ones democracy can't easily resolve.

Then came social media, amplifying the impact by dissolving the line between the channel and everything else. Jonathan Haidt argues that engagement-optimized platforms have damaged the shared factual foundation democratic debate depends on.³³ His causal account is disputed — the strongest counter-argument holds traditional media may bear more responsibility³⁴ — but the directional finding, that today's information environment produces more fragmentation than the pre-social era, holds up across different research. A 2025 field experiment strengthens the case: a week of more animosity-laden content in participants' feeds shifted feelings toward the opposing party by an amount equivalent to roughly three years of natural drift, reversing once the content was removed.³⁵ The distribution system rewards outrage, and attitudes move accordingly; news, advertising, and propaganda are now genuinely hard to tell apart online.

These forces had been building for decades, but a convergence of events calcified their impact. In September 2008, the federal government committed hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars to rescue failing financial institutions just as the housing wealth of millions of middle-class Americans evaporated. Two movements grew from that same grievance in

opposite directions — the Tea Party, angry at government overreach, and Occupy Wall Street, angry at concentrated wealth³⁶ — and the political center lost credibility with both flanks at once. Social media then scaled to mass politics between 2008 and 2010, handing two energized movements a distribution system optimized for engagement — and outrage. Each accelerant raised the cost of defecting, reinforcing a decline in cross-partisan cooperation already decades in motion.

Finally, the force that completes the picture: substitutes — the alternative that would let citizens route around the whole arrangement. Here there have been almost none. The reason is structural: no market incentive existed to build neutral civic infrastructure, because citizens are too diffuse to pay for it and the parties prefer the current environment. The absence of a substitute is the final barrier — and, as Part II argues, the specific opening SureVoter is built to fill.

3. The Breakdown Itself

Section 2 explained the *structure* — the five forces that let the industry ignore the average citizen. This section traces the *consequence*: what those forces do to a citizen's signal as it tries to move through the system. Because the industry's customers aren't average citizens, its machinery regularly ignores, bypasses, and even competes with this loop.

What follows are the four points where the loop breaks — and at each, the failure is not incidental.

Failure Point 1: The Citizen Signal Never Forms

To develop a view, citizens need data to form an opinion.

The collapse of local news has opened a significant information gap: it's hard to form a preference about a candidate or ballot measure you don't know exists, and for most local races, local news was the only source telling people the race was happening.

The Local News Collapse.

The infrastructure of local accountability, disappearing.

~1/3

of all U.S. newspapers have
closed since 2005

50M

Americans live in areas
with limited or no local
news access

213

counties have no local news
coverage at all

Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University, 2025

By 2025, roughly 50 million Americans had limited or no access to local news, and 213 counties had none at all — a decline of about a third of American newspapers since 2005.³⁷ Peer-reviewed research finds that when local newspapers close, civic engagement, including turnout, measurably drops.³⁸

Beneath whether citizens can access the facts sits a harder question: whether they're equipped to make sense of them. Three erosions compound here: the partisan channel that frames news before it arrives (Section 2.5); the collapse of local reporting; and the quiet hollowing-out of civic education. America once built a genuinely national infrastructure for civic learning — a federated network, coordinated by the Center for Civic Education, that placed programs like We the People and Project Citizen in schools nationwide. Much of it was dismantled after 2010, not by any vote against civic education but as collateral damage from congressional earmark bans, which cut the Center from roughly 98 staff to under a dozen and stripped away curricula reaching tens of millions of students.³⁹

Taken together, Failure Point 1 is three overlapping problems, not one. Each is a place the signal fails to form, and each is a place different infrastructure could intervene.

Failure Point 2: The Citizen Signal Never Transmits

Once formed, preferences must be transmitted so government can act. Voting is the most basic form of that transmission: a blunt instrument signaling broad approval of a platform.

By that standard, the signal is weakest exactly where government touches daily life most directly. A Portland State University study of America's 30 largest cities, funded by the Knight Foundation, found voter turnout for mayoral and city council elections under 15% in two-thirds of them. The National School Boards Association estimates school board turnout at just 5–10% — even though school boards govern more elected officials than any other office and shape decisions that affect residents more immediately than most federal votes ever will.⁴⁰

The pattern continues up the ballot: research on the 2022 elections found "roll-off" rates of 10–12% in state legislative races — roughly one in ten people who voted for president or governor didn't bother voting for their state legislator — with even higher roll-off in judicial retention races and ballot initiatives.⁴¹

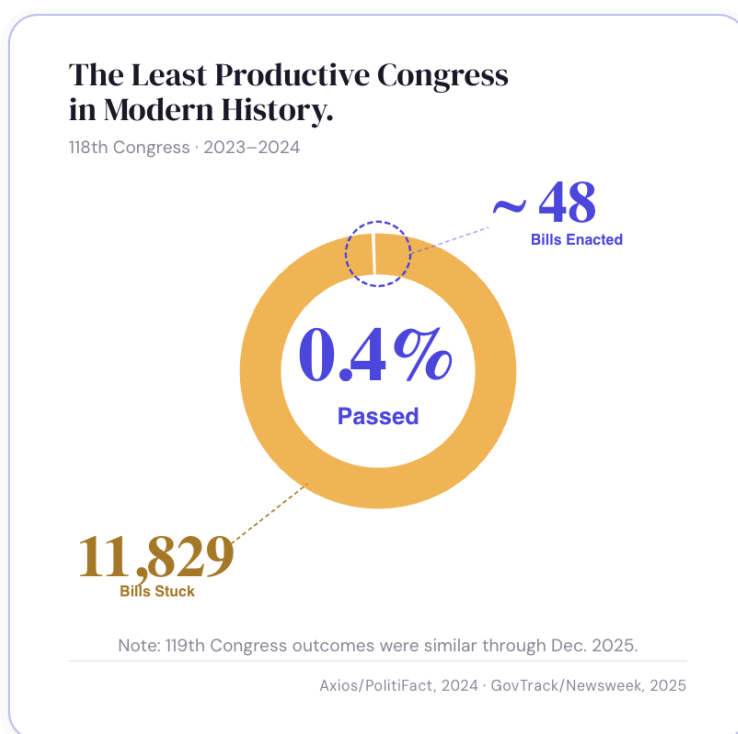
Put simply: people vote for the candidates and offices they've heard of; for the rest, they guess, vote party lines, or skip the option. Even preferences that do form rarely reach the people in power. The channels a citizen has between elections — the form letter, the opinion poll, the town hall — are largely unchanged from decades ago, each blunt on its own and now overwhelmed. Officials receive far more contact than they can read, much of it templated or organized, and a growing share manufactured outright.

SureVoter's own discovery research with elected officials returns to the same frustration again and again: they can't find the genuine signal inside the volume, and frequently can't even confirm whether a message comes from an actual constituent.

Failure Point 3: The Response Never Comes

The clearest evidence of the breakdown sits in Congress's own voting record. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE analysis — the standard measure of congressional polarization, built from roll-call votes back to 1879 — finds ideological distance between the parties at its highest level of the modern era, with virtually no overlap left between the most conservative Democrat and the most liberal Republican.⁴²

The accountability gap this document has traced through Congress extends further than Congress itself. A growing share of policy that shapes daily life — environmental rules, healthcare coverage decisions, financial regulation — is written by federal agencies rather than by anyone a citizen voted for. Critics on the right have long argued this leaves citizens with "no real pathway to hold [regulators] accountable";⁴³ others argue the accountability model this critique assumes is too narrow, pointing to judicial review, oversight, and internal agency norms as the real checks.⁴⁴ Either way, when the decision-maker was never on a ballot, Step 4 of the feedback loop — elections holding someone accountable — has nothing to act on.



Even the signals that do arrive meet a government with less capacity to respond. The 118th Congress was among the least productive in modern history: through March 2024 it had passed just 42 bills — 0.4% of the 11,877 introduced, the lowest rate since at least 1989.⁴⁵ The pattern hasn't reversed: by December 2025 the 119th Congress had passed fewer bills by a comparable point than nearly any Congress since 1993, though independent trackers note this partly reflects omnibus bills replacing many separate ones.⁴⁶

This is the partisan trap's supply side — the same candidate–supply collapse documented in Section 2.2 (Thomsen; Hall), seen from the demand end: when a candidate's job is to defeat the enemy rather than represent the district, primary voters select for confrontation, and the candidates willing to work across the aisle are often the ones who lose.

Failure Point 4: Accountability Never Follows

When government fails to respond, elections are supposed to correct that failure. Several forces get in the way.

First, there's no shared scoreboard. Citizens and officials work from largely uncontested but different sets of facts, so each side claims vindication from the same events. A 2025 Pew Research Center survey found roughly 80% of Americans believe Republican and Democratic voters can't agree on basic facts — essentially unchanged since 2016. Of those who see this gap, 67% blame partisans interpreting information differently, and 53% say partisans simply get different information altogether.⁴⁷ Second, the concentrated, largely undisclosed campaign money documented in Section 2.4 drowns out the correction elections are meant to deliver, amplifying an older, smaller slice of the electorate over the district as a whole.^{48 49}

The V-Dem Institute's 2026 report documents an unprecedented decline in U.S. democracy in 2025.⁵⁰ The Century Foundation recorded an authoritarian turn the same year.⁵¹ Bright Line Watch's rolling survey of political scientists shows a consistent picture but a more granular one: expert ratings, tracked several times a year rather than annually, bottomed at 53 in April 2025 and have since stabilized in the mid-to-high 50s — with researchers tying the most recent modest improvement to two specific, checkable developments: stronger judicial limits on executive power and the end of National Guard deployments in several cities.⁵² This isn't a new problem — it's what accountability failure looks like when it persists without remedy.

Appendix D catalogs these issues in more granular form: 33 specific problems, each mapped to its failure point and marked by how SureVoter's product responds — solved directly, influenced indirectly, or outside SureVoter's scope.

Lastly, it's hard to hold leaders accountable when no one can make sense of what they're doing. Modern legislation is often too complex for citizens to understand, and as Section 2.3 documented, the drafting and schedule are dominated by donors and suppliers rather than constituents.

To be clear, this isn't a story about citizens failing to agree with each other. As Section 2.4 showed, the demand for bipartisan-supported policy is real — it just doesn't carry enough weight to move a legislator, because the electorate a legislator answers to isn't the district majority. It's the primary electorate that decides whether they keep their job.

This is the machinery from Section 2.2 operating at the level of a single vote. A representative can accurately read broad, cross-partisan support for a policy and still have

a rational incentive to ignore it, because the people who'll vote in their next primary are a smaller, more extreme group than the people the policy would benefit.

Closed primaries and gerrymandering are the same mechanism wearing two faces: both let a smaller, more extreme slice of the electorate exercise outsized control over who holds office, regardless of which party is in power. The incentive that keeps the incumbent safe is the same incentive that renders the signal moot.

4. What Is at Risk?

For the ninth year in a row, in 2024, more people lived in countries where democratic conditions were getting worse than in countries where they were improving. International IDEA's 2025 report finds representation scores at their worst level in over 20 years.⁵³

Diminished trust plays a central role. The Valgðarsson research on political trust points to an alarming pattern: in Hungary, the collapse of trust in representative institutions came before Viktor Orbán's 2010 consolidation of power — not after, and that decline created the conditions for the power grab.⁵⁴ This pattern isn't confined to one ideological direction. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez's dismantling of independent institutions after 1999 followed a similar sequence: declining public trust preceded, and helped enable, the consolidation of power. Political scientists Levitsky and Loxton have documented this pattern of populist-driven backsliding across multiple Latin American cases, spanning both left and right. The United States is not Hungary, or Venezuela, but the pattern — unresponsiveness collapsing trust, which weakens whatever defends against further concentration of power — isn't unique to any one country. This phenomenon isn't hypothetical: Appendix D, Problem #31, documents a case where this dynamic altered a real US regulatory vote.

There's now direct experimental evidence this mechanism operates at the level of individual belief, not just national statistics. A 2025 study experimentally induced short-term affective polarization in Chilean voters and found it directly reduced their support for democracy as a system of government.⁵⁵ Separately, U.S. research finds the public's willingness to act as a democratic check erodes as partisanship and platform divergence increase.⁵⁶

In short, the more partisan and dysfunctional our system becomes, the more apathetic the public becomes about civic participation, putting democracy itself at very real risk.

SureVoter's theory of change doesn't require agreeing with any partisan account of where American democracy stands today. It only requires a broader conclusion, backed by evidence: the democratic feedback loop has deteriorated, with real consequences for legitimacy, institutional resilience, and democratic stability itself.

PART II: THE MECHANISM

SureVoter's Focus: Improve Democratic Outcomes

Part I's diagnosis points to a specific opening. Gehl and Porter show the politics industry is protected from the two things that would force it to serve the public: new competition and new ways of competing. Their remedy is to change the rules of the game directly.

SureVoter's theory is different. Rather than changing the rules the industry competes under, SureVoter changes what the industry's underserved customer can see, coordinate, and demand — restoring a form of buyer power the machinery currently suppresses, within the existing rules. Where structural reformers introduce new competition from the outside, SureVoter raises the cost of continuing to ignore the customer democracy is actually designed to serve.

We believe better outcomes can be realized by redistributing information, restoring voter agency, and providing access to better coordination tools — within the existing political system. Done well, over time, this can create the conditions for broader impact: an American democracy that is more productive, and a civic experience that is more rewarding, for everyone.

It's time to make democracy listen.

SureVoter's Starting Point

SureVoter's initial product build is designed to solve the first and most foundational problem: a democracy where citizens, candidates, and representatives struggle to communicate.

The research in Part I suggests the U.S. is dealing with more than that — institutional erosion, fragmented facts, structural barriers to running for office. SureVoter doesn't solve those directly. But it doesn't ignore them either: better information and coordination aren't just outcomes — they're catalysts.

5. What SureVoter Does

SureVoter is building the first AI-native civic operating system for democracy: a platform that restores the democratic feedback loop by lowering the cost of participation and improving the quality of information available to democracy's stakeholders. Every product either repairs a specific stage of the broken feedback loop (Section 3) or addresses one of the Five Forces to restore the loop for all citizens (Section 2), often at the same time.

The three-stage rollout, described below, rebuilds the loop from the bottom up: first helping the citizen signal form and transmit, then making the response and accountability that should follow it visible and durable.

Read against Porter's Five Forces, these offerings are built specifically to change the competitive environment:

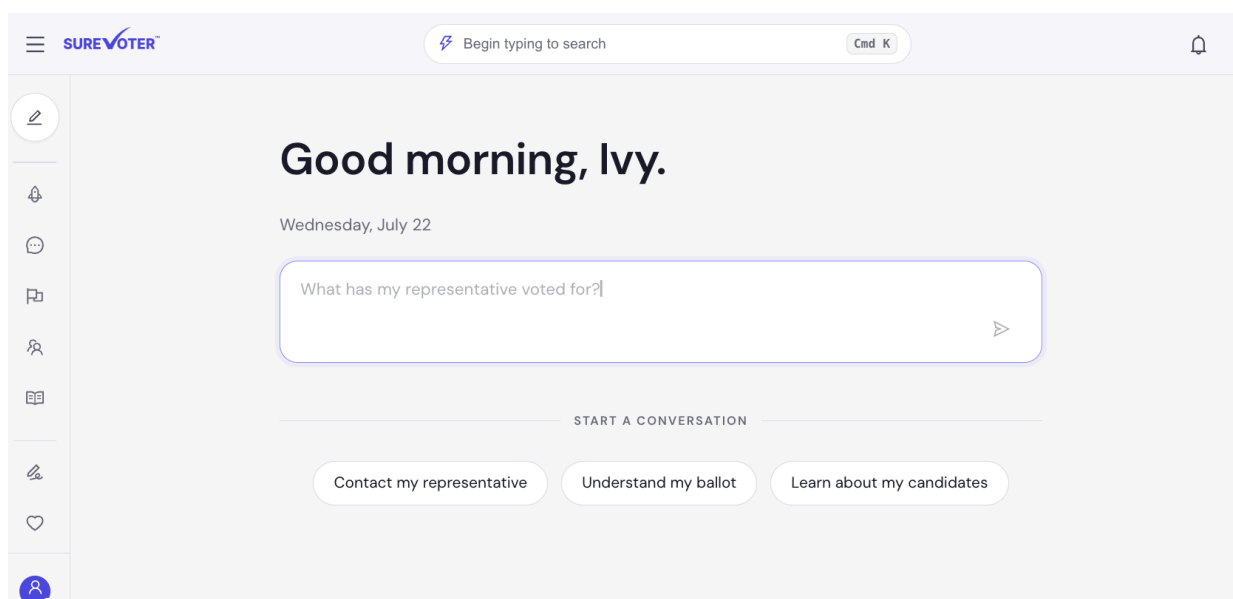
- Rivalry (§2.1). SureVoter strips partisan framing out of civic information, helping citizens weigh substance before the partisan reveal — nudging the contest toward problems rather than teams.
- Barriers to entry (§2.2). SureVoter verifies and publicizes cross-partisan majority preferences, lowering the risk to officials who break from the primary electorate's script, and democratizes data and modern technology to reach voters at scale.
- Supplier power (§2.3). Bridge gives officials and candidates, including independents, the same quality of verified intelligence lobbyists and donors already supply — sourced from registered voters, a supplier accountable to constituents that the industry has never had.
- Buyer power (§2.4). Verification makes the average citizen legible and credible, and aggregated signal gives that customer a voice with weight — restoring citizens' buying power. This is the core of the theory.
- Channel and substitute (§2.5). Lens contests the partisan distribution channel head-on, and the Phase 2 MCP and agent layer provides a neutral civic-data substitute the market never had an incentive to build.

Every user has the option to verify they're a registered voter. That single step makes the platform more powerful for citizens and solves a real problem for officials: it cuts through spam bots, duplicate accounts, and manufactured outrage campaigns that let the loudest voices — not necessarily the most representative — dominate what officials hear.

Stage 1: Civic Clarity and Coordination

Stage 1 lowers the cost of understanding and engagement.

For Citizens. Surely™, SureVoter's AI thought partner, is a neutral, non-persuasive guide that helps citizens understand candidate positions, voting records, ballot language, and legislative actions. Explanations are personalized by priority, reading level, and context — never by conclusion. Citizens make the decisions. Surely makes them better informed.



The civic public data landscape is robust and plentiful; SureVoter organizes it through Surely, a real-time, one-stop shop for answers that also helps citizens communicate with their candidates and officials — understanding their leaders' positions while clarifying their own. Unlike polling, these conversations are natural, unforced, and unscripted; each one deepens the citizen's Civic Profile, and the stronger the profile, the more clarity and agency Surely can offer.

Surely also addresses a second knowledge gap: how the civic system itself works. A grounded, source-attributed explainer layer — covering process and history rather than any candidate's positions — activates when a question is structural, sourced from official government data and nonpartisan reference organizations rather than freely generated.

A companion product, Lens by SureVoter, addresses the information problem at its source: because most news arrives already framed by a point of view, Lens shows coverage of the same story from across the spectrum, side by side, without editorializing. More "frame highlighter" than "fact checker," Lens broadens awareness of the issues that matter most to each citizen — a direct challenge to the partisan channel described in Section 2.5.

SureVoter will continue developing Surely so it becomes each citizen's preferred, ongoing civic agent — not a tool only consulted every four years.

For Representatives. Bridge by SureVoter gives representatives, candidates, and government agencies tools to directly communicate with verified constituents, improving responsiveness while surfacing constituent trends. For an official, this replaces guesswork with evidence: instead of assuming what a district wants from donor calls and the loudest constituents, they get a verified, geographically precise read on where cross-partisan agreement already exists.

The screenshot displays the 'In progress' section of the SureVoter interface. At the top, a search bar and status indicators (Surely Live, HIGH) are visible. Below the header, a summary bar shows 4 open, 6 needs human, 1 awaiting review, and 1 urgent items. The main area features a table of constituent issues, each with a subject, channel, requester, received date, confidence score, and assignee. A sidebar on the left provides navigation options for views, smart queues, channels, and topics.

SUBJECT	CHANNEL	REQUESTER	RECEIVED	CONFIDENCE	ASSIGNEE
Escalated Foster placement case - urgent timeline (Sofia Reyes) casework outcome without published position #0ACD03	Internal	Internal	3d ago	66%	Dev Seed User
Agent drafted awaits review Help with my VA disability claim backlog (Marcus Hale) #0ACD04	Voter - 0404	4d ago	74%	Dev Seed User	
Escalated SBA disaster loan still pending after 142 days (Aisha Bello) sentiment + tenure trigger #0ACD02	Voter - 0202	3d ago	42%	Dev Seed User	
Escalated Urgent: my father faces deportation in 9 days (David Maldonado) crisis lesson: deportation #0ACD01	Voter - 0101	2d ago	31%	Dev Seed User	

Legend: agent resolved (green), agent drafted (blue), needs human (orange), escalated (red), in sweep (purple), awaiting reply (yellow).

Citizen Civic Profiles, developed in part from these conversations, become anonymous, aggregated constituent signals available to elected officials, giving their own AI agents context for drafting legislation, gauging support, and forming positions informed by the people who elected them.

In campaign cycles, voters can interact with every candidate to understand how each reflects their own beliefs — more nuanced than blue or red, though the cost of understanding each candidate has long made partisan framing a cognitive shortcut. AI chatbots now give direct, conversational access to each candidate, so vetting one feels inclusive: a voter worried about inflation can explain how rising prices have affected her and suggest solutions, rather than answering a poll's yes-or-no question, grounded in data she's provided and sourced in real time.

The root of most misunderstandings is poor communication. SureVoter's first stage is built to fix that.

Stage 2: Accountability and Collective Agency

Stage 2 introduces the accountability layer — a continuous, auditable alignment score comparing what representatives said with how they voted, tracked against citizen preferences. Not partisan judgment. A record. A measure of consistency and alignment back to each constituent's needs.

Stage 2 also introduces collective agency: TownSquare by SureVoter gives citizens a place to discuss community issues and be heard by elected officials — cross-partisan debate that surfaces genuine consensus alongside fact-anchored disagreement. Only verified voters of a given district can participate, since civic deliberation is most productive among neighbors, not outside actors.

Surely provides the clarity citizens need to reach their own conclusions, free of partisan noise. Where Bridge delivers signals to an official's inbox, Surely, with the citizen's consent, can channel that input into public hearings and formal comment periods — structured, citable, timestamped, and verifiable by outside institutions.

Government agencies face a sharper version of this problem: Problem #31 documents regulatory votes overturned by tens of thousands of AI-generated comments impersonating real constituents. The same verification layer that protects a legislator's signal gives an agency a defensible way to know whether public comment reflects real people.

Stage 3: Informed Governance

Stage 3 extends Surely into the actual machinery of governance — not just to make institutions more efficient, but to make constituent intent a structural input for the people who run them. Surely becomes a force multiplier for public servants asked to do more with less, turning notes, research, hearings, testimony, and constituent insight into usable work

product, applying multi-agent legislative drafting, cross-office deliberation, and outcomes tracking against the community intent captured in Stages 1 and 2.

Stage 3 also introduces deep contextual collaboration: Steward by SureVoter gives elected officials and government agencies a single working memory for the raw material of governing — notes, research, hearing transcripts, testimony, and the constituent signal captured upstream in Stages 1 and 2. Rather than leaving staff to manually reconcile these inputs across disconnected tools, it structures them into usable work product: briefing memos, drafting inputs, and a persistent record of what constituents have said and when it was acted on. That record is shared across the office rather than held by whoever happened to take the call — a caseworker, a legislative aide, and a communications lead are working from the same account of what a constituent raised and how it was handled, so a concern that surfaces once doesn't require the constituent to raise it again with someone new. For an office asked to do more with less, it is the mechanism by which constituent intent becomes a structural input to governance, not a stack of notes someone meant to get back to.

At this stage, SureVoter evolves from platform to civic operating system: infrastructure democratic institutions use to coordinate, document, and measure their own performance against the needs of the people they serve — built for the 21st century rather than confined to the practices of the 1900s.

6. How This Is Supposed to Work

How does the platform in Section 5 produce the change described in Sections 1–4? The first four steps trace the same feedback loop Section 3 showed broken — signal forming, reaching representatives, drawing a response, being held accountable — now repaired and functional. The fifth looks beyond the loop, to what becomes possible once this functionality is restored.

Step 1: Lowering Cost Enables Participation

Everything depends on the platform lowering the cost of civic participation. If citizens don't find SureVoter meaningfully more useful than what already exists, the chain breaks at the first link.

Step 2: Participation Produces Signal

Sustained engagement generates continuous, priority-ranked, geographically precise data tied to real civic actions — signal that doesn't currently exist anywhere in the civic information ecosystem. Bridge's product targets are an 80% reduction in communication triage time within 90 days of onboarding, a 50% constituent verification rate, and a 60% AI response acceptance rate.⁵⁷ These are product benchmarks, not theory-of-change targets on their own, but hitting them is the evidence base for the next step.

This signal draws from the full verified electorate, not the narrower primary electorate the trap currently privileges. Failure Point 2 showed why that gap matters: a representative can

read cross-partisan support accurately and still have every incentive to ignore it, because a smaller, more extreme group decides their next election. Signal built from everyone who shows up changes whose preference actually counts.

Step 3: Signal Creates Incentive for Representatives

Signal changes the information environment officials operate in. The fundraising treadmill dominates a representative's schedule because organized interests know exactly what their members want and can deliver or withhold resources accordingly.⁵⁸ SureVoter is designed to eventually produce that same quality of intelligence — from registered voters instead of donors — while lowering the cost of reaching constituents. If successful, legislators can refocus on representation; fundraising becomes secondary.

SureVoter produces the signal representatives can rely on when defending a vote that deviates from partisan norms. That matters because the trap punishes whoever moves first: a representative who can point to verified, broad-based support isn't moving alone.

Step 4: The Feedback Loop Reinforces Itself

At enough penetration in competitive districts, the loop starts reinforcing itself: officials who communicate more effectively see constituent trust rise, which brings in more users, richer signal, and more adoption. This depends on citizens actually perceiving that their engagement produced a result. At launch, that sense of "this worked" comes from confirmed receipt and response tracking inside Bridge itself — real, but a modest version of the record Stage 2 will provide.

A parallel loop runs through citizens: people who see visible proof their engagement produced an outcome build the self-efficacy Bandura describes, and come back, bringing their networks with them. The Issue Intelligence layer (Stage 1.2) gives citizens a reason to return between elections, deepening their Civic Profile and keeping the loop running continuously.

Step 5: Scale Creates the Conditions for Reform

This last step is the most conditional, and so the most important to state carefully. SureVoter doesn't claim the platform will produce structural reform on its own — only that successfully executing Stages 1 through 3 will, over time, create the political conditions under which reforms most Americans support become politically possible.

The specific mechanism is the Blind Alignment Test: citizens interact with policy positions and voting records without seeing names, party labels, or ideological markers, mapping their own values against the substance before the partisan reveal. When people discover their actual alignment this way, partisanship loosens its grip over how people choose, and the information gap that has long perpetuated that grip shrinks. This is a long-run bet, not achieved in Phase 1, but what the platform is built to grow into.

7. Why This Moment Is Our Best Chance Yet

The problems in Part I aren't new — the feedback loop broke down gradually, over decades, and earlier attempts to repair it fell short. So why can we succeed where others failed? Because the conditions have changed dramatically.

7.1 AI Has Made Participation Affordable

Political dysfunction persists partly because participating is expensive: paying attention, monitoring officials, and coordinating with others all cost real time — exactly the barrier that hands organized interests their advantage over ordinary citizens (Section 2.4).⁵⁹ Power has always flowed to whoever could afford those costs.

Large language models, supported by the right civic data and architecture, can change that cost structure in ways that weren't possible three years ago: an AI-native civic platform can now translate complex legislative information into something tailored to an individual's priorities, reading level, and language, at almost no additional cost. The mechanism is simple: lower cost enables participation, participation creates signal, signal enables transmission, and at scale, transmission changes the information environment officials operate in.

7.2 The Institutional Moment

The same conditions that make SureVoter necessary also make our solution easier to explain. Democratic backsliding has now been documented by the V-Dem Institute and the Century Foundation, not just partisan advocates, and the audience for a civic infrastructure solution now includes foundations, institutions, and citizens who've been watching things deteriorate and looking for a response.

Gehl and Porter argue that changing outcomes requires changing the industry's rules. SureVoter's bet is the complement rather than the contradiction: redistributing information and coordination advantages can change outcomes within existing rules, while building the conditions that eventually make structural reform possible.⁶⁰ In December 2025, Dr. Beth Simone Noveck's written testimony before the U.S. House Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation recommended Congress adopt this exact sequence — structured public input, AI-assisted synthesis, a visible institutional response — citing examples from Brazil, Boston, and New Jersey.⁶¹ Separately, the OECD's 2026 survey found public input processes measurably increase trust in national government, with an even stronger link to political efficacy.⁶² Neither source cites the other or is aware of SureVoter; that both converge on the same sequencing in the same 12-month window is affirming.

7.3 Becoming a Source AI Assistants Can Trust

Another shift explains why this theory can scale beyond any single platform: general-purpose AI systems are quickly becoming the primary way people get information, yet no reliable, neutral civic data source exists for them to draw on — a problem that makes every other failure in the feedback loop worse.

SureVoter's MCP Server and Agent-Accessible API (Phase 2) address this directly: an open layer exposing verified Representative Profile data to AI agents, language models, voice assistants, and civic organizations. When Alexa, Siri, and Google Assistant ground their civic answers in SureVoter's verified data, our theory no longer depends on everyone adopting the platform directly — only on SureVoter becoming the trusted civic data standard those systems rely on.

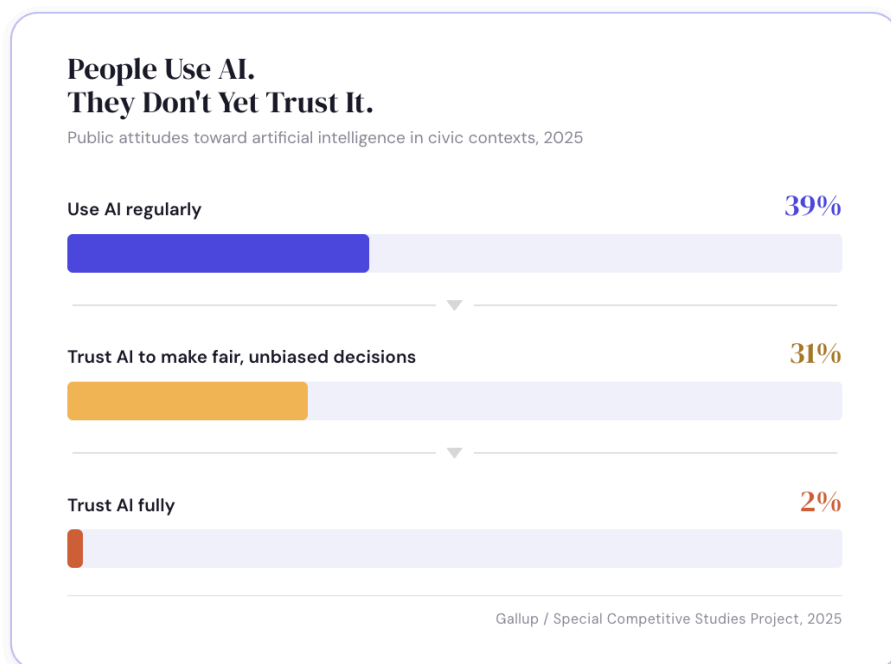
8. What Could Prove Us Wrong

These are the assumptions our theory depends on — the ones that could turn out to be false. Naming them is what makes it possible to know if we're wrong, and what to watch for.

8.1 Neutrality Has to Be Real, and Trust Has to Be Earned

The entire theory depends on citizens across the spectrum trusting that SureVoter isn't manipulating them. If the platform is seen as biased, the chain breaks: users leave, officials dismiss the signal, and SureVoter becomes one more partisan actor. Neutrality has two parts — technical and perceived — and we need both.

Surely's models are evaluated against a structured set of test cases — currently 76 adversarial scenarios across contested policy areas — scored for persuasive framing, unequal treatment of comparable positions, and unsourced claims. Explanation and advocacy are separated at the instruction level: Surely describes tradeoffs and cites its sourcing hierarchy but never recommends a position. The same discipline extends to Surely's civic-process explainer, grounded exclusively in a versioned knowledge base — official government sources first, nonpartisan reference organizations second. That's the technical half.



The perceived half is harder: even a genuinely neutral system still has to be trusted as neutral, and that trust doesn't come automatically. A 2025 Gallup/Special Competitive Studies Project survey found that while 39% of Americans use AI regularly, only 31% trust it to make fair, unbiased decisions even "somewhat," and just 2% trust it fully.⁶³ Using something and trusting its judgment are measurably different things, and closing that gap is exactly what this assumption depends on.

An open-books approach, an independent foundation to steward SureVoter, a minimum-group-size privacy standard⁶⁴, and three-tier sourcing are our structural response — not guarantees, but the best available design against the single biggest threat to the theory. If a constituent's input becomes part of the official record, any journalist or auditor can independently check whether the signal was represented accurately and whether officials responded.

One asymmetry is worth naming: research on reducing affective polarization (Broockman, Kalla & Westwood 2022; Voelkel et al. 2022) finds that interventions lowering partisan hostility don't reliably restore democratic commitment — the relationship may not run the same way in reverse. This matters for Step 5's Blind Alignment Test, which assumes closing the gap between perceived and actual distance reopens space for cooperation; if the asymmetry holds, closing that gap may not be sufficient.

This assumption fails if independent testing finds measurable partisan skew in Surely's outputs, or if repeated surveys show a gap in perceived neutrality between conservative and liberal users beyond an acceptable variance, sustained across two survey waves. If we cross that line, we pause citizen-facing expansion until the model or sourcing approach is fixed and re-tested.

8.2 Citizens Have to Care Enough to Act

Every assumption above assumes citizens will show up. That's not guaranteed. Political apathy isn't just a downstream symptom of learned helplessness (Section 2.4) — it's a live risk here specifically: a citizen can find Surely clear and neutral, see genuine signal reach their representative, and still not act, because clarity and trust aren't motivating. Lowering the cost of participation (Section 7.1) helps citizens who already want to engage; it doesn't manufacture the desire to engage among those who've concluded it isn't worth the effort.

This assumption fails if activated users read content, understand it, and don't act on it — measurably lower conversion from Civic Profile activation to an actual Bridge submission or TownSquare contribution than engagement targets assume. If that gap persists, the fix isn't more clarity; it's a different hypothesis about what moves someone from understanding to action.

8.3 Participation Has to Reach Real Scale

The feedback loop needs meaningful reach in competitive districts. Taiwan's Join platform showed a government-backed platform can reach population-scale engagement and produce real policy change.⁶⁵ The companion lesson from vTaiwan is that such platforms

can be fragile once political support fades.⁶⁶ SureVoter's approach addresses this: because the nonprofit's independence doesn't depend on election outcomes, it's insulated from the volatility that undermined vTaiwan.

SureVoter is also building a model valuable enough for the politics industry to pay for, so the citizen experience stays free, forever. Citizen acquisition starts through referral — officials or candidates inviting their own constituents — behaving differently than a typical paid-acquisition product, relying instead on network effects. In parallel, collaboration with civic organizations, outreach to civic-minded media, and the activation of "civic ambassadors" — volunteers working to build awareness of SureVoter within their communities and social networks — offer broader paths to scaled usage.

SureVoter's initial pilot in Florida will surface these dynamics early. This assumption fails if districts — starting with Florida — don't reach 3–5% of registered voters, balanced across party and independents, with an activated Civic Profile within 12 months of launch. If that happens, either the acquisition model isn't working or our threshold was wrong — either triggering the need for a specific decision, not just more time. The channel mix — how many activated profiles come from civic-organization partnerships versus direct acquisition — will be the first real test of whether SureVoter strengthens those institutions or routes around them.

Civic organizations aren't only a distribution channel: the same API access described in Section 7.3 offers them access to insights and supports the data-informed pursuit of their own missions and initiatives.

8.4 Officials Have to Respond to Verified Constituent Signal

The theory assumes officials will change behavior when given verified constituent intelligence. The incentive is real: an official who can point to verified signal has a lower-risk case to make to their base than one relying on instinct alone — the protection Step 3 describes. That's testable, and could be wrong: officials in safe seats might keep favoring donor pressure regardless. The honest version is conditional — some officials, in some districts, will change behavior, and that's enough to start the loop.

Officials activating and upgrading to SureVoter's paid tiers tests this, but activation alone isn't proof. This assumption fails if officials who adopt Bridge show no measurable change in responsiveness — no movement on the 60% AI response acceptance target, no increase in substantive replies — after two full quarters of use. If usage keeps growing but behavior doesn't move, the theory is failing even as adoption looks healthy.

8.5 The Learning Agenda

Naming our assumptions tells us what evidence would falsify the theory. It doesn't, on its own, commit us to finding out. That takes a plan: what gets measured, on what schedule, and by whom.

This is a results framework, not a KPI dashboard. Operational metrics tell you whether the platform is being built and adopted; this framework measures something narrower — whether the five-step chain in Section 6 is actually working. A quarter can hit every product target while the underlying causal chain still isn't connecting.

Not every step will produce a clean confirm-or-deny result. Democracy Fund's evaluation team has argued that most "impact" thinking assumes a single model of steady, measurable change, when several different patterns can be equally legitimate evidence something is working.⁶⁷ A district where adoption stalls but trust stops declining may be evidence of a stabilizing effect; a long stasis followed by a sudden jump after a trigger event is a legitimate signature of Step 5, not evidence the mechanism has failed.

Review schedule: citations and data get reviewed annually. The causal chain itself needs a separate, less frequent but more rigorous check — a full review of Section 6 against actual Florida deployment data, no later than 18 months after launch. Ideally, this review comes from an independent evaluator testing our execution against what we said we'd do, rather than us grading our own work.

PART III: THE VISION

9. What Success Looks Like

Success is the trap loosening its grip, one stage at a time.

Near-term success means the Section 8 risks never materialize: a neutral AI accurately maps citizen priorities, the aggregated output beats traditional polling, officials claim their profiles, and users across the spectrum feel understood rather than sold to. This is the first crack in pessimism — clarity that didn't exist before, reaching people who'd stopped expecting it.

Medium-term success means the feedback loop is actually operating: officials using the signal, constituents returning after seeing real outcomes, civic data compounding into an intelligence resource that doesn't exist anywhere else. This is proof accumulating — what the trap has historically obscured or withheld.

Long-term success means structural reform becomes politically possible because the information environment has changed, and enough proof has accumulated that pessimism no longer pays off by default. That won't be SureVoter's achievement alone — structural reform requires political mobilization no single platform can produce by itself. SureVoter's contribution is the infrastructure that makes it possible.

10. The Theory at Scale

The mechanism doesn't need universal adoption to reach national scale — it needs two distinct paths to compound.

The first is the local network effect described in Section 6, Step 4: within a district, adoption reinforces itself once it clears a threshold. National scale isn't one uniform rollout; it's many districts crossing that threshold independently, on their own timelines. This works best in competitive districts, where electoral accountability still functions — the same reasoning behind Sections 2.1–2.2, where gerrymandering and closed primaries protect incumbents regardless of party. SureVoter doesn't change either party's map⁶⁸, but where competitive districts remain, this mechanism operates exactly where accountability pressure exists, and where the trap is weakest.

The second path doesn't depend on district-level adoption at all: becoming the civic data layer other AI systems already use (Section 7.3). Once assistants like Alexa, Siri, or Google Assistant ground their civic answers in SureVoter's verified data, reach is no longer limited by how many citizens download a platform — only by how many people already ask their AI assistants a civic question. This reach grows daily.

11. The International Dimension

The partisan trap isn't a uniquely American condition — it's one instance of a pattern that shows up wherever citizens stop believing their institutions will respond and institutions no longer feel the need to prove otherwise.

International IDEA's 2025 assessment finds civic participation and representative responsiveness at their weakest levels in over 20 years across most democracies studied.⁶⁹ The OECD's 2025 survey of Latin America finds declining confidence in representative institutions even where commitment to democracy as a value remains high⁷⁰ — the same trust-before-backsliding sequence Section 4 documented in Hungary⁷¹, playing out under different pressures.

CIVICUS's 2025 analysis of the civic technology field finds no shortage of tools built to address this — the shortage is durability: experiments that prove a concept and disappear once funding or political will turns against them.⁷² That's the same fragility Section 8.3 flagged in vTaiwan.

If SureVoter's model succeeds domestically, its answer to that durability problem travels: a structure built to survive changes in political leadership, open enough to be adapted rather than rebuilt from scratch, isn't a uniquely American solution to a uniquely American trap. It's an architecture that can improve democratic outcomes everywhere.

12. Overcoming the Partisan Trap

Pessimism is what keeps the trap in place. When people stop believing agreement is possible, they stop rewarding anyone who tries for it — and the system gives them more of what they already expect.

We believe SureVoter offers a different path. As clarity improves and citizens see real signs their voice moved something, pessimism has less to feed on. In its place, something more hopeful can take root: a return to the kind of partisanship democracy benefits from — debate, compromise, and action, rather than suspicion and standstill.

This isn't only good for citizens. The trap's own definition is a situation worse for nearly everyone inside it, including the parties themselves. A Congress that passes 0.4% of the bills it introduces gives its own members almost nothing to point to. A candidate who wins a hyper-polarized primary still has to govern a full district afterward, with a mandate from a fraction of it. And the "exhausted majority" — 67% of the country, by one measure — is a pool of persuadable people left untouched by both parties chasing their flanks; whoever first offers something other than the fight has something real to gain.

None of this requires either party to lose for the other to win. That's precisely what a trapped equilibrium prevents — and why an exit from it doesn't need a villain, on either side, to be worth taking. This won't happen quickly or everywhere at once. But it can happen the same way the trap took hold — one experience at a time, compounding, until belief in what's possible outweighs the habit of expecting nothing.

13. Conclusion

The democratic feedback loop broke down gradually, over decades, at every stage: citizens stopped forming clear preferences, those preferences stopped reaching institutions, institutions stopped responding, and elections stopped correcting the failure. Partisanship didn't just accompany that breakdown — it became the trap holding it in place, rewarding everyone for staying inside it and punishing whoever moves first to leave. That trap is not an accident of bad actors but the predictable output of a self-reinforcing industry, protected from competition and from any obligation to serve its largest customer.

It's hard to call any of this productive: when we're more likely to vote against a candidate than for one, when a willingness to compromise makes you "compromised" in your own party's eyes, and when so much effort goes into ensuring the other side loses — even though most Americans share a vision for what progress looks like. In most cases, the real obstacle is no longer the issue itself.

When a system rewards partisanship over problem-solving, our divisions widen, and so does the distance between the reality and the promise of American democracy. Perfectly rational. Imperfect and maddening. The trap fuels the gap.

Nothing in this document claims the loop can be rebuilt overnight, or that the trap can be dissolved by a platform alone. What it claims is narrower and testable: that redistributing information and coordination capacity within the existing rules can restart the loop and ease the pressures that sustain the trap. Done well, this work creates the conditions — and the infrastructure — for bigger changes and more productive outcomes.

This document is meant to be used, not filed away. When a funder asks why this organization exists, this is the answer, laid out so it can be checked. When a partner asks whether SureVoter's theory is compatible with their own, this is the basis for that judgment. When a citizen, candidate, or representative wants to understand what we're doing and why, they have their answer.

And as the people leading this organization change and grow over time, it's meant to serve as a reminder of why we're built the way we are — and why what we've built matters.

APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Bridge by SureVoter — The official-side receiving layer: a unified, AI-assisted inbox aggregating constituent communication, prioritizing verified constituents, and surfacing structured signal to officials and agencies.

Civic OS — SureVoter's long-run platform concept: a full-stack civic operating system handling citizen-representative communication, accountability scoring, and government coordination.

Democratic feedback loop — The mechanism by which citizen preferences become collective decisions: signal formation, transmission, policy response, and electoral accountability.

Dual-entity architecture — SureVoter America Foundation (non-profit, operating entity and steward of America's interest) and SureVoter LLC (for-profit technology company licensing model to democratic institutions) – both designed to resolve the mission-sustainability tension that has undermined previous civic technology initiatives.

Learned helplessness — Seligman's (1975) term for the withdrawal response to repeated uncontrollable negative outcomes, describing the psychological dimension of civic disengagement.

N≥11 cell suppression — The privacy standard for constituent intelligence: every data point reflects aggregation across a minimum of 11 verified citizens, drawn from U.S. Census Bureau standards.

Partisan trap — SureVoter's term, borrowed from the economics of self-reinforcing equilibria (e.g., liquidity traps, poverty traps) and formalized for partisan politics by Bueno de Mesquita and Dziuda (2023): a condition in which partisanship persists, and often worsens, because no single actor — voter, candidate, or party — can unilaterally exit without being punished for moving first. In this document, it is the equilibrium the politics industry's machinery produces and locks in.

Politics industry / political duopoly — Gehl and Porter's (2020) framing, adopted as the organizing lens of Part I: American politics understood as a healthy, self-serving industry in which the two major parties operate as a duopoly — competing for power while cooperating on rules that block new competition and insulate both from accountability to the average citizen.

Representation gap — The gap between citizen preferences and representative action, documented by Gilens and Page (2014), which SureVoter's constituent signal and accountability mechanisms aim to close.

Steward by SureVoter — The institutional-side working-memory layer: a persistent, structured record of an office's notes, research, hearing transcripts, testimony, and the constituent signal captured through Bridge and Surely, organized into usable work product

— briefing memos, drafting inputs, and a timestamped account of what constituents said and when it was acted on. Contextual detail captured by one staffer or team is shared across the office rather than siloed, so a caseworker, a legislative aide, and a communications lead are working from the same record of what a constituent raised and how it was handled — closing the gap where a concern surfaces once and no one downstream ever sees it.

Surely™ — SureVoter's AI thought partner: a neutral, non-persuasive civic agent helping citizens understand their democracy.

Theory of change — A written account of the causal logic connecting an organization's activities to its intended change, distinct from a mission statement, roadmap, or business plan.

APPENDIX B: WHAT WE ARE NOT CLAIMING

We are not claiming SureVoter will fix American democracy — only that it can repair a specific, documented failure in how citizen preferences form, transmit, and produce accountable responses, creating conditions under which further reforms become possible.

We are not claiming AI is inherently good for democracy. A specific application — cost reduction, structured signal aggregation, neutral information synthesis — addresses a specific documented failure; AI that amplifies outrage or undermines civic epistemics is harmful. The argument here concerns this application only.

SureVoter is built on values — democratic legitimacy, civic agency, institutional responsiveness, the belief that power should flow from citizens. What we claim is operational neutrality: the platform does not favor parties, candidates, or ideological positions, in a verifiable, auditable form.

We are not adopting Gehl and Porter's reform agenda. We adopt their diagnostic framework — politics as an industry, the two parties as a duopoly, the Five Forces — to organize Part I. Their prescription is structural rule-change (for example, Final Five Voting); SureVoter's theory of change works within the existing rules. Sharing their diagnosis is not the same as sharing their remedy, and this document is explicit about the difference.

We are not claiming commercial success is irrelevant — officials paying for constituent intelligence is evidence the theory is working. And we are not claiming to solve problems outside our scope: physical safety, campaign finance law, gerrymandering, and constitutional structure are documented problems we acknowledge but do not propose to fix. Our scope is the information and coordination failures within existing rules.

Whether Bridge's voter-verification model generalizes to non-legislative regulatory agencies is confirmed as roadmapped, not current-state capability. See Problem #31 in Appendix D.

APPENDIX C: KEY SOURCES, ANNOTATED

This appendix does not annotate every citation in the document — every footnote is already a complete, standalone citation. It annotates the sources that meet at least one of seven explicit criteria, chosen so the list functions as a credibility check for a skeptical reader: (1) cited, or invoked by name, in more than one section; (2) carries an explicit disclosure of advocacy, funding, or institutional affiliation; (3) anchors a claim added or corrected during a documented citation-audit pass; (4) anchors the primary framing statistic in Section 1, Section 4, or Section 10; (5) is the underlying source for one of the document's charts; (6) anchors a claim that a specific, named SureVoter product feature is designed to directly respond to; (7) is explicitly named as one of the structural forces organizing Section 2's argument, or as the primary comparative case study for one of Section 8's five assumptions.

[C.0] Bueno de Mesquita and Dziuda, "Partisan Traps" (2023). The formal theoretical model underlying Section 1's central framing of the equilibrium the industry sustains: a game-theoretic account of how voter pessimism about common-interest reform leads to the reelection of ideologically aligned incumbents, reinforcing the pessimism that produced it. Disclosure: a working paper (BFI No. 2023-145 / NBER No. 31827), last revised October 2024, not yet peer-reviewed. Cited for its formal mechanism, not as settled empirical fact. Meets criteria 3 and 4.

[C.1] Gilens and Page (2014). The empirical foundation of the document — the finding that average-citizen preferences have near-zero policy influence relative to organized interests, which anchors the "who is the customer" thesis of Section 1. Not in scientific dispute as to direction. Meets criteria 1 and 4.

[C.2] Gehl and Porter, The Politics Industry (2020). The organizing framework for Part I's entire diagnosis: politics as an industry, the two parties as a duopoly, and Porter's Five Forces as the structure of Section 2. Also the reference point for the mechanism logic of Section 7. Disclosure: Katherine Gehl founds the Institute for Political Innovation, which advocates structural reform (notably Final Five Voting); this document adopts her diagnosis but explicitly not her reform prescription (see Appendix B). Meets criteria 1, 2, and 7.

[C.3] Putnam, Bowling Alone (1995/2000). The foundational social-capital research behind the demand-side collapse in Section 2.4. Meets criterion 7.

[C.4] Seligman, Helplessness (1975). The psychological mechanism behind the underserved customer's disengagement in Section 2.4, establishing why better tools alone are insufficient. Meets criteria 1 and 7.

[C.5] Bandura, Self-Efficacy (1997). The constructive complement to Seligman: political self-efficacy is buildable through visible proof of impact. Meets criteria 1 and 7.

[C.6] Fukuyama, Trust (1995). The macro-institutional complement to Putnam, establishing trust as foundational infrastructure for cooperative institutions. Meets criterion 7.

[C.7] Haidt, *The Atlantic* (2022), and Raychoudhury, *The Atlantic* (2022). The epistemic-fragmentation argument in Section 2.5's channel analysis, paired deliberately with its strongest published counter-citation. Meets criteria 2 and 7.

[C.7a] Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes (2012); Iyengar & Westwood (2015); Mason (2018) — paired with Fiorina, Abrams & Pope (2005) and Fiorina & Abrams (2009). The foundational affective-polarization literature behind Section 2.1's "competing on tribal identity" argument, paired with the strongest published counter-thesis that mass polarization reflects political-class rather than electorate movement. The gap between perceived/affective and actual/substantive distance is the premise Section 6's Blind Alignment Test depends on. Meets criteria 3 and 4.

[C.8] Telecommunications Act of 1996 / History of Fox News and MSNBC. A correction: an earlier draft incorrectly attributed cable news' rise to the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, which PolitiFact and Snopes have fact-checked as false (cable was never subject to it). Retained in Section 2.5 with the correction visible. Meets criterion 3.

[C.9] Valgðarsson et al., *British Journal of Political Science* (2025). The most rigorous analysis of political-trust trends. The Hungary finding — trust collapse preceded backsliding — is the single most important empirical argument for urgency in Section 4. Meets criterion 1.

[C.9a] Cox, Cubillos & Le Foulon (2025) and Graham & Svolik (2020). Direct causal/experimental evidence complementing [C.9]'s macro trust-collapse argument with a micro-level mechanism. Meets criteria 1 and 4.

[C.10] Knight Foundation / Carnegie Corporation of New York (2022). The source for the local-election-turnout chart in Failure Point 1. Meets criterion 5.

[C.11] States Win (fka Sister District Action Network) (2022). The roll-off-rate data behind Failure Point 1's state-legislative claim. Disclosure: States Win is a Democratic-aligned electoral organization; the specific figures are independently consistent with non-partisan election-administration data. Meets criterion 2.

[C.12] Quorum/Axios/PolitiFact (2023–24) and GovTrack.us/Newsweek/CSPC (2025). The two data sets behind the Congressional-productivity chart in Failure Point 3. Meets criterion 5.

[C.12a] McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, *Polarized America* (2006) / DW-NOMINATE. The academic benchmark for congressional elite polarization, anchoring Failure Point 3 at the measurement level. Meets criterion 4.

[C.13] LGBTQ+ Victory Institute, "Threats on the Trail" (2026). Candidate-safety survey data supporting Failure Point 3. Disclosure: an advocacy organization, in academic partnership with Loyola Marymount University. Meets criterion 2.

[C.14] Canes-Wrone (2024) and Issue One, "The Price of Power" (2017). The fundraising-treadmill claim, now anchoring the supplier-capture argument in Section 2.3.

Disclosure: Issue One is a campaign-finance-reform advocacy nonprofit; its figures are independently corroborated by the peer-reviewed Canes-Wrone study. Meets criterion 2.

[C.15] International IDEA, Global State of Democracy 2025. The most current comprehensive global assessment, documenting the ninth consecutive year of net democratic decline. Meets criteria 1 and 4.

[C.16] Noveck, Written Testimony (2025). The evidentiary anchor for Problem #5's constituent-contact volume and Section 7.2's convergence argument. Meets criteria 1 and 3.

[C.17] Kreps and Kriner (2024). The evidentiary anchor for the response-rate finding in Problem #5 and the verification argument in Problem #18. Meets criteria 1 and 3.

[C.18] Ruedy, "Six Models for Understanding Impact," Democracy Fund (2018). The source of the evaluation vocabulary Section 8.6 adopts wholesale. Meets criterion 7.

[C.19] Gallup / Special Competitive Studies Project (2025). The adoption-versus-trust gap in AI systems, charted in Section 8.1 as the sharpest illustration of the document's most existential assumption. Meets criteria 3 and 5.

[C.20] Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022) and The Daily Beast on vTaiwan (2024). The primary comparative case study for Section 8.3's participation-at-scale assumption. Meets criterion 7.

[C.21] Serna and Massoglia / OpenSecrets (2024) and Bonica and Grumbach (2025). The campaign-finance-concentration and donor-age statistics anchoring the buyer-power argument in Section 2.4, Failure Point 4, and Section 10. Meets criteria 1 and 4.

[C.22] Nord et al. / V-Dem Institute (2026), Schenckan and Cambanis / The Century Foundation (2026), and Bright Line Watch (December 2025–March 2026 surveys). The two annual backsliding assessments anchoring Failure Point 4's closing argument and Section 4's urgency claim, paired with Bright Line Watch's more frequent expert-survey data, which tracks the same decline at finer temporal resolution — a sharp drop to 53 in April 2025, followed by partial stabilization in the mid-to-high 50s, with the most recent modest improvement tied to two specific, checkable developments: a rise in experts saying the judiciary effectively limits executive power (18% to 32%) and in experts saying the military isn't exploited for political ends (20% to 45%). Unlike the Haidt/Raychoudhury pairing at [C.7], this isn't a dispute over direction — all three sources agree on the decline — but a difference in measurement frequency that adds texture and gives the claim a built-in, checkable signal of whether things are getting better or worse. Meets criteria 4 and 7.

[C.23] Rucho v. Common Cause, 588 U.S. 684 (2019). The source of the political-question doctrine the document invokes for both Texas's and California's 2025 mid-decade maps — a single, consolidated ruling that addressed a Republican-drawn map (North Carolina) and a Democratic-drawn map (Maryland) together, decided 5–4, holding that partisan gerrymandering claims are outside federal courts' jurisdiction. Anchors the market-division argument in Section 2.1 and the scale argument in Section 10. Meets criteria 1 and 4.

[C.24] Sabato's Crystal Ball, "The 'Big Sort,' Again" (2022). The evidentiary anchor for the market-division paragraph in Section 2.1 and for Appendix D Problem #30. Meets criterion 3.

[C.25] Smith / Los Angeles Times (2026) and Sierra Club / San Francisco Chronicle reporting (2026). The evidentiary anchor for Problem #31 (AI-generated constituent impersonation). Disclosure: Sierra Club has a stake in the underlying air-quality rules; the load-bearing claims are the impersonation facts themselves. Meets criteria 2 and 3.

[C.26] The bipartisan compromise-preference literature (Problem #29). Georgetown Battleground Poll (Nov 2024): 95% want cooperation, 82% support compromise even at personal cost. More in Common's "Hidden Tribes" (2018–2024): 67% "Exhausted Majority." Pew (Oct 2025): the demand for compromise is directed outward. Disclosure: More in Common is advocacy-adjacent, with independently replicated methodology. Meets criterion 2.

[C.27] Thomsen (2017) and Hall (2019). The representational-talent research behind the barriers-to-entry argument in Section 2.2 and Failure Point 3: polarization is driven as much by who declines to run as by who wins. Meets criterion 6 — the Candidate Discovery Signal is a named feature designed to respond to this finding.

[C.28] Heritage Foundation, "From Administrative State to Constitutional Government" (2023), paired with Shah, Walker, et al., "The Accountable Bureaucrat," Yale Law Journal (2023). The unelected-bureaucrat accountability critique in Section 3's Failure Point 3, paired deliberately with its strongest published counter-citation. Disclosure: Heritage is a conservative advocacy think tank; the pairing itself is the reason this appears here rather than as a bare footnote. Meets criterion 2.

APPENDIX D: THE PROBLEM INVENTORY

The 33 problems from SureVoter's founding analysis, organized by the four failure points from Section 3. Each entry names the mechanism and whether SureVoter directly solves, indirectly influences, or leaves it outside scope.

Failure Point 1: The Citizen Signal Never Forms

#2 — Information overload makes truth indistinguishable from noise. Volume exceeds what anyone can process, and engagement-optimized platforms surface resonant content regardless of accuracy. Scope: Directly solved.

#4 — Civic participation is too costly for most people to sustain across attention, understanding, monitoring, and coordination, concentrating influence in organized interests with the infrastructure to bear those costs. Scope: Directly solved.

#10 — Civic infrastructure was built for an earlier era. Tools designed for slow-moving local communities have not been updated to match today's demands. Scope: Directly solved.

#11 — Modern government operates at a scale — 330 million people, thousands of agencies — the original civic architecture, designed for a population of 4 million, was never scaled to match. Scope: Directly solved.

#12 — The pace of civic change outstrips tracking tools. By the time most citizens learn something happened, the engagement window has closed. Scope: Directly solved.

#13 — Policy complexity exceeds most individuals' processing capacity. Citizens cannot evaluate what they cannot understand; representatives struggle outside their expertise. Scope: Directly solved.

#20 — No trusted, verified alternative to engagement-optimized social media for civic discourse, which amplifies conflict over consensus. Scope: Directly solved.

#21 — Perceived political division is significantly more extreme than actual policy disagreement, produced by an information environment that surfaces conflict and suppresses agreement. Scope: Directly solved.

#25 — No reliable way to assess how an official's record aligns with your values. Existing tools are party-branded or ideology-labeled. Scope: Directly solved.

#26 — Comparing candidates across a full ballot is effectively impossible. Ballot roll-off is the rational response to fragmented information. Scope: Directly solved.

#27 — Civic information is absent or unreliable in the AI systems people already use, hallucinated or partisan for lack of a canonical data layer. Scope: Directly solved.

#28 — Local government is almost entirely invisible to civic technology. City councils, school boards, and planning authorities make the decisions shaping daily life most directly,

yet data is fragmented and meeting records inconsistently published. Scope: Directly solved.

#29 — The majority preference for compromise is structurally silent. A November 2024 Georgetown Battleground Poll found 95% want the parties to work together and 82% support compromise even at personal cost; More in Common identifies 67% of Americans as an "Exhausted Majority." Yet primaries, donor networks, and engagement-optimized media amplify active minorities on both flanks. Scope: Directly solved.

#32 — The "futility problem": citizens have no reliable way to know if civic action will matter, and disengage absent visible proof. Scope: Directly solved. (Renumbered from a duplicate #25.)

#33 — Citizens lack a neutral way to understand the mechanics of the civic system itself — how redistricting works, what a primary is, what a state legislature actually does — independent of any candidate or campaign. Scope: Directly solved.

Failure Point 2: The Citizen Signal Never Transmits

#3 — Citizens have no meaningful way to reach representatives. Formal channels exist on paper but are designed for volume management, with no mechanism connecting contact to visible outcome. Scope: Directly solved.

#5 — Constituent questions go permanently unanswered. Congress receives more than 81 million constituent communications each year, a volume that has grown even as committee and support staff capacity has shrunk 40–45% since the 1970s–80s. A 2024 randomized field experiment sending genuine constituent emails to 7,132 state legislators found a response rate of just 17.3%. Scope: Directly solved.

#16 — Organized campaigns drown out individual voices with templated volume that legislative offices treat as noise, absent a verification layer. Scope: Directly solved.

#18 — No neutral mechanism prioritizes verified constituent voices over organized contact. A 2024 field experiment found legislators could barely distinguish AI-generated constituent emails from genuine ones. Scope: Directly solved.

#30 — Closed primaries structurally disenfranchise a growing plurality of voters. Geographic sorting has made the primary the decisive civic moment in most districts: "super landslide" counties grew from 6% of U.S. counties in 2004 to 22% by 2020. Homogeneous primary electorates skew older and less tolerant of compromise, and independents excluded from closed primaries have no say in the contest that decides who represents them. Scope: Indirectly influenced.

#31 — AI-generated content can now impersonate real constituents at a scale that defeats existing verification norms. In June 2025, the South Coast Air Quality Management District's board voted 7–5 to reject clean-air rules after a flood of roughly 20,000 AI-generated public comments; when the agency spot-checked commenters, most said they had never written the messages. In early 2026, a comparable campaign targeted the Bay Area Air

District using an AI platform called Speak4. The San Francisco Chronicle confirmed at least 10 submissions were made in residents' names without consent. Scope: Directly solved — with the regulatory–agency extension noted as roadmapped.

Additional problems contributing to this failure point: #10, #11, #20, #28, #29.

Failure Point 3: The Response Never Comes

#6 — Representatives are overmatched by communication volume. A member of Congress represents ~760,000 people; a state legislator 50,000–100,000 — small staffs were not designed for digital-era volume. Scope: Directly solved.

#7 — Representatives have no reliable window into constituent priorities. Polling, town halls, and correspondence are infrequent, biased toward engaged minorities, or unstructured. Scope: Directly solved.

#9 — Governance complexity exceeds individual capacity without better tools; representatives fall back on party guidance or lobbyist briefings. Scope: Directly solved.

#15 — The legislative architecture rewards gridlock over problem-solving; chamber rules and campaign finance make blocking easier than building. Scope: Directly influenced.

#17 — Legislative staff capacity is structurally inadequate, cut over four decades while complexity has grown; the gap is filled by lobbyists unaccountable to constituents. Scope: Directly solved.

#23 — Verified constituent intelligence has never been built at the resolution governance requires. Scope: Directly solved.

#24 — Representatives cannot track how constituent sentiment shifts over time; available intelligence is a snapshot, not a trend. Scope: Directly solved.

Additional problems contributing to this failure point: #5, #10.

Failure Point 4: Accountability Never Follows

#1 — Citizens cannot understand what representatives are actually doing. A representative's record is technically public but practically inaccessible: scattered, partisan-framed, hours to synthesize. Scope: Directly solved.

#8 — Representatives cannot communicate their work credibly; channels are perceived as self-promotional by default, with no neutral alternative. Scope: Directly solved.

#19 — Constituent relationship history does not survive changes in representation; successors start from zero. Scope: Directly solved.

#22 — The civic feedback loop has never been closed in one architecture: constituent concern, representative action, visible outcome. Scope: Directly solved.

Additional problems contributing to this failure point: #24, #25, #30, #31.

Outside the Loop

#14 — No market incentive existed to build neutral civic infrastructure: citizens are too diffuse to pay for it, and parties prefer the current environment. This sits beneath all four failure points rather than at any one of them — it is the missing "substitute" of Section 2.5, the absence of a market that would have built a fix. Scope: Directly addressed by SureVoter's dual-entity commercial model.

APPENDIX E: SOURCES AND NOTES

1. Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564–581. The directional finding isn't disputed; the precise size of the effect has been debated (see Enns 2015). This document relies only on the directional finding.
2. Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan, and Wioletta Dziuda. "Partisan Traps." University of Chicago BFI Working Paper No. 2023-145 / NBER Working Paper No. 31827, November 2023, last revised October 2024. A formal game-theoretic model, not yet peer-reviewed; cited for its mechanism.
3. Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (2012): 405–431; Iyengar & Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines," *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (2015): 690–707; Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*, University of Chicago Press, 2018. Counter-citation: Fiorina, Abrams & Pope, *Culture War?* 2nd ed., 2005, and Fiorina & Abrams, *Disconnect*, 2009.
4. Pew Research Center survey data, 2016 and 2022, on cross-partisan perceptions of the opposing party's morality.
5. Abramowitz, Alan I., and Steven W. Webster. "The Rise of Negative Partisanship," *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016): 12–22; and "Negative Partisanship," *Political Psychology* 39 (2018): 119–135. See also Finkel, Bail, et al., "Political Sectarianism in America," *Science* 370 (2020): 533–536.
6. Sabato, Larry. "The 'Big Sort' Continues, with Trump as a Driving Force." Sabato's Crystal Ball, UVA Center for Politics, February 2022. Finds 22% of U.S. counties were super-landslide counties in 2020, up from roughly 5–6% in 2004.
7. Brennan Center for Justice analysis of congressional district competitiveness: since the late 1990s, the number of districts whose presidential results roughly matched close national results has fallen by more than half.
8. Birenbaum, Gabby, Eleanor Klibanoff, and Carla Astudillo. "Texas Republicans target five seats in new congressional map." *Texas Tribune*, July 30, 2025; "Supreme Court lets Texas

use gerrymandered map," NPR, December 4, 2025; Schneer, Benjamin, Explainer, Harvard Kennedy School, 2025.

9. *Rucho v. Common Cause*, 588 U.S. 684 (2019). Consolidated with *Lamone v. Benisek*. Decided 5–4, opinion by Chief Justice Roberts, dissent by Justice Kagan (joined by Ginsburg, Breyer, and Sotomayor). Holding: partisan gerrymandering claims present political questions beyond the reach of the federal courts.

10. Bright Line Watch, February 2026 survey of political scientists and the public on partisan redistricting.

11. The Republican Party, formed in 1854 by anti-slavery Whigs, remains the last major party to enter American politics and endure. Later challenges were short-lived: Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive ("Bull Moose") Party (1912) and Ross Perot's Reform Party (founded 1995; Jesse Ventura elected Minnesota governor, 1998) each elected only a handful of candidates and faded within a decade. Standard party histories; see Ballotpedia, "List of political parties in the United States."

12. Forward Party (United States): founded October 2021 by Andrew Yang and Christine Todd Whitman (merged 2022 with the Renew America and Serve America movements, the latter led by former Rep. David Jolly). As of January 2026 the party holds no federal, gubernatorial, or statewide office, one state-legislative seat, and roughly seven local offices. Party records and Forward Party organizational data as of January 2026.

13. Gallup, Party Identification (annual tracking): self-identified independents have for years outnumbered adherents of either major party (typically ~40%+ independent).

14. Unite America Institute. "Not Invited to the Party Primary." As of early 2026, 13 states hold fully closed primaries; more than 18 million independent voters are excluded across 15 states.

15. Ballotpedia, "Sore loser laws by state" (analysis dated August 2025): 48 states restrict a candidate who loses a party primary from appearing on the general-election ballot as an independent or another party's nominee (via explicit statutes or functional equivalents); only New York and Connecticut do not.

16. Federal Election Commission, Contribution Limits 2025–2026. An individual may give a federal candidate \$3,500 per election. To a single national party committee, the same individual may give \$44,300 per year to the main account plus \$132,900 per year to each of its convention, recount/legal, and headquarters accounts; a party's national, Senate, and House committees are separate committees with separate limits, so the aggregate a single donor may direct to one party in a cycle exceeds \$1 million. Framing of the asymmetry as engineered follows Gehl and Porter (2020).

17. Campaign Legal Center, "What Is the Federal Election Commission?" (2025); Brennan Center for Justice, "Fixing the FEC" (2019). The FEC, created in 1975 to enforce the post-Watergate Federal Election Campaign Act, has six commissioners (no more than three

per party — in practice three Democrats and three Republicans) and requires four votes for any enforcement action, a structure that regularly produces 3–3 party-line deadlock.

18. Thomsen, Danielle M. *Opting Out of Congress: Partisan Polarization and the Decline of Moderate Candidates*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

19. Hall, Andrew B. *Who Wants to Run? How the Devaluing of Political Office Drives Polarization*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

20. Noveck, Beth Simone. Written Testimony (Dec. 17, 2025). Staff-reduction figures per Congressional Research Service, House of Representatives Staff Levels, 1977–2023, and LegBranch.org (May 30, 2017), as cited in the same testimony.

21. Lieb, David A., et al. "You elected them to write new laws. They're letting corporations do it instead." USA TODAY / Arizona Republic / Center for Public Integrity, April 3, 2019. Found at least 10,000 bills almost entirely copied from special-interest model legislation, with more than 2,100 signed into law. Won the 2020 Goldsmith Prize.

22. Wagner, Wendy, and Will Walker. *Incomprehensible!* Cambridge University Press, 2019.

23. Serna, Albert Jr., and Anna Massoglia. "Outside spending on 2024 elections shatters records." OpenSecrets News, November 6, 2024.

24. Bonica, Adam, and Jacob M. Grumbach. "Old Money: Campaign Finance and Gerontocracy in the United States." *Journal of Public Economics* 249 (2025). The median dollar comes from a 66-year-old donor; by 2024 the donation-weighted average donor age had climbed to 67.4, up from 61.5 in 2016.

25. Turnout of the voting-eligible population in the 2016 general election was approximately 60 percent, leaving roughly 40 percent of eligible citizens not voting (United States Elections Project, Michael McDonald). On composition: Knight Foundation, *The 100 Million Project* (2020), finds chronic non-voters hold weaker partisan attachments and identify as less partisan than active voters; Gallup's party-identification tracking consistently finds self-identified independents outnumber the adherents of either major party.

26. Seligman, Martin E.P. *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*. W.H. Freeman, 1975.

27. Bandura, Albert. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. W.H. Freeman, 1997.

28. Putnam, Robert D. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital." *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 65–78.

29. Fukuyama, Francis. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. Free Press, 1995.

30. Federal Communications Commission, Syracuse Peace Council, 2 FCC Rcd 5043 (1987) (repealing the Fairness Doctrine 4–0). See also the summary of the 1949–1987 requirement

and the 1987 and 1991 congressional attempts to codify it, both blocked by presidential veto threats.

31. History of Fox News and History of MSNBC (contemporaneous reporting); Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. 104–104. Note: cable networks were never subject to the Fairness Doctrine — that repeal shouldn't be cited as a cause of cable news's rise, per PolitiFact (June 2024) and Snopes (September 2025).

32. Adams, James. "Is Political Polarization Unique to the US?" UC Davis Magazine, October 2024. Analysis of partisan hostility across 20 democracies from the mid-1990s through 2017.

33. Haidt, Jonathan. "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid." The Atlantic, April 2022.

34. Raychoudhury, Pratiti. "Research Shows Stronger Connections Between News and Polarization Than Social Media." The Atlantic, May 2022.

35. Piccardi, T., Saveski, M., Jia, C., et al. "Reranking partisan animosity in algorithmic social media feeds alters affective polarization." Science, November 2025.

36. "How the 2008 financial crisis fuels today's populist politics." PBS NewsHour, March 15, 2023; "Occupy Wall Street, Tea Party Movements Both Born of Bank Bailouts." Fox Business, October 2011; "Thank the Financial Crisis for Today's Partisan Politics." Chicago Booth Review, 2018.

37. Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University. State of Local News Report 2025. October 2025.

38. Shaker, Lee. "Dead Newspapers and Citizens' Civic Engagement." Political Communication 31, no. 1 (2014): 131–148.

39. Blauw, Michael. "250 Years In: The Civic Education Story America Needs to Remember." Guest post for the Center for Civic Education, July 18, 2026. Documents the rise of the Center for Civic Education's federated national infrastructure (We the People, Project Citizen, the 1994 National Standards for Civics and Government, and the NAEP Civics Framework), its contraction after the 2007–2010 congressional earmark bans redefined directed funding — reducing the Center from roughly 98 staff with coordinators in nearly every congressional district to under a dozen — and an ongoing revival led by state coalitions, CivXNow, and a recent Carnegie investment.

40. Knight Foundation / Carnegie Corporation of New York. "Visualizing Voter Turnout in Local and School Board Elections." November 2, 2022, citing a 2015 Portland State University study and NSBA turnout estimates.

41. States Win (formerly Sister District Action Network). "Down-Ballot Roll-Off Patterns in 2022." December 2022. Roll-off averaged 9.86% in gubernatorial-year races and 12.11% in

Senate-year races. Disclosure: States Win is a Democratic-aligned organization; its figures are independently consistent with non-partisan election-administration data.

42. McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, MIT Press, 2006, and ongoing DW-NOMINATE updates at voteview.com.

43. Heritage Foundation, "From Administrative State to Constitutional Government" (2023).

44. Shah, Walker, et al., "The Accountable Bureaucrat," *Yale Law Journal* 132 (2023).

45. Quorum congressional data analysis, as reported in Narea, Nicole, "118th Congress to be most unproductive in modern history," *Axios*, December 19, 2023; and *PolitiFact*, April 3, 2024.

46. GovTrack.us, "Historical Statistics about Legislation" and year-end 2025 tracking; CSPC, "The CSPC Dispatch," December 19, 2025; *Newsweek*, July 2025.

47. Pew Research Center. "Most Americans Say Republican and Democratic Voters Cannot Agree on Basic Facts." *American Trends Panel*, March 10–16, 2025. Published July 30, 2025.

48. Serna and Massoglia (2024); see note 23.

49. Bonica and Grumbach (2025); see note 24.

50. Nord, Marina, et al. *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era?* V-Dem Institute, March 2026.

51. Schenkan, Nate, and Thanassis Cambanis. "Century's New Democracy Meter Shows America Took an Authoritarian Turn in 2025." *The Century Foundation*, January 15, 2026.

52. Bright Line Watch. "The Persistence of Diminished Democracy in a Second Trump Presidency." Survey report, April 2026, brightlinewatch.org. Data collected in partnership with Luth Research (experts) and YouGov (public); expert sample of 621 political science faculty, February 19–March 10, 2026.

53. International IDEA. *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move*. September 2025.

54. Valgðarsson, Viktor Orri, et al. "The Long-Term Decline of Political Trust in Democratic Countries." *British Journal of Political Science*, 2025.

55. Cox, Cubillos & Le Foulon, "Affective Polarization and Democratic Erosion," *Political Science Research and Methods* (2025), doi:10.1017/psrm.2025.10019.

56. Graham & Svobik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114 (2020): 392–409.

57. SureVoter Phase 1 Epic Brief P1–6: Constituent Communication Center (CCC) — Bridge by SureVoter. Section 3, Success Definition.

58. Canes-Wrone, Brandice. "Congressional Fundraising Dynamics and Their Implications for Problem-Solving." Yale ISPS Working Paper 25-15, December 2024. Supplementary: Issue One, "The Price of Power," May 2017; HuffPost, January 8, 2013 (DCCC scheduling documents). Disclosure: Issue One is a campaign-finance-reform advocacy nonprofit; its figures are corroborated independently.

59. Gehl and Porter (2020); see note 2 in Appendix C. The participation-cost analysis is SureVoter's own synthesis of the Gehl-Porter framework, applied to the barriers facing individual civic engagement.

60. Gehl and Porter (2020). The claim that outcomes can change within existing rules by redistributing information and coordination advantages is SureVoter's own hypothesis — an extension of the Gehl-Porter framework's focus on formal rule-change toward a technology-enabled, environment-change strategy.

61. Noveck, Beth Simone. Written Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Modernization and Innovation, "The Future of Constituent Engagement with Congress," December 17, 2025, filed at docs.house.gov.

62. OECD. "Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector," in Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results. OECD Publishing, 2026.

63. Gallup and the Special Competitive Studies Project. Reward, Risk, and Regulation: American Attitudes Toward Artificial Intelligence. Survey of 3,128 U.S. adults, April 25–May 5, 2025.

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