

A DEMOCRACY WITHOUT ANCHORS

DEALIGNMENT AND THE
AGE OF CYNICISM



The Center for
Applied Research
on Democracy

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About CARD

The Center for Applied Research on Democracy (CARD) serves organizers, funders, and political practitioners to make sense of a political terrain that existing frameworks no longer fully explain. CARD's work begins from the premise that many of the strategies the pro-democracy field has relied on were built for a different political era. Our role is to provide the missing layer between diagnosis and practice: a rigorous, social justice analysis of how the decline in political homes and civic anchors is reshaping political behavior, how right-wing groups have adapted to this terrain, and what organizers and funders must do differently in a low-trust, fragmented environment. Through research, training, and practitioner-facing tools, CARD translates analysis into strategic shifts in base-building, narrative, organizational design, and leadership development. We exist to help the field move beyond defending democracy as it was, and toward rebuilding the conditions under which democratic life can be lived, trusted and sustained.

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Executive Summary

Contemporary U.S. politics is often described in terms of polarization or rising extremism. Those accounts are important, but they often miss a more fundamental transformation that is crucial to understanding our political terrain. This report documents the growth and impact of a dynamic we describe as **dealignment**: the erosion of durable attachments to the institutions that once organized political participation, identity, and legitimacy.

For much of the twentieth century, political and civil life was organized through a dense ecosystem of institutions—unions, churches, civic associations, local media, and political organizations—that anchored participation in everyday social life. These institutions provided the infrastructure and social relationships through which many kinds of people understood political interests and issues, worked through ideas and disagreements, and joined social movements around shared visions and values.

Over the past several decades, this institutional landscape has thinned. Changes in work, housing, media systems, and public investment have undermined participation in these institutions. As a result, fewer people encounter politics through recurring, structured environments. Participation in political life has become more episodic, attachment more contingent, and institutional trust more fragile.

This structural transformation is widely experienced as cynicism. Across political and social contexts, across racial groups and geographic lines, people describe institutions and the political elites attached to them as distant, extractive, or unresponsive to their needs. Cynicism, in this sense, is not simply disengagement or apathy. It is a patterned response to repeated experiences of institutional failure or absence, a way of interpreting politics shaped by diminished expectations and low trust.

The right has adapted more effectively to this terrain. Conservative actors have developed strategies that engage cynicism directly, often by deepening distrust of institutions or redirecting it toward alternative sources of authority and meaning. By contrast, much of the progressive and pro-democracy ecosystem continues to operate as if institutional attachment remains stable, relying on models of persuasion, mobilization, and trust that no longer map onto lived experience.

Understanding this shift requires moving beyond dominant frameworks.

Polarization assumes a stable center that has been pulled apart, obscuring the erosion of the institutional foundations that once sustained that center. Conventional accounts of authoritarianism focus on strong leaders and institutional capture, often underestimating the role of long-term institutional failure and abandonment in shaping political attitudes.

For organizers, funders, and other practitioners, developing a new framework is imperative. Rebuilding durable political engagement requires more than improved messaging or mobilization strategies. It requires grappling with the conditions that thin civic attachments, exacerbate cynicism and developing forms of organization that can operate within a political landscape defined by weakened institutional ties.



Toward a New Framework for Funders, Organizers, and Researchers

Since Donald Trump's emergence on the national stage nearly a decade ago, progressive movements and the broader pro-democracy sector have relied on the framework of anti-authoritarianism to name the dangers of Trumpism, resist its normalization, and situate MAGA governance within longer histories of democratic backsliding.¹ This work has been indispensable. It made clear that Trumpism represented far more than another cycle of partisan competition.² It was a governing project that sought to dismantle public institutions and civic capacities built over generations, including public education, higher education, public health, labor protections, income supports, civil rights enforcement, and the norms that sustain constitutional government.

The dangers motivating this response are real. The dismantling of educational programs, the escalation of immigration enforcement, attacks on civil rights, the weakening of public health and environmental protections, and the erosion of democratic institutions all demand sustained resistance.

At the same time, the anti-authoritarian framework has often left a second question insufficiently explored. Why were these attacks able to gain traction in the first place with a broad range of the public, including many who did not identify with the MAGA base? Why have appeals to defending democracy struggled to become a broadly compelling public narrative?

This question has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Although large majorities of Americans continue to express support for democracy as an ideal, appeals centered on protecting democracy have had limited resonance across wide sections of the electorate. Recent research, including surveys by the Center for Working-Class Politics and the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, finds that "protecting democracy" does not rise to the top of issue priorities.³

As Katy Osborn and Scott Warren argue, "...activists seeking to protect American democracy from authoritarian influences are pursuing a failing strategy. They are defending largely abstract democratic processes, such as norms and rules, on the assumption that everyone agrees that they are legitimate and worth saving...Calls to defend democracy promise to alienate anyone who feels that democratic institutions have somehow

failed them.”⁴ This gap between widespread support for democratic ideals and the limited appeal of democratic defense points toward a deeper crisis than authoritarianism alone can explain.

This report argues that the missing piece is democratic legitimacy.

Trump’s assault on governing institutions succeeded because many of those institutions had already been losing legitimacy across broad sections of the public. That erosion extended well beyond a committed base of white Christian nationalists. It reached many of the constituencies that progressive politics has long sought to organize, including working-class communities, communities of color, younger Americans, and many women.⁵ Long before Trump, large numbers of Americans experienced public institutions as distant, unresponsive, inaccessible, or extractive. Decades of economic restructuring, neoliberal governance, political exclusion, and institutional failure had already weakened confidence that these institutions served ordinary people.⁶

This report argues that the erosion of democratic legitimacy cannot be understood apart from the decline of what we call **political homes**. Political homes are the institutions and spaces through which people learn to participate in public life, build relationships of trust, develop civic skills, and come to see themselves as members of a democratic community. They include labor unions, congregations, local newspapers, civic organizations, neighborhood associations, political parties, community organizations, and many other forms of everyday collective life. Together they formed the social infrastructure that anchored democratic participation.

Over the past two generations, many of these institutions have steadily weakened. Economic restructuring, widening inequality, the acceleration of work and daily life, technological change, geographic mobility, and the decline of local civic institutions have reduced the spaces where democratic habits are cultivated and sustained. As these political homes have disappeared, democratic values have become increasingly disconnected from everyday experience.⁷ Calls to defend democracy continue to express important principles, but they often fail to connect with people whose relationships to public institutions have already been profoundly transformed.

The decline of political homes has also reshaped the terrain on which contemporary politics unfolds. Right-wing and authoritarian movements have expanded by building new forms of organization, identity, and

belonging in places where older civic institutions have receded. Their success reflects more than ideological persuasion. It reflects their ability to occupy organizational spaces that democratic institutions once filled, including in many working-class communities and communities of color.

This legitimacy crisis reshapes the work of everyone committed to democratic renewal. For philanthropy, it raises questions that extend beyond policy design or legislative strategy to the conditions under which durable public support can be built. For labor unions, community organizations, and social movements, it speaks directly to the growing challenge of base building in an era marked by political cynicism, institutional distrust, and declining civic participation. For elected officials and advocates, it challenges the expectation that democratic legitimacy will naturally recover following an electoral victory or the defeat of authoritarian candidates. The conditions that produced widespread disaffection will remain unless they are directly addressed.

The central conclusion of this report follows from this analysis. Defending democratic institutions remains indispensable. It is equally necessary to rebuild the social infrastructure that makes democratic life possible. Revitalizing political homes, restoring confidence in public institutions, creating new forms of democratic participation, and rebuilding relationships of trust are no longer peripheral tasks. They have become central to the future of democratic politics.

The chapters that follow examine how these democratic anchors were weakened, how their decline reshaped American political life, and why rebuilding the institutions of everyday democracy is one of the defining challenges facing the pro-democracy movement today.



Section 1: What is “Dealignment” and Why Does it Matter?

Partisan Dealignment

In political science, “dealignment” has traditionally referred to the weakening of durable attachments between voters and political parties. Beginning in the mid-to-late twentieth century, scholars observed a gradual decline in strong partisan identification, an increase in self-described independents, and greater volatility in electoral coalitions.⁸ Unlike “realignment” which refers to voters moving from one party to another (e.g. the shift of Black voters to the Democratic Party beginning in the 1930s or the movement of white working class voters to the GOP in the 1960s), dealignment refers to the weakening of such partisan identifications altogether.

Survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and other longitudinal datasets document several interrelated trends. The proportion of Americans identifying as strong partisans declined from a mid-century high, while the share of voters calling themselves “independent” increased substantially over time. Patterns such as ticket-splitting and electoral volatility also became more pronounced in certain periods.⁹

These trends prompted debate about the meaning and consequences. Some scholars argued that weakening party identification signaled civic decline and growing detachment from formal politics, while others suggested that voters were becoming more issue-oriented or candidate-focused, exercising greater independence rather than disengaging.¹⁰ Still others noted that even many “independents” leaned consistently toward one party, complicating narratives of widespread partisan detachment.¹¹

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Importantly, classical dealignment treated parties as the central organizing institutions of democratic life and measured alignment largely through self-reported partisan attachment and voting behavior. This approach builds on foundational work in political behavior that emphasized party identification as a durable psychological attachment shaping political perception and action.¹²

Over time, however, scholars began to observe that declining partisan attachment coincided with broader trends: declining trust in government, falling membership in civic associations, declining union density, and lower participation in religious and voluntary organizations.¹³ These patterns suggested that weakening party ties might not be an isolated phenomenon but part of a more expansive transformation in the institutional foundations of political life.

Partisan dealignment captures an important dimension of contemporary politics. It identifies the erosion of stable partisan anchors and the rise of electoral volatility. But by centering party identification as the primary measure of alignment, it narrows the scope of analysis.

Voters are not simply less loyal to parties. Instead the institutions that once anchored political identity, mediated disagreement, and sustained participation no longer reliably perform those functions.

Weakening party identification is a central phenomenon, but it must be situated within a wider process of institutional thinning, one that reshapes how people relate not only to parties, but to unions, churches, civic organizations, media ecosystems, and collective life itself.

Expanding Our Framework of Dealignment

Partisan dealignment identifies an important shift in the weakening of partisan attachment. But political parties are not the only institutions that organize political belonging.

In this report, we use dealignment more expansively to describe a wider process of institutional thinning: the loosening of attachments not only to parties, but also to unions, churches, civic associations, local media, and other

organizations that historically structured how people participated in public life and made sense of politics.¹⁴

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Over the last few decades, institutional attachment has weakened across domains. Union density has declined significantly from its mid-twentieth-century peak.¹⁵ Religious membership and regular attendance have fallen across many denominations.¹⁶ Participation in voluntary associations and civic groups has diminished.¹⁷ Local newspaper circulation and newsroom employment have contracted sharply, leaving many communities without robust local coverage.¹⁸ Surveys show steep decreases in confidence in government, media, and other major institutions.¹⁹

Taken together, these trends document a thinning of the institutional infrastructure that once mediated political life. A broader system of recurring interactions, shared interpretations, and collective attachments is rapidly eroding, a decline that is not attributable to any single organization or aspect of civic life.

This shift has important consequences. When institutional attachments weaken, the capacity to absorb disagreement diminishes. Without durable organizational ties, political differences are less likely to be negotiated within shared structures and more likely to result in disengagement, fragmentation, or exit. The erosion of institutional density thus reshapes not only how people participate, but how they interpret conflict, evaluate institutions, and decide whether engagement is worthwhile.



Figure 1: Labor Union Voting in Oak Ridge, TN, 1948. Photo: Library of Congress

Material and Structural Drivers

Work and Economic Restructuring

The postwar period, characterized by high levels of union density and civic participation, was characterized by relatively stable employment relationships across many sectors. Large workplaces—factories, public-sector offices, and unionized firms—brought the same groups of workers together day after day. These settings were environments in which relationships formed, political information circulated, and collective identities took shape.²⁰

Union density in the private sector peaked at roughly one-third of workers in the mid-twentieth century. Today, it has fallen to below seven percent.²¹ As union membership contracted, so too did the institutional spaces that connected economic life to political participation.

At the same time the expansion of service-sector employment, the decline of unionized manufacturing, and the growth of contingent and nonstandard work arrangements has accelerated since the 1970s. A significant share of the workforce now operates in jobs characterized by shorter tenure, variable schedules, and limited institutional attachment. Roughly ten to fifteen percent of workers engage in some form of contingent or gig work, with broader trends toward subcontracting and flexible employment extending beyond formal gig platforms.²²

In gig and platform-based labor arrangements, workers, who are typically geographically dispersed, are often classified as independent contractors, and connected primarily through digital systems rather than shared physical workplaces. Even outside the gig economy, employment has become more individualized, with workers less likely to share long-term ties to a single employer or workplace.²³

Furthermore, stable workplaces once served as sites of recurring interaction and political education. Union meetings, shop-floor conversations, and workplace organizing created channels through which workers could connect their immediate lived experiences—wages, safety, and scheduling—to broader political questions.²⁴

As employment relationships become more fragmented and less durable, those channels weaken. Worksites and employment are less often a bridge between economic life and political organization and more of an individualized relationship between worker, employer, and market.²⁵

As the labor movement has weakened and working arrangements have shifted, many Americans have lost a reliable place to engage with and make sense of politics. A worker juggling multiple gig platforms may never meet coworkers in person, let alone discuss politics with them. These changes contribute to a broader erosion of institutional trust and a growing skepticism about whether collective organization can effectively represent individual interests.

Housing, Mobility, and Local Stability

Patterns of housing and mobility have also shifted, reshaping how people encounter institutions in everyday life. For much of the twentieth century, many forms of civic participation were rooted in relatively stable, place-based communities. People often lived in the same neighborhoods for extended periods, sent their children to local schools, attended nearby congregations, and participated in neighborhood associations or local organizations. These overlapping forms of attachment created repeated, in-person interaction through which relationships and institutional ties were sustained over time.²⁶

In recent decades, rising housing costs, increased residential turnover, suburbanization, and longer commute times have altered how people move through and relate to their communities. While overall geographic mobility has declined since the mid-twentieth century, housing stability has become more unequal. Homeowners now remain in place for a median of over a decade, while renters move much more frequently. At the same time, nearly one-third of U.S. households are cost-burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing.²⁷

When individuals move more frequently or spend less time embedded in neighborhood life, opportunities for repeated interaction diminish accordingly. Schools, congregations, and civic organizations become less consistent points of contact, and relationships that might otherwise deepen over time are more likely to remain transient.²⁸

Media Transformation

The media environment has undergone a particularly consequential transformation. In the mid-twentieth century, local newspapers, radio stations, and civic publications served as mediating institutions linking national events to local interpretation. Editors were often embedded in the communities they covered, and audiences were geographically bounded. As a result, political developments could be interpreted within shared

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contexts, and public debate unfolded within relatively stable, overlapping audiences.²⁹

Over the past two decades, this landscape has thinned. Local newspaper circulation has declined sharply, newsroom employment has contracted, and many communities have lost locally rooted outlets altogether. The United States has lost more than one-third of its newspapers since 2005, and more than 200 counties now lack any local newspaper, with many others served by only a single, often under-resourced outlet.³⁰ In their place, media markets have become more consolidated and increasingly detached from specific local publics.

At the same time, digital platforms have reorganized the circulation of information. Content now moves through algorithmically curated networks rather than through subscription-based systems that sustain ongoing relationships between institutions and audiences. Distribution is driven by engagement—what attracts attention, provokes reaction, or travels quickly—rather than by editorial judgment anchored in a particular community.³¹

Political discussion is more constant and more visible than before. But it unfolds under very different conditions. Instead of taking place in shared spaces where people interpret events together, it now moves across fragmented, overlapping networks. A political argument that once unfolded over weeks in a local paper can now play out in minutes in a comment thread.

The result is a loss of shared context. Without common interpretive frameworks, people are less likely to make sense of events in similar ways, even when they are engaging with the same issues.

Religious Engagement and Church Attendance

Religious institutions have historically been among the most durable sites of civic and social interaction in American life. Regular attendance and congregational membership, along with participation in church-based activities created recurring spaces for social connection, shared moral interpretation,

and community leadership. In many communities, congregations functioned not only as sites of worship but as institutional anchors that connected individuals to broader civic and political life.

Over time, however, religious engagement and attachment to religious institutions have significantly declined. Long-term survey data show a steady erosion across multiple measures of religiosity. In the 1950s, roughly three-quarters of Americans reported that religion was “very important” in their lives; by 2026, that figure had fallen to under half (47%). Similarly, the share of Americans with no religious affiliation has risen sharply—from just 2% in 1948 to approximately 24% today.³²

Patterns of participation have shifted as well. From the early 1990s through 2008, most U.S. adults reported attending religious services at least monthly. Since 2018, that pattern has reversed: a majority now report attending rarely or not at all. At the same time, confidence in the church and organized religion has declined, with only 36 percent of Americans reporting a great deal of confidence in these institutions. While there have been some recent reports of an increase in church attendance among young people, and national religious attendance has largely plateaued, these developments do not reshape the overall trajectory of the declining role of religion in shaping political life.³³

These changes represent a transformation in one of the most stable forms of institutional engagement in American life. Religious institutions have not and will not disappear, but their reach as sites of recurring interaction, moral interpretation, and collective engagement is significantly reduced. As with other domains, institutional attachment becomes less routine, more selective, and more contingent.

Figure 2: Easter 2016 Worship Service At Grace Baptist Church Knoxville, Tennessee, 2016. Photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC-BY-SA-4.0



Taken together, these shifts point to a broader transformation in how institutional life is organized and experienced. Across domains—work, housing, media, religion, and public provision—the conditions that once supported recurring interaction and durable attachment have weakened. Under these conditions, political attachment becomes more fragile. Participation is less sustained, disagreement is less likely to be absorbed within shared structures, and the relational costs of disengagement decline.



Section 2: The Institutional Foundations of 20th-Century Political Life

Institutional Density and Political Function

To understand dealignment, we must first clarify what has been lost. Alignment does not refer to ideological consensus or the absence of conflict. Rather, it describes a condition of institutional density—a landscape in which multiple overlapping institutions anchored people’s political lives and structured how disagreement unfolded.

These dense institutional ecosystems performed several core political functions, primarily serving as crucial sites of interpretation, meaning-making, aggregation, accountability, and continuity for many Americans.

First, institutions provided interpretive infrastructure. They helped people make sense of political events, policies, and crises. Individuals do not encounter political information as isolated consumers; they interpret it through shared cultural frameworks, social networks, and group-based experiences that shape how events are understood and evaluated.³⁴ Historically, local newspapers, churches, unions, and civic organizations served this role. Before the consolidation of media markets in the late twentieth century, most communities sustained multiple locally accountable outlets that interpreted events through shared community frameworks.³⁵ These institutions translated abstract political developments into familiar moral, economic, and social terms.

Second, institutions enabled aggregation without fragmentation. Influential scholarship in sociology and political theory demonstrates that cross-cutting affiliations—membership in multiple overlapping organizations—reduce the likelihood that disagreement over a single issue will produce a wholesale rupture.³⁶ Individuals embedded in multiple social networks are less likely to interpret political disagreement as total incompatibility, because their relationships extend beyond any single issue domain. More recent scholarship reinforces this insight by showing how organizations create bounded publics in which disagreement can be sustained without exit.³⁷ People with differing views on war, welfare, gender roles, or electoral politics remained attached to shared institutions because those institutions structured interaction across issue areas. In this

context, disagreement unfolded within ongoing relationships rather than producing immediate fragmentation. Because participation was embedded in social life, withdrawal carried relational and social costs. In this sense, institutional density made political heterogeneity durable by anchoring it within shared organizational environments.

Third, institutions sustained continuity over time. Political participation was not limited to election cycles or moments of crisis. Regular meetings, recurring publications, rituals, and social events created durable channels for engagement. Organizational continuity enabled the transmission of knowledge, strategies, and leadership across generations. Scholars of social movements and civic life have emphasized that organizational continuity is central to sustaining the capacity for collective action. Institutions mobilize people in discrete moments, but also preserve knowledge, transmit strategies, and cultivate leadership across generations.³⁸ Archival practices, leadership development, and organizational memory allow institutions to carry lessons from past struggles into new contexts. At the same time, recurring interaction—meetings, services, publications—normalizes participation as an ongoing practice rather than an episodic response.

Finally, institutional density produced relational accountability. Leaders were proximate to members. Editors lived in the communities they covered. Clergy, organizers, and local officials operated within shared social environments. This proximity created forms of accountability grounded not only in formal oversight, but in ongoing social relationships. Research across political science, sociology, and organizational studies shows that trust and legitimacy are shaped by repeated interaction, familiarity, and embeddedness within social networks.³⁹ When actors are known and accessible, their actions are more easily evaluated and contested within shared settings. Ethnographic and sociological work further demonstrates that accountability is often relational rather than purely institutional. It emerges through norms, expectations, and the reputational consequences of acting within a shared community.⁴⁰ In this way, institutional density did not eliminate conflict or inequality, but it structured how power was experienced and contested.

This is not to idealize the past. Many institutions were exclusionary, hierarchical, and deeply unequal. Access was often stratified by race, gender, and class, and participation frequently required sustained struggle. But they performed stabilizing political work, absorbing conflict and mediating disagreement, linking everyday life to collective interpretation, and making sustained participation possible.

Dealignment, in this sense, describes the erosion of institutional density, and with it, the political functions that density made possible. As rates of union membership, church attendance, civic participation, and local media presence have declined, the structures that once mediated disagreement have thinned. When those mediating layers weaken, the costs of exit decline, the durability of attachment shrinks, and the conditions for cynicism emerge.

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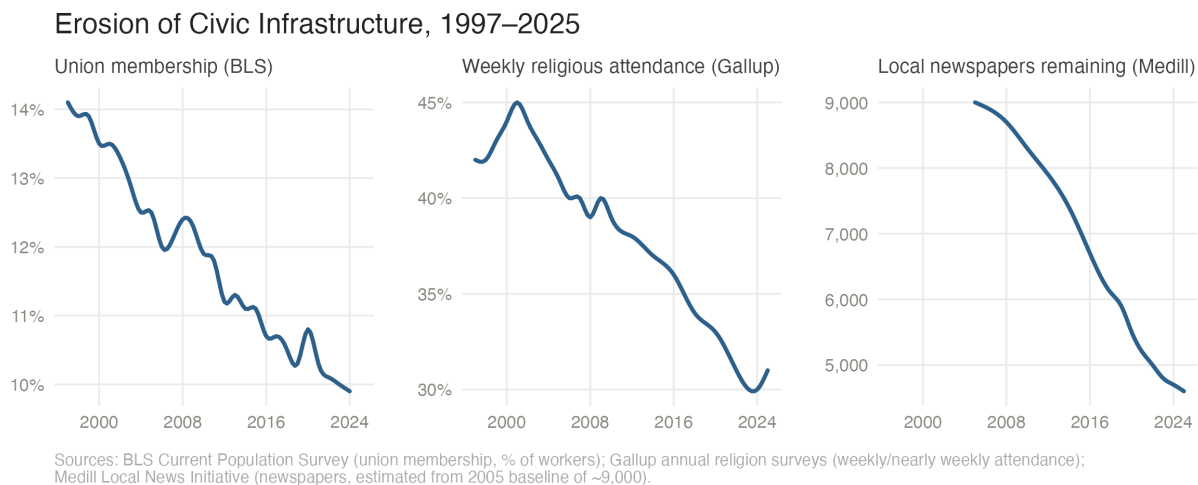


Figure 3: Erosion of Civic Infrastructure, 1997–2025.

Historical Examples

The erosion of institutional density does not unfold abstractly. It reshapes how people interpret events, how they disagree, and how they remain—or fail to remain—attached to collective life. To see how alignment once functioned, and how widespread cynicism emerges, it is useful to examine three domains in which institutional density historically structured political experience: local media ecosystems, labor institutions, and churches and civic organizations.

Each illustrates the same underlying shift: from mediated heterogeneity within shared institutions to fragmentation, exit, and detachment.

Case Example: The Black Press as Interpretive Infrastructure



Figure 4: Chicago, Illinois. Newsboy selling the Chicago Defender. April 1942. Photo: Library of Congress

In the early 1940s, Black readers across the country encountered a lively debate in their local newspapers. Labor leader A. Philip Randolph had proposed a mass March on Washington to protest discrimination in the defense industry, and editors and readers across the Black press weighed in. The Pittsburgh Courier championed the march and used its pages to mobilize support, while other outlets expressed concern that confrontation with the federal government could provoke backlash or undermine incremental gains.⁴¹ Letters to the editor and opinion columns debated tactics, leadership, and political strategy.

Historically, the Black press functioned as a form of interpretive infrastructure. In many cities, multiple locally anchored Black newspapers operated simultaneously, serving overlapping but distinct audiences within shared communities.⁴² Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*,

Pittsburgh Courier, and *Baltimore Afro-American* reached large readerships and were embedded in dense networks of churches, civic organizations, and neighborhood institutions. Editors were closely tied to community life; readership was geographically and socially bounded; and political disagreement unfolded within a shared interpretive environment.

These outlets did not speak with a single voice. Editorial positions often diverged sharply on questions of strategy, leadership, and policy. During the 1930s and 1940s, for example, Black newspapers debated whether Black voters should shift their allegiance from the Republican Party to Franklin Roosevelt's Democratic coalition, fiercely debating political strategy.⁴³ Yet these debates occurred within a recognizable public. Readers encountered disagreement without losing their place within a shared interpretive world, meaning political conflict was visible but mediated.

Over time, local media ecosystems weakened under the combined pressures of economic restructuring, consolidation, and technological change.⁴⁴ As print circulation declined and digital distribution expanded, many locally embedded outlets shuttered or saw their reach significantly reduced.

At its peak in the early twentieth century, there were over 1,900 Black newspapers in the United States. Today, estimates suggest that roughly 200 remain, many operating with limited resources and reduced local reach.⁴⁵

In their place, new forms of media circulation have emerged, increasingly national, platform-dependent, and algorithmically driven. Contemporary outlets such as The Shade Room, a social media account that primarily shares celebrity-driven news, operate under fundamentally different incentive structures. Rather than cultivating a bounded, locally accountable readership, they aggregate attention across dispersed audiences. Distribution is governed by algorithmic amplification rather than subscription-based continuity and sustained editorial relationships, and editorial authority competes with platform metrics.

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The political function of collective interpretation has not disappeared, but it has been reorganized. Shared audiences have given way to fragmented and overlapping publics. Debate now circulates across dispersed networks—often through comment threads, reposts, and influencer mediation—rather than within sustained editorial frameworks.⁴⁶

This transformation also alters accountability. Where earlier Black newspapers were embedded in and accountable to specific communities, contemporary media actors are often more directly accountable to platforms and the logics of visibility and monetization that govern them. The result has been a thinning of the shared interpretive infrastructure for Black Americans, mirroring wider shifts in Americans media consumption. Political disagreements that once unfolded within a common public now travel across fragmented networks and in comment sections, accelerating detachment and weakening durable institutional attachments.

Case Example: Labor Unions as Sites of Social and Political Integration

On a weekday evening in the 1960s, a union hall in a Midwestern industrial city might fill with workers after their shifts ended. Shop stewards reported on workplace grievances, discussed upcoming contract negotiations, and reviewed plans for the next local election. Conversations moved between wages, safety conditions, and national politics. Members debated candidates and policies while planning carpools to the polls, organizing coworker turnout, and planning Labor Day picnics and other social gatherings.

Union halls functioned as more than administrative offices or hiring sites. They were recurring spaces where economic concerns and political questions intersected. Meetings, trainings, and workplace organizing created opportunities for leadership development and political education. Shop-floor conversations circulated information about elections, legislation, and public policy affecting workers' lives.⁴⁷

Unions also played a broader role in shaping political attitudes and social solidarities. Union membership has historically been associated with higher levels of political participation and, in some cases, reduced racial resentment through cross-group contact and shared economic framing.⁴⁸

Of course, union members did not agree on every political question. Workers often held divergent views on candidates, parties, and social issues. But the institutional structure of unions allowed those

disagreements to exist within shared economic organizations.



Figure 5: Garment Union demonstration. April 1983. Photo: Library of Congress

Union density has declined dramatically over the past several decades. In the mid-twentieth century, roughly one-third of American workers were union members; today, that figure stands at approximately 10 percent overall and less than 7 percent in the private sector.⁴⁹

This decline is the result of a combination of forces, including economic restructuring, the shift from manufacturing to service-sector employment, and sustained legal and political challenges to organized labor.⁵⁰ At the same time, many unions have narrowed their scope. Faced with declining membership and resource constraints, union activity has often become more focused on contract negotiations and workplace-specific concerns, with less capacity for broader civic engagement, political education, and social programming.⁵¹

In this environment, disagreement more readily leads to detachment. Without dense institutional bonds, political variation is less likely to be negotiated within shared organizations and more likely to produce disengagement or exit.

The diminishment of unions thus represents more than an economic shift; it also weakens a key institutional bridge between everyday life and

sustained political participation, one that historically connected individual experience to collective organization and political action.

Case Example: Churches and Civic Institutions as Anchors of Moral Framing

On Sunday mornings throughout much of the twentieth century, churches across the United States functioned as recurring gathering spaces for civic life. Congregants arrived each week not only for worship but for a wide range of social activities—committee meetings, bake sales, youth programs, neighborhood organizing, bible study, and discussions about local events. Sermons and church meetings often connected moral teachings to public concerns, linking questions of justice, obligation, and responsibility to issues such as economic hardship, war, and civil rights.

In many communities, especially in Black communities, churches served as central nodes of civic organization.⁵² They hosted political meetings, coordinated mutual aid, and provided leadership platforms for community activists. Congregational life brought people into repeated contact with one another, creating social environments where political questions were discussed within ongoing relationships.

Members did not always agree on political matters. Older congregants sometimes expressed concern about the risks of confrontation, while younger activists pushed for more direct action. Yet these disagreements unfolded within institutions that emphasized shared moral language and communal obligation. People argued with others they saw every week—neighbors, relatives, fellow congregants—within relationships that extended beyond any single political issue. Moral interpretation was collectively produced, contested, and revised within durable institutional settings.⁵³

Research suggests that partisan identity has become increasingly intertwined with moral and social identity, making political conflict more likely to be interpreted as a clash of fundamental values rather than a negotiable difference of opinion.⁵⁴ In the absence of shared institutional settings, fewer spaces remain in which such disagreements can be worked through within ongoing relationships.⁵⁵

As a result, conflict more readily signals incompatibility rather than a problem to be negotiated. Exit becomes easier, and sustained deliberation more difficult. Moral language does not disappear from politics, but it is less often produced within shared institutional contexts and more often

circulates through individualized or networked channels, where it can be intensified, simplified, or strategically deployed.

Under these conditions, individuals must make sense of political life without the mediating frameworks that once structured collective understanding. Common-sense interpretations—“nothing works,” “they don’t care,” “it’s all a scam”—circulate more widely and become harder to contest. The next section examines how this transformation contributes to the emergence of the age of cynicism.



Section 3: Cynicism — Dealignment as Lived Experience

Political Cynicism Defined

A few weeks before an election, there is a knock at the door. The conversation is polite and familiar: the cost of rent, the price of groceries, the state of schools, the need to protect democracy. Nothing in the exchange is implausible. But underneath it sits a quiet, practiced doubt. The listener has heard versions of this before. Maybe they have spent hours trying to untangle a benefits application, fought with a hospital bill, watched a promised reform stall out, or seen leaders return only when they need votes. What lingers is uncertainty about whether engaging again will make any difference.

Cynicism is the lived experience of dealignment: the way institutional thinning is felt, interpreted, and acted upon in everyday life. It differs from skepticism, which can sustain accountability, and from alienation, which implies distance. Cynicism reflects diminished expectation—an orientation shaped by repeated encounters with institutions that feel unresponsive, extractive, or unreliable.⁵⁶

How Cynicism Forms

Cynicism accumulates through experience. People encounter institutions in moments that matter—seeking healthcare, navigating benefits, dealing with schools or workplaces. Scholars of the state have shown that these encounters are shaped not only by policy outcomes, but by the design of institutions themselves—by opacity, administrative burden, and the way benefits are hidden, delayed, or made difficult to access. Over time, those experiences teach people how to interpret institutional claims. What begins as frustration with one office, one agency, or one campaign can harden into a broader expectation: this probably will not work; they probably will

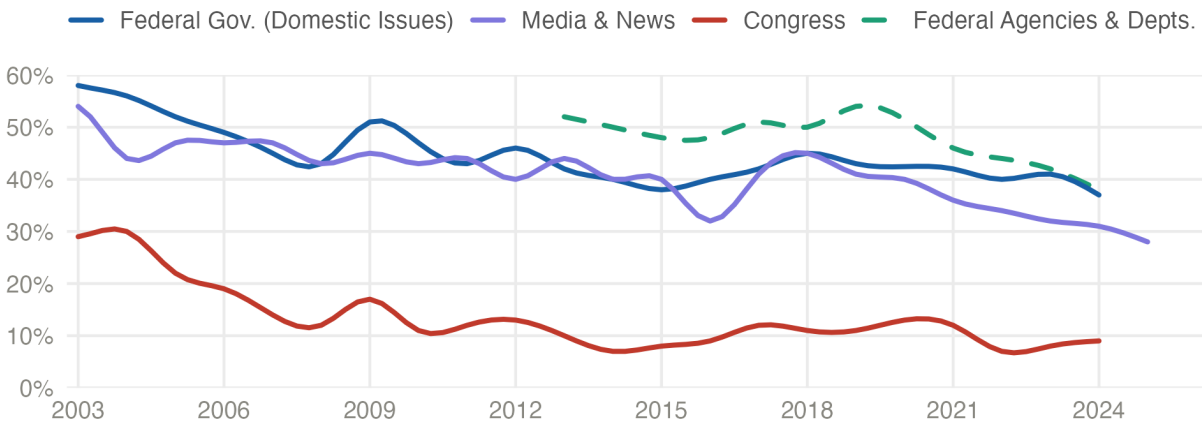
Cynicism is the lived experience of dealignment: the way institutional thinning is felt, interpreted, and acted upon in everyday life.

not follow through; the burden will likely fall on me.⁵⁷

This pattern is visible in survey data. Trust in government has declined sharply over time, and confidence in core institutions remains low across domains. In moments of crisis—economic downturns, public health emergencies, or local disinvestment—these perceptions often intensify, reinforcing the sense that institutions are not reliably structured to meet people’s needs.⁵⁸

Confidence in U.S. Institutions, 2003–2024

% expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence · Source: Gallup



Federal gov = % with great deal/fair amount of trust handling domestic issues (Gallup Governance survey).
All others from Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey (great deal/quite a lot). Federal agencies tracked since 2013.

Figure 6: Confidence in U.S. Institutions, 2003–2024.

Cynicism effectively reshapes how large swaths of the public engage with politics. People continue to pay attention, discuss, and participate, but more selectively. Engagement becomes conditional rather than habitual. Individuals may show up for specific moments while withholding long-term attachment. Trust is extended cautiously, often only after outcomes demonstrate it. Participation becomes a calculation rather than a durable relationship.⁵⁹

Historical Roots

Over the past four decades, privatization, deregulation, and austerity has reshaped the political order and fundamentally altered public life. Sustained ideological assaults on government capacity, combined with material disinvestment in public institutions, shifted expectations about what the state could or should provide. Political narratives framed public

institutions as inefficient, corrupt, or inherently untrustworthy. These changes were spearheaded by the right but were embraced across party lines. The result has been a steady hollowing out of public systems and a narrowing of political imagination.⁶⁰

By the 1990s, the bipartisan embrace of market-oriented governance and declining commitments to public goods and redistribution had begun to erode both policy capacity and institutional legitimacy.⁶¹ The aftermath of September 11 reoriented state power toward surveillance and security, reshaping public perceptions of accountability and civil liberties. The 2008 financial crisis, in particular, marked a turning point in how many people understood institutional responsiveness. Governments intervened to stabilize financial institutions while millions of people lost homes, savings, and economic security, and the institutions most responsible for the crisis faced limited consequences. Many concluded that democratic systems were more responsive to economic elites than to ordinary citizens.⁶²



Figure 7: From Occupy Wall Street, by B. D. Leak, 2011, [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC BY-SA 4.0.

Subsequent crises reinforced these perceptions. The years that followed saw rising deaths of despair linked to opioid addiction, economic decline, and the collapse of local economies. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of public health systems and the erosion of social safety nets.

Each episode reinforced the sense that institutions were unreliable, unresponsive, or indifferent. Political withdrawal deepened, shown through declining party membership and growing perceptions of political powerlessness.⁶³

Across these crises, people experienced institutions not as sources of protection but as distant and inconsistent actors. Cynicism emerges from this history. It is not a fixed ideological orientation but a rational response to decades of institutional retreat. As institutions withdrew from delivering stability and collective security, individuals withdrew from institutions in turn. This reciprocal retreat has reshaped how people imagine public life and whether they believe collective solutions are possible.

Institutional Change and Loss of Ownership

There has also been widespread shifts in ordinary citizens' ability to participate in and belief in the capacity of political institutions. Trust in government has declined across advanced democracies, party systems have been destabilized, and populist movements have surged on both the Left and the Right, often mobilizing against perceived elite capture.⁶⁴ The civic organizations that once anchored participation, including parties, unions, and voluntary associations, have weakened. Many people now encounter politics primarily as spectators or consumers rather than as participants. Skepticism once directed at corrupt officials has broadened into distrust of expertise itself, into suspicion of science and historically low levels of public trust in higher education.⁶⁵ The proliferation of misinformation and polarized media ecosystems has eroded confidence not only in institutions but also in the possibility of shared truth.

Yet the loss of faith in institutions cannot be explained solely by misinformation or digital manipulation. It grows from lived experience, and those experiences are not uniform. For many Black Americans, distrust emerges from a long history of exclusion and unequal treatment. For trans people, cynicism reflects ongoing hostility and erasure within public systems. For those navigating precarious housing, low-wage work, or crushing debt, it arises from repeated encounters with systems that fail to provide stability or dignity. In each case, cynicism is shaped by material conditions and historical memory.

The cumulative effect has been what some scholars describe as organized abandonment. As resources, legitimacy, and attention have been redirected upward, large segments of the population have been left to manage insecurity on their own. Public systems, including schools, health

care, and municipal services, have been hollowed out. Public universities increasingly chase private funding and rankings rather than public missions. Hospitals operate as corporations. Governments outsource essential services to private contractors. The promise of collective provision has been replaced by individualized survival.

Under conditions of dealignment, cynicism becomes a public orientation. As attachments to unions, faith communities, and parties weaken, the social infrastructures that once structured political identity dissolve. These institutions once provided a sense of belonging and a framework for understanding public life. In their absence, people become newly available for alternative forms of connection and socialization. This does not automatically produce right-wing affiliation, but it creates openings. In the absence of durable democratic institutions, appeals offering recognition, purpose, and community can gain traction.

Cynicism, then, can be a rational adaptation to a world in which institutional attachment has grown fragile and public promises have repeatedly outpaced lived experience.

Youth and the Experience of Dealignment

Young people today are not simply moving away from old political attachments; many never experienced those attachments as meaningful in the first place. For older generations, dealignment is experienced as the weakening of institutions that once structured political identity and attachment. But for many younger people, especially Gen Z and younger millennials, the decline of these institutions and the resulting widespread cynicism has defined the political environment into which they came of age.

Young people often encounter politics less as a stable set of institutions delivering substantive protections and benefits and more as a fragmented field of claims, identities, crises, and contradictions. They have lived through economic precarity, climate anxiety, gun violence, pandemic disruption, attacks on bodily autonomy, racial backlash, and the visible failure of institutions to deliver security or accountability. In that context, skepticism toward parties, government, media, universities, and nonprofits is a grounded interpretation of lived experience.

Many young people may hold progressive views on issues while remaining distrustful of both major political parties, skeptical of institutional politics,

and unconvinced that traditional civic participation will materially improve their lives. Others may be drawn into heterodox or cross-pressured formations that combine economic populism, anti-institutional sentiment, cultural grievance, wellness politics, or identity-based belonging in ways that do not map neatly onto conventional left-right categories.

This creates both risk and possibility. The risk is that young people's alienation becomes a terrain for reactionary movements that offer belonging, certainty, and explanation. The possibility is that younger generations may also be more open to new political formations that do not require loyalty to failing institutions as the price of participation. For organizers and democratic actors, the challenge is not just to "message better" to young people, devise policy platforms, or insist that existing institutions are capable of meeting all of their needs. Instead it is to build institutions, narratives, and political communities capable of earning trust among people who have little reason to assume that existing systems are working as intended.



Section 4: How the Right Recognized and Exploited Dealignment

When everything feels rigged, when the systems that provide people's lives with meaning are perceived as broken, when large swaths of the population feel lonely and disaffected, new political openings are created. Beginning in earnest in the early 2010s, segments of the political right began to orient themselves toward this environment in ways that proved consequential.

This approach can be traced through the Tea Party, the founding of Turning Point USA, and the rise of Trump. Across these formations, the right demonstrated a sharper understanding of a changing political environment in which distrust of institutions had become widespread and durable.

After the 2012 election, one current within conservative politics sought to rebrand the Republican Party modestly, softening its rhetoric and signaling a broader social appeal. A more significant response, however, was already taking shape through a turn toward institutional insurgency and affective politics. These actors treated distrust not as a problem to solve, but as a resource to organize.

Instead of trying to restore confidence in public institutions, many actors on the right learned how to work with public estrangement from them. They mobilized grievance, cynicism, and anti-establishment feeling, speaking directly to people who felt ignored, humiliated, or abandoned by political and economic systems. Through these appeals, participants were offered a story about why their frustrations made sense and were morally justified.

The Tea Party provides an earlier example of this shift. Emerging in response to the 2008 financial crisis and federal bailouts, it framed government power as the central problem confronting American life. Protest signs frequently read "Stop the Spending," "Take Our Country Back," and "No More Bailouts," phrases that echoed a broader narrative taking shape that asserted political and economic elites were colluding at the expense of ordinary people. Many participants saw both parties as complicit, describing the government as distant, unaccountable, and captured by elite insiders.⁶⁶

Elites, experts, universities, the media, public health authorities, and

The right became unusually attentive to the emotional texture of dealignment, especially feelings of betrayal, dispossession, and social unraveling.

administrative agencies were cast as arrogant, self-protective institutions detached from ordinary life. These narratives did not need to be internally consistent across all domains, and they often weren't. Their power lay in their ability to name a diffuse sense of dislocation and assign responsibility.

For example, Donald Trump's campaign speeches repeatedly framed institutional failure in stark, experiential terms. In his 2016 announcement speech, he argued that "the system is totally rigged against you." His campaign rhetoric effectively linked economic insecurity, immigration, and political corruption into a single narrative of betrayal. The slogan "drain the swamp" similarly reframed government not as a site of collective decision-making, but as a corrupt and self-serving system in need of disruption. The phrase was deliberately vague, but politically effective, allowing participants to project a wide range of frustrations onto a shared target: entrenched institutions and the people who ran them.

The right became unusually attentive to the emotional texture of dealignment, especially feelings of betrayal, dispossession, and social unraveling. It positioned itself as a disruptive force willing to confront a system widely experienced as broken, and it built new forms of belonging in that opening.

This orientation extended to knowledge-producing institutions. Right wing actor's repeated use of the phrase "fake news" to describe mainstream media outlets did not simply challenge specific coverage; it undermined the legitimacy of media institutions altogether. By encouraging audiences to distrust traditional sources of authority, this framing reinforced a broader sense that institutions could not be relied upon to tell the truth.

At the same time, right wing groups built new forms of belonging in the spaces opened up by institutional decline. Rallies, conferences, influencer networks, church-based activism, campus organizations, and digital communities gave participants shared language, recognition, and a sense of collective purpose.⁶⁷

Trump rallies, for instance, function as sites of collective identity formation as much as campaign events. Attendees

often describe them as environments where they felt seen and affirmed in ways that extended beyond policy agreement. Similarly, organizations like Turning Point USA have built campus networks and host events and gatherings that provide young conservatives with a sense of community and shared language, often explicitly framed against what they describe as dominant institutional cultures in universities.



Figure 8: Charlie Kirk speaking with attendees at the 2023 Turning Point Action Conference in West Palm Beach, Florida, July 2023, [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC BY-SA 2.0.

Crucially, this approach did not depend on coherent policy agendas. It worked through insurgent identity, symbolic conflict, and relational organizing in spaces where institutional credibility had already eroded. Political attachment was built less through programmatic coherence than through recognition and shared grievance.

In this sense, the right's advantage has not simply been ideological. It has been diagnostic. It recognized earlier—and responded more directly to—the conditions of dealignment we have outlined in this report. It learned how to convert cynicism into political energy, transforming distrust into a basis for identification and participation rather than withdrawal. By contrast, many pro-democracy actors continued to operate as if institutional legitimacy could be assumed, rather than rebuilt.

Section 5: Progressive Inertia in an Age of Cynicism

While the right was actively reorienting its strategies toward a political environment defined by distrust and detachment, many progressive organizations moved in the opposite direction. Rather than adapting to dealignment, much of the pro-democracy remained wedded to inherited forms of institutional standing and belonging.

One of those assumptions was that there remained a broad and receptive audience for progressive leadership and trust in the institutions that delivered progressive reforms. Across policy, advocacy, and movement spaces, there has been an implicit belief that strong arguments, sound policy, compelling narratives, and moral clarity would be sufficient to attract and mobilize support. Legitimacy was treated as something that flowed from institutional position—expertise, research, or organizational standing—rather than something that had to be actively rebuilt under changing conditions.

This shaped how the right was interpreted. Because much of the contemporary right offered few substantive policy proposals—particularly around material concerns—it was often assumed that its appeal would be limited and temporary. Many progressives expected that voters would eventually recognize the gap between right-wing rhetoric and material outcomes, and that better policy proposals would ultimately prevail.

This logic also shaped electoral strategy. For example, many Democratic campaigns in 2024 placed significant emphasis on abortion rights following the Dobbs decision, assuming that the unpopularity of abortion restrictions would translate into broad and durable electoral support. This assumption proved largely false. Exit polls conducted by The Washington Post found that voters who said abortion should be “legal in most cases” only preferred Kamala Harris over Donald Trump by a margin of four points, 49-45.⁶⁸ Ballot referendum results across the country echoed this reality, showing that voters could support abortion rights while remaining distrustful of political institutions more broadly, or disengaged from party identification altogether.

At the same time, progressive institutions frequently overestimated the durability of their own alignments. Labor organizations assumed that historical ties to working-class constituencies would continue to hold, even as union density declined. Academic and nonprofit sectors frequently

operated as though expertise and moral authority still translated into public trust, despite growing evidence of institutional skepticism.

Compounding this was a widespread belief that progressive legitimacy itself was not under serious threat. While there was recognition that trust in government had declined, there was less sustained attention to how deeply skepticism extended across institutions more broadly, including those associated with progressive politics.

These assumptions shaped responses to Trumpism. Much of the analysis focused on authoritarianism, norm erosion, and threats to democratic institutions. These concerns were real and significant. But this framing also narrowed the scope of interpretation. It treated Trump primarily as a deviation from an otherwise functional system, rather than as a political figure whose appeal was rooted in widespread disaffection with that system.

As a result, less attention was paid to the underlying conditions that made right-wing insurgency resonant: cynicism toward institutions, a sense of abandonment, and the erosion of shared social life. Appeals to defend democratic norms often failed to connect with people who already experienced those institutions as distant or unresponsive.

The right has proved skillful at navigating these responses. Each new condemnation of norm-breaking from critics strengthened Trump's appeal among those already estranged from institutions. For many, elite alarm over democratic backsliding confirmed the sense that the system cared more about itself than about their lives.

The result was not only electoral vulnerability, but a deeper loss of contact with the lived experience of politics under conditions of dealignment. We have seen this demonstrated time and time again where participation has become more episodic, trust more fragile, and attachment more contingent, strategies that assume stable audiences and institutional credibility encounter real limits.



Section 6: Implications for the Pro-Democracy Sector

If dealignment is the core condition, then the pro-democracy sector must focus on rebuilding institutional anchors and restoring legitimacy from the ground up.

What Can No Longer Be Assumed

Several core assumptions that have structured the field of pro-democratic advocacy and organizing no longer hold.

First, legitimacy is no longer automatic. Many institutions within the pro-democracy ecosystem—nonprofits, advocacy organizations, media outlets, even campaigns—continue to behave as though credibility flows from expertise, values, or institutional role. It does not. For a large share of the public, institutional claims to authority are met with skepticism by default. Legitimacy is not granted in advance; it is contested and must be earned repeatedly.

Second, constituencies are no longer stable. The erosion of unions, churches, and civic organizations has weakened the durable ties that once anchored political identity. Agreement on individual issues does not translate into sustained alignment. Voters move in and out of engagement, hold positions that cut across ideological lines, and often resist consistent identification with parties or organizations. Treating the public as a set of stable blocs obscures more than it reveals.

Third, participation is no longer durable. Many organizations continue to rely on models built around long-term membership and sustained engagement. In practice, participation has become episodic. People show up in moments—elections, crises, protests—and then recede. Rather than a failure of motivation, this should be understood as a justified reaction to the absence of institutions that once made participation part of everyday life.

These shifts represent a breakdown in the assumptions that have underwritten much of the field's strategy.

Implications for Organizers

For organizers, the implication is straightforward and difficult: the starting

point is not alignment, but cynicism.

Large segments of the public are not waiting to be mobilized. They are navigating politics at a distance, often with low expectations and limited attachment. Strategies that assume latent alignment—or that treat disengagement as a problem of awareness or misinformation—misread the terrain.

Under these conditions, trust cannot be built through messaging and narrative alone. It is built through repeated, reciprocal interaction. People do not come to believe in institutions because they are persuaded to; they come to believe through experiences in which institutions demonstrate responsiveness, reliability, and relevance.

Organizations that continue to operate as if they control a stable base will find that base increasingly elusive.

At the same time, organizing must adapt to the fact that political life is increasingly structured through horizontal and networked environments. People encounter politics through peers, digital communities, and informal networks, not primarily through formal organizations. Influence travels laterally. Organizations that continue to operate as if they control a stable base will find that base increasingly elusive.

Perhaps most importantly, the field must confront the absence of political homes. Southerners on New Ground (SONG), an organizing space for LGBTQ+ youth founded in 1993, defines political home as “a space for understanding conditions and patterns, building analysis, and organizing.”⁶⁹ Mid-twentieth-century institutions provided spaces where people returned regularly, forming relationships that sustained participation across time and disagreement. Those structures have largely eroded. Today, organizations like Make the Road New York or the Chicago Teachers Union attempt to fill this void, anchoring members through routine community assemblies, political education, and mutual aid.⁷⁰ ⁷¹ In the absence of true political homes, organizing that focuses solely on mobilizing moments—such as reactive, post-election rapid-response networks or fleeting digital advocacy campaigns—will continue to produce short bursts of engagement without durable attachment.

Rebuilding political homes—spaces of ongoing interaction, shared meaning, and collective life—is central to the work

ahead. As Rosenfeld and Schlozman argue, “the essence of mass politics is engaging with people in civil society — and not just an engaged layer of activists — in a sustained, repeated way that’s visible to fellow citizens with whom they are linked in work and community...Policy does not produce its own political reward.”⁷²

Implications for Funders

In many cases, philanthropy continues to fund political work as if institutional trust were intact, rather than as something that must be rebuilt.

Following the 2016 election, philanthropic investment in “pro-democracy” work increased significantly, with a strong emphasis on protecting institutional norms and countering authoritarian threats. While these investments were urgent, they often assumed that the underlying institutions being defended still commanded broad legitimacy. Far less attention was directed toward the deeper conditions—distrust, detachment, and social fragmentation—that shaped how those institutions were experienced by the public.

Much of contemporary funding practice is oriented toward scale, efficiency, and measurable outcomes—priorities that align with campaigns and programmatic interventions, but sit uneasily alongside the slower, less legible work of rebuilding relational and institutional infrastructure.⁷³ The emphasis on short-term deliverables and quantifiable impact has encouraged forms of political work that are episodic rather than durable, prioritizing moments of mobilization over the sustained presence required to rebuild attachment.

In an environment shaped by institutional distrust, there are no guaranteed pathways to rebuilding legitimacy. Yet prevailing funding models often reward predictability and penalize risk, discouraging the experimentation that this moment demands.

Perhaps most difficult, it requires letting go of forms that no longer carry legitimacy. Some organizations, strategies, and modes of engagement persist less because they remain effective than because they are familiar, fundable, and institutionally legible. Continuing to invest in them without reassessment risks deepening the disconnect between the pro-democracy field and the public it seeks to engage.⁷⁴

Electoral and Media Implications

Electoral politics and media strategy will also have to adapt to a dealigned terrain.

Campaigns increasingly operate in an environment defined by heterodox voters—individuals whose beliefs do not align consistently with party platforms or ideological categories. These voters are often treated as anomalies or persuasion targets. In reality, they are a product of dealignment. As partisan attachments weaken, individuals assemble political identities in more contingent and cross-cutting ways, drawing on multiple and sometimes conflicting frames.⁷⁵ Strategies that assume stable partisan blocs or coherent ideological sorting are therefore working with an increasingly outdated model of the electorate.

At the same time, political communication unfolds within fragmented meaning ecosystems. There is no longer a shared informational environment within which messages can reliably circulate. Instead, audiences encounter political content through distinct media networks, social ties, and algorithmically curated feeds, each with its own interpretive frames.⁷⁶ The issue is not exposure to different information, but the absence of shared contexts for interpreting it. Message discipline alone cannot compensate for this fragmentation.

This exposes the limits of the forms of persuasion favored by political consultants. Polling, message testing, and targeted advertising remain useful tools, but they operate within a narrower field of influence than is often assumed. They cannot substitute for the absence of trust or shared interpretive frameworks.

In an environment shaped by cynicism, many people are not choosing between competing arguments; they are questioning whether political institutions are responsive at all. Arguments that presuppose institutional legitimacy often fail before they are fully heard.



Figure 9: Amazon warehouse workers outside the National Labor Relations Board, October 2021, [Wikimedia Commons](#). CC BY-SA 2.0.

Conclusion: Confronting Dealignment in an Age of Cynicism

Over the past decade, the pro-democracy field has mobilized in response to the crisis—defending institutions, countering authoritarian threats, and refining its strategies for persuasion and turnout. These efforts have been urgent and necessary. But they have often proceeded without fully reckoning with the terrain on which they are operating.

This report has argued that something more fundamental than polarization is underway. The institutions that once organized political life, however imperfectly, no longer anchor people in the same way. In their absence, political life has become increasingly unsettled. People continue to participate, pay attention, and engage, but they do so with weaker attachments, lower levels of trust, and diminished expectations that politics will improve their lives.

In this environment, the challenge is not only to defend institutions, but to reimagine how political life is organized when attachment is fragile and trust must be earned.

That work is already beginning, often at the margins. Community organizations in Minnesota that have focused on building durable membership and coalition building over many years were able to mobilize effectively against ICE. In other contexts, groups like KC Tenants have used tenant organizing to create forms of political life rooted in everyday experience. Similarly, recent waves of worker organizing—from Starbucks Workers United to organizing efforts at Amazon—have shown how collective identity and action can emerge through peer networks that combine digital communication with in-person organizing.

These forms of political life are slower to build, harder to scale, and less predictable in their outcomes. They do not produce immediate clarity about what works. But they begin to address the underlying condition this report has described: a politics in which people are no longer securely attached to the institutions that claim to represent them.

In addition to continuing our research on dealignment and the post-institutional political terrain, CARD's next phase of work will focus on documenting new forms of relational accountability in partnership with advocacy groups and philanthropic organizations. How can organizers and funders support structures that make leaders proximate to members

again? What are the new institutional forms for shared interpretation that aren't reliant on old media? These are some of the areas we seek to explore together.

The task ahead is not just to defend democracy as it is, but to rebuild the conditions under which it can be lived and sustained.



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