

FARAH STOCKMAN

# This Group Has \$100 Million and a Big Goal: To Fix America

Nov. 5, 2022



By Farah Stockman

Ms. Stockman is a member of the editorial board.

**Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter** Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

In February 2020, in the midst of a vitriolic presidential election, an idealistic group of donors from across the ideological spectrum met to plan an ambitious new project. They called themselves the New Pluralists and pledged to spend a whopping \$100 million over the next decade to fight polarization by funding face-to-face interactions among Americans across political, racial and religious divides.

Fixing what is broken in American democracy requires more than changing voter ID laws or the shape of our congressional districts, they argued. It requires forging deep personal connections that will change hearts and minds and ultimately American culture itself.

Their experiment rests on a basic idea: Far too many Americans lack the skills, the opportunity and even the inclination to work together across lines of difference toward a common goal. Part of the solution, these donors believe, is embracing a very old idea that has fallen out of fashion: pluralism.

The term “cultural pluralism” was coined in the early 1900s by Horace Kallen, a Jewish philosopher who proposed it in the midst of a huge wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. He argued that rather than try to stamp out their Polishness, Italianness or Jewishness, as many white Anglo-Saxon Protestants wanted, America should be a “nation of nationalities” where people learn to work together across lines of difference. The freedom to be different but still participate in political life as a vital part of the whole was key to the country’s genius, he argued. Mr. Kallen thought of the American people not as a melting pot, where everyone turns into the same bland stew, but as an orchestra, where distinct sounds join harmoniously.

That notion fuels the New Pluralists, too. Although it’s hard to find two people who describe the project the same way, respecting difference, not papering it over, is seen as central.

In his era, Mr. Kallen drew fierce criticism from those who accused him of promoting a Balkanization of the country. A scathing review of his book in The New York Times in 1924 declared that the nation faced a stark choice: “Is it to remain one in spirit, tradition and language, or is it to become a hodgepodge boardinghouse for alien groups?” It wasn’t until the 1980s, with the rise of the idea of multiculturalism, that his ideas were widely embraced.

Today the New Pluralists project is grappling with a similar set of challenges as the ones Mr. Kallen wrote about over a century ago. An influx of immigrants is once again challenging prevailing notions of who Americans are and what it takes to make a country harmonious and whole. At the same time, the country does indeed feel Balkanized along a host of fault lines: rural versus urban, young versus old, religious versus secular and, of course, red versus blue.

But the critiques that pluralism faces today are different. Far from being considered too radical, pluralism might not sound radical enough in an era of insurrection and potential coups. To some activists, pluralism sounds like both-sides-ism or a call to meet in the mushy middle. And yet pluralism feels more crucial than ever. Our multiracial democracy can’t survive without it.

I discovered the New Pluralists this summer after I attended an online workshop on depolarizing hosted by one of its grantees, a group called Braver Angels. I found the group online because, at a time when so much attention is paid to toxic politics, I wanted to know more about groups that stood for just the opposite.

Co-founded by Bill Doherty, a Minneapolis-based marriage counselor, Braver Angels is an organization with grass-roots chapters across the country that teach conservatives and liberals to debunk lazy stereotypes and clarify disagreements without yelling. In the workshop I attended, reds and blues wrestled with how they typecast the other side. Nearly all the participants were white and looked to be over

the age of 40. And they were, by definition, open to reaching across the partisan divide. In other words, they were low-hanging fruit. I came away feeling more hopeful about the country nonetheless.

I realized then that there was a whole ecosystem of groups, created during the Trump years, that is dedicated to bridging divides: the People's Supper, which helps communities host potluck dinners and other events that promote racial and political reconciliation; the One Small Step project at StoryCorps, which brings together strangers for recorded conversations about their lives; More in Common, which surveys public opinion and put out an influential paper about the country's "exhausted majority." The New Pluralists help fund them all.

The idea for the New Pluralists came about in the wake of Donald Trump's election. Jennifer Hoos Rothberg, the New York-based executive director of the Einhorn Collaborative, a foundation started by a Wisconsin-bred hedge fund manager, said it kept getting calls from people who were alarmed by the level of polarization and thought they could help fix it. One call came from Melissa Weintraub, a longtime conflict resolution practitioner who had worked with Israelis and Palestinians.

"You know that tool kit I use in the Middle East? I want to bring that to Wisconsin and Iowa," Ms. Rothberg recalled Ms. Weintraub saying.

Right then and there, Ms. Rothberg told me, "we set up a rapid response organizing around bridging divides." The Einhorn Collaborative gave away \$6 million in one-off funds but wanted to do something bigger. In 2019, Ms. Rothberg invited other donors involved in similar work to a meeting in New York to see if they could pool their money to fund these projects on a larger scale. She purposefully invited donors from across the political spectrum. Stand Together Trust, formerly the Charles Koch Institute, which funds social ventures to solve common problems, agreed to join. But that made some social justice funders on the left balk because they didn't want to be in the same room, Fay Twersky, who attended that meeting as a representative of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, told me.

In the end, about a dozen donors stuck with it. They landed on the name the New Pluralists, partly because pluralism felt neutral in an era when so many words have taken on a partisan flavor. This past summer, they brought together a group of grantees for a retreat in Atlanta in an attempt to foster relationships among them. They included the civil rights thinker John Powell of the Othering & Belonging Institute and Rachel Peric of Welcoming America. They are called field builders in the New Pluralists' overly cerebral parlance. The big idea here is to turn pluralism into a coherent field — like public health — with clearly defined norms and practices that can be replicated, measured and improved.

Lennon Flowers, a co-founder of the People's Supper, told me that the gathering felt like a salve. She said the money and credibility her organization gets from the New Pluralists filter down to the local partners, showing that "this work matters and this proves we're not alone."

But a big question remains: Can a group of wealthy donors change American culture from above? How exactly does that work? If you are trying to change a law, you hire a lobbyist. To change American culture, whom do you hire?

Nevertheless, the group is doubling down on its vision. Over the summer, it put out a request for grant proposals from grass-roots groups engaged in this work. Eight hundred applications poured in — too many to fund. That's when the New Pluralists began an effort to challenge donors to devote \$1 billion over the next decade to pluralism, an initiative it announced at a White House unity summit in September.

"The need is so great, and the opportunity is so great that we need more of philanthropy to take this seriously," the New Pluralists' executive director, Uma Viswanathan, told me.

Even the most fervent of the New Pluralists admit that they aren't sure they will succeed. But I hope they do. After all, orchestras don't sound good by accident. People have to practice.

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.*

Farah Stockman joined the Times editorial board in 2020. For four years, she was a reporter for The Times, covering politics, social movements and race. She previously worked at The Boston Globe, where she won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 2016. @fstockman

A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: They Are Betting \$100 Million on Pluralism. Will It Work?