



# Summary Report: SHIFT Convening

June 3-5, 2022, Pine Mountain Settlement School

## **Background: Building on extensive thinking and conversations**

SHIFT invested significant time and resources to do the thinking and learning that culminated in the Convening. After contemplating the idea of a people's policy platform between 2019 and 2021 and concluding that such a platform would only have legs if it was designed from the bottom-up, SHIFT engaged Laura Rigell as Convening Organizer to get to know organizations already doing related work and plan a gathering that would invite on-the-ground leaders to explore what is needed to make their work more impactful.

Laura spent between September 2021 and May 2022 getting to know the ecosystem of bottom-up democracy work and then planning the Convening. During the exploration and learning phase, she met with 174 people across 96 organizations, largely through Zoom calls but also with some time spent on the ground shadowing organizing work in Appalachia. This exploratory outreach was initially open-ended with the goal of getting to know the field, with increased focus through Laura's sense-making of the distinct approaches and how they could contribute to each other. These conversations allowed Laura to build trust with leaders and find out what questions they were grappling with, helping to inform who to bring together at the Convening and how to structure the conversation.

## About the Convening: A slow-paced weekend in the mountains of eastern Kentucky

The Convening brought together 21 leaders from the democracy ecosystem for a weekend (Friday at 6pm until Sunday at 1pm) at Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan County, Kentucky. The agenda included significant unstructured time for participants to connect with each other, including a bonfire and outing to “Seedtime on the Cumberland,” a music festival in a neighboring county.

Participants reported that the time to build relationships was one of the most valuable aspects of the event. The facilitated portions of the weekend included sociometry exercises to get to know how participants perceived themselves and their work, a Story Circle, discussion of potential collaborative projects, a Q&A session with the SHIFT Board, and an asset mapping exercise that invited participants to plan one-on-one follow-up’s with each other.

## Participating Organizations: Connecting across silos

The fields of **bridging**, **organizing**, and **governance** each offer a key contribution to the **project of enacting democracy**. The Convening brought together curious, creative leaders from these typically-siloed fields to get to know each other’s approaches and explore potential synergies. SHIFT had observed that these fields are currently grappling with related questions about how to bring everyday people together across lines to shape the future of their communities. The categories are included below, recognizing that they are not perfect and that more discussion could be had to further refine them and understand how organizations see their work fitting into them.

### Bridging:

*healing and finding common ground across the lines that keep us divided*

- ❖ Essential Partners
- ❖ Braver Angels
- ❖ One America Movement
- ❖ Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Chicago



Released Summer 2022

### Organizing:

*relational organizing and campaigning to design and enact a collective vision for the future*

- ❖ WV Can’t Wait
- ❖ United Vision Project
- ❖ Showing Up for Racial Justice - KY
- ❖ GA Youth Justice Coalition
- ❖ HEAL Together
- ❖ Hoosier Action
- ❖ The People
- ❖ Native Organizers Alliance
- ❖ Make It Work Nevada

### Governance:

*participatory decision-making that builds buy-in and leads to wiser outcomes*

- ❖ Co-Intelligence Institute
- ❖ RadicalxChange
- ❖ Democracy Beyond Elections



2



## Key questions and themes

The Convening aimed to invite out curiosities and tensions that are coming up on the ground. The topics below are provided as a snapshot of some of the themes and questions that emerged, not to reflect consensus of the participants.

- **What does it mean to win?** “Power with” instead of “power over.” “We have to challenge the organizing approach that is about forcing change and vilifying the enemy.”
- The balance between **long-term relationship and power building and short-term fights**. Recognizing the culture of busyness and constant state of exhaustion many are experiencing. Curiosity about what organizing and funding structures would make the work more sustainable and impactful.
- The importance of having **spaces like this to zoom out and share vulnerably** with others facing similar challenges.
- Observations that the communities represented (such as rural Indiana and native reservations) are facing similar challenges and an interest in **connective tissue** that would support continued learning and exchange.
- Frustration with democratic processes not currently working for the common good. **“We have to change the rules**, because they were never designed for us to show up and change things.”
- **What does the healthy, inclusive democracy that we want look like?** What does bottom-up policy making look like? How can we build together toward that vision? How can we learn from indigenous models of governance?
- **Rejection of partisan identities** being relevant to the work of building across lines for the common good. Discussion of the importance of having diversity of thought, experience, and identity at the table. Shared belief in the **fundamental dignity of every human being**.
- **Concern about rising threat of authoritarianism and political violence** in the US. Interest in learning from international movements. What does it look like to resist authoritarian slide in our communities on the ground? How does that relate to the work of imagining and moving toward the democracy that we want?
- **“Break the funder stranglehold.”** How do you compel philanthropic groups to change the power dynamics and to understand that there are no shortcuts in this work? Long-term investment is required if we are going to transform what is politically possible.



## Participant Feedback

- Many praised the ratio of structured to unstructured time, saying that it was critical for the relationship-building that took place. Connections were also made in the carpools to and from the airports.
- Some stated that they would have liked to have had an additional day.
- Many wished that time had been built in earlier in the weekend for them to learn more specifically about each other's work (the time was rather focused on story sharing and identifying shared challenges). This hunger to learn from and connect with each other fueled all participants to have at least one follow-up meeting with another participant, with many having multiple follow-up conversations in the weeks following the event.
- Some named a desire to have had more group and small group time to flesh out a shared vision and a strategy to enact it.
- The choice of the venue received mixed reviews, with many praising the beautiful rural setting and others wishing for a more accessible location. Those from Appalachia regretted that we did not spend time sharing about the unique organizing history of Harlan County.

## With gratitude: Resources and partners that made the Convening possible

The total cost of the Convening (including room and board, travel for participants, stipends for non-staff participants, facilitation, note-taking, and supplies) was \$45,201. SHIFT covered \$37,701 of this cost, with **New Pluralists** co-sponsoring the event at \$7,500. SHIFT invested an additional \$49,000 in Laura's engagement as Convening Organizer between September 2021 and September 2022 to conduct the exploratory outreach, Convening planning, and follow-up.

**Ben Fink and Tanya Torp** served as the facilitators for the weekend, designing the agenda, leading participants through the experience, offering activities that sparked connections, and inviting participants to co-create the experience that they wanted. **Myla Williams** of Georgia Youth Justice Coalition took notes during the Convening. **Pine Mountain Settlement School** hosted the Convening at affordable pricing. **All of the participants** set aside a weekend of their time with additional time spent traveling to the site.



Released Summer 2022





## Path forward: Designing a hub in response to participant interest

SHIFT is now starting the process to co-create a hub that will support the Convening participants and other interested organizations to share tools, approaches, and insights with each other in an ongoing way. This is in response to ideas developed by participants during the Convening and in one-on-one and group follow-up conversations since the weekend. Participants have repeatedly expressed interest in:

- Being supported to learn from each other and partner to bring together their approaches in place-based pilots.
- Having access to each other's trainings and being coached to apply bridging, organizing, and governance tools in their own contexts.
- Working together to defend against the rise of authoritarianism while inviting people toward the democracy we want to build.

The hub will create a lightweight structure within which this work can be resourced so that we can continue learning and dreaming together.

## Get in touch!

Contact Laura Rigell ([laura@shiftcommongood.org](mailto:laura@shiftcommongood.org)) with any questions, suggested connections, or ideas. Interested organizations and funders are encouraged to reach out to explore potential synergies.

