

WV Can't Wait

Case Study

September 2024

Introduction

Pluralism can be hard to understand, much less imagine in practice. To start building the ecosystem's collective understanding of what pluralism looks like—knowing it can take nearly infinite forms—New Pluralists supported the development of [four case studies of pluralism in practice](#). These case studies will start to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications, providing tangible examples of how people across the country are practicing a different way of being and making decisions together. These practical illustrations not only enrich our understanding of pluralism's nuances and challenges but also serve as valuable learning tools for individuals, community leaders, and organizations interested in practicing pluralism themselves.

One example of pluralism in practice is the work of West Virginia (WV) Can't Wait. This case study about their work draws on an interview with one of the co-chairs, Stephen Smith, and a focus group with four community members who have actively engaged in WV Can't Wait's work (see appendix for full list of participants).

This case study is one of four exploring diverse practices, approaches, and ideologies in pluralism work. As you read, remember that these are real-world examples of organizations with different worldviews engaging in pluralistic efforts. The goal is not to agree with every perspective presented, but to appreciate the variety of ways and people involved in this work. This case study represents one approach to pluralism among many, highlighting the diversity inherent in the ecosystem.

FOUR CASE STUDIES

This case study is part of a broader evaluation to understand the current state of pluralism in the United States, including [evaluating the health and vibrancy of the pluralism ecosystem](#) and [assessing the status of key conditions that promote or inhibit pluralism](#).

It is one of four case studies produced to explore instances of pluralism in practice—what it looks like, what it accomplishes, and what we're learning about what works and what doesn't work in practicing pluralism. The four case studies are intended to represent diverse approaches to pluralism work. The audience for them is curious ecosystem actors who want to learn more about pluralism.

Pluralism is both a worldview and a practice. As a worldview, pluralism is the belief that the coexistence of diverse opinions, ways of life, and value systems enriches all members of a society and that all people deserve to be recognized, respected, accepted, and engaged based on their diversity. As a practice, pluralism invites us to work creatively and collaboratively with the diversity we encounter in life—across races, ethnicities, creeds, religions, political affiliations, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, individual experiences, beliefs, and actions.

Context and Overview

West Virginia has a rich history of multiracial collaboration and collective action. For example, the [Mine Wars](#) of the early 1900s involved Black, White, and immigrant miners working together to challenge coal companies. The United Mine Workers of America union and other institutions that emerged from this collaboration were “*not perfect, and there was a lot of racism inside them, but were a lot more inclusive and pluralistic than certainly formal local, state, or federal government was.*” One hundred years later, the [2018 teachers’ strike](#) in West Virginia also showcased the ability of West Virginians to work across race and class to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and see changes in their communities.

Yet, this multiracial work and collaboration often takes place outside of formal government. Local and state government generally feel distant from the lives and interests of everyday West Virginians. For example, WV Can’t Wait points out that the state’s legislature does not represent the demographics of the state. Fifty percent of West Virginians are women, but they make up only 14% of the legislature.¹ Ten percent of West Virginians are people of color, but they make up 2% of the legislature.² WV Can’t Wait also sees people who are young, working class, and LGBTQ+ drastically underrepresented. The discrepancies between the state legislature demographics and the overall population not only lead to underrepresentation of certain groups’ perspectives, needs, and experiences in the policymaking process, but they also impact residents’ connection to and trust in the government.

Within this context, WV Can’t Wait was founded in late 2018 to advocate for and work toward a government that is inclusive and representative of all citizens. The WV Can’t Wait team believes that a government in West Virginia that truly belongs to the people “*works better—we think less people get hurt, we think better solutions emerge when the people who are closest to a problem are the ones who are trusted to solve it.*”

To build toward that vision of a government that is truly representative of and accountable to the people it serves, WV Can’t Wait employs two primary approaches:

- 1 Expanding participation in formal government**, including both who holds elected office and who formal government answers to
- 2 Supporting the self-determination and self-governance of community members** by providing money, training, fiscal sponsorship, mental health services, etc. to West Virginians who are meeting unmet needs in their own communities

The following case study provides more detail about WV Can’t Wait’s approach to the work, its impact to date, and what its leaders and participants are learning along the way.

1 State demographic data pulled from [2020 Census data](#); legislature demographic data pulled from [2020 National Council of State Legislatures data](#).

2 Ibid.

Approach

WV Can't Wait aims to build a people's government in the Mountain State—meaning the government works for everyone, not just the powerful. For WV Can't Wait, a people's government is one where those closest to issues are empowered to solve them. This looks like people who have experience with housing instability shaping policies to expand affordability for everyone or people who have a history of drug use shaping local responses to the opioid epidemic, alongside their neighbors. Smith explained, *"We think government is about our lives belonging to us, everybody's life belonging to each other, our communities lives belonging to the community. And because we believe that, there's a commitment to pluralism."* In other words, WV Can't Wait's work is pluralistic because of its commitment to expanding who gets a seat at the table, finding each other's shared humanity across dimensions of difference, and, through that, working to improve the conditions of people's lives. Two main strategies are employed: expanding participation in formal government and supporting the self-determination and self-governance of community members.

To do this work, WV Can't Wait calls in any West Virginians interested in getting involved, including community members from all political ideologies and all racial and ethnic identities, those who are houseless and middle class, those who identify as LGBTQ+ and straight, and everything in between. WV Can't Wait's success in engaging community members from diverse groups across the state not only makes their work more pluralistic, but it also strengthens and sustains the outcomes of their work. As one focus group participant explained: *"It makes a lot of sense that the more people you invite in and the more that you cultivate that culture, that the more democratic the process is, the happier everyone is, and the more empowered everyone feels and a part of the process. And so if there are mistakes ... it's in their hands and they can work to change it."*

Describing their **co-governance work** through formal government,³ Smith explained that the organization's view, based on countless conversations with people around the state, is that very few elected officials across the state—of any political party or affiliation—are accountable to community members who don't have wealth and money. WV Can't Wait works with the elected officials it partners with to bring those typically left out of government into the governing process—either as the candidate themselves or as active participants alongside their elected officials. When an elected official from a community that is typically left out of government partners with WV Can't Wait and *"is willing to not just be a single representative, but anxious, excited, energized to bring the whole community with them, to hold the door open to those closed rooms through co-governance campaigns,"* it changes who government is accountable to. For instance, Smith shared an example from Charleston where once a month around 20 city councilors and citizen leaders from underrepresented communities—*young folks, people of color, working class people, harm reductionists, the elderly*—come together over pizza to imagine, strategize, and push for a city government that could work for everyone. Their work includes not just issue campaigns but also creating a website where residents can get one-on-one constituent services, planning office hours and town halls to demystify city government, and recently, developing a ballot initiative to change the city code for simple possession of cannabis. In short, WV Can't Wait sees the results of this work in that *"agendas change, less harm is done to those people, and the types of solutions that are possible get a lot broader because of who's getting brought in, who wouldn't be brought in otherwise."* This is pluralism in action.

WV Can't Wait also supports the self-determination and self-governance of community members. This involves working with folks who face structural barriers to accessing government services to develop their own systems or structures to meet their needs—often outside of formal government. WV Can't Wait takes an approach of

³ [New America defines co-governance](#) as "a broad range of models of civic engagement that allow people outside and inside government to work together in designing policy. Beyond demands, co-governance represents a willing shift of power and trust among two typically adversarial parties. Instead of representatives and those represented on either side of a line, both see themselves as colleagues with unique and valuable capacities and perspectives that support the other's interests and positions."

accompaniment in its work with these folks, which means supporting people with resources, training, legal support, etc. To illustrate this work, Smith provided the example of the Tenants' Rights Project, which is fiscally sponsored by WV Can't Wait, and whose renter and homeowner members are currently facing eviction threats from a global hedge fund. WV Can't Wait helped to author their first grant, supported the development of their strategic plan, provided organizing training, and provided ongoing technical and emotional support via regular phone calls and check-ins. When one of the lead organizers recently received notice of a lawsuit from the hedge fund, WV Can't Wait helped raise money to hire a lawyer so they could fight back. When asked how this accompaniment work relates to pluralism and creating a government in West Virginia that truly belongs to the people, Smith explained: *"The fundamental question is, who does government belong to? ... One way to get a people's government is by getting someone elected or getting someone elected's office to pay attention to you. And the other way to get it is to say, well, we can also create it for ourselves. We can create our own spaces, we can create our own bases of power to get some of the self-determination and government and inclusion that formal government won't give to us. We support any path that will lead to more people having the true belief that government now belongs to them. We don't care which path they choose."* In other words, WV Can't Wait sees it as a strategy for West Virginians to demonstrate self-governance in the absence of formal support.

Smith explained that the history and culture of West Virginia informs WV Can't Wait's decision to prioritize participants' health and safety across their pluralism work.

He noted that given the *"level of sort of unapologetic ... White supremacist groups in West Virginia,"* WV Can't Wait pays specific attention to physical safety and mental health.⁴ The organization offers mental health services to volunteers, staff members, and elected officials they are allied with—donated free of charge by aligned counselors, faith leaders, and psychologists. They also offer a physical safety and security program, including a five-day, in-depth Community Defender Training for participants to gain a wide range of skills to support communities that are under attack. Smith explained: *"If we want people who are going to get kicked in the teeth to fight these fights for a more pluralistic society, we have to be able, on the back end, to say, 'Hey, if you need to see somebody, we can take care of that.' Or, 'If you're being threatened by White supremacists online, or you're worried about people following you home from a city council meeting, we can help you with that.'"*

Impact

The WV Can't Wait folks we spoke with shared the impact of this work in terms of changes they've noted in their communities, as well as in themselves individually.

Among the broader community, focus group participants shared a number of positive changes through their work with WV Can't Wait, including

- establishment of a "people's housing office" in Parkersburg, which has helped over 1,000 individuals secure housing in its first 2 years of operation;
- inclusion of community input into decisions about how to spend American Rescue Plan Act funds in multiple municipalities;
- creation of the first shelter in West Virginia to specifically serve LGBTQ+ clients in Morgantown;
- creation of a public art position in Wheeling city government and numerous public art projects in other municipalities;

⁴ In 2023, the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) tracked 12 hate and anti-government groups in West Virginia.

- a raise in the minimum wage for city employees in Huntington and Charleston, as well as a new childcare benefit for city employees in Huntington;
- winning the state's strongest cannabis decriminalization law in Charleston, resulting from a combination of both a ballot initiative and working with city council;
- a successful community response to the city's plans to clear unhoused people from the streets ahead of the Charleston Sternwheel Regatta that prevented unnecessary arrests or "sweeps;" and
- creation of city-sponsored warming or day shelters for unhoused folks in Charleston, Huntington, Morgantown, and Wheeling.

Many of these changes happened through co-governance initiatives that have allowed diverse groups of residents to engage directly with city councils, co-shaping agendas and reducing harm. When there was an absence of formal government support, participants in WV Can't Wait turned to self-governance, supporting marginalized groups in their efforts to create their own structures and engage with existing ones. For example, in response to the plans to clear unhoused people from the streets ahead of the Charleston Sternwheel Regatta, volunteers with WV Can't Wait originally went to city council to ask for a resolution committing to avoid unnecessarily harassing unhoused neighbors. When the city council refused to act, community members organized groups to drive around and keep an eye out for their unhoused neighbors, offer them water and popsicles, and gather information on any hostile interactions with the police. In the end, unhoused folks were left alone for the first time in the past few years of the Regatta.

At the individual level, focus group participants reported personal growth and a sense of identity as organizers through their involvement with WV Can't Wait. For example, Brian Butcher ran for city council through his involvement with WV Can't Wait and has been deeply involved in community organizing efforts. Butcher explained that before working with WV Can't Wait, he approached politics much more antagonistically, saying he did not want to engage with people he disagreed with or try to understand their perspective. Now, Butcher finds he is a lot more patient with folks and interested in understanding where they are coming from. He's quick to point out, though, that while doing that, he's *"not sacrificing a damn thing"* of his own values. He's able to balance these two things because, in his words, *"It'll sound corny, but I learned how to love people for who they are and, just, like, truly loving people and having a basic baseline of empathy for them before coming to the politics of it and then working off of that to establish where we could love each other."* This has led to Butcher developing strong working relationships with his fellow council members, even those he vehemently disagrees with. Speaking about one council member whom he disagrees with deeply, Butcher explained: *"She's also this incredible mother and caring and really loves people. And she's been there for me to look for my keys when it was freezing out, you know what I mean? And so on that personal level, we're very close in that way."* This example shows the importance of personal relationships and empathy as essential tools for effective governance, allowing for better communication and collaboration among council members. Butcher's personal transformation illustrates what's possible when individuals embrace pluralism in their own work and relationships.

Another community member, Deives Collins, became involved with WV Can't Wait due to concerns about harassment at Pride events and other threats to queer life. She participated in the Community Defender Training, contrasting it with previous experiences in other organizations that lacked urgency and focus on pressing issues. Though Collins had been considering leaving West Virginia because she felt disconnected from her community, she described a renewed commitment to staying in West Virginia, saying *"[my work with WV Can't Wait] was the thing that I did not want to leave when I decided I was going to stay in West Virginia long term."*

Finally, while not directly attributable to WV Can't Wait, three of the four focus group participants now have new jobs that are connected to work they started doing through WV Can't Wait.

Learnings

Smith shared three key things the WV Can't Wait team has learned about practicing pluralism in its work to date:

1 **Some people will try to use bad-faith understandings of pluralism to maintain the status quo.**

As described above, WV Can't Wait's work involves fundamentally shifting who the government is accountable to. Smith shared a story about folks who supported the legalization of cannabis attending a city council meeting. Smith explained that it felt like the city council's response was *"We're going to take you, a few thousand people, and treat you as maybe one person at the table, and then we're going to load the table with three other experts. And that's 'pluralism' because it's people productively disagreeing ..."* While it's important that pluralism consider a diversity of viewpoints, it is also important to consider how widely those views are held and by whom. Hearing multiple perspectives is valuable, but artificially overrepresenting the viewpoints of a few can skew the process, especially when their form of expertise is held in higher esteem than people's lived realities. This experience illustrates how people can use the general frame of pluralism as a distraction to avoid actually shifting who the government is accountable to. In other words, an amorphous and inauthentic understanding of pluralism can provide a shield that allows decision makers to maintain the status quo.

2 **Setbacks can build power.**

Working in a different way and taking on big, complicated issues will inevitably include setbacks. Yet, Smith explained that these setbacks, while challenging, are often required for building long-term social change. The earlier example of the community response to the city's plans to clear unhoused people from the streets ahead of the Charleston Sternwheel Regatta illustrates this point. In that instance, *"It was the willingness to lose bravely that actually led to the win"*—meaning that calling attention to the past treatment of unhoused neighbors and increasing community vigilance contributed to the decreased police response, even though city council did not take its own action to protect unhoused neighbors. Smith shared other examples when folks engaged civically on a specific issue and didn't see the outcome they wanted, but that still led to increased energy and engagement among people who had been activated. Some of those folks went on to participate in the Community Defender Training, are now considering running for office, and/or have gotten more involved in other WV Can't Wait programs or actions. Smith summed it up by saying: *"Brave work requires lots of losing ... that's what makes it brave. And the losing then leads to a whole lot of good stuff that wouldn't have happened if you've been playing it safe."*

3 **You won't come out unscathed.**

Reflecting on what's hard about practicing pluralism, Smith highlighted the personal and community harm that often accompanies work to change the status quo, which can lead to public backlash and misrepresentation. He described examples of WV Can't Wait staff and partners being mischaracterized in the media—both in the work and their approach—and receiving threats because of their work. Despite WV Can't Wait's efforts to mitigate this risk through the mental health and safety work that it offers, it's still inevitable. Simply put, to deeply practice pluralism—and therefore fundamentally change how power is held and shared in a community—you will face pushback, criticism, and sometimes personal threats or attacks. Smith explained that *"the desire to avoid that harm that is required is really great. It's really tempting to try to negotiate against your people or to not push quite as hard, or to agree to something that's a symbolic win rather than material win in exchange for not having people be publicly mad at you or not being publicly attacked. And I think that's the hardest part and the biggest pitfall."* This temptation to negotiate against community interests to avoid conflict can undermine the effectiveness of pluralism initiatives.



Want to learn more about West Virginia Can't Wait? Visit their website at www.wvcantwait.com, or contact Stephen Smith directly at stephen@wvcantwait.com or (304) 610-6512. It is part of WV Can't Wait's culture to invite anyone who is interested in their work into conversation. They would love to hear from you.

Appendix

INTERVIEWEE:

- Stephen Smith, WV Can't Wait Co-Chair

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:

- Brian Butcher, Morgantown City Councilor and WV Housing Justice Co-Director
- Deives Collins, WV Can't Wait Security Captain
- Wendy Tuck, Parkersburg City Councilor
- Corey Zinn, Charleston Can't Wait Co-Chair