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Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy

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The Need: A Massive Infusion of Strategic Support for U.S. Democracy

American democracy is at a dangerous inflection point. The moment requires a step-change in strategy and support. Without such momentum, the country faces a democratic setback potentially as serious as the ones already occurring in India and Hungary (both now ranked only "partially free" by Freedom House) and the nearly one-hundred-year reversal that occurred following America's Reconstruction era.

Many Americans view this moment with concern, but their worry is measured: America's system is creaky, but the world's oldest democracy has strong institutions and will pull through.

However, since the end of the Cold War, most democratic failure globally has been caused by elected governments using legal methods, such as gerrymandering and technical rule changes, to derail democracy. Their destructions of their own democracies have been supported by pluralities or majorities of their citizenries, whose polarization leads them to back policies that harm democracy to ensure their side prevails. America is on precisely this path.

The age and consolidation of U.S. democracy provides resilience—but Americans should not expect too much from the country's historical strength. Many of the laws that form institutional guardrails were written poorly in the aftermath of the Civil War, with loopholes that are easily challenged given a lack of precedent. Moreover, the country's age means that much of what are presumed to be laws and institutions are, in fact, simply norms. These norms are eroding quickly.

Other organizations and philanthropists already understand the danger America is in. They are pouring time and money into getting more people to vote, particularly minorities and swing voters, to win back democracy. These efforts are necessary—but not sufficient. America's democratic decline has accelerated despite record numbers of people, minorities, and swing voters voting. And for those on both sides of the aisle for whom these voting measures are proxies for partisan preferences they believe will save U.S. democracy, democratic decline in many states has accelerated despite Democratic control of both chambers of Congress and the presidency at the national level. The community supporting U.S. democracy needs a better strategy.

This paper has four parts:

The Danger:

- International markers of American democracy's swift decline
- The playbook already underway at the state level to undermine democracy
- How polarization is enabling antidemocratic action
- The rise in political violence against key, targeted groups

Five Strategies with concrete tactics to alter the current disintegration

- Enable responsible conservatives to vote for democracy
- Reduce the social demand from the right for illiberal policies and politicians
- Engage the left in defending democracy by making it deliver
- Build a broad-based, multistranded, prodemocracy movement around a positive vision concretized in locally rooted action
- Strengthen accountability to reset norms on what behavior is legal and acceptable

Insufficient Tactics: activities that are crucial to hold democratic ground but that will not alter the trajectory

- Help Democrats win
- Increase voter turnout
- Get more minorities to vote
- Court more swing voters

- Improve election administration
- Increase economic redistribution
- Fix gerrymandering

Three Near-Term Futures:

- Stable countries run by one political party where voters cannot alter politics
- Countries run by one political party whose control is upheld by violence
- A political stalemate with increased criminal and political violence

America is in a vicious cycle, and it is speeding up. Severe polarization is rapidly narrowing the available solution sets. The moment is serious and dire.

Yet it is not hopeless. During the 1890s in an era known as the Gilded Age, which was the last period of polarization as vast as today's, America faced even greater troubles. Politicians were openly bribed, and legislation was bought. Company-controlled militias controlled their workers with tools such as an armor-plated vehicle mounted with machine guns known as the "death special" with legal support from the Supreme Court. Serious movements for communism and anarchism threatened the country's democratic foundations. Anarchist bombings and the assassination of a president elevated political violence. Meanwhile, as historian Robert Mickey explained:

> Leaders of the eleven states of the Old Confederacy founded stable, one-party authoritarian enclaves under the "Democratic" banner. . . . These rulers curtailed electorates, harassed and repressed opposition parties, and created and regulated racially separate—and significantly unfree—civic spheres. State-sponsored violence enforced these elements.[1]

What followed was not the death of democracy. Instead, many Americans with different interests brought about social and political reforms that revitalized the social contract and enabled the so-called American Century of the 1900s. Unfinished work from that set of democratic changes led to the Civil Rights Movement.

As political scientist Lee Drutman has written, a nadir can also enable a change of direction.[2] Today, Americans have a chance to not just piece together the cracked remnants of what was—but to create the next chapter of America. In fact, we not only can do better, but we must think bigger to galvanize the movement we need to succeed at our immediate challenges. We must act now, at scale, with strategy.

The Danger: America's Democratic Decline

U.S. Democracy Is in Swift Decline

Every major international measure of democracy demonstrates serious U.S. decline. The Varieties of Democracy index charts growing autocratization since 2010; the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States to a "flawed democracy" in 2017; Europe's International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance now classifies the United States as a "backsliding democracy"; and Freedom House shows the United States on one of the fastest downward trajectories of any country, now ranking U.S. democratic quality alongside Romania and Croatia.[3]

America has long-standing democratic challenges that built slowly over the last twenty-plus years. The country's politics have fundamentally altered, and many Americans who came of age in previous decades are not aware of just how great the change has been.[4] The terms "swing" and "battleground" states did not exist before the 1990s, because so many states were competitive. Now, just a handful are at play in presidential races, raising the stakes in those places while effectively disenfranchising many voters elsewhere whose contra-majority votes in safe constituencies are known not to matter well in advance. This year's redistricting further increased the number of so-called safe seats, which now compose about 90 percent of the House of Representatives. Such a large number of safe seats pushes candidates to cater to the views of extreme partisans rather than tacking to one side during primary elections and then back to the middle for their general elections. The procedural tool known as the filibuster (which requires sixty votes to override, allowing a minority of senators to stop legislation even if a majority support it) was altered in the 1970s in a way that made it easier to use. Yet it has only been routinely employed since 2010. It has made rule by the majority into rule by the supermajority, creating gridlock, incentivizing further gerrymandering, and frustrating Americans who feel that even voting for a party that wins the majority does not advance their policy goals.

These slow-growing phenomena opened the door to today's acute problems. Antidemocratic politicians supported by safe seats and polarization have walked through and begun enacting an authoritarian playbook. This playbook has massively accelerated democratic disintegration over the last five years. Like the American author Ernest Hemingway's famous quip about how one goes bankrupt, America has been losing its democracy at first gradually, and then suddenly.

The left has contributed its share to this slippage. In the strategies section, I suggest tactics to reverse the alienating politics of the left that are deepening polarization, static identities, and competitive victimhood and driving many Americans toward extremism. However, the rapid decline is asymmetric. It is primarily being driven by a very different Republican Party.

Of the Republicans in Congress on the day former president Donald Trump took office, half are now gone. Since the Republicans' Tea Party revolution, a supposedly populist upsurge partially engineered from the top in 2008 to alter the power structure in the party, approximately 75 percent of Republican House and Senate seats have changed hands.[5] The Republicans leaving are those who—like former congressmen Jeff Flake, Peter Meijer, and Rob Portman—have been more bipartisan or willing to stand for democratic norms. Those elected after 2008 include Representatives Lauren Boebert, Madison Cawthorn, and Marjorie Taylor Greene. Among those known to have asked Trump for preemptive pardons for their role in the insurrection, nearly all were elected after 2008.[6] The extremist wing of the Republican Party is a recent phenomenon whose nationwide reach and depth within states is already extensive. A report by the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (an organization that has for a long time been tracking white nationalism and anti-Semitism) found that 21 percent of Republican state legislators had joined extremist social media groups.[7] Trump is an accelerant of this trend, but his absence alone will not undo the damage.

The Republican Party is no longer the party of former president Ronald Reagan, nor is it even the party of long-serving conservatives like Representative Liz Cheney. A paper classifying over 1,000 political parties across 163 countries by ideology and tactics finds that the current Republican Party looks far closer to authoritarian populist parties—like Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance in Hungary and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey—than to mainstream conservative parties such as Germany's Christian Democratic Union or Canada's Conservative Party.[8]

That is because leaders of this new Republican faction are not only further right but are also far less committed to democratic institutions, practices, and norms.[9] They are aware that in increasingly safe seats, their main threat is from a primary challenger.[10] A base whose majority is White, evangelical, rural men, and which in 2016 gained a larger percentage of formerly swing voters who cared about identity issues but wanted more government economic redistribution, is more easily motivated by identity than by traditional conservative policy issues such as small government or low taxes.[11] These politicians have also come of political age seeing that bipartisanship can enable hit ads that hurt their chances in primaries but that violence and voting manipulation will not be punished at the ballot box.[12]

A Corrosive Playbook Is Already Underway

The democracy community needs speed and strategy at scale, because antidemocratic activity at the state level is already well underway. It is following a playbook pioneered by democracies that have been destroyed recently in other countries as well as in the United States' own past authoritarian enclaves.[13]

Legal changes to alter who can vote, which votes count, and who adjudicates. In Hungary, the Fidesz party used autocratic legalism to legally alter laws with the support of voters until the playing field for democracy was irrevocably tilted in a way that created

supermajorities for one party.[14] President Viktor Orban, who was elected to a fourth term in 2022 despite the country's remaining six opposition parties backing a single candidate, shows how effective such legal manipulations can be.

In America, many states have been flooded with laws to alter voting. The worst of these maneuvers have occurred in a dozen states that have passed laws transferring power to more partisan electoral bodies and/or criminalizing their election administrations. These antidemocratic legal moves cannot be overcome by turnout.

For example, in Texas, poll watchers must be granted access to any part of a polling location. Texas has also criminalized any action by an election worker to restrain poll watchers.[15] Texas also has an open carry gun law with no permit requirement. So, if poll watchers walked into a polling location with assault rifles in Texas, their actions may run afoul of federal intimidation legislation but appear to be in keeping with state legislation. A judge would have to adjudicate. Meanwhile, the law preventing election officials from intervening means that at best they can call law enforcement, whose presence can also have intimidating effects at polls.

At the same time, protective laws are failing. Michigan's secretary of state tried to pass what is known as a time-and-place ban, which would have restricted the open carrying of guns into or within 100 feet of polling stations during the state's early voting and election period in 2020. A judge blocked the effort.[16] That ruling opened the door for what followed when Michigan gubernatorial candidate Ryan Kelley (whom the Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] would later arrest for egging on the crowd at the U.S. Capitol on January 6) and state senate candidate Mike Detmer met with poll workers in Michigan.[17] Kelley suggested that those worried about fraud should unplug tabulation machines, while Detmer reportedly advised poll workers to "be prepared to lock and load. So, if you ask what we can do, show up armed."

Meanwhile, an obscure legal tactic could allow state legislatures to legally select their own slates of electors (whose votes are those that actually count to determine the winner of the presidency), regardless of the will of their voters. The "independent state legislature" theory argues that the Constitution gives state legislatures alone the final determination of election procedures, superseding state constitutions, courts, governors, and even voters, whose votes for electors are only advisory.[18] This once-fringe theory sounds far-fetched, but the Supreme Court has taken a case that will allow it to decide on the theory in June 2023, and four of the sitting Supreme Court justices have previously indicated their potential support in decisions from *Bush v. Gore* (2000) to spring 2022. While Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett has remained silent, the activism of this Supreme Court does not encourage confidence.[19]

The democracy community should stop conflating these dire changes with measures that require voter identification or reduce mail-in ballot access. I address such laws in the "necessary but insufficient" section, because their results are mixed.[20]

Personnel changes to ensure extreme partisans adjudicate election decisions. The key Republican in Wayne County, Michigan, who certified Detroit's election and thus allowed the state's votes to be counted, has since been replaced with a fierce election denier.[21] Georgia's Republican secretary of state, who refused to look for the 11,000 votes that Trump asked him to find, has faced death threats, harassment, and a Trump-supported primary challenger (though he ultimately kept his seat).[22] A coordinated campaign with bureaucratic, electoral, and violent components is attempting to replace competent, long-standing election officials of both parties with partisan activists.

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Threats of violence against election workers, once nearly nonexistent, are now frequent—the Department of Justice (DOJ) has tracked over a thousand threats against election officials since the 2020 elections.[23] In Colorado, threats are severe enough that some election officials are undertaking active shooter trainings and have been told to drive home following different daily routes to maintain their safety.[24] A 2022 Brennan Center poll found that one in six election officials had experienced threats, and half had not reported them.[25] About 50 percent had been threatened in person—not just online or on the phone. One in three knew at least one official who had already quit because of fear or threats.

The criminalization of routine electoral work is also part of a campaign to force out existing election workers and replace them with partisan activists. Laws are already being used in Arizona, Wisconsin, and elsewhere, forcing bureaucrats and bipartisan election boards to retain legal counsel to avoid jail for normal election decisions. For instance, in Arizona, new, contradictory laws forced the secretary of state to face criminal charges if she updated state election machines with the new maps. But these updates were also required by statute, following census-required redistricting. After updating them as required, she must now deal with the fear of jail time as a result. Many election workers are deciding that keeping their jobs is not worth these potential consequences.

America has the most decentralized elections in the world, and to run fair elections, local officials must master highly localized information and bureaucratic arcana. The median election official has worked in that role for twelve years; in large districts, most have served fifteen or twenty years. Fears of criminal, legal, or violent repercussions are creating an exodus of mid-level professional staff—the level of resignations since 2020 is unprecedented.

Stop the Steal activists—who wrongfully maintain that Trump won the 2020 U.S. presidential election—are being courted to replace them. Trump White House strategist Steve Bannon's podcast devotes an extra hour of programming each day to highlight the local officials he is recruiting to run for office.[26] The United States has over 3,000 counties: an investigation of just sixty-five of them found 8,500 new Republican precinct officers, with

no similar Democratic surge.[27] These new officials are managing everything from voter registration to cybersecurity.

In addition to taking over professional staffing, election deniers are running for the top elected positions that manage state voting procedures. In Colorado, an election denier in charge of Mesa County's elections enabled voting machine passwords to be posted to public, online QAnon chat rooms.[28] While she was indicted on ten counts by a Republican prosecutor, she is now running for secretary of state—a position that determines election rules. In fact, two-thirds of those vying to be secretaries of state in 2022 claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent. More than one hundred election deniers have won their primary campaigns in 2022; nine states, including Michigan and Arizona, have election-denying candidates running for all major executive offices: governor, attorney general, and secretary of state.[29]

Deepening doubt in elections as free and fair expressions of voter desires. Finally, just as Russian President Vladimir Putin has convinced many Russians that they are ridding Ukraine of Nazis, in the United States disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation on right-wing television and talk radio has succeeded in creating an alternate reality that facts cannot dislodge. This media echo chamber does not need to create a solid story that can be confirmed or denied. Instead, it is selling doubt. Voters who aren't sure that a particular form of wrongdoing happened, but simply feel that something is not right, are actually harder to persuade with facts. Thus, while in October 2020 solid majorities of Republicans believed elections were fair, months of conspiracy theory coverage by mainstream-right outlets means that now, only 35 percent trust the election system and nearly three-fourths believe the current president occupies the White House illegally.[30]

This media echo chamber does not need to create a solid story that can be confirmed or denied. Instead, it is selling doubt.

These conspiracies build on one another. If you do not believe that COVID-19 is a serious disease, then altering election rules to make it easier to vote by mail in 2020 appears suspect. If you are concerned about an elite ring of pedophiles, then Democratic politicians requiring every American to wear a mask in public and establishing unprecedented lockdowns, which were widely reported to accelerate child abuse, appear pernicious. The building of conspiracy upon conspiracy—well-understood in psychological literature—makes unraveling each more difficult.[31]

Polarization Creates Vicious Cycles That Accelerate Disintegration

Much of the authoritarian playbook is unknown to voters. Polarization has allowed this authoritarianism into U.S. politics and enabled the sudden, rapid decline of U.S. democracy.

Polarization is based in some misbeliefs about the other side—which are greater among educated, media-consuming partisans on both sides and highest on the left.[32] It is exacerbated by misinformation and disinformation. But it is also grounded in justified fears of the other

side's social and policy agendas. The extreme level of U.S. polarization means that when the left describes its concerns about growing authoritarianism, the right has its own examples to list in return.

Coronavirus-related mask mandates, lockdowns, and forced business and school closures mean that people on the right not only fear authoritarianism in the social and economic spheres but have had concrete, daily experiences with what many feel to be the curtailment of their democratic rights. The feeling that their fears of democratic loss have been dismissed by the left make it hard for the average conservative to take the left's concerns seriously. For instance, many felt a double standard when their economic, social, or mental health concerns about pandemic bans on public gatherings were ridiculed, while mass gatherings for Black Lives Matter protests were lauded. And while political violence and spontaneous hate crimes that harm people are being committed vastly more by those on the right and the overwhelming majority of Black Lives Matter protests were peaceful, the property damage from the few protests that were not resulted in over $2 billion in insurance payouts across twenty states, by far the most costly civil disturbance in modern U.S. history.[33] The failure of the left to take such property losses and their personal costs—particularly to small business owners—seriously, and the conflation of these concerns with racism, galls many on the right.

Meanwhile, instances of mass shootings, school shootings, the sending of child services to the homes of parents of LGBTQ children, and the rollback of legal abortion even in some cases of rape, incest, and the health of the mother are handing people on the left daily, concrete losses of rights in an equally personal and visceral manner.

As policy agendas have become more extreme with less overlap over the last twenty years, partisans fear the other side so much that voters are willing to allow antidemocratic action by their side to keep the other out of power. By February 2021, 72 percent of each party was claiming the other was "a serious threat to the United States and its people."[34]

Scholars Milan Svolik and Matthew Graham have found that 85 to 90 percent of U.S. citizens would vote for their party even if it engaged in undemocratic action, rather than cross party lines.[35] Numbers are far worse in states where voters have actually had to make such choices. A recent Bright Line Watch survey found that 28 percent of Democrats and 39 percent of Republicans favored "doing everything possible to prevent the other party from governing effectively"—numbers that reduced only slightly when misbeliefs about the other party were corrected.[36]

Looking at cases of severe polarization globally since 1950, researchers Jennifer McCoy, Murat Somer, and Benjamin Press found that no other established democracy has been this polarized for as long as the United States. In McCoy's and Press's words,

> "There are no peer analogues for the United States' current political divisions—and the track record of all democracies does not provide much consolation."[37]

The lack of consolation is because among less-established democracies that faced pernicious polarization, the majority experienced democratic degradation. Of the twenty-six countries that degraded, twenty-three descended fully into authoritarianism. Of the minority of cases that did not degrade, all but nine repolarized in ensuing years.

Polarization is allowing authoritarianism to take hold with voter support.

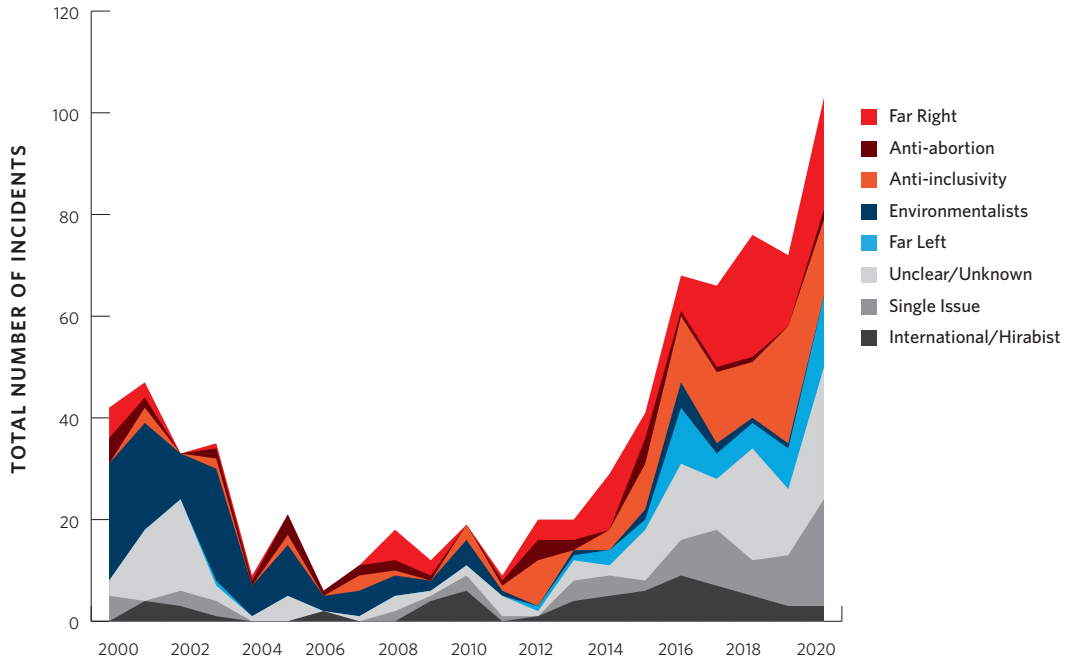
Globally, the world is in the sixteenth year of democratic recession. Democracies have primarily been dying at the hands of their own voters, who appreciate democracy but fear the other party so much that they will allow antidemocratic action to keep their side in power.

This is what is happening in America. Polarization is allowing authoritarianism to take hold with voter support.

Violence Is Rising and Builds on Itself

In the face of ginned-up beliefs that their democracy is under threat and emboldened by the feeling that some police and politicians will excuse their actions, right-wing violence is skyrocketing, as data that I expanded from the Global Terrorism Database show (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Terrorist Attacks in the United States by Ideology, 2000–2020



Source: Global Terrorism Database data set, coded by the author. See Box 1 for an overview of methods.

Box 1: Methodology

The **"far left"** category includes attacks by groups identified with the far left, such as anarchists, and attacks that are partisan or support left-related policies such as economic redistribution. It includes attacks against law enforcement motivated by racial or left-associated concerns. **Environmental** terrorism includes animal rights and was large enough to merit a separate category, but it may be viewed as related to the far left. The **"far right"** category includes attacks by groups identified with the far right, such as militias, QAnon, and white supremacists, and attacks that are partisan or support policies associated with the American right, such as anti-gun control. **Anti-abortion** attacks were large enough to merit their own category but may be seen as related to the far-right. **Anti-inclusivity** includes hate-related terrorism against religious, ethnic, and racial minorities that cannot be attributed to any organizational affiliation. The **single-issue** category includes incel attacks, terrorism related to nonpartisan conspiracy theories, personally motivated attacks, and other small categories not clearly associated with the right or left in the United States. **International/Hirabist** includes attacks by individuals who associate themselves with al-Qaeda, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and similar causes. The **unclear/unknown** category includes terrorism where the perpetrator is unknown or the motivation is unclear. It is largely composed of bombings of White-majority Protestant, Catholic, and other churches whose perpetrators are unknown and of activities of disturbed individuals that do not appear to be influenced by a political ideology.

These categories have been developed and coded by the author from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) data set. The GTD's event-based data set uses a definition of terrorism that does not include state violence or violence carried out as part of a law enforcement operation. It also does not include spontaneous clashes erupting at protests or riots or more spontaneous violent hate crimes. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data set does include ideological violence at protests and riots, but it cannot demonstrate trends because it only began tracking U.S. data in 2020. However, the relative volume of left- and right-wing violence within ACLED's existing data is similar to the GTD data set.

In the fall of 2021, a University of Chicago study found that nearly 10 percent of Americans agreed that "force is justified to restore [Trump] to the presidency."[38] A separate, 22,900-person poll found that almost one in five Republican men claimed that violence was justifiable "right now."[39] FBI-reported hate crimes are at their highest level since the backlash against perceived Muslims that followed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. White supremacist propaganda has risen nearly twelvefold since 2017, and supremacists are holding more than three times as many public events.[40]

Violent desires are also growing on the left. Attacks are up slightly according to data from the Global Terrorism Database, particularly against law enforcement and visible Trump supporters. A survey by Nathan Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason from February 2021 found that 11 percent of Democratic respondents justified assassinating politicians of the other party.[41] A survey of over 8,000 people from July 2022 found that of the respondents who justified political violence, 36 percent supported violence in defense of ethnic or racial minorities. Meanwhile, threats against members of Congress from both sides of the aisle are more than ten times as high as they were just five years ago: the number of threats investigated by Capitol Police leapt from 902 in 2016 to 3,939 in the first year of the Trump presidency and reached 5,206 by 2018; 8,613 in 2020; and 9,625 in 2022.[42]

Apart from the vastly disproportionate number of incidents, there is another crucial difference between left- and right-wing violence from a democracy standpoint.

On the left, those who justify violence identify least strongly with the Democratic Party—suggesting a disaffected fringe over whom the Democratic Party lacks control.[43]

On the right, those who show the greatest support for violence also most strongly identify with the Republican Party.[44] That allows their violence to be used for political goals. Postelection violence and intimidation on the right began to align with the political calendar in 2016 and 2018. By 2020, violence and armed demonstrations were highly connected to key dates of election procedures.[45] Right-wing violence and intimidation, in other words, is targeted.

For that reason, many people don't feel this increase in violence. They see the January 6 insurrection as an isolated event. But it is not. On the right, violence, threats, and intimidation are being directed politically and are used for three goals.

1. **To intimidate prodemocracy Republican politicians and thought leaders, causing them to resign or silence themselves, creating a single Trumpist-Republican-conservative identity.**

   Violent tactics are being used against Republicans who show democratic backbone to eliminate the option of being a prodemocratic, conservative Republican or a Republican who engages in bipartisanship. Representative Adam Gonzalez, one of the Republicans who voted to impeach Trump after January 6, is not running for reelection after constant harassment and threats of violence against him, his wife, and their young children. Immediately after his announcement, Trump issued the statement "1 down, 9 to go!"[46] Of the ten Republicans who voted for Trump's impeachment, four are retiring—two of them have admitted that death threats played a role in their departure.[47] In fact, nearly every Republican national or state decisionmaker who supported fair elections in 2020 has been targeted with threats and violence, often with militia participation.

   After Marjorie Taylor Greene doxed colleagues who voted for U.S. President Joe Biden's infrastructure bill, a number admitted to receiving death threats. Retiring Republican Representative Frank Upton, who voted for Trump's impeachment and also for Biden's infrastructure bill, admitted that the death threats, particularly against his spouse and family, were frightening and would affect other representatives' willingness to vote for measures sponsored by the other party to create bipartisan legislation.[48] Parents may be particularly at risk for intimidation out of public service. Al Schmidt, a Republican election board member in Philadelphia, resigned after being singled out by Trump and targeted with threats so significant that his children were given Philadelphia police protection.[49]

Violent groups are also being used to overturn the leadership of local Republican parties. In Nevada, the right-wing, European chauvinist organization known as the Proud Boys took part in key votes in Clark County (the seat of Las Vegas and by far the largest county in the state) to sideline prodemocratic Republicans and empower a more Trump-aligned faction, allegedly at the behest of state Republican leadership.[50] Local leaders scheduled meetings in schools precisely because they were gun-free zones, and they canceled other gatherings in an attempt to avoid being threatened out of office. Proud Boys have also joined the leadership of Florida's Miami-Dade County Republican Party, turning meetings into intimidating shouting fests that are driving traditional conservatives away.[51]

Another target are opinion leaders. By offering a way to be conservative and prodemocratic, they pose a grave threat to the antidemocratic faction. Many respected conservative media personalities, such as the evangelical journalist David French, have received death threats and threats against their families, deterring others in the conservative establishment from following their lead and speaking up for democracy.[52] Violence is a means to silence free speech. By reducing the marketplace of ideas to a binary—either antidemocratic Republicans or Democrats—violence also abets polarization.

2. To eliminate officials who stand in the way of stealing a future election.

As already described, similar tactics are being used against elected officials and administrative election officials alike, from both parties, who could impede efforts to alter rules or procedures that would enable the theft of a future election. Secretaries of state such as Jocelyn Benson of Michigan, Katie Hobbs of Arizona, Jena Griswold of Colorado, and Maggie Toulouse Oliver of New Mexico have been targeted at their homes. Some had to relocate throughout the election season. Mid-level staff and temporary election workers have also been targeted.[53]

Republican state and county officials who have stood up for democracy and the fairness of their elections, such as Bill Gates in Maricopa County, Arizona, fall into the first category as well as this one and thus are targeted for both reasons.[54]

3. To solidify the base by appealing to a shared identity and identifying perceived enemies to unite against.

The use of dehumanizing language and increasingly violent imagery against women, minorities, and Democrats unites base voters whose grievances knit them together but who do not always share the policy beliefs of traditional conservative constituencies.

This dehumanization may entail accusations that Democratic politicians, school board members, and community leaders are "groomers" for pedophilia, as well as vile racial epithets, violent misogynistic imagery, and jokes using similar dehumanizing tropes. All these strategies lead more aggressive supporters to threaten, dox, and sometimes use actual violence against Democrats; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; and women.

These forms of violence are the result of an attempt to create unity and intensity among base voters. Thus, they are the most widespread form of violence and threats, reaching everyone from school board members and public health officials to mayors and members of Congress. Threats are proliferating at the local level where municipalities have fewer resources to protect officials: a 2019 study found that 13 percent of mayors had been subject to physical violence—and that survey was taken prior to the uptick in threats in 2020.[55] Extremist groups, such as the Proud Boys, are piggybacking on mainstream right-wing targets, causing health departments, school boards, and other institutions to face even greater violence and threats.

Women are three times more likely to be targeted, minority women even more so. Democratic female politicians received ten times as many intimidating and abusive messages as their male colleagues, with minority women the most targeted.[56] But it also affects everyday women, minorities, and immigrants through increased hate crimes and mass shootings. While this form of violence is more about unifying the base than harming the target, it creates an atmosphere that abets efforts to target particular members of these denigrated communities who fall into the first or second categories—such as Black female poll workers.

On the left, violence looks more like what occurred in the 1960s and 1970s: it is coming from those outside the system, fringe individuals and groups fighting regular politics and acting without direction—such as the Bernie Sanders supporter who shot at members of Congress during a baseball game and the young progressive men who attack police officers believing they are supporting minority rights.[57] However, far-left violence is rising, and could expand if prominent progressives begin espousing more militant sentiments.

On the right, one of the most worrisome aspects is the mainstreaming of violence. Most Americans who commit spontaneous hate crimes look similar demographically to other violent criminals: they are generally young, unmarried, childless, unemployed men with low levels of education who often have prior criminal records. In other words, individuals with an inherently aggressive personality, who might commit other violent criminal acts, are being fired up by the normalization of hate to direct their anger at more politically focused targets.

But the majority of those who commit organized political violence, such as on January 6 or at Stop the Steal events, are married, middle-class, middle-aged men with kids, jobs, and involvement in church or community groups. Those who were arrested for the January 6 insurrection mainly consumed mainstream media, not social media or far-right echo chambers.[58] Many were nevertheless also members of extremist groups.[59] Unlike those committing spontaneous hate crimes, this community of well-established Americans seems to see violence and intimidation as an extension of their political voice or even an act of citizenship, rather than a criminal or terrorist act.

That is a final, urgent reason for a step-change in focus: violence that has become mainstream is likely to grow and is vastly harder to counter.

Five Strategies to Change the Trajectory and Improve American Democracy

America's democracy faces two very different problems. An acute threat is emanating from a faction of Republican politicians who are trying to gain control over government to maintain power by reducing democracy. Their efforts build on long-term, slow-growing threats: a right where too many moderate conservatives are willing to support an antidemocratic faction to fend off the feared left, and a left where too many Americans aren't sure they care enough about the democratic system of government to fight for it.

Today's acute threats were able to metastasize quickly because society's immune system had been weakened by these long-term problems of polarization and decades of lost faith that democracy can deliver a better life. Thus, it isn't enough to restore the status quo from just before the acute threat took hold—Americans must use this crisis to propel their country forward.

Some of these tactics are short term, while others will take longer to come to fruition. All are difficult, but many have been achieved in countries far more violent and politically volatile than the United States is today. However, waiting on the long-term goals and prioritizing the immediate will not succeed. The U.S. and NATO war in Afghanistan demonstrated how fighting twenty years' worth of one-year battles is a failing strategy.

Democracy proponents risk fighting endless two-year battles each election cycle, to equally failed results. Instead, addressing the acute threats requires attention to both **electoral** and **social** drivers (see table 1). I recommend five strategies:

1. enable responsible conservatives to vote for democracy,
2. reduce social demand from the right for illiberal policies and politicians,
3. engage the left in defending democracy by making it deliver,
4. build a broad-based, multistranded, prodemocracy movement around a positive vision concretized in locally rooted action, and
5. strengthen accountability to reset norms on what behavior is legal and acceptable.

Table 1: Suggested Tactics

		Immediate	Medium- to Long-term
Electoral or Institutional	1	**Enable Republicans to vote for democracy** Support prodemocracy candidates in primaries and general elections with money, fusion voting, and cross-party voting; ensure antidemocratic candidates lose	**Enable Republicans to vote for democracy** Reduce the salience of primaries and safe seats via ranked choice, proportional representation, and/or majority winner voting systems so extremists can be beaten from their own side
	4	**Multistranded, locally grounded movement** Create state and local community resilience strategies that connect civil society, government, and law enforcement to reduce extremism and potential violence	**Multistranded, locally grounded movement** Reinvigorate local politics through participatory budgeting, deliberative democracy, and other localized democracy building practices
	5	**Accountability** Electoral Count Act reform Contest the independent state legislature theory Strengthen laws on addressing threats to election officials and elected politicians, law enforcement extremism, and other areas that have seen growing violence Defamation lawsuits	**Accountability** Pursue criminal and civil lawsuits against extremists and antidemocratic government activity Ensure professional accountability for antidemocrats Legislate Supreme Court term limits and ethics rules Increase accountability for white-collar crime
Social	1	**Enable Republicans to vote for democracy** Create a branded identity for prodemocracy conservatives and candidates	
	2	**Reduce social demand for illiberalism** Counter-extremism support for populations at risk for violent or antidemocratic views	**Reduce social demand for illiberalism** Rebuild local news Regulate social media and gaming platforms Revive rural American communities
	2 3	**Reduce social demand for illiberalism and engage the left in defending democracy** Build mass campaigns to meet people's information needs and inoculate against bad information	**Reduce social demand for illiberalism and engage the left in defending democracy** Invest in a positive vision of masculinity Invest in economic structures that support democracy; return social status and high wages to laboring jobs
	3	**Engage the left in defending democracy** Connect democracy to social justice issues	**Engage the left in defending democracy** Address police brutality and community safety together
	4	**Multistranded, locally grounded movement** Intra- and inter-party democracy building for unlikely allies Build popular, inclusive, forward-looking vision for the country's democratic future	**Multistranded, locally grounded movement** Spread an inclusive vision via journalism, art, and other public projects Develop social urbanism for local communities Facilitate local, social activities for community engagement and self-help for mutual benefit Develop grounding philosophy for inclusive vision

Enable Responsible Conservatives to Vote for Democracy

A democracy cannot exist with illiberal, antidemocratic politicians in charge. Over a third of Republicans believe the 2020 elections were free and fair. Were that third to vote for prodemocracy candidates alongside Democrats, the United States would look like many European countries, which have an angry minority of voters advancing smallish fringe parties rather than an existential challenge to democracy itself. Yet prodemocratic Republican voters continue to fuel an antidemocratic faction of their party because that faction is winning Republican primaries and mainstream conservatives simply cannot bear to support Democrats. For reasons of identity and policy, this is unlikely to change: Republican voting has not altered in large numbers in response to antidemocratic tactics, split-ticket voting is becoming extremely rare, and negative partisanship is very high.[60]

Social tactics such as bridge-building won't affect electoral outcomes, either. There is zero evidence that changing an individual's beliefs about other groups—such as helping someone feel more warmly toward immigrants or more secure in their social status—will alter voting behavior. Therefore, without immediate electoral and longer-term institutional changes that enable moderate Republicans to vote for prodemocracy Republican candidates against an antidemocratic faction, none of the social changes suggested later have the means to affect voting behavior in a way that will save the country's democracy.

Support prodemocracy candidates in primary campaigns and general elections to ensure antidemocratic candidates lose and prodemocracy politicians of all parties win. If antidemocratic candidates win, opportunistic politicians will continue to support illiberalism and antidemocratic tropes because they see this as a winning election strategy, whether they believe in what they are saying or not. And because leaders have immense power to set social norms, they will contribute to this vicious cycle, even if they are simply mouthing attitudes they don't actually endorse.[61]

Candidates who amplify antidemocratic or violent rhetoric or imagery must bear electoral costs for that strategy. Tactically different but equally critical is ensuring that the heroic politicians of both parties who supported democracy in 2020 win. Both are important for changing momentum. This suggestion requires campaign funding, but it also requires innovative strategy: in Utah, for instance, the Democratic Party is choosing not to run its own candidate in a heavily conservative state but is instead backing an independent, prodemocracy candidate who has a chance.[62]

These short-term efforts are essential. They are also endless. They require immense expenditures every two years to hold the line: for example, the 2020 elections cost $14 billion for national campaigns alone, not counting races for state legislatures, governors, and secretaries of state.[63] Addressing the roots of the problem also requires institutional reform.

Support primary election reform. Without institutional changes, fighting the antidemocratic faction is like trying to stop water flowing through a sieve. Safe seats force all

candidates to cater to a more extreme base, meaning that in some elections, there will be no obviously prodemocratic candidate to support—every viable candidate may deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election. Because so many seats are now safe, primaries have become the real election for over 90 percent of Congress.[64] That is why Representative Adam Kinzinger's Country First movement recognizes that without primary reform, the effort to elect prodemocracy Republicans cannot move forward.[65]

Various forms of electoral change or majority-winner rules would allow for what amounts to a multiparty system within the two-party field, enabling same-party candidates to run against each other without being spoilers.[66] These changes include: nonpartisan and open primaries (where voters don't have to register to a party to vote in a primary or can vote in either parties' primary), ranked choice voting (where voters rank several candidates in order of preference), and final-four or final-five voting (where politicians of the same party can run against one another). Other primary election reforms include fusion voting (where small parties such as the Greens or Working Families Party can cross-endorse), proportional representation (where the number of seats held by a political party is proportional to the vote for the party in that area, rather than a single candidate winning the entire jurisdiction by winning 50% +1 votes), and other systemic innovations. All of these alterations provide a prodemocracy way for conservatives to vote for prodemocracy conservatives without serving as spoilers or throwing a vote away. These sorts of systemic innovations, which should differ by state, would let partisans vote for prodemocracy candidates from their party. These innovations would also allow a fuller electorate to make their views known in places where one party determines who wins.

As a consequence of safe seats, the 2018 elections of Cawthorn, Greene, and Boebert were decided by 5 percent, 8.3 percent, and 10.3 percent of their electorates, respectively.[67] But thanks to open primaries, at least 5,400 Democrats voted in the 2022 Republican primary, and Cawthorn lost by 1,500 votes. Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger needed 27,000 votes to avoid a runoff and received over 37,000 from Democrats under Georgia's open primary system.[68]

Institutional reform isn't a silver bullet that can overcome having a real majority thanks to popularity and funding—Cawthorn's outbursts against Republican colleagues and poor constituent services softened his support. Boebert, however, won her primary despite thousands of Democrats registering as Republicans, and Greene won her primary in part because she raised $9 million while the next most viable Republican had raised just over $390,000.[69] Nevertheless, encouraging greater choice and agency for voters is an essential step for giving prodemocracy candidates a fighting chance. It also builds greater representation and trust in the system. It will not always yield moderation—as QAnon and election denialism grow, it could allow immoderate leaders to gain in some locations. The sooner that primary reform is implemented, and the more care that is given to the precise type of system in a given state, the less likely these pernicious effects will take hold—but this is a recommendation that has both crucial importance and an expiry date. It must start now.

Create a new identity for conservative Republicans to stand for prodemocratic beliefs. To break the connection between an illiberal social movement and a party, it is not enough to have an institutional way to vote for a conservative prodemocracy candidate. There must also be a brand, identity, and social group one can belong to so that a regular voter, candidate, or public official does not have to fear being painted as a "Republican in name only" (RINO) for supporting democracy.

When conservatives have stood up one by one for democratic beliefs, they have been shamed, shunned, and punished, as with Liz Cheney, who lost her primary; former senator Jeff Flake, who was voted out of office; and Cindy McCain, a former Arizona Republican kingmaker and the wife of the deceased senator and former Republican presidential candidate John McCain, who was censured by her own party. Never Trumpers—Republicans who publicly disavowed Trump—have lost jobs, friends, and even places of worship. Few people are attracted to a movement with such high personal costs for such abstract goals. Social norms play a strong role in how all groups, particularly authoritarian-leaning personalities, will act.[70]

Building a large, strongly identified, conservative, prodemocratic grouping with which individuals can identify and belong without social opprobrium offers a permission structure for changing social norms. The grouping must be a movement, not an official nongovernmental organization—though it could be assisted by multiple such organizations—and it must be large enough to deter efforts to pick prominent personalities off one by one. This identity is essential for institutional reforms to generate value.

Reduce Social Demand From the Right for Illiberal Policies and Politicians

Address the status loss and dignity deficit that is driving some Americans to turn against democracy. The widespread feeling that the system is rigged, and that this intentionally tilted playing field has caused a once-privileged group to lose status (a feeling particularly strong among white Christian males), has opened a window for antidemocrats to empathize and offer explanations that boost their power. America cannot have a healthy democracy without addressing these social forces.

Racism is clearly playing a dominant role in these dynamics, according to a multitude of studies.[71] The problem, however, is intersectional. Beliefs about the properness of male dominance were more potent than racial beliefs in predicting whether men and women in 2016 and 2020 voted for Trump.[72] Hostile sexism predicts support for political violence better than racism does. In both cases, however, there is correlation between these views and hostility toward people who are not white.[73] Meanwhile, as Duke University political scientist Ashley Jardina has shown, mobilized white identity politics transcends class.[74] So does hostile sexism. Plenty of college-educated White men (and some of the women who love them) feel their relative loss of status to minorities and women perhaps even more keenly, because they expect to be in the top place on the social spectrum. But class still

plays a role: American men and women without college degrees hold more traditional views on gender, religion, and other issues.[75] Today's culture wars sideline economics in order to unite non-college-educated Americans with many White people, men, and working class or male minorities, particularly Hispanics who may hold more traditional religious beliefs and gender norms.

To many American liberals, this may feel like the perfect moment for a comeuppance. But the impulse to rub White male noses in their perceived status loss plays right into the hands of authoritarians.

Political organizers build political identity around a "story of self, a story of us, and a story of now," in pioneering community organizer Marshall Ganz's words—or, as Ian Haney López writes, who we are, what status we hold, who validates us, and who threatens us.[76] Recognizing that men, White people, Christians, and working-class Americans are all grappling with their relative loss of status over the past fifty years, an antidemocratic faction has woven a successful narrative. Soft and sometimes explicit versions of the so-called great replacement theory claim that White people, men, and Christians are being displaced from their positions by minorities, women, and immigrants who are being let into the country or elevated to power by Democrats, Jews, "the government," or "elites." The QAnon claims of blood-drinking, satanic pedophiles supported by a "deep state" sound crazy, but they are actually a version of this story—one that paradoxically appeals less to self-interest and more to the helper impulse by saying that Christian childrens' souls are under threat from Democratic elites who hold cultural and political power. With stakes so high, democracy must be curtailed to save Christianity, White people, and men or, in a softer version, the Christian-European heritage that has made America great.

The weaponization of cultural issues is allowing what had been social divisions in the culture wars of the 1960s and partisan divides in the culture wars of the 1980s to fuel an authoritarian movement today.

The story explains why some groups are losing status, validates some individuals' difficulty competing, and provides immediacy to anti-democratic efforts to keep other Americans permanently away from power. But the Trumpist faction of the Republican Party offers more than ideology. Like any good organizing effort, it also provides understanding and community, potent offerings in an age where anomie and loneliness are at alarming levels.

The weaponization of cultural issues is allowing what had been social divisions in the culture wars of the 1960s and partisan divides in the culture wars of the 1980s to fuel an authoritarian movement today.

The authoritarian movement is cultivating a story that puts men, Christians, and White people at the top of a status hierarchy. The prodemocracy community must remain inclusive and liberal—but writing off all members of these groups as racist or unsaveable simply

thrusts them closer together. Instead, the democracy movement must understand how this story brings out the worst in many individuals who also have better selves. Rather than pushing them to bond further with the authoritarian movement, it is crucial to separate allies from within these groups who will support inclusive democracy. That sounds unappealing to many who wish to write off much of America and move forward without them. But if prodemocracy efforts don't reach people who are feeling their loss of status and seeking explanations, then authoritarian politicians, male-chauvinist Proud Boys, incel chat boards, hypermasculine militia movements, and myriad white nationalist groups are happy to recruit them instead.

Once a status hierarchy is created, it is not just those at the top who maintain it. People tend to make their most socially respected identity the most salient. Therefore, some middle- and working-class men tie themselves to a higher rung by emphasizing their whiteness. Hostile sexism is also common among women, many of whom hold onto ideas of rightful male dominance and anti-female attitudes to raise their status within the right-wing hierarchy. The population with the greatest support for anti-Semitic views are young conservative Latino men, and second highest is young conservative Black men.[77]

But not all those who support a traditional hierarchy are trying to put others down. For some working-class families facing the brutal realities of raising kids while one parent works a morning shift and the other has shift work at night, attaining traditional stay-at-home motherhood is a mark of success and family stability. These families resent elites with choices for sneering at a goal they hope to someday achieve.[78] Minority men and immigrants may emphasize their identity as hard-working and law-abiding or focus on their work identities as small business owners, and they may not want to share their hard-fought gains with others whom they don't feel followed the same rules. For instance, Pew Research Center found that 19 percent of Latino people favored Trump's border wall in 2018, a figure that rose to 48 percent among Latino conservatives.[79] One in ten African Americans today are immigrants and may identify more with gender norms from their home countries, or with a story of immigrant striving, than with the struggle against American racism.[80] Others may feel their masculinity or religious beliefs are more important to them than their race or ethnic identity and may support traditional, but not hostile, relationships with women.

The fact that people have many identities to choose from helps explain why the Hispanic vote for Trump increased by over a third between 2016 and 2020, the Black male vote doubled, and even the Asian vote grew.[81] While racism clearly played the largest role in motivating swing voters toward the Trumpist Republican faction in 2016 and continues to be an effective dog whistle, voting shifts in 2020 clarify that other factors are also driving the social support for authoritarian policies.[82]

For White, working-class men and women, for example, suicide, opioid addiction, and alcoholism have lowered life expectancies—an unprecedented fate for a developed country.[83] Men of all races without college degrees also face low marriage rates, high births out of wedlock, and declining social capital, all of which leave them lonelier. Women will soon out-graduate men from college two to one. America now has a large reservoir of men under

30—the most violence-prone group in any society—who have low levels of education, lack marriage possibilities and access to steady and well-paying jobs, feel humiliated by their low status in a country where downward mobility is seen as personal failure and in a working class culture where they expect themselves to be providers, and who must also hear high-status individuals tell them how privileged they are because of their gender and possibly race.

Anger at having these more complex cultural, economic, and identity concerns dismissed by elites as racism is being harnessed and weaponized by adversaries of democracy. Feelings of disrespect are being cultivated by an antidemocratic faction to drive together a large contingent of the country. Decades of studies of international insurgencies suggest that answering the legitimate grievances of groups, particularly concerns about corruption or unfairness, is important for diffusing conflict. How can the prodemocracy community stop unwittingly fusing these groups together and instead untangle this skein by understanding and answering the grievances that can be legitimately addressed?

Of course, working-class White people continue to hold privilege over working-class people of color historically and currently in hiring, housing, and many other spheres. But the knowledge that someone else has it worse does not erase a sense of resentment when one's life is tough enough and people with vastly greater wealth and power deride its difficulty. There are also real costs to a strategy of competitive victimhood, rather than a politics of inclusivity. Jardina has found that white identity politics emerge periodically in times where the White population feels under threat, such as the current demographic moment.[84] But even in such eras, the 30 to 40 percent of White people who feel a growing sense of white identity can avoid accompanying that feeling with racial hostility—if fears of threat are calmed. There are many ways to calm such fears—such as unionization, which elevates the role of class in one's identity, or more inclusive rhetoric that ties issues of class and race together. Instead, unfortunately, it is not just the right that is increasing the sense of threat. Left-wing tropes about the coming majority-minority country and simplistic concepts of racial identity amplify White people's anxiety and ironically increase the likelihood that a white sense of identity will be accompanied by racism and actions against other groups, from voting contrary to minority interests to actual violence. For instance, researchers have found that priming White college students who identify strongly with their white identity to think about white privilege led them to express greater racial resentment.[85]

Disarming the political weaponization of masculinity, race, religion, and class requires efforts that:

Reduce extremism within particularly at-risk populations such as evangelicals, veterans, and discrete right-wing communities supportive of violence by supporting organizations already trusted by these populations to reduce chances for extremist recruitment, build moderate voices, and create social groups supportive of speaking in favor of democracy and against violence.

Invest in a positive vision of masculinity and masculine citizenship. The movement to offer more positive views of women's and girls' roles in society has been of immense importance to altering social norms over the last fifty years. Yet it has not been accompanied by mass efforts to craft a mainstream, positive view of masculinity to stand alongside these empowered women and girls. On the right, efforts to create a positive masculine vision have curdled toward reinforcing male dominance.[86] Among progressives, understanding of the concept of "toxic masculinity" is strong, but a positive vision that holds space for emotionally and socially healthy men who also like pickup trucks, hunting, physical labor, physical strength, and traditionally masculine pursuits is not. And neither vision is clear on where nonbinary individuals fit into their views on gender.

This need for a new masculine frame that affirms a positive vision of masculinity is also important because of the interlinked nature of white male citizenship and guns in America today. Political scientist Alexandra Filindra found that, in 2015, 43 percent of White men viewed owning a gun as a sign of good citizenship, a view particularly strong among White male gun owners who score high on surveys of anti-Black prejudice.[87] These views have deep roots: laws since the nation's founding have conflated White men bearing arms with community protection. In the early days of America's colonies, and again after the Civil War, some states legislated that White men were required to bear arms, while Black men were barred from doing so.[88] While gun ownership can certainly coincide with being prodemocracy in the twenty-first century, that confluence requires notions of masculinity that encourage self-control—something the United States has actively supported in programming in places like Afghanistan.[89] In the current moment of heightened political violence, finding ways to differentiate White male citizenship from so-called community protection would reduce the traction that militias such as the Oathkeepers and Three Percenters have gained. These militias depend on the notion that armed protest and vigilante community protection are acts of citizenship similar to voting.

Like all human beings, men need to feel that they hold roles that are valued in society, not in spite of but because of who they are. They cannot simply be admonished to refrain from negative actions—they require a positive and aspirational view of manhood that enables their full selves rather than requiring them to stifle parts of their identities. For instance, values that support democracy, such as honor, responsibility, hard work, and sacrifice, are among the virtues associated with masculinity by traditionalists.

For a healthy twenty-first-century society, these roles must support empowered women and nonbinary individuals, not come at their expense. Similarly, men must perceive that empowering women and nonbinary individuals also supports individual men's well-being, not that the groups are in competition for the top of a hierarchy. Programs intended to build such mutual regard are regularly incorporated into work in developing nations such as India, where some microcredit programs for women, for instance, also work with men to show them how wives who can read and save money actually support their families and their husbands' social ranks rather than undermine poor men's fragile grip on status.

There is a nascent effort to create healthy visions of masculinity in the United States. It includes ad campaigns for mainstream male products, nonprofits that focus on sports and other pursuits while bringing in more attuned ideas of manhood, and school programs that teach emotional intelligence and regulation skills to students of all genders.[90] America needs more programs like these, as well as programs that offer healthy visions of mutually supportive and empowered genders within evangelical Christianity, where a negative version of masculinity has taken hold in recent decades.[91]

Rethink how economic structures could better support democracy. Though class and inequality are components of America's social divisions, government-led economic redistribution won't address the problems of democracy. Government redistribution programs actually increase the threats to masculinity by deepening a sense of dependence. Reforms that are means-tested are particularly disliked by working- and middle-class Americans, who are more motivated by the fear of losing what they have to higher taxes than by the prospect of gaining more. Their disgruntlement is enhanced when programs are targeted at those who have even less, pitting the working class against those who are not working.[92] Finally, years of dog-whistle politics have succeeded in inaccurately relating means-tested redistribution programs with African Americans, meaning that government redistribution measures intended to reduce inequality and poverty tends to increase racism.[93] America can take a page from the international development field, which has spent twenty years learning that government-provided services intended to enhance government legitimacy can backfire because of the inevitable jealousies and misinformation that arise over who gets what, when.[94]

Despite these problems with simple redistribution to ameliorate class grievances, the long-term loss of well-paying (and often male) manufacturing and other laboring jobs is playing a deep role in disempowering people who want to draw dignity from work and, instead, pushing them to look to more polarizing identity markers such as race for status.

American democracy does not need a simplistic redistribution that, however well-intentioned, backfires, but it does need a deeper rethinking of how economic structures could better support democracy and a holistic approach to how to alter them—the sort of work the Hewlett Foundation is supporting.[95] Democratic scholars since Aristotle have noted that a broad middle class is crucial to democracy, while a resentful class facing loss is a major risk, acute poverty can be co-opted by politicians offering handouts, and oligarchic concentrations of wealth skew voters, policy, and politicians. The prodemocracy community would do well to revive an old strain of democratic thought that also grounded the thinking of some of the country's founders, who believed that policymakers must consider how economic structures help or harm democracy—from concentrations of wealth to forms of work that remove the habits of free choice or association.[96]

Return social status and higher wages to laboring jobs that don't require a college education. The Great Resignation and the low unemployment rate offer an opportunity to return better pay and, just as important, respect, to jobs that require manual labor but not college degrees.

Nearly two-thirds of American men don't have a college degree. And today, they are significantly less likely than women to complete high school, to enroll in college, and to graduate college.[97] Society's respect for working-class labor therefore affects most men. It is also possible that conservative, white-collar men view attitudes toward traditionally male laboring jobs as proxies for society's respect for traditional male status.

The lower status of non-college-degree-requiring jobs also plays into hostile sexism. Starting with the generation born in 1974, women have consistently outpaced men educationally. Many White men seem to have made a personal choice not to compete with women—about four in ten claim they "just don't want to" continue schooling, transforming an aspirational norm of universal college education into a source of resentment.[98]

That means that rhetoric matters as much as programming. For instance, former president Barack Obama vastly increased the nation's apprenticeship programs, and Trump increased them as well—but Obama also vocally emphasized college as a goal that everyone should reach for, undermining the status his programs could have given to these skilled-labor jobs.

How well a job pays and how much attention it receives from government leaders can serve as indicators of status if consciously deployed to serve that function. Political leaders should be encouraged to support apprenticeships, short-term training, certifications, and other skilled labor programs, as well as considering programs such as community-college-with-training efforts.[99] The Chamber of Commerce and local business communities could support privately funded but similar programs, as well as deploy supportive rhetoric. In some fields, reducing credentialing requirements might be useful for cutting barriers to entry.[100] In others, gradients of credentialing might provide greater status and income to skilled laborers, so long as these barriers are not used to exclude minority groups. These are empirical questions that require studying by industry.

Unions can also help bring greater recognition and financial compensation to these roles. Unionization also appears to have the positive effect of reducing racism, possibly by emphasizing class solidarity over racial difference: studies have found that gaining union membership between 2010 and 2016 reduced racial resentment among White workers.[101]

Revitalize rural America. The decline of rural America is leaving the rural working class in an economic riptide, constantly pulling their stability out from under them. A problem rooted in economics has spread to opioid addiction and violence: the murder rate that has risen nationwide since 2020 also rose sharply in rural America, particularly in red states.[102] The geographic concentration of violence means that in urban areas, the 30 percent rise in murders the United States experienced largely affects people living in a few very hard hit blocks. In a rural area, the same rate of increase is felt across a community because there are so many fewer people.[103] Yet working-class Americans, who make up a greater percentage of rural America, are less likely to move due to the value they place on family, geographic roots, and economic needs that encourage them to remain near family homes and support systems.[104]

Neither party has addressed this problem well, but antidemocratic forces are succeeding in framing the enemies as immigrants, Jews, people of color, and coastal elites who look down on the hard work, values, and needs of so-called flyover country. While both the working class and White demographics moved away from Trump in 2020 compared to 2016, rural voters increased their support for the Trumpist Republican faction.[105] Because the Senate and electoral college give particular power to rural voters, these lived realities combined with adept framing are having immense electoral consequences.

Removing or seriously addressing the following grievances might help. The needed efforts are partially economic. But they are also about ensuring that regulations are appropriate to rural areas, where life is quite different than city life. They are also about returning agency to rural areas, where the ability to control one's destiny is of particular personal value and yet has been denuded due to economic forces, educational failures, and government regulations. Economic, social, and cultural efforts to revive rural America are unlikely to affect partisan voting—but they may be important to reducing the sense of grievance of being left behind that is fueling an extremist, authoritarian faction within a party.

Change the information space by fighting disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation and by rebuilding local media. Realities regarding status loss and who or what is to blame are seen through the prism of perceptions, not facts. Those perceptions are strongly shaped by the media. Much has been made of social media's pernicious effects on democracy. Its algorithms and business models exacerbate outrage and anger.[106] They also help recruit and provide platforms to extremists.[107]

But in Europe, social media has not been found to have the polarizing effects that it has in the United States—some studies show that it can actually help bridge divides in highly polarized countries.[108] A cross-country study on affective polarization finds that in the United States, the phenomenon predates the internet and correlates more closely with the rise of cable news.[109] Surveys also find extremely negative democratic effects from far-right and right-wing television and radio such as Newsmax, One America News, and Fox, rather than social media.[110] That finding is corroborated by studies of those who attended the January 6 rally. Only one-tenth of arrested insurrectionists received most of their news from social media; most favored conservative television and radio.[111]

In other words: the broader media environment determines the ways that social media affects a population. Together, right-wing radio, television, and social media form an echo chamber in which traditional conservative media is as serious a problem as social media. Both traditional and social media must be addressed to affect disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. Meanwhile, a strong local news environment and the existence of trusted medias of record can reduce polarization and help democracy even without changes to social media.[112]

Programming for solutions in the social media realm should consider three audiences who are affected differently by social media. The largest is a general audience who engages almost

entirely with entertainment and social news. This population rarely chooses to consume political news on purpose. Since they, like most people, have homogenous groups of friends offline, social media's weak links to old acquaintances often helps them become more open-minded and less polarized.

Next, a small, highly partisan audience is becoming more entrenched in its views thanks to social media. For them, social media is highly polarizing. Most of their feeds reinforce the rightness of their views, while the occasional opposing viewpoints from former friends or family polarizes them further. More media-sophisticated partisans are more susceptible to sharing misinformation and are more resistant to correction.[113] This problem is occurring on the left and right; more educated, media-consuming liberals tend to have the most distorted views of the other party, while affective hatred and sharing of misinformation may be slightly greater among Republicans, possibly because they are older or because of the deeper echo chamber of both online and offline media on the right. Because highly educated partisans are the social group that is closest to most prodemocracy activists, these polarizing effects of media tend to resonate with the prodemocracy world and this groups' experiences are often seen as the whole landscape.

The third audience is the smallest but the most dangerous. It consists of individuals who seek out more specialized platforms such as 4chan, 8kun, Gab, and closed groups on Facebook, Telegram, and other sites in which to revel in hateful memes and jokes. This same small group also interacts differently with mainstream social media: studies of YouTube show that most engagement with extremist content on that platform was largely confined to a small, concentrated group of people who had preexisting negative views on gender and race.[114] The amount of hateful discussion in these online fora is predictive of offline action. People who frequent hate sites are densely connected, seem to be mobilized to retweet more frequently, and are coordinated for attack.

These online populations follow a classic power law: a small number of people are responsible for a great deal of the online problem.

Actions to mitigate the dangers of social media should take these different audiences into account, focusing most action on the third group and undertaking careful, empirically tested work on the second. For the first group, simply providing easy access to good information is often enough. Efforts should aim to:

Rebuild local news sources. Trusted local media appears to serve as a bulwark against rabbit holes, democracy-eroding corruption, and polarization.[115] Local media is also correlated with a host of prodemocratic habits from voting and split-ticket voting to civic participation. Local media appears to amplify the effects of countermeasures that help fight disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation.[116] Its eclipse in recent years has opened space for more polarized news.[117] Supporting many efforts underway to reinvigorate local journalism and provide local news sources to communities helps break polarization and democratic decline.

Launch mass campaigns using positive messaging to meet peoples' information needs and inoculation techniques to fight extremism.[118] Inoculation techniques and efforts as simple as suggesting that people look up from their computers and connect with their families have been shown to deescalate violence and stop the spread of disinformation, even among deeply committed antidemocrats.[119] These must be driven by constant testing and can be employed to pull people away from disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation and toward more positive community and family associations.[120]

A significant number of people find their way down rabbit holes into disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation because good information appears lower in algorithms and thus in search results—or because facts appear behind paywalls that block poorer and less-partisan individuals. Fox News is free; the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and many local news sites are not. The democracy movement should invest in web-savvy campaigns and consultants as part and parcel of all philanthropic giving to ensure that it is easy for people to find good information and avoid bad.

Advocate for social media platforms to deplatform high-profile individuals but only demote vitriolic but lower-profile accounts as deplatforming can exacerbate their extremism, for the gaming industry to promote efforts for self-policing, and for Congress to regulate the core business model of social media platforms that profit from outrage and polarization. These advocacy efforts are hard and slow-moving but could all help fight disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation.

Carefully deploy impact litigation against echo chambers responsible for defamation and other antidemocratic activities that are also illegal, to deter media propagandizing.[121]

Engage the Left in Defending Democracy by Making It Deliver

While a faction of the right is seeking to use government to undermine democracy, Democrats are underalarmed about the threat. That might be in part because of recent wins: trust in elections tends to be influenced by whether one's side has won or lost, as well as elite framing about the voting experience. Thus, Democrats actually had particularly high levels of trust in the 2020 election, and only 35 percent of Democrats express concern about democracy being stolen.[122]

But the lack of alarm on the left about the loss of democracy may also be because many on the left, particularly minority voters and poor voters, keep being asked to turn out to vote to save democracy, disregarding the fact that democracy keeps failing to meet their needs. Organizations that purport to represent the poor or minorities cannot rally their base around abstractions like democracy if voting does not deliver concrete value for their lives.

While the acute threats to democracy are largely emanating from the right, Americans cannot build a brighter future without addressing the long-term concerns of those who are

so disillusioned with government that they do not see the democratic system as one that serves them. The need for status and reassurance on the part of groups traditionally higher on the social and political hierarchy cannot be provided at the expense of groups that have long been left out of the full fruits of democracy.

High-quality studies of Black and Latino communities find that these groups' policy desires focus on economic improvements (such as fighting inflation, supporting better-paying jobs, affordable housing, quality and affordable healthcare, and access to college education), reducing racism, improving air and water quality in their immediate neighborhoods rather than broad climate change issues, improving public schools, and reducing crime and improving criminal justice or immigration reform—in roughly that order.[123] Voting and democracy issues show up at the bottom of the list. In part, that may be because significant pluralities feel that voting does not matter because neither party is seen as advancing these concrete needs.[124] These views are especially strong among people under age fifty. The problem lies partially in communicating successes but largely in actually moving the bar.[125] People cannot be rallied around democracy when they are worried that their kids are going to school in trailers, their babies are going hungry, they can't pay for healthcare, and voting did not change anything. And while many in racial and ethnic minorities in the middle and upper classes don't feel these acute needs personally, they may identify with fellow members of their racial or ethnic communities. To change the tide, organizations should focus on the following efforts.

Connect democracy to real social and economic needs, particularly of underserved communities. Democracy organizations should recognize that democracy cannot remain abstract—it must be embodied in addressing actual needs that affect real people and in localities closest to the voters. The various communities that compose the left are less likely to support democracy goals unless they see solid movement on issues that matter to them and view that movement as being supported by organizations that purport to stand for democracy. Core organizations in the prodemocracy universe need to make a much greater effort to reach out across racial and class lines, not just ideological divides, by supporting these communities on concrete needs that matter to them.

Highlight how failures of democracy are among the reasons social and economic goals are not being met. Groups organized to promote social and economic justice should include democracy in their agendas. For instance, the National Urban League has done this in practice by crafting its latest State of Black America analysis around issues of voter suppression.[126] In Michigan, some organizations have emphasized how unelected emergency managers taking over disproportionately Black municipalities and being unresponsive to voters was a prime cause of the Flint water crisis.[127]

Recognize that the programs to address status anxiety among men and the working class described above also apply to minority working class men and should be crafted and framed to help both communities. Democrats used to be the party of the working class; its strong pillars of support among minorities and the college-educated have diluted this economic

focus. Republicans have always included business elites and are now welcoming the working class, but they do so by setting aside class and racial issues and prioritizing shared cultural beliefs. These shifts are leaving specific interests of working-class minorities off the policy agendas of both parties.

Efforts to build a positive vision of masculinity; boost status and salaries for skilled labor; and counter disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation (which disproportionately target Black and Latino users online) will assist minority men and working-class minorities on the left just as they help the white working class and men on the right. The key is to ensure that these programs do not have structures (explicit or unintentional) that serve as barriers to these participating communities. Structuring programs to appeal across race would be ideal. But in some cases, different substance as well as outreach will be needed: for instance, White men and minorities are being targeted differently by disinformation, requiring specific programming.

Provide information tailored to what minority groups are looking for. Government programs and organizations focused on democracy and social and economic justice cannot ignore the role of information access in achieving their goals. While much of the left's democratic dissatisfaction is about actually delivering policies that improve equality of opportunity and reduce systemic bias, too many democracy and social justice organizations are failing to effectively communicate what has been accomplished by politicians and organizations or offer effective means of agency. Much of the antidemocracy disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation that disproportionately targets minority communities reaches them because typical searches for information do not turn up what they are looking for.

Some of this is a problem of media paywalls mentioned before. Paying for news seems particularly unlikely among those who rarely seek out political information anyway. Another problem is created by not providing information to groups in the ways and at the times that they use it. For instance, the quick spread of the term "Latinx" among educated progressives ignores the fact that just 3 percent of people of Hispanic heritage use the term.[128] That discrepancy means that when most Latino Americans search for information on the web, they are going to miss information from groups that use Latinx and will find information that is specifically targeted to the search terms they use. Often, algorithms direct immigrants toward information from their countries of origin, including Spanish-language sites overseas that have been inundated with Russian disinformation.

Greater web savvy and attention to cost in order to reach minority and working-class audiences is not a nice addition to democracy programming; it is essential to fund because it is crucial to meeting people where they are.

Address police brutality, criminal justice reform, and community safety together. For years, political parties have failed poor and minority communities by addressing the issues of criminal violence and police brutality separately.

Democratic trust is deeply harmed when the police, some of the most visible representatives of the state, act with brutality or bias. In fact, globally, a sense that the state is impartial in exercising power is one of the greatest builders of trust in government and in fellow citizens, while unequal justice is one of the fastest ways to lose governmental legitimacy.[129]

Yet plans to address the problems of brutal and unequal policing must also grapple with the reality that civilian-on-civilian homicide is far and away the greatest cause of death for Black men in their twenties, larger than the next five causes combined.[130] The concentration of homicide in urban areas falls vastly, disproportionately on minorities—these deaths, coupled with a clearance rate in which fewer than half of all homicides in America are now solved, are one of the most-important and least-discussed equity issues in the country.[131]

To mobilize against criminal violence and ignore state violence, or to protect people from the state only to leave them prey to street violence, solves no one's actual needs for safety. Criminal justice reform is at risk of being undone by rising crime levels. These issue sets need to be addressed together, with empirical evidence, to help communities that deserve protection by the state and, too often, from the state.[132] This means that work to root out extremism in law enforcement must be pursued aggressively.[133] But it must be carried out with the police wherever possible, so that it can take place alongside evidence-based work, such as focusing on the few places where most crime occurs and the few people who commit the most violent crime, to reduce the skyrocketing murder rate, which had the largest rise in over a century in 2020.[134] Solution sets may also lie outside traditional thinking about crime, such as exploring the role cognitive behavioral therapy can play, a particular need in minority communities underserved by trauma-informed therapy.[135]

Build a Broad-based, Multistranded, Prodemocracy Movement Around a Positive Vision Concretized in Locally Rooted Action

More than half of all Americans believe the country's best days are behind them as a nation.[136] Many feel the system is corrupt and not worth saving. Serious, positive, prodemocracy work is currently confined to a small circle of people who are disproportionately middle to upper class, White, and talk mainly to each other. Yet international democracy-support research is crystal clear: mobilizing major change in polarized democracies requires broad-based constituencies of unlikely allies. International examples suggest that people are motivated by positive messages and concrete actions. In the context of U.S. democracy, eschewing national messages and issues in favor of local change is the best way to build on the trust that remains in the system and to evade partisan polarization.

Decades of international work to support democracy have found that broad-based social movements are the key to overturning authoritarian systems and that their strength lies not just in numbers but also in their breadth across polarized divides.[137] America maintains a democracy, which is why the electoral components of enabling responsible conservatives to vote for democracy remain so important. But Americans can draw lessons from movements that have succeeded against more authoritarian odds.[138]

All government systems rely on pillars of support to maintain legitimacy, such as the business community, religious leaders, the media, police, and the military. These pillars are composed of individuals with complex personal goals, identities, and needs. Movements to support democracy need to get more of these pillars to vocally join the prodemocracy side and eschew active, or more often passive, support for antidemocratic activities. Attracting key individuals and groups within various pillars to stand publicly on the side of democracy signals to mainstream society that they, too, can stand for prodemocracy goals without fear of retaliation. It is also essential for overcoming the polarization that allows authoritarianism to grow with voter support.

Ideological partisanship is not the only divide that must be overcome to build a united, prodemocracy movement. Many indicators of democratic health in America move in different directions based on race, class, or age. For example, trust is a society's immune system, and it enables communities to unite against threats and come together to solve problems.[139] Political trust in institutions is based in social trust, or a belief that others will follow publicly understood social norms and that broad values and expectations of each other are shared.

Ideological partisanship is not the only divide that must be overcome to build a united, prodemocracy movement.

The decline in trust in democratic institutions and in fellow Americans over the last sixty years (with a sharp acceleration over the last twenty) is well documented.[140] What is less known is that trust in government actually bottomed out under Obama, hitting just 5 percent and 6 percent for the so-called silent and boomer generations, respectively. But for Black Americans, it was rising at the moment when it was at rock-bottom for White Americans, who remain the demographic majority. Ominously, Black and White peoples' trust levels in government started moving in opposite directions at that time and have continued to do so—suggesting that policies and politicians who enhance the trust of one group are lowering the trust of another. Americans cannot build broad-based trust without bridging this racial divide.

Meanwhile Gen Z has the lowest level of trust of any generation and far less attachment to democracy.[141] They need to be brought into the prodemocracy space with efforts that are particular to their generation. This may entail civic education with international and historic examples of just what more can be lost and positive examples of what can be accomplished with broad-based action.

Finally, one of the few issues that unites Americans across parties is the widely held view that the system as a whole is rigged toward elites. This "vertical polarization" gets less attention than left-right polarization, but it is just as acute, has enabled populist politicians to gain ground, and causes democracy messaging to fall flat for audiences who feel that the so-called democracy is actually tilted against them.[142]

Unifying a prodemocracy movement must thus work not only across parties but across racial, generational, and class-cultural divides, while bringing in key societal pillars, such as businesses, religious institutions, and the military. It also must speak to divisions within these groups. Many racial minorities are progressive in some areas but hold more traditional religious beliefs, and many immigrants are both racial minorities and believe they can rise to the top of America through hard work and do not wish to solidify outsider identities.

Authoritarians rely on division—their strategy is to use fear and anger to divide society in order to get different parts of society on their side or at least to feel conflicted enough to remain passive. Deepening divisions, even for discrete prodemocratic ends, thus helps the authoritarian playing field. Yet deepening and sharpening divisions is precisely what most partisan, get-out-the-vote messaging does. International experience in building broad-based movements, as well as U.S.-based efforts to fight disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation show that it's easier to mobilize with a negative vision—but that it is not enough to sustain success. Manifold movements with "Enough!" in their names have won battles against authoritarian governments globally, only to lose their democracies to backlash when they try to consolidate a new system absent a positive, inclusive vision. Even when prodemocracy candidates and issues win using negative or fear-based messaging, it deepens polarization and thus invites backlash that entrenches the authoritarian playing field and enhances the authoritarian advantage over time. And when they lose, they increase nihilism and hopelessness.

A prodemocracy movement must be grounded in a positive vision of what the country could be if everyone could see themselves and their children as benefiting in the future, rather than a zero-sum game to be won. In the same way that the efforts mentioned in the previous two sections could help White, right-wing men leaning toward extremism and could also assist African American men disaffected with decades of systemic mistreatment, some of the cure for the country's democratic ills requires recognizing where complex identities and needs intersect. These ideas and feelings must be concretized in images, grounded in philosophy and policy ideas, and made real through actions.

Finally, local methods of engagement help people gain agency and stay grounded in what is clearly real—not what nationalized media tells them is happening. Some of this engagement will entail local changes to the ways democracy is practiced. But prodemocracy work cannot be entirely political, otherwise it self-limits to a small slice of the citizenry who cares about politics. Americans must be reminded of what it means to come together and how that feels, through positive, apolitical group pursuits that offer moments of collective emotion—sports, concerts, community service, dance. These are all ways to emotionally engage Americans who may be too polarized to participate in prodemocracy activities in the political sphere or who may simply not be interested in politics.

Movement Building

Build a movement that brings together unlikely allies. Right and left, minorities and law enforcement, evangelical Christians and nonreligious individuals, younger Americans and older voters, businesses and unions—all of them need to be positive, active or passive parts of a broad-based, prodemocratic social movement in which members of every group can see themselves participating.

To bring together unlikely allies without losing flanks, as much work must be done to craft intraparty and intragroup solidarity for democracy as is dedicated to cross-group efforts. A conservative prodemocracy movement must not be branded as anticonservative; a liberal prodemocracy movement cannot be viewed as sacrificing core progressive goals. Liberals and conservatives who come together for democracy cannot simply be in the centers of their parties or come from one generation or race.

While on the right, intraparty work already omits violent individuals who have placed themselves on the antidemocratic side, on the left, more work is needed to address those willing to tolerate violence against businesses, personal property, and law enforcement. Research on broad-based movements shows that they must absolutely eschew violence of any type, even from aligned movements or flanks, because it quickly turns mainstream sentiment against them and reduces their breadth.[143] Careful engagement must take place with groups that might otherwise use violence to achieve their ends.

Efforts to bring together intragroup and cross-group coalitions for democracy, build trust, and eventually engage in public actions will often be slow and under the radar; trust takes time and can be harmed by too much early public scrutiny. Despite slow returns on investment, these conferences, meetings, strategy sessions, and other trust-building and coalition-building activities are essential.

Narrative, Vision, and Philosophy

Craft a positive, forward-looking, inclusive vision of America that provides a place for all Americans while gaining precedence over divisive visions on the right and left. This is not a recommendation about communications alone—Americans must first believe in a positive future as a single country and then articulate and imagine that future before they can communicate it.

Tyranny requires the consent of those tyrannized—Putin controls Russia because many Russians believe nothing can be changed and that nihilism is the only reasonable response. People like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are so dangerous to Putin's regime because they show people that a better path is possible. The United States is not facing tyranny but the hopelessness of fighting fellow Americans to a stalemate. For good reason, the prodemocracy community is barely able to think beyond avoiding a stolen election in 2024. But as important as that goal is, it is hardly something to look forward to. Many Americans

are demoralized by crime, inflation, and the fear of a downwardly mobile future for their children; they also cannot envision what the American dream looks like for them. Recent Supreme Court rulings are deepening polarization. A zero-sum, scarcity mindset cannot craft a way out of polarization and sclerosis.

Narratives must offer a common, hopeful view of America in which all Americans can see themselves as potentially successful, comfortable, and possessing agency and voice.[144] A future vision cannot be blind to identity: women, racial minorities, and other identity groups band together because they know identity solidarity is essential to being heard in a world that remains normed to White, Christian men. But it must alter the thin notions of static, divided identities now in vogue on the far left and far right and instead center the multiplicity of identities within each person.

Today, an identity-obsessed far-right trumpets exclusion and an identity-focused far-left claims inclusion, but both offer a vision of a society based on a hierarchy of static, thin, and unchangeable identity markers in which some groups are on top and those who lack a privileged identity cannot aspire to greater status. What differs is simply where groups are positioned relative to each other, who has voice, and who is silenced. The status loss and reduction of agency that this zero-sum model of identity requires from certain groups is fueling backlash and empowering white nationalist identity movements and antidemocratic activities. Meanwhile, rather than unifying the country against a white supremacist vision of America, the fear of status loss is dividing the potential prodemocracy movement and pitting subgroups against one another.

Eric Ward, the executive director of the Western States Center, explains this best in an interview I recommend in its entirety:

> I reject the recent trend of blaming [minority] communities for empowering themselves. However, I also strongly reject the growing practice by many leaders within minority communities to treat identity politics as a final destination. It's not. Identity politics are supposed to be our bridge to rebuilding people centered movements for justice . . . The problem with strengthening [static] narratives that force people into a position where their only identity is only white, or male, or a woman, or a Jew, or Black is that it strips them of the fullness of their humanity. It simply doesn't speak to who we are as humans. . . .
>
> Being subjugated to the role of an ally, ensures that we'll never build a large enough movement or common identity that is viable enough to defeat systems of white supremacy or an emerging white nationalist movement. All we will do is leave inequality firmly entrenched. These missteps increase the ability for more reactionary individuals to expand their attacks on civil rights and other people centered movements.[145]

A future-centered image of what America could be must allow people to exist in the fullness of their identities—and to bring those contradictions and complexities into a modern America in which no one is automatically barred from gaining status because of any portion of their identity. What does an America look like where this occurs? Answering that question requires engaging it directly within and across groups to build a united prodemocracy movement.

It is also important to consider what the prodemocracy community is doing that may be at cross-purposes with building this vision. Organizations and philanthropists should speak up if the rhetoric and imagery that the groups they support are using supports a hierarchical image of society with static, unchangeable, thin identities—even if those images turn the traditional hierarchy on its head.

Invest in a multitude of arenas to build a new vision. A positive vision must be imagined and believed before it can be shared. This requires far more than focus groups and strategic communications. Americans who are exhausted, angry, and cut off from one another do not have the capacity to consider a better future, while the prodemocracy community is too focused on defending the democracy that exists, largely in its more abstract, institutional form, to think big.

It may seem Pollyannaish at the current moment to consider a future together. Yet the alternative to a future together is one that somehow is lived apart. While some on the right trumpet secession, and some on the left would be happy to see them go, such a path is not only impractical and potentially deadly but also simply allows the same cultural and political problems to continue in the same places, under a different national name. There is simply no other way forward but to craft a joint future. In postconflict settings, the international community asks countries to integrate people who have massacred, stolen from, beaten, and tortured their fellow citizens back into communities and villages. Are Americans so much smaller-hearted and unimaginative that partisans cannot envision ways to live together with those with whom divisions are not yet as stark?

The visions Americans must build should not be about the abstraction of democracy itself—they should be about what Americans hope for from their daily life in America. This future lived experience must be concrete and grounded. Perhaps deliberative democracy exercises could be used to discuss different parts of daily life, as well as major culture-war issues, to diffuse the latter with ideas that undermine hardened polarization with practical thinking while elevating shared desires for Americans' lives in the future. How does the country achieve the American Dream of the future, together, rather than by looking back nostalgically at an America in which portions of the population were kept from competing or offering a vision that frightens the people who remain the majority of the voting public? Figuring that out is major work in and of itself.

Develop a cohesive philosophy and grounding ideas. A narrative of a future that crosses the chasms of partisan polarization and the polarization between elites and nonelites must

also be supported by philosophical, policy, and intellectual efforts that offer depth. How would and should policies change if there were not a dominant, assumed, normative identity in the United States? What would change in the economic system to support an America of greater opportunity in rural areas as well as cities and for the non-college-educated? How can the philosophical values of "freedom from" and "freedom for" both be instantiated? What core values underpin such a vision, what values are undermined, and how are these values grounded in the country's founding documents, religious texts, and other places Americans go for meaning and moral absolutes? Do current efforts to group and enumerate subcommunities help or hinder complex identities, and how could Americans do better while also meeting other public service needs? How would work to move these ideas forward upend assumptions within racial, religious, or other communities of interest that might generate backlash, and what could help them find footing? These are questions best answered by think tanks, special editions of serious magazines, and public intellectuals. They need conferences and core support to answer these questions in conversation with one another within and across societal divides.

Disseminate these ideas. Dissemination will require artistic, literary, and cultural endeavors as well as advertising and other mass-media efforts to inculcate a concrete, pictorial vision of what a more inclusive America, with complicated identities and a greater agency for individuals, looks like and can be. For instance, just as advertisers are shaping images of healthy masculinity, advertisers could be brought into communication with prodemocracy groups and narrative specialists to see what ideas bubble up from focus groups aimed at many demographics, while testing what forms of rhetoric and imagery can catch the public imagination and counter the current great replacement theory trope that pits one group of Americans against another. To enhance the stability of the country, the Chamber of Commerce and other business groups might consider supporting public service announcements and online campaigns that reinforce this complex, positive, future-oriented vision of America.

Journalism should also be involved, by supporting reporting and editing that complicates narratives and brings full individuals with complex identities more clearly into view for the American public.[146]

Local, Concrete Action

Ideas and images must be concretized in lived experience. The progressive movement was successful in part because it had many strands through which people could engage—from building local playgrounds to prison reform, ranked choice voting to antitrust activities, where Americans could act within their neighborhoods or at the national level. Even abstract politics was rooted in local associations to get things done. Viewed purely from a methods perspective, progressive strategies of building broad-based and active coalitions that connected democratic reforms to social engagement and local action are worth emulating.[147]

Reinvigorate local politics. Americans are frustrated by problems that are not getting solved and by national narratives that obscure complexities, deepen polarization, and prevent

communities from addressing obvious needs. Particularly in places facing significant social dislocation, rapidly changing demographics, economic downturn, or speedy economic growth and inequality, communities need to be engaged in practical solutions to real problems.[148] The local level, where trust remains highest, is where people can build civic attitudes and habits from such engagement. Local engagement on issues that matter locally, if well-messaged and moderated, can help people exercise problem-solving muscles.

For instance, the furor over schools and curricula is one of many issues that has been politicized into binary caricatures, with debates fueled by national groups, such as Moms for Liberty, that are backed with national money and a national agenda.[149] But the intensity points to deep demand across the political aisle for solutions. Many parents—who are being pushed toward extremes or silenced—actually hold mixed, complex views, from those who saw their kids' educational attainment and mental health suffering during prolonged school closures to those frustrated by what they saw during Zoom classes.[150] Engagements modeled after Democracy in One Room, which brought together hundreds of Americans in a representative sample to discuss tough issues in a moderated manner with factual information brought in throughout, could reduce the shouting and give parents a means to improve their kids' lives and understand what their schools and teachers are dealing with.

Such deliberative democracy models might meet Americans in multiple arenas where they are already passionate and could assist in finding common-sense solutions that defang cultural wedge issues. Like schooling, climate change is a national, polarized issue. But many communities are increasingly affected by fires, floods, or tornadoes, and they can engage on concrete ways to build resilience to these disasters locally. A multitude of other issues can enable people to practice their problem-solving muscles in actual situations in which they must address the complexities of others' lives and desires, reducing the national caricatures that others have become.

Localities can experiment with a variety of new democratic methods to increase engagement, from participatory budgeting (such as when Madrid allocated 100 million euros of its municipal budget through citizen rankings of projects in order of preference), to citizen assemblies (which in Ireland have been used to recommend constitutional and legislative referendums on issues from abortion to the structure of Dublin's local government).[151] In Europe, the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy collects examples of these practices that the United States could look to for ideas.[152]

Increase healthy, cohesive local social engagements. Narrative must be embodied in experience. But America has been on a decades-long path of reduced social engagement. Community engagement in and of itself is not necessarily good—a study of Weimar Germany found that Nazi membership grew more quickly in places with more dense community organizations.[153] In the United States, greater white evangelical church attendance and right-wing engagement with community groups is correlated with higher levels of belief in conspiracy theories.

Instead, social engagements that bridge differences in ways that unite people in common tasks are important. However, many bridging programs, as they are often called, have deep flaws: they self-select people with the time and ideological preferences that make them open to such engagement, thus failing to reach target audiences. They often push toward a mealy middle that fails to honor different identities or respect real differences. And by asking people to show up in their opposing identities, they risk reifying and hardening identities of partisanship or other differences. Many rely on conversation alone, which research suggests is inadequate for success, rather than a constructive task. Instead, what is needed is:

Eschew bridging divides for their own sake, and embrace self-help for mutual benefit.
Americans need to engage across their divides. But self-conscious bridging-divides programs leave out both more partisan and less political Americans. These key groups are more likely to engage in organizations that give them some benefit than those that are explicitly about healing our nation. Unions once provided skilled laboring men, in particular, with social engagements that crossed partisan lines. Unions are unique in that the choice to invest time in a disparate group of people with whom one shares little in common other than a job also helps the giver directly. Civic commitments that include this sort of self-help are likely to have more staying power and reach people who are pressed for time or otherwise uninterested in cross-partisan or cross-racial engagement.

In addition to unions, some of the largest examples of such cross-partisan engagement for mutual benefit today are the various twelve-step groups for alcoholics, addicts to narcotics, and similar groups that maintain that the opposite of addiction is connection.[154] Deeply personal, locally based meetings involve high levels of personal engagement where partisan identity is unimportant while the shared identity of overcoming addiction bridges divides. Sadly, opioid use has now crossed racial and class barriers, making such groups a major way that Americans of all types meet and build community. What if part of the connection such groups fostered was connection to our civic fabric, adding a positive sense of agency and the empowerment of community service to the interpersonal healing?

Lending circles—an updated form of the old mutual aid and burial associations in which a group of people meet regularly to divide funds, take loans, and help one another with entrepreneurial ventures—are common in other countries. They are just getting started in the United States, where they can build community, help people with essential financial support, and build credit for the one-third of American adults who have low credit scores or no credit history.[155]

Other forms of mutual self-help are myriad: sports and recreation groups for adults or families could also be encouraged with the provision of civic space, creation of tournaments, and volunteer opportunities for trail building, field improvements, and other material outcomes. Religion is among the most racially and partisan divided spaces in the nation—what if the desire for connection with the divine was brought together with the need to connect across difference? Construction, landscaping, and gardening mutual help groups might be assisted with a tool lending library, city- or private-sponsorship of occasional how-to classes,

and civic space and encouragement. By assisting these efforts but requiring volunteer time in return, cities will actually reap greater civic benefit than if they overly provide for these efforts.

Bringing people together across social groupings should be a goal of these programs, based on research that finds creating a third identity in a constructive engagement together is one of the best ways to alter perceptions and polarization. But to garner participation from those most in need of it, these programs should not be framed as overtly about democracy or politics; the goal is to build other forms of social problem-solving and community engagement that breaks partisan barriers and instead unites across difference.

Invest in social activities that simply remind people that they enjoy doing things as a community. Mayors should be encouraged to hold a variety of civic days for engagement with low barriers to entry and time commitments that can range from little to greater, including community concerts, movies, clean-up days, family sports days, and civic festivals that require engagement, such as Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

To build on ideas mentioned earlier, events that specifically target men should be front and center, such as father-child sporting events, coaching opportunities, rebuilding the homes of the elderly, or Habitat for Humanity–style activities that offer men the chance to play positive, respected roles in their communities. Because of the level of geographic partisan sorting, such events will likely do little to bridge partisan divides. Instead, they are attempts to help people facing loneliness, anomie, and personal dislocation find positive communities that tie them to American ideals, rather than leaving them to build negative online associations that pull them toward violence.

Engage social urbanism. Wherever possible, such events should encourage mixing from different parts of municipalities to bridge class and racial divides. For example, in Medellin, Colombia, an effort to fight violence included holding popular city concerts in lower-income parts of the city to encourage a common civic identity. Also, desirable civic infrastructure—such as a library built by an internationally renowned architect—was built in less desirable parts of town to restitch the civic fabric.

The United States should consider such "social urbanism" concepts to use urban planning to benefit democracy. After all, thinkers from former president Thomas Jefferson to French historian Alexis de Tocqueville recognized the value of town squares in New England as embodying and assisting the country's nascent democracy. What would a geography of place look like that assisted democracy and reduced the barriers created by the current levels of inequality? This is a question that could be seeded in urban planning conferences and universities.

Craft community and municipal resilience strategies. Communities like Whitefish, Montana have used replicable strategies to face down hate and bring their communities together.[156] The DOJ's Community Relations Service, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service,

and nonprofits should be supported in their efforts to work with local officials and leaders within states and municipalities to create early warning and response systems that convene groups across differences—including religious organizations, businesses, trusted local media, local government, and other stakeholders—to dampen rumors and address threats in particular localities or communities where tensions are high or where data or trends indicate the likelihood of greater tension. Support for the DOJ's Community Relations Service should be expanded so that it can broaden its role in training communities and law enforcement in methods to keep the peace, address hate crimes, and develop ongoing, sustainable, community-based methods to prevent and respond to violence fueled by hate, while nonprofits with mediation experience can assist in broadening its reach.[157]

Strengthen Accountability to Reset Norms on What Behavior is Legal and Acceptable

A strategy to support democracy requires sticks as well as carrots. There are red lines that must be upheld for democracy to work. Those who lose elections have to accept defeat. Those who interfere in elections must be denounced and brought to account. Violence can have no place in democratic life. Corruption poisons trust—whether corrupt actions are technically legal or not. Politicians and wealthy elites cannot be above the laws that bind the rest of the people.

Accountability from the state and from society matters in determining what is viewed as acceptable political and social behavior and what is unthinkable. The more laws must be brought to bear, the more the rule of law will be strained—for that reason, wherever possible, it is better to assert social norms to curb antidemocratic behavior. However, as these social norms give way, the legal net below is too threadbare to catch the free fall of U.S. democracy. It needs shoring up.

Accountability must be carefully deployed to avoid backlash. In other countries, when state actions to quell violent uprisings like the militia movement in the United States cast a net broad enough to include innocents or involve state violence in return, the result is the growth of the very movements that governments are trying to squelch. Because the actions below to hold people to account can be falsely construed as antidemocratic by the faction of Americans who believe that their efforts to counter election fraud and authoritarian pandemic mandates are fighting for democracy, it is crucial to have a united and cross-party democracy movement of unlikely allies to engage in and support accountability together. The more cross-ideological pillars of support to back these norms, the harder they will be to dismiss as partisan.

It is crucial to have a united and cross-party democracy movement of unlikely allies to engage in and support accountability together.

Reform the Electoral Count Act. This law from the post–Civil War period determines the final decision regarding national elections, and it is full of dangerous loopholes. As former federal circuit judge J. Michael Luttig articulated during the Select Committee on January 6 hearings, it needs rapid reform to clarify procedures in order to avoid democratic disaster in the case of a close election in 2024.[158] Reform of the Electoral Count Act must be prioritized even if a broader set of desirable reforms turn out to be impossible.

Use civil impact litigation to try to bankrupt and deter violent and extreme antidemocratic groups. This strategy has been used against the Unite the Right and January 6 rally organizers; individuals who have engaged in intimidation and violence, like the founder of the neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer; and media organizations such as the Gateway Pundit and One America News Network that appear to assist in the spread of violence and disinformation.[159]

Pursue criminal lawsuits against individuals who undertake violence, threaten officials, or break democratic laws. While criminal law is the purview of the government, outside organizations can help states understand and use lesser-known laws, and philanthropy can assist these groups.

Bring lawsuits against government bodies to force them to uphold equality under the law, protect rights, and avoid misuse of government services. These lawsuits are particularly important to bring against law enforcement bodies to convince voters that laws will be applied equally and will protect all. For example, there are important lawsuits against the Department of Homeland Security following its federal deployment of riot police in Portland and against local Texas police who refused to assist calls for help as a Biden campaign convoy was attacked by pro-Trump drivers.[160]

Ensure professional accountability, such as being disbarred, for lawyers who violate democratic norms.[161] Other professional norm-setting bodies and entities should be used to hold members accountable and uphold democratic norms.[162]

Bring legal challenges and support legal scholars to build and advance long-term legal theories that enhance prodemocratic norms. Some of this work will be defensive, such as undermining efforts to enshrine the independent state legislature theory that is being revived despite the significant violence it enabled around elections throughout the nineteenth century.[163]

Other aspects must be forward-looking, to build the legal foundation for an economy of greater opportunity, for example, or to ground group and individual rights in a manner that enables greater identity complexity.

Clarify state and federal laws and doctrine against violence to make them easier to adjudicate or to enable greater deterrence.[164] Measures could include:

- extending protections against intimidation from election officials to immediate family members, contractors, and vendors;[165]
- extending the doctrine to strengthen the rules against extremism within the active-duty military to the laws that govern federal law enforcement, particularly at the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice; and
- clarifying legal conditions and precedent to remove extremists in local law enforcement.[166]

Increase accountability for political elites and white-collar criminals. The sense that the wealthy are buying American politics is widespread and corrosive to trust in democracy—both Biden and Trump voters listed accountability for public leaders as their fifth most important value in an in-depth survey.[167]

Often these concerns are translated into efforts to curb money in politics. Such work is currently doomed, given the composition of the Supreme Court and precedents on money equaling speech. Moreover, efforts to limit campaign spending can backfire: plutocratic money will always find a way to affect the system when big issues that affect businesses or wealthy ideologues are on the table. Meanwhile, small-dollar donors are not necessarily better for democracy: small-dollar donations tend to support antiestablishment candidates, which means they also support more polarizing candidates on the left and right.[168] Small-dollar donations surged after January 6 when some corporations temporarily cut funding to candidates who supported the insurrection.[169] The most extreme Republican candidates, such as Greene, bought expensive fundraising lists and used them to fundraise from small-dollar donors while building an image of widespread grassroots appeal. Meanwhile, limiting donation amounts leads candidates to waste inordinate time on fundraising, forcing them to spend more time with wealthy givers. Their lack of time leads them to lean even more on lobbyists for policy information, allowing money to influence policy through even more direct routes than donations.

Thus, a more orthogonal approach focused on accountability for the wealthy and well-connected instead of on campaign donations may achieve more while meeting the actual desires of more Americans for accountability of elites. Although overt corruption in America is quite low, the sense that the system is rigged is in part based on legal activities that feel unfair to many Americans—such as the ability of corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid taxes.[170] It has not been lost on the American public that financial elites impoverished millions in 2008, with few repercussions, or that much of the campaign support that is legally allowed in America feels corrupt. Nearly three-quarters of Americans are somewhat or very dissatisfied with the influence of major corporations on democracy (though, crucially, nearly the same amount trust small business).[171] Increasing taxes for the extremely wealthy, closing loopholes for them and for corporations, and other activities that make people believe that plutocrats are paying their share and abiding by the same laws are crucial for enhancing the public's belief in the democratic system.

One step is shining light on the problem—but internationally, transparency without change can actually enhance the public's view that their political system is rigged. Therefore, efforts to reduce corruption and legal activities that appear to benefit political and financial elites must not only shine light but also enhance actual accountability and repercussions. This has been made harder by the Supreme Court, but the issue is not as intractable as campaign finance reform is.

Pursue Supreme Court term limits. While courts still enjoy higher levels of trust than U.S. politicians and electoral institutions, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* after multiple justices declared the case as settled precedent in front of Congress feels to many on the left like perjury before Congress, which is itself a crime. The lack of ethics rules also undermines trust. Recent court decisions also enable political corruption, further undermining faith in the democratic system.

Until the 1960s, the average tenure of a supreme court justice was fifteen years; it is now twenty-six years.[172] Majorities of both parties support limiting the tenure of Supreme Court justices—in May 2022, term limits garnered 60 percent support—even as they disagree about adding justices to the court's number.[173] There is historical precedent in which to ground a change to tenure and service. At the country's founding, Supreme Court judges "rode circuit," which meant serving simultaneously as Supreme Court and lower federal court judges. These roles were only separated in the 1800s by an act of Congress, not a constitutional amendment. Biden's Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States has a long discourse regarding the possibility of returning to such an arrangement based on federal judges serving eighteen-year-long Supreme Court stints with term limits, which would allow each president to choose an equal number of justices each term.[174] While such a change would be seen as political in the current moment, it might assist in depoliticizing court confirmations and lowering the stakes over the long term. Meanwhile, ethics rules for the Supreme Court are wise and extremely popular.

Common Strategies That Are Insufficient to Alter the Trajectory of U.S. Democracy

American democracy is starting to drown. Philanthropists are investing in a number of strategies that are treading water. These are essential for keeping democracy alive and important to invest in. But they are not able to get the country out of the current situation.

In preparation for the 2024 elections, some philanthropists are crafting a multi-hundred-million-dollar effort to protect the election. A similar effort in 2020 funded crucial activities that contributed to a free and fair election and potentially prevented an even more precipitous democratic decline that could have been predicted from a second Trump term. Without those efforts, democracy would be in a far worse place today. However, despite significant funds, such activities did not alter the negative trajectory of U.S. democracy. If anything, democratic decline has sped up at the state level. Because these strategies are major planks of prodemocracy activity and philanthropy, it is worth spelling out why they are necessary but insufficient to meet the challenge. For the foreseeable future, U.S. democracy will need a both-and, not an either-or, solution set.

Help Democrats win. A number of the theories below may be executed as good faith, nonpartisan strategies or may be pursued subconsciously or more explicitly to help Democrats win until the Republican Party becomes a prodemocratic party again.[175] Given the revelations surrounding Trump's efforts to overturn a legitimate election in 2020, and the fact that many who aided his efforts on Capitol Hill and in some states are still in power, these strategies are important to forestalling more rapid democratic decline, especially if Trump runs in 2024.[176]

However, a strategy grounded in helping Democrats win to save democracy is 100 percent certain to fail. In twenty states, Republicans already hold both legislative chambers and the roles of governor, attorney general, and secretary of state. Democrats cannot realistically alter state policies in these states through government control; they must change minds. Nationally, the constitutional framework—combined with strong national support for Republicans and the redistricting of seats in the House of Representatives that just occurred following the 2020 census and will last for the next decade—means that the Republican Party is very likely to win power over Congress and/or the presidency before it ends its current antidemocratic tactics.[177] And perhaps most problematic for this strategy is experience: after 2020, Democrats won control of the presidency and both chambers of Congress—and democratic degradation nevertheless advanced rapidly at the state level and within society.

Meanwhile, the perception of partisan bias in prodemocracy activities may be sharpening divisions and precluding efforts to bolster democracy.

Increase voter turnout. More Americans voted in 2020 than in any modern election. Both parties experienced significant gains.[178] Meanwhile, the number of antidemocratic election law alterations at the state level grew, as did increases in violent threats, while trust in elections eroded greatly among Republicans and Independents.

Get more minorities to vote. This strategy often tries to marry the fact that challenges to voting disproportionately target minorities and that people of color have historically voted Democratic. However, by attempting to kill two birds with one stone, it risks missing both.

Targeting all the laws being passed to suppress voting fails to prioritize those that most harm both minorities and democracy.[179] For instance, no state had voter identification requirements before 2006, making them a long-term focus of the democracy community hoping to help minority voters. While voter identification laws don't have overall effects on turnout, some studies suggest that they do suppress minority votes, particularly of Latinos.[180] Other large, credible studies find no negative effect on any demographic group (nor any effect on fraud).[181] Meanwhile, voter identification laws are supported by large majorities of Black voters (66 percent), Hispanic voters (77 percent), and Asian voters (75 percent), meaning that fighting battles to remove identification requirements yields equivocal outcomes that aren't supported by the communities that activists are purporting to help.[182]

Similarly, I love mail-in voting and personally wrote in its support in multiple venues in 2020 because of its importance to an election held during a pandemic prior to vaccine availability.[183] Mail-in ballots accounted for nearly half the 2020 ballots. But its use was miniscule before 2000—when U.S. democracy was in better shape.[184] It largely expanded, for good reason, because of fears of large gatherings during a deadly, contagious pandemic. Meanwhile, there's no evidence behind claims that it benefits Democrats, and its record with improving minority turnout is mixed. (Though theoretically helpful for preventing problems with long election lines, fears of violence, or an inability to get time off from work on election day, African Americans tend to use it less, in part due to justified fears that their ballots will be disproportionately disqualified, while Hispanic or elderly voters use it the most).[185]

Linking important voting measures that have public support with those that don't opens the entire agenda to questioning. To maintain credibility and focus, prodemocracy efforts to help minorities vote should target the rules that are empirically proven to have harmful effects such as longer wait times, caused in part by reduced Sunday voting and reduced voting locations.[186] Ideally, they would target those that both have harmful effects and are felt by minority voters themselves to be most problematic.[187]

For those pursuing minority votes in the hopes of increasing Democratic chances, the realities in crucial states such as Florida—which now comprises over a tenth of the votes for the electoral college—are becoming more mixed. Racial minorities have multiple identities: they may also be male, religious, working class, rural, or immigrants from communist nations, allowing their votes to be harnessed by politicians who can speak to other elements of their identities that may be more salient to them. Latino voters have never been a monolith.[188]

They showed more conservative voting patterns in the 2020 election than in 2016, and majorities of second-generation immigrants saw themselves as "typical Americans" in a reply to a survey question with that wording. Majorities of immigrants are more concerned with economic than social issues. And nearly ten percent of Black Americans are now immigrants, which is one potential reason for the increase in Black male votes for Trump—which reached nearly a third in high-immigration states like Minnesota.[189] Among those who are immigrants from former communist countries, many have been targeted by disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation and are proponents of the "big lie," which implies that Trump actually won the 2020 election.[190] Moreover, negative partisanship means that identity-based campaigns may increase turnout for the other side.

Court more swing voters. The alternative to a base-vote theory is a swing-voter theory. This is difficult, but not impossible, for moving voters away from Trump and other proponents of the big lie. The effort to court swing voters in partisan general elections through persuasion (as opposed to fielding a candidate who simply attracts this group) appears to rarely work without a strong ground game and other innovative tactics: there are just too few persuadable voters left, except in unusual races or with particularly careful targeting efforts.[191] Persuadable voters do seem to move if they have been properly identified through experiments and then targeted with methods like real, face-to-face conversations. These efforts are worth engaging in for targeted races where they can make a difference. But very little of the money spent on persuasion actually goes to efforts shown to work: the vast majority is spent on advertising that has virtually no effect.

Meanwhile, for those wanting to move the country in a democratic direction rather than just voting for Democrats, there is another problem: the two groups of voters who are least likely to support democracy—those who have previously voted for different parties and those who do not vote consistently—also represent two key characteristics of swing voters.[192] Swing voters show the strongest support for a third party—but not the one that many good-government types imagine.[193] Only 4 percent of U.S. voters want a moderate party that is socially liberal and economically conservative. Instead, many support liberal economic redistribution combined with conservative cultural policies: they favor government help for themselves and others they deem "deserving" (a category with a strong racial tilt), combined with greater salience of a white, Christian, native-born identity, leaving them with a foot in both parties. Swing-voting White Americans—many of whom moved into the Republican Party in 2016—scored particularly high on racial resentment.[194] Among these economic liberals and cultural conservatives, Democracy Fund's Voter Study Group found that 52 percent supported a "strong leader" who need not bother with Congress or elections, and 40 percent did not favor democracy.[195]

Improve the electoral system. U.S. elections have real security challenges, such as software so outdated that software providers have declared that they will discontinue patches before 2024, as well as problems born of normal human errors that provide ready fodder for disinformation and distrust.[196] Rebuilding faith in the electoral system must include bipartisan, compromise measures that make voting more secure and more accessible, such as

those passed in Kentucky in 2021.[197] It also requires efforts to simply improve local election administration, such as the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence is doing.[198] These efforts are important and necessary—fighting alleged fraud that did not occur is hard enough; arguing for democracy in the face of actually compromised elections would be far more difficult and is a reality that the country would have faced in 2020 but for a massive infusion of private capital to allow counties to purchase protective gear, pay workers, and otherwise run the 2020 elections.

Yet, technical reforms are not enough to alter the perceptions that are deliberately being seeded to undermine faith in elections. Colorado, for instance, has some of the nation's most technically proficient elections, as well as a virulent Stop the Steal movement. Facts don't alter beliefs. Meanwhile, the grants made in 2020 to make elections more secure actually fueled doubts in some people.[199] Philanthropists hoping to use technical reform to actually strengthen election security are sensible. Those seeking to use such donations to strengthen belief in elections should look to the field of international development, where decades of research into using funding to strengthen government services in order to deepen government legitimacy show that such programs often enhance distrust, in part because they are inevitably delivered earlier or in greater amounts to some communities that are themselves distrusted.[200]

Increase economic redistribution. The acute degradation of U.S. democracy is not being caused by poverty, unemployment, or other causes of individual economic loss. Democracy Fund's Voter Study Group found no correlation between personal financial circumstances and support for authoritarianism.[201] Neither a sense of being left behind economically nor changes to individual economic standing are correlated with Trump voters.[202] These findings echo multiple other studies of terrorism, right-wing violence, and the January 6 insurrectionists that find that poverty, the decline of manufacturing, unemployment, and other economic factors are not predictive of right-wing violence in the United States.[203]

Neither a sense of being left behind economically nor changes to individual economic standing are correlated with Trump voters.

Those most frustrated with democracy are facing a sense of thwarted expectation based on the gap between what they are achieving and what they believe themselves to be entitled to. Data internationally shows that such perceptions are fairly impervious to rising individual incomes. In fact, in the United States, more economically developed states are most at risk of right-wing violence.[204] Internationally, some research suggests that extremist politics may be most attractive to people who are doing less well than others within a growing economy (even if they are doing better than they had been doing previously), making economic redistribution a poor tool to target the problem.[205]

Reforms to help individuals improve economically are useful—if directed toward disadvantaged minority communities, where concrete economic programs could address the

democratic erosion caused by democracy's failure to deliver. But the victim narrative and grievance politics of the partisan right make doing so without backlash difficult, unless redistribution occurs across class lines.[206] Meanwhile, for the reasons discussed earlier, economic redistribution programs will not address the drivers of democratic decline from the right.

While government redistribution programs to individuals won't alleviate democratic challenges from the right, the economic structure of America is playing a role in enhancing status anxiety and allowing cultural issues that are stand-ins for class be weaponized for authoritarian ends. Economic shocks such as the 2008 recession do affect feelings toward the entire political system—particularly when the wealthy received bailouts and the working and middle classes did not. Inequality also enhances a sense of status loss and feelings that the system is rigged, as well as being highly correlated with violence. More work is needed in looking at what alterations to America's basic economic structure could help its democracy and what forms of implementation would work to concretize those goals.

Fix gerrymandering. The United States needs to have a serious conversation about gerrymandering. Allowing politicians to pick their constituents reduces trust in the system and enables the increase in safe seats that are driving extreme candidates.

Yet there are three problems with simply doing away with gerrymandering. First, it is easy to speak against partisan gerrymandering when the other side is doing it—but harder to defend unilateral disarmament. Second, racial gerrymandering is allowed under the Voting Rights Act, and it helps minority voters symbolically and substantively.[207] Yet racial gerrymanders are seen as partisan by the right. Paradoxically, they may harm overall Democratic chances for gaining seats in the House of Representatives by packing large numbers into safe districts above what is required for representation. Moreover, because their votes matter disproportionately to one party, gerrymandering allows the other party to ignore, suppress, or even engage in violence against minority voters, a pattern that plays out around the world and that leads some other divided societies to undertake vote-pooling systems like ranked choice.[208] Finally, voter-supported legislation to reduce gerrymandering—such as Florida's laws requiring districts to be built around contiguous areas—can undermine political and racial gerrymandering, leading to calls of racial unfairness. And, of course, much of the problem of safe seats has to do with voters self-sorting geographically, not gerrymandering itself.

Something that seems to voters so blatantly unfair must be addressed—and yet the solution set here is unclear. The United States needs new thinking, not doubling down on the old.

Three Possible Futures

America is approaching three possible futures in the near term.[209] These are not far-off prognostications. Instead, they are intended to hold a mirror to a future that is almost here, to show what is likely to solidify. Without significant, fast action, America could start to look like other:

- stable countries run by one political party where voters cannot alter politics,
- countries run by one political party whose control is upheld by violence, or
- countries with political stalemates and increased criminal and political violence.

Stable Countries Run by One Political Party Where Voters Cannot Alter Politics

Close elections in 2024 in states like Michigan, Pennsylvania, or Wisconsin lead local activists from the losing party to file allegations of fraud. Their goal is not to win, necessarily, but to delay certification and sow doubt among the public. The media duly publicizes the cases, amplifying doubt regarding the true winner. While justice grinds slowly through the courts, the state legislature notes that the "safe harbor date" is approaching, the date by which states must have certified their elections to avoid opening the door to a Congressional challenge to the election results.[210] Needing to send a slate of electors, the state legislature cites all the media coverage of a doubted election, as well as the cases in court, and chooses the disputed side. The other, supposedly winning party files a case disputing the decision—but when the case hits the Supreme Court, justices support the independent state legislature theory they decided in favor of in June 2023, claiming that state legislatures have the final say in election determinations. Having moved past the safe harbor deadline, Congress has no recourse.

In the ensuing year, with control of both houses of Congress, the presidency, and majorities of state legislatures, partisans could alter voting rules at the national and state levels to solidify their gains. Over the next decade, voters see that they have no clout in states where their opposing votes do not count. Many move, as the personal realities created by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and child services interfering in the families of LGBTQ children cause Democrats to further concentrate themselves in states with legislation that favors their values, while Republicans angered by red tape on their businesses and annoyed by their children returning from school with homework on race and climate change do the same.

Businesses cowed by retaliatory legislation try to keep their voices out of politics in order to do business across state lines, allowing themselves to be increasingly extorted for campaign donations to avoid being punished for trumped-up political offenses. Others choose the partisan side most closely resembling their customer base. They limit their workforce and company headquarters to a state with their politics and remain outspoken about their values—at the cost of massive customer loss and a more limited market.

The result of these voting law changes, movements of people, and partisan gerrymandering, alongside the constitutional requirements of the electoral college and Senate representation, is that Democrats can no longer realistically win the presidency or a majority in the Senate, and they are blocked from a majority in the House of Representatives at least until the next census. They would gerrymander and alter laws in return to solidify strength in states they control. States where one party controls all major offices and cannot realistically be unseated become the overwhelming reality. Corruption grows, as tends to occur in such anocracies, tilting the political and economic playing field toward favored businesses and families. Polarization between the states deepens.

A stable, one-party country due to voting law changes is currently the situation in Hungary, now ranked only "partially free" by Freedom House.[211] In the United States, thirty-three states (twenty Republican, thirteen Democrat) are already governed by one party in control of both legislative chambers, the governorship, the secretary of state, and the attorney general.[212] Not all of these seats are solidified, but 2022 redistricting has pushed more of them in that direction.

Countries Run by One Political Party Whose Control Is Upheld by Violence

Voters in some counties of Arizona, Georgia, and Texas face armed intimidation in and around voting booths during the 2024 election. A Georgia court allows the state to take over the precinct of Atlanta and determine the outcome. In Texas and Michigan, courts convict poll workers trying to keep armed actors from polling locations—making vigilantes feel the state is on their side and increasing intimidation of voting officials. When the election is decided in favor of Republicans, the left does not believe it has been free or fair.

Protests engulf the country. In more than one Black-majority city, police violence against protestors takes on a racial element. Militias and white supremacists enter cities to purportedly protect businesses, as they did during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. But these armed groups have grown stronger and more accepted over the last four years. In some counties, sheriffs and police have deputized extremist groups to serve as law enforcement support.[213]

Over the next four years, vigilante violence backed by state acquiescence becomes a feature of politics in many jurisdictions. As doxing and violent protests at homes become common, dissent is increasingly dangerous. Businesses also keep their heads down, not wanting to be targeted by violent protests. Some partisans with means move somewhere more friendly to their party. But the roaring economies of Texas and Florida keep many Democrats in these and other red states, just as many Republicans remain on the booming coasts. Meanwhile, inflation, interest rates, and high housing prices prevent many from moving to where they would feel safer.

By the end of the decade, intimidation upholds the political order in various counties that lean red but still have a strong Democratic plurality. While violence is still unusual, threats

and legal harassment are a feature of political life, and occasional vigilante violence is common enough and rarely punished. Liberals in purple and red districts tend to keep their politics to themselves to avoid armed confrontations or threats against their kids. This violent tinge to politics and the inability of liberals to safely campaign or even recruit volunteers mean that Republicans tend to win swing districts.

Progressives concentrated in urban cities lack political clout nationally but have become far more left politically than the majority of U.S. citizens. Republicans and even many moderates fear losing their jobs, toxic cyber comments, harassment of their kids at school, or threatening protests at their homes if they voice heterodox ideas.

Americans of both political parties who find themselves on the wrong side of their partisan divide, and those in the exhausted majority, feel democracy has devolved into mob rule and is a sham.

India's politics of intimidation bears some resemblance to parts of this story; it is now rated only "partially free" by Freedom House.[214] This is also similar to earlier eras in U.S. history, including both the unstable period in the early years of Jim Crow and later when the system began to unravel following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, when White Citizens' Councils blossomed to carry out their so-called massive resistance campaign.

Countries With Political Stalemates and Increased Criminal and Political Violence

Thousands of new election officials for the 2024 election had been summoned to their jobs by Bannon and motivated by fears of fraud. During the election season, large numbers of mistakes and problems occurred. Many may have been caused less by ideology than incompetence after the loss of experienced election professionals—others were perpetrated purposely because of fears of fraud. The sheer number of errors render elections in many counties suspect. Meanwhile, in retaliation for the United States sending weaponry to Ukraine, Russia hacks the election systems in multiple states. While in 2016, Russia tried to meddle but found most state voter rolls protected, by 2024, outdated Microsoft 7 software that no longer received security updates was being used in most jurisdictions, making changing voter files simple.[215] The one thing that unites the country after 2024 is that Americans don't trust the results if the party that they oppose won their state.

Stop the Steal rallies on the right and counter rallies on the left pop up in state after state. In big cities, protests are "protected" by left-wing militias whose ideologies, improvised weaponry, and refusal to engage with the police in pre-protest planning result in more brutal police tactics. The ensuing arrests and police brutality engender further protests that become increasingly violent at night. Militias and white supremacists eagerly enter the fray, using the street fights to hone their skills and recruit members.

As racial tensions and distrust rise, the police retreat from some areas. Meanwhile, their time is diverted from normal law enforcement to patrol protests and political events. Criminal violence rises. Murders, which jumped 30 percent in 2020 and rose again in 2021, increase further. Nationally, overwhelmed and less-trusted police have trouble solving cases, and fewer than half of all cases are solved, further increasing the murderous spiral. Social norms begin to break down under the strain. Road rage and other minor incidents turn increasingly deadly.[216] Riots, protests, and lack of customers hurt businesses. Spending on security and reduced customer traffic increase costs and decrease revenue. While online stores bustle, city centers become hollow shells.

Politics remains competitive in many places. Politicians of both parties have a real chance, and voter intimidation is not commonplace. But candidates can virtually expect death threats, bricks in their windows, and the need to hire private security—most people think it's insane to run for office.

This situation has echoes of the 1960s and 1970s, when assassinations, riots, and the growth in fringe extremist groups affected trust and the zeitgeist of acceptability, leading to a doubling of the murder rate, which continued to rise until it hit an all-time high in the early 1990s. This is also a situation similar to Italy's Years of Lead. In 2020, the United States faced the greatest one-year rise in murder in over one hundred years; the rate rose further in 2021, and the clearance rate for homicides is already below 50 percent.

Conclusion

Americans are living with immense amounts of anger, hate, disdain, and fear. No one wants to live with these emotions, and no one wants to be on the receiving end. Society has driven itself into a corner from which there is nowhere to go.

But these trend lines are not etched in stone. Prognosticating forward from the 1880s would have led to three similar scenarios—some of which became true in the South. But a major, national, political and social movement brought about more honest politics, an end to child labor, safe food and water, and the flourishing of unions alongside business growth, heralding what became known as the American century. The 1960s and 1970s featured social unrest, thousands of nighttime bombings, the assassinations of multiple political leaders, and riots that hollowed out city centers for decades. And yet new policies, from post-Watergate political reforms to improved policing, had positive effects including reduced polarization, historically low levels of violence, and more productive politics, all of which held for nearly fifty years. Those reforms helped America usher in the internet, win the Cold War, and assist the greatest international florescence of democracy the world has ever seen.

Americans today can do better now than patching holes in our leaking ship. We can choose to be more creative to advance a far better future for all of us.

The five strategies described here aim at the roots of our acute problem: an alliance on the right between elites trying to consolidate power through antidemocratic means and an angry, illiberal social movement. This confluence means that democracy's problems must be tackled from both political and societal angles. A solution must also address the long-term challenges of those on the left who have given up on democracy. Finally, it must counter forces on both the left and right contributing to the pernicious polarization that makes solving democratic challenges so intractable, offering instead a positive, attractive, comforting vision in which all parts of the nation can see themselves as potentially gaining through its mutual creation.

Each of the tactics is a field unto itself; I do not intend to downplay the work involved. One goal of this paper is to show how much more expansive a true democracy agenda needs to be. Some areas, such as enabling responsible conservatives to vote for democracy and Electoral Count Act reform, are urgent. But others are of vital importance: without a coordinated and inclusive prodemocracy movement, for instance, all of the efforts to strengthen accountability and reset norms on what behavior is legal and acceptable will be dismissed as partisan and most will fail or even enhance polarization.

The pernicious effects of U.S. democratic decline will not be confined to America's borders. As autocratic coordination increases, stumbles within U.S. democracy gravely harm democracy abroad. Given the strong correlations between democracy and economic growth

through improved human capital, peace, and even life expectancy, a major setback to U.S. democracy would have tremendous consequences on global poverty and well-being.[217]

The stakes are massive, and each moment deepens the polarization that is making these problems less amenable to change. As Americans, we must start now, at scale, strategically, with a broad, cross-party coalition to save our democracy.

About the Author

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