

The Democracy Advocate

A Guide to Strengthening Our Democratic Institutions



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Defending Democracy advocates for policies and actions that strengthen democracy and its institutions through: education, mobilization, and outreach.

Thoughts on Democracy

As the editorial team of the Advocate mulled over the theme for this issue of the newsletter, July 4th was on the horizon. What better time to articulate our view of democracy and to support what it means to be an American, for democracy and patriotism not nationalism bind factious people together in a free country.

Democracy has been defended, discussed, described and denigrated since the time of Plato. Neither time nor relevance permits a thorough discussion of the different enumerations of the concept. But, at this moment in our history, it is critical to recognize that two competing ideas of what constitutes democracy exist - *liberal democracy* versus *illiberal democracy* - which one prevails will define our future as a free nation.

Both have a similar conceptual foundation – governance by the people, i.e., popular sovereignty. However, beyond that communality the divergence is wide and critical to the future of our nation. Liberal democracy – a form common to most Western-style governments– assumes fair elections between multiple competing parties, which may have different values but are in agreement on maintaining a critical array of rights and freedoms via institutions and constitutional safeguards. These rights and freedoms include adherence to the rule of law; protection of private property, freedom of speech and religion, and the right to peaceful assembly, acceptance of election results, human rights, and civil liberties to name a few. All of these are protected by our Constitution and Bill of Rights, as interpreted by the Supreme Court, and by a multi-layered set of institutions (formal and

informal) that serve as guardrails protecting individuals from authoritarian edicts. Illiberal democracy – a form common today in Hungary, Russia, and Venezuela, among others, and admired by the current administration in Washington – have elections tightly controlled by a central government with no obligation to ensure fairness. **AND**, all individual and civil liberties are negotiable without any pretense of guarantees. Institutional and constitutional arbitrators of these freedoms are centralized and controlled by a cadre of individuals and organizations that hold power in the country. In effect, illiberal democracies are authoritarian regimes with a thin veneer of democracy.

As an organization, Defending Democracy strongly advocates for **liberal democracy** and fights to ensure that illiberal democracy or other forms of authoritarian governments do not become enshrined as our “democracy”. We further support and advocate that

- Our current form of democracy requires constant, critical review to ensure that we become more open and available to all who abide by the rule of law,
- Personal freedoms and rights are available to everyone regardless of race, creed, gender, political affiliation, or economic status, and
- Institutions are designed to ensure an open democracy – our judiciary, political, religious, and educational systems – are free to function effectively as safeguards to our civil liberties and individual and organizational freedom.

Get Involved: For Events of Note, Go to one of the following sites

Sources for Upcoming Events Sponsored by Local Activist Groups
Use QR codes or the Website URLs

[The Democracy Action Hub](#)



NRV Citizen Activist Network



JOIN US

We provided you a list of local activist groups in our first newsletter. However, we failed to include the links to those groups so you could contact those of interest. Here is the list again with links to their information.

[Blacksburg Refugee Partnership](#)
[Citizens for Arsenal Accountability](#)
[Community Works NRV](#)
[Democratic Socialists of America](#)
[The Future Economy Collective](#)
[Justice Advocates](#)
[League of Women Voters](#)
[Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America](#)
[NAACP, Montgomery Co, Radford City, Floyd](#)
[New River Abortion Access Fund](#)
[New River Environmental Coalition](#)

[New River Valley Citizen Activist Network](#)
[NRV Indivisible](#)
[Our Bodies Our Choice](#)
[POWHR \(Protect our Water Heritage Rights\)](#)
[Pulaski Free Store](#)
[Red, Wine and Blue Virginia](#)
[The Community Group of Montgomery County](#)
[The Democracy Action Hub](#)
[Virginia Organizing: New River Valley](#)
[Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy](#)

Website, Videos and Podcasts of Importance:

Podcast: The Ezra Klein Show – <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-ezra-klein-show/>

Ezra is a New York Times columnist who discusses issues related to democracy, the rise of illiberalism, and “cancel culture on the Right and Left.

PBS Documentary – *Hannah Arendt*. First shown on June 27, 2025 now streaming on Amazon Prime. Hannah Arendt’s work on German fascism is a classic. Her concept of “banality of evil” is a powerful one that fits much of what we see transpiring today.

[CREW](#) - Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. Site devoted to documenting and publishing ethical violations and corruption in the U.S. government.

[Tracking and Resisting this Authoritarian Movement](#). Website by Lynn Burnett organized to help groups resist the authoritarian movement in this county.

Readings For Resistance and Resilience:

Here are some books worth spending some time reading over the summer. Included are those that help us understand authoritarianism and how to resist, and equally important, those that will help us be more resilient personally in times of high anxiety.

Resisting Authoritarianism

Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals. Saul D. Alinsky. Vintage Books. 1971. Classic book that arose out of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. How you unite the “haves” and “have nots” to work for collective social change.

Liberalism and its Discontents. Francis Fukuyama. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2022. What has gone wrong with liberal democracy and what should be the principles for a liberal society.

From Dictatorship to Democracy. A Conceptual Framework for Liberalism. Gene Sharp. The New Press, 2012. Provides a blueprint for nonviolent resistance to authoritarian regimes and can move them to a more democratic state.

Personal Resilience – Coping with Anxiety

The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive. Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer. Guilford Press. 2018. Building on mindfulness practices of loving kindness and spiritual philosophy, the book offers exercises and readings on “becoming an inner ally instead of an inner enemy.”

Corruption and Fraud Alerts

It is extremely time consuming and tiring to track the ethical and corruption activities of this government - too, too many. The CREW site noted above is a good website to track past and current ethical/corruption behaviors as they arise. For example, CREW documented over 4,000 ethical conflicts in the first Trump administration and notes that thus far, it appears this staggering number will easily be surpassed as Trump and his cronies create more opportunities for him to line his pockets from those who seek his favors. In a separate report of note, the House Judiciary Committee released a [report](#) that indicates Trump’s “corrupt pardon spree” has deprived victims and survivors of crimes of over \$1.3 billion in restitutions and fines owned to them and taxpayers. Fraudsters and millionaire tax evaders, and white-collar criminals clearly have a friend in the White House. How much money is being funneled to Trump enterprises by those who have profited by these actions? The wholesale corruption associated with the Gilded Age in this country is a pittance to what is unfolding today in Washington.



Activist Interviews

Why I Engage:

Interview with Jennifer Cooper who is active with
Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America

1. Why “defending democracy” and why now?

Honestly, it wasn’t the idea that attracted me, but rather the people. I have known and admired Jim and Sally Bohland for 40 years (she was my high school guidance counselor!), particularly their leadership and dedication at the Montgomery County Christmas Store. When I saw the Bohland name attached to this initiative, I knew it would be a studied, organized, and principled effort I’d want to be a part of. A strong democracy affects my activist work, too. For example, a majority of Americans support stricter gun safety laws, so why is it so hard to get them passed?

2. What motivated you to become an activist?

Coming from a family who worked in helping professions (teachers, farmers, public servants), serving society and others was ingrained in me. As a young adult, I quickly noticed that the people I liked and respected shared similar values. As my faith grew, so did my activism. I was fortunate to be able to pursue this path as a volunteer and hopefully make a difference.

3. How is the work you are doing related to defending democracy?

My local Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America efforts focus on “keeping kids safe” – we need to change the fact that guns are the leading cause of death in this vulnerable population. And, the Be SMART secure gun storage program lands well with people in our red areas of the state – even gun owners. Other social justice initiatives I work on address racial

and economic disparities, whether it’s providing a leg up through the Montgomery County Baby Shop or Christmas Store, or trying to change the system by doing legislative advocacy work. It boils down to creating a semblance of egalitarianism, to ensuring that everyone has a chance.

4. In what ways do you build community through social action?

I’d always rather build relationships through shared projects than through chit-chat at a social event. During these divisive times, I find it helpful to associate and work with like-minded people. When Blacksburg United Methodist Church hosted a community “Sing for Social Justice” event in March, I felt a heartwarming solidarity from being with many others who feel as I do about what is happening in our world.

5. What is most surprising about the justice activism you are doing now?

People’s passion about and interest in current affairs today. I have been involved with the Church & Society arm of the United Methodist Church for over 20 years, and it’s been difficult to get folks jazzed about addressing root causes of social injustices. Recently at Blacksburg UMC, we transformed that committee into a Social Justice Small Group, a supportive community exploring the spiritual foundations of social justice, and we had 18 people sign up!

***Opinion – Making Sense of Nonsense* by T. Pain**

Further Thoughts on Democracy

Some of the most enlightening and thoughtful expressions about democracy have been penned by poets, ministers, and by citizens in countries where democracy does not exist. We offer several here for your consideration.

Jazz composition dares to bring together these diverse instruments, cultural histories and musical perspectives to play together, sharing the same melody; creating something out of our varied and sometimes ugly histories that is unquestionably beautiful. This is the hope of American democracy—individuals striving, on their own, to become more perfect, to create more beauty out of their own traditions, yet, remaining true to the national group.

Rev. Otis Moss III

A functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy, educated, participatory followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership.

Chinua Achebe

Peace cannot exist without justice, justice cannot exist without fairness, fairness cannot exist without development, development cannot exist without democracy, democracy cannot exist without respect for the identity and worth of cultures and peoples.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you
Langston Hughes

If you want to raise a crop for one year, plant corn. If you want to raise a crop for decades, plant trees. If you want to raise a crop for centuries, raise men. If you want to plant a crop for eternities, raise democracies.”
Carl Schenck

Readers Forum

We welcome your feedback on the newsletter. In particular we would like suggestions for feature stories, books, websites, opinions, etc. Also, if you wish to write something for us, send it along for review.

Send all correspondence to our email address: defendingdemocracy124@gmail.com

If this Democracy Advocate was forwarded from a friend and you would like to be on the Defending Democracy activist list, click the Subscribe button at the bottom of this email, or drop a line to our email address with your name, email address, and zipcode.