

The Democracy Advocate

A Guide to Strengthening Our Democratic Institutions



2025, Issue 3

Published by: Defending Democracy

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

Redefining Our History: An Authoritarian Ruse

When authoritarian regimes assume power, be they fascist, communist, or oligarchies, one of their priorities is to reinterpret the history and redefine the culture of the nation to fit their ideological and political goals. Nazis had their Nazification programs, Stalin imprisoned or killed those who opposed the reinterpretation of his history, the Cultural Revolution in China punished those who were not pure Maoist, and Orbán in contemporary Hungary quickly began to alter Hungarian history for his purposes by attacking the curriculum in higher education. The motives behind these efforts are twofold. First, creating a narrative based on restorative nostalgia – “we were great once and I will take us there” – appeals to citizens who see desperation or failure in the current society and can be excited by simple solutions to their fears. The second more insidious reason is that by appealing to the past, blame can be assigned to those responsible for destroying past glories, thus, justifying punishing those groups or institutions responsible for the decline. Jews, immigrants, capitalists, communists, elites, and religious institutions have found their place in the pantheon of “enemies” depending on the country and historical context. Understanding this history of authoritarian motivations enables us to better understand the actions to reinterpret our history by the current Republican authoritarian regime in the United States. [Yes, I hear my Republican friends protesting that Republicans are not authoritarians!! But Republicans enabled populists and anti-democratic plutocrats to assume control of their brand by near unanimous support for the president’s appointments and policies. So, own it!!].

What is unfolding in America today is an attack on our culture, on the institutions of democratic governance, on our rich but conflicted history, and on any group or individual who supports different narratives about the meaning of democracy and freedom. The goal is to create a new social reality that Republicans believe will resolve what they perceive as the dysfunctionality of our current social order. For many Republicans, democracy as it has been constituted throughout our history must be torn down in order to reconstitute a new social reality. Like Hitler, they argue that our public and private lives need to be reordered and aligned with history as they interpret it. Use of lies, propaganda, and subterfuge have long been a strategy of the autocrat to get unpopular policies approved even by those most negatively impacted by them.

Drawing from the playbook of past authoritarian regimes, the current administration has targeted educational institutions – primary and secondary public schooling as well as higher education. Drawing on specious reasoning – DEI, antisemitism, liberal bias, or disenfranchisement of conservative thought - a comprehensive attack on our educational institutions has continued unabated. University grant funding has been used as blackmail to demand federal control of hiring, curriculum and student enrollment. The Department of Education has been scheduled to be abolished and its funding to public schools terminated in some cases. Vouchers are encouraged as a means of shifting enrollments to private schools where oversight of curriculum and ideological bias is unregulated and the “right history” can be propagandized (See Mark Benson’s Op-Ed in this newsletter). We only can discuss our “good history” in schools, national museums, national parks, or textbooks. In Virginia, Gov. Youngkin issued an executive order banning “inherently divisive” concept! The terrible institution of slavery, the harsh realities of reconstruction, the contributions of labor unions, and the suffrage movement, for example, are ignored or rewritten to place a smiley face on our heritage. The lessons of the harshness or cruelty of some American institutions are lost to future generations. So too, are our shining examples of redemption, resilience, and recovery. These lessons from history can forestall future mistakes and give us hope that democracy is not an enemy of freedom, but a means for balancing the conflicting values of a socially diverse, creative society.

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

The Community Group of Montgomery County

Website: <https://thecommunitygroup.org/> The Community Group of Montgomery County is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to the enrichment of the African American community through civic action, education, leadership, and economic empowerment. The Community Group (TCG) created and sponsors the Dialogue on Race. Annually, TCG also makes grants and gifts to county churches, civic groups, charities, and public education. If interested in the Community Group, see the web site.

Website, Videos and Podcasts of Importance:

Amicus - A legal podcast with Slate's Dahlia Lithwick. <https://slate.com/podcasts/amicus>

Covers the law and the nine Supreme Court justices who interpret it for the rest of the country. Recent episodes address the lawlessness of the current administration's attempts to make universities capitulate as well as building a police state, all of which the Supreme Court have supported.

Requiem for The American Dream - Noam Chomsky and the Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEnv5l8Aq4I

Readings For Resistance and Resilience:

Here are some books worth spending some time reading. 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

On Bullshit. Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton University Press, 2005. This slim volume is a reprint of a 1986 essay by a renowned moral philosopher, addressing the disregard for the truth (once formerly called "humbug") and how it is so much more dangerous than lying.

1984. George Orwell. Secker & Warburg, 1949. Doublethink, newspeak, big brother! Chillingly prescient for today about the denial and falsification of reality as a way of asserting power over the masses.

Democracy Unmoored: Populism and the Corruption of Popular Sovereignty. Samuel Issacharoff. Focus on how populism attacks the institutions of democracy. Draws from examples across many different nations across the globe.

Personal Resilience – Coping with Anxiety

Active Hope: How to face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. "Hope without action is naïve optimism. Action without hope can fail because it doesn't believe in goals".

Corruption and Fraud



So much to choose from in a Republican administration that is already the most corrupt in our history. And, it is only eight months into their regime. It is important to recognize that corruption is not simply the act of undertaking illegal actions for financial gain – bitcoins, bibles, and bribes. Presidential or congressional actions that are illegal and taken for the purpose of maintaining political power are perhaps the more dangerous form of corruptness as they debase the foundations of democratic governance. Public officials have a moral if not legal obligation to act on behalf of the public good – to maintain the social contract. To do otherwise destroys the trust we have placed in our democratic institutions. In a recent piece in The New Yorker, Jon Allsop introduced the term – misarchist, where a misarchist is a leader who is hostile to government and the people who run it but is willing to use state power to for their own ends. Misarchists often see a public office as their personal property, which they can use however they want to take down their enemies. Two recent acts of this administration highlight the actions of a misarchist. First, the firing of the head of labor statistics, Erika McEntarfer (Ph.D. in economics at Virginia Tech), for reporting monthly jobs' statistic that displeased the President. This is a report that has stood the scrutiny of multiple administrations and statistical reviews, yet the messenger was dismissed for honest reporting. Anyone hear a peep from our Republican congressional delegation condemning the action? Second, which constitutes the greatest threat to our democracy, is the attempt by the Republicans in Texas to try and define congressional districts, an act which is blatantly unconstitutional. So, how did our President and his Republican colleagues in Washington react? They called for the FBI to arrest and to return Texas Democrats to Austin for a vote. Shades of the “democratic behavior” of Hitler and Stalin!! When will the justice system take a stand against the actions of these misarchists??



Activist Interviews: Why I Engage:

Interview with Penny Franklin

Penny Franklin has represented District B on the Montgomery County School Board since 1999 and has served as chair and vice - chair. She is the first African American to ever be elected to public office in Montgomery County. Penny considers public service her calling and has worked tirelessly to build community and address societal inequities.

1. Why “defending democracy” and why now?

I believe two things. You need to speak up and take a stand on today's issues and concerns. I also believe education is key to a civil society. Promoting and maintaining an educated public is essential. Without an educated public, people will not have the critical thinking skills and background knowledge needed to actively participate in our society and avoid being persuaded by political rhetoric. Public education depends on the entire education system, working together from the local school board, the superintendent, the teachers, and support staff being engaged and adequately funded. My concern is that without an education people will not have the skills they need to compete for good paying jobs with health care. This leads to low paying jobs and the need to work multiple jobs just to get by. We cannot continue being hogtied by a constant stream of executive orders designed to rewrite history, ignore our past mistakes as a country, and constrain educating our children.

2. What motivated you to attend your first protest?

I was 9 or 10 years old when I marched with my mother in Christiansburg after Martin Luther King's assassination. I was proud to be there with other members of my community and to stand up for what was right. My mother used a word to describe each of my sibling's personalities and mine was “fighter.” I got that from my mother. She was a fighter herself and in fact through the force of her personality, she integrated the maternity ward at the old Radford Hospital by refusing to be sent to the “colored” ward. That aspect of my personality helped me become a labor union leader and an advocate for public education.

3. How did you get involved with the Defending Democracy group?

I have known and respected Andy Morikawa for a long time. When he asked me to join the Defending Democracy group, I was flattered as I believed in the many things you are advocating. But it was a difficult time with me caring for my mother and continuing my work on the Montgomery County School Board as well as serving as the leader of my local union. So, I had to decline an active role but have remained aware of the good work you and other organizations are doing. I want to be involved with people and organizations that are taking action and that's what Defending Democracy is doing.

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

Being there, speaking up and standing up, and encouraging others. When I am protesting across the street from the Trump Store in Christiansburg it is important for other members of the community to see what I stand for. Actions like that help build activism and community. There is also strength in numbers. Not everyone wants or needs to lead but is willing to be part of a movement.

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

That we still need to be doing this. I thought we had come much further as a nation. Now I feel we are fighting to keep any of the progress we have made on so many issues from education to race to the environment. I'm not going back. Some of the prejudices my grandparents faced are still there, but perhaps not as obvious. The actions of the Trump Administration are hidden in plain sight. Their objectives are clear. Motivated by power, greed, and fear they want to make sure they keep some people down. I want to see something better. I want to have a world where my grandchildren do not have to fight. That is my motivation.

Opinion – Making Sense of Nonsense

Guest OP-ED by Mark Benson

The Big Bad Bill's Voucher Subterfuge

Most Americans agree on one thing: education is essential. Public schools provide a foundation for equal opportunity, equipping students with knowledge, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills for life. They help young people work with those different from themselves, grow into active citizens, and strengthen communities and the workforce. Despite their importance, a growing “school choice” movement is pushing education vouchers as part of a broader effort to privatize government. Project 2025, led by the Heritage Foundation, calls for privatizing institutions from Medicare to Veterans Affairs. With \$70 billion in federal education spending, privatizing schools could cut federal and local costs. Marketed as helping low-income families, vouchers rarely provide real options. In Virginia, average private high school tuition is \$19,000; the average voucher is \$2,000. For low-income families, the \$17,000 gap is insurmountable. For families already in private schools, the voucher is an 11% discount—subsidizing those who can already afford tuition. Vouchers also drain public school resources. In Virginia, funding formulas count enrollment and daily attendance, so every student drawn to private school reduces public school budgets, shrinking resources for those who remain.

Although the “school choice” slogan polls well, voters reject vouchers when they understand them. In 2024, voters in Colorado, Kentucky, and Nebraska defeated voucher proposals. Direct federal outlays for vouchers would be a non-starter, so the Big Bill disguises them through the tax system. Under the plan, the federal government gives an eligible taxpayer up to \$1,700, which the taxpayer then directs to a voucher program formally called a scholarship granting organization (SGO). The SGO passes the \$1,700 to the donor's chosen private school. The taxpayer pays nothing, serving merely as a pass-through for federal funds flowing to private schools nationwide. This setup creates a smokescreen: students may think the voucher comes from the school, the school may think it comes from the SGO, and the SGO may see it as coming from the “donor.” Only a careful observer can trace the full chain and recognize it as a way to advance a deeply unpopular policy. Proponents know that an open admission, that the U.S. Treasury is directly funding a national private school voucher program, would spark public backlash. So, they disguise the political agenda as philanthropy to avoid opposition. Advocates warn it could divert billions in its first year, growing quickly as it becomes routine. Virginia can block participation before it starts. Parent groups, teachers' unions, school boards, PTAs, and civil-rights organizations must press lawmakers to reject the scheme and demand transparency from any SGO in the state. Ask District 41 candidates Chris Obenshain and Lily Franklin: “Will you defend Virginia's public schools and oppose federal vouchers?”

The choice is clear: protect public resources for the common good, or watch them siphoned away to subsidize private education for the few who can already afford it.

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.