

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.

HOPE $\longleftrightarrow$ ACTION

In our first issue of The Democracy Advocate we warned against developing a sense of “hyper-normalization” as day after day we were bombarded with threats to our democracy by this “Republican” administration. It is easy to become desensitized to the barrage of corruption, anti-democratic policies, and polarizing actions of this administration and to withdraw from engaging against these threats to our democracy. We have begun, however, to see signs of hope and actions pushing back against what seemed six months ago to be a continuous slide towards authoritarianism. Hope and action are the reinforcing notions that are fundamental to our ability to take positive steps towards strengthening our nation’s commitment to democracy. Hope encourages us to act and active engagement creates a sense of community that reinforces our hope for the future. Given the importance of the reinforcing hope and action dynamic, we have introduced a new section to The Democracy Advocate that we call “Signs of Hope for Democracy” that will complement on-going emphasis on “action”, or just DO IT. We will continue to alert our readers to the autocratic threats and corruption that are buffeting our democracy, but we will also lift up actions that are giving us hope and prompting us to act against authoritarianism.

Websites, Newsletters and Podcasts

For those interested in democracy-building efforts in Roanoke and surrounding areas, we highly recommend the Newsletter authored by Bill Hackworth. Bill was an original member of Defending Democracy and has remained active in Roanoke. To subscribe to his newsletter write him at wmhack@aol.com

To access past issues of the newsletter or other documents from Defending Democracy go to: <https://uucnrv.org/justice/defending-democracy/>

To see how Hungary is fighting back from its authoritarian government, read the following article: [Hungary Fights Back](#). More on Hungary’s pro-democracy movements and others in Eastern Europe in a forthcoming Democracy Advocate newsletter.

Listen to Ezra Klein’s podcast on “[Groyperfication](#)” of the G.O.P to understand how antisemitic and racists one segment of the G.O.P has become. We are in perilous times when this type of vitriolic speech become part of our political discourse.

SIGNS OF HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY

This is a new, reoccurring feature of the newsletter where we highlight hopeful signs of resistance to and resilience of our democracy, and focus on individuals or institutions that have taken positive steps to securing our democracy.

- Elections Results in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York City soundly rejected the “Trump/Republican” agenda. In Pennsylvania voters reelected three Democratic justices who stood firm against attempts to overturn the 2020 election, while in Maine voters rejected stringent voter ID requirements. Perhaps the most significant result was in Georgia where democrats (2) were elected to the Public Service Commission (statewide election) for the first time since 2007. Hopefully this foretells the contests for Governor and U.S. Senate in 2024. Georgia is now on Republicans’ minds anxiously! In numerous local elections, voters expressed their support for democracy.
- Profile for Hope: Heather Gerken, incoming CEO of Ford Foundation. When barraged by critics from the current Trump-Republican administration for vowing to focus on election integrity and rule of law, she replied forcefully. “When the Ford Foundation funded the civil rights movement, it was a source of controversy,” she said. “It was incredibly important that we were protected in doing that work. When the Ford Foundation stood up to protect free speech and dissent during the McCarthy era, it was incredibly important that we had the right to do that.” Kudos to Dr. Gerken!
- The courts continue to rule against Trump’s use of executive orders to by-pass congressional authority.
- The Supreme Court ruled not to reconsider the law allowing for same-sex marriages.
- Trump’s disapproval ratings continue to rise. Latest CNN ratings (10/25) show 63% disapproval ratings up from 58% in July. Exit polls for the November 4th elections indicated disapproval for Trump was a major factor in voters’ selections.
- Mass protests, for example, No Kings rallies, grow in size and in the diversity of participants and of locations.
- Beth Macy announces she will run as a Democrat in the 6th Congressional District against Ben Cline, someone who has supported anti-democratic efforts by Trump.



Readings For Resistance and Resilience:

Here are some books worth reading. Included are those focused on hope and resilience.

Giving Up is Unforgivable. A Manual for Keeping a Democracy. Joyce Vance. Penguin Press, 2025. Outlines what have been effective actions to diminish the growth of authoritarianism in the U.S. A central theme is don't give up Hope.

Active Hope. How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience and Creative Power. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. New World Library, Novato, California, 2022. Offers insights into how we cope with what some have called the *Great Unraveling*, a description of the chaos the envelops us now.

Chasing Hope. A Reporter's Life. Nicholas Kristof. Random House, New York, 2024. Discussion of the human responses to tragedies and challenges that have faced communities trying to respond to the despair that has emerged globally.

The Soul of America. The Battle for our Better Angels. Jon Meacham. Random House, New York. 2019. Discusses the current issues and concerns in American politics and society by looking back at critical times in our history when hope overcame division and fear.

Corruption, Fraud, & Stupidity

East Side, West Side The People's House is Crumbling Down

Since Trump's inauguration, the current Trump-"Republican" regime has been tearing down the White House (the People's House) metaphorically by its immoral and illegal actions. What should be a place held in esteem and recognized for the foundational values that we honor as a nation, has become the site of corruption at a level hitherto unknown, of a shameless grifter, and of countless cases of duplicitous behavior. Now part of our house, the East Wing, is physically being destroyed to be replaced by a gigantic ballroom with an architectural design consisting of 1/3 Versailles, 1/3 casino, and 1/3 French brothel. Bypassing the legal approval system, the complete demolition of the East Wing has proceeded despite initial statements from the President that the East Wing would be modified and not destroyed, and it would cost less than \$200 million. Now estimated to be at least \$300 million, the renovation is being funded by corporations and plutocrats wishing to curry favor with this administration. As of this time, at least 40 corporations and individuals have contributed to the project, many of which do billions of dollars in business with the government. These include IT companies like Google, Meta, Amazon, among others; defense contractors like Lockheed Martin and Palantir Technologies; numerous crypto-currency companies and individuals (one pardoned by Trump after conviction for fraud); fossil fuel energy representatives; entertainment and casino companies; and numerous long-time Trump funders. The people's house, our house, is now owned by sycophantic corporations and plutocrats. Any guesses who the new ballroom will be named for?



Activist Interviews

Why I Engage

Interview with Trenton Matthews By Katherine Allen

Trenton, age 22, is a recent graduate of Virginia Tech, where he majored in Human Development and Family Science. As he takes some time off to prepare for further education in Social Work, you can find Trenton making drinks at a local coffee shop, Bollos.

1. Why “defending democracy,” and why now?

Personally, I believe many people have begun to lose hope in the way our current democracy functions. Too often, I hear others claim that their “vote doesn’t matter,” when in reality, their vote matters more now than ever. It’s easy to get caught up in the complex language of politics, but at its core, democracy is about electing officials who will advocate for us. When we disengage or back down, we allow donors and political action committees to shape decisions in their own interest rather than the public’s.

2. What motivated you to attend your first protest? (What was it for? When? Where?)

I started getting involved in protesting and politics in late 2019 and early 2020. At the time, I was still fairly young and wasn’t able to fully wrap my head around national politics, but I heard what my community had to say about “liberals,” and I felt compelled to take action. Towards the end of 2020, I joined a group of fellow students from my high school to help establish the Young Democrats of Orange County, VA. As the first ever president of the club, I really had to take a step back and recognize the importance of the work I would be doing. Living in a rural, predominantly Republican area, we faced our fair share of backlash, yet the experience of engaging my peers in both local and federal politics ignited my passion for activism.

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

One of the most powerful aspects of community activism is how easily ideas can emerge from simple conversations. I often see things on social media and assume that I am alone in my thoughts; however, that’s rarely the case. Many of my friends and fellow students share similar views or offer alternative perspectives on issues such as the housing crisis, Medicare for All, and tax reform. These casual conversations often serve as the foundation for future solutions, though many people overlook their importance. Whether you go to a protest, or participate in an educational session, these moments of dialogue can lay the groundwork for meaningful ideas and actions in the future. Conversation is only the first step in transforming narratives into change.

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

What surprises me the most is how interconnected political issues really are. When I first started my journey in activism, I only focused on surface-level issues, believing there was always one oppressor and one oppressed group. As I have gained more experience, whether by volunteering at the local domestic violence shelter or protesting the genocide happening in Gaza, I began to see through my veil of black-and-white. I started asking why it is that we can’t raise the minimum wage, but we can send millions to Israel? Why can’t we provide free healthcare to citizens, but insurance CEOs can make millions in bonuses each year? There is still work to be done as a nation, but real change begins by supporting and uplifting the people

in our communities. The people we see every day at work or at school, and our neighbors who will lend a hand when times are tough, are the ones we should focus on and uplift.

5. What are your “activist hopes” for the future?

This is a big question because my hopes for the future are HUGE. One of my main hopes for the future is that people begin to focus more on community as they continue to engage in social activism. We often share more struggles than we realize with our neighbors, and it's important to bridge those gaps by treating others with dignity and respect. When we start to realize how similar we are, difficult conversations become easier to have. I hope that in the future, people come to see that our shared struggles can bring us closer together, rather than dividing us over issues that have little impact on our overall well-being. Find common ground with your neighbors and talk about it over a cup of coffee in the morning or a grilled hotdog in the evening.

Opinion - Making Sense of Nonsense
By T Pain

“When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes a duty” (Source: unknown)

Consider the question- how do we resist unjust laws that threaten the viability of liberal democracies around the world, and simultaneously take positive actions to reshape democracies to ensure their resilience for future generations? Two perspectives are embedded in this question: a personal viewpoint (what can I do), and an institutional one (how do we organize to take effective action). Personally, we voice our resistance to the current Republican administration by marching, protesting, writing letters, speaking out, etc. But, as our colleagues in the [Rural Urban Bridges Initiative](#) remind us, personal resistance alone will not move us beyond our current high levels of angst. Actions that will improve the lives of people are required to quell the current authoritarian dynamic. Personal resistance gives us HOPE, but collective ACTION is necessary to rebuild our democratic institutions and repair the chasm of distrust that has evolved.

Before starting this OpEd, I encountered two articles that helped focus my thinking about this central question from both a personal and an institutional perspective. I have drawn on them in trying to answer the initial question I posed above.

M Gessen's article in the New York Times (11/3/2025) - *How to be a Good Citizen of a Bad Country* - speaks to the personal aspect of the question. As Gessen notes, it is easy to ignore the chaos that envelops us, and to assume we are good citizens if we pay our taxes, if we vote even when the election process is suspect, and if we contribute to the public good in some fashion via voluntarism, for example. Yet, while we assume this role of a good citizen, our democratic institutions can be systematically destroyed. “What does one do then? How can we be a good citizen of a bad state?” We must weigh the moral obligation to act versus taking a risk. That judgment is deeply personal, and yet saving democracy requires coordinated risk-taking by millions of individuals who face the same quandary - take anti-authoritarian acts or normalize the aberrant behavior of the current administration.

Defend Democracy has created a simple guide to civic engagement that may help one with the weighty decision of how to be a good citizen in a bad country. How can I personally make a difference? Access the [Civil Engagement Guide](#) and consider how you can take steps to move from HOPE, or despair, to ACTION. Check those activities that you currently are doing, consider what additional items on the list are within your capabilities, recruit a friend and have

them get engaged and finally, set a timetable for moving to a higher level of engagement. Think creatively. For example, documenting inappropriate government behavior with photos and videos to combat disinformation. See [documenting](#).

As I pondered the institutional responses necessary to move the trajectory of change towards democracy, I encountered the work being produced by the [Ash Center](#) at Harvard on preserving democracy. The Commentary of Oct 16, 2025 on Countering Autocratization - *Lessons from the 2025 Harvard Nonviolent Action Lab Summit* - offers five strategic priorities for collectively engaging against authoritarianism that are important to consider as we move to institutional action.

- **Coalition Building by Pro-Democracy Actors**
Keep the eye on the end goal - pro-democracy coalitions will require working with individuals and groups with whom we may disagree on individual policies. The goal is to preserve democracy, full stop!
- **Avoid Tactical Stagnation**
Mass protests are vital but coalitions must engage in a full range of non-violent activities. Implement multiple long-term strategies that create enduring safe guards to democracy.
- **Change Authoritarian Legitimacy**
Authoritarians have created legitimacy narratives in order to produce a false veneer of democratic governance. To challenge these, we need to advocate a system of governance that aligns with popular values and delivers on the aspirations and goals of all citizens. Shatter their untruthful veneer of democracy by speaking to truth.
- **Global Autocratic Alliances Must be Recognized and Weakened**
Authoritarians have plentiful resources and have used them to think and to act globally. Strong networks of NGOs, civic groups, and democratic institutions must be created. Research globally because other nations are working against the same anti-democratic forces, and then act locally.
- **Combat Disinformation and False Narratives**
Autocrats have expanded their control over digital outlets as a means of distributing false narratives. Pro-democracy must create competing systems in the digital world and use those tools to confront right-wing propaganda.

If you find these five priorities daunting and beyond your individual capabilities, you are correct. Acting individually is important for our own self-esteem, but collective action involving multiple different organizations is essential for change. Networks of faith groups, NGOs, community associations, neighborhood groups, professional cooperatives, educational institutions, labor confederations, and many other groups will be required to build coalitions strong enough to withstand the efforts of populists and plutocrats to build a governance system for the few and powerful. **UNITY** among all democratic actors is required for success.

Readers Forum

We welcome your feedback on the newsletter. In particular, we would welcome suggestions for feature stories, books, websites, opinions, etc. If this Democracy Advocate was forwarded from a friend and you would like to be on the Defending Democracy activist list, drop a line to our email address with your name, email address, and zip code. Send all correspondence to our email address: defendingdemocracy124@gmail.com