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 ⟷ ACTION

You will note a slight change in the format of our newsletter. We will be adding regular features for particular policy areas, such as, education, environment, and media, etc. We believe it important to keep you informed on how the current administration has addressed what most Americans consider as serious issues. We hope the change keeps you informed and activated to take a stand on issues of relevance to you.

WE KNOW THIS MAN

We have been dumbstruck by the boorish behavior, corrupt actions, non-sensical policy proposals, and steam of falsehoods uttered by our President in the past eleven months. But the truth is, we all have known "Donald Trumps" since our childhood. He is the bully on the playground in elementary school; the rich kid in high school who harassed those who he considered not worthy of his attention and empathy, gaining a clique of like-minded bullies to encourage him; the college student who partied more than studied because he had a legacy pass to graduation; the member of the country club who told off-color jokes at inappropriate times (and who was known to cheat on the golf course, turning bogies into pars); and the adult who bluffed his way through serious conversations by ridiculing his friends and rivals with denigrating "nicknames". Unfortunately, we never expected those Donald Trumps to become the President of the United States. Perhaps if we had been bolder in confronting those Trumps along the way, we would not be experiencing the horror story unfolding in Washington today. However, we have the opportunity to confront "them" now. Take action against corruption, be angry at incompetence, and stand up for civility and America values

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 see how Hungary is fighting back from its authoritarian government, read the following article: Hungary Fights Back. More on Hungary's pro-democracy movements in our OpEd below.

Media Monopolies

One of the first actions authoritarians take once in power is to gain control of the public media to ensure no competing voices are heard. The past twelve months demonstrate the success Trump has had in his strategy to control our media. Using regulatory control, bogus lawsuits, and public threats to facilitate mergers and acquisitions, he and his tech oligarchs have made significant gains in destroying public trust in media and creating right-wing control of the media. A recent report by the Free Press indicates a least 200 cases where the Trump administration has tried to censor free speech. Here are some figures that illustrate the problem of monopolistic control of the media:

- 90% -think of it – of all U.S. media is owned by just six companies and acquisitions and mergers continue and are encouraged by the government
- 85% of all daily newspapers are owned by 10 companies
- Lee Enterprises, Daily Press, and Berkshire Hathaway own 23 local newspapers in Virginia. For information on local newspapers in Virginia check: Virginia Press Association. For information on ownership and trends in media check The Future of Media Project at Harvard University.

As the number of independent news outlets shrinks, we recommend three online outlets: two from Virginia and one international, and urge you to give them a try if you haven't already. Cardinal News; Blue Virginia News; and Fair Observer.

SIGNS OF HOPE FOR DEMOCRACY

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

- Kudos to Republicans in the Indiana legislature who refused to approve a redrawing of congressional districts to favor their party in the 2026 election. Political courage still exists in some.
- Trump approval ratings continue to be subterranean – going below 35% in some recent polls.
- Fractures are opening in the MAGA world as the plutocrats and the populism are realizing they have different goals and values; and as the misogynists, antisemites, racial bigots, and neo-Nazis begin to publicly voice their extremist values.
- The courts continue to block many of the actions by the Trump administration, including the sending of federal troops to various cities across the country. Follow court decisions on Just Security.

Readings For Resistance and Resilience:

Here are some books worth spending 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.

Szelényi, Zsuzsanna. (2022). *Tainted Democracy: Viktor Orbán and the Subversion of Hungary.* London: C Hurst & Co.

Bergen, Peter (2022). *The Cost of Chaos: The Trump Administration and the World*. London: Penguin Books.

Karl, Jonathan (2025). *Retribution: Donald Trump and the Campaign that Changed America*. New York: Dutton.

Leonnig, Carol and Aaron C. Davis (2025*). Injustice: How Politics and Fear Vanquished America's Justice Department*. New York: Penguin Press.

The Assault on the Environment Continues

Following the roadmap of Project 2025, where the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is described as working outside its legal Congressional mandate and aligned with politically connected activists, the Trump-Republican administration continues to dismantle rules and regulations designed to address climate change and other manmade impacts on the environment. Instead, the Administration chooses short-term economic gains (and in many cases immediate) over actions designed to protect the environment. As a follow-up to our OpEd in Issues 5, here are some recent actions to reverse hard earned gains related to emissions.

- Roll back of fuel efficiency standards
- Blocking of global maritime emission standards
- Suspension of support for off-shore wind farms
- Relaxation of methane emission regulations.

Corruption, Fraud, and Stupidity

The title of The Atlantic story (Dec. 15, 2025) – "*Making Corruption Rampant Again*" – highlights the difficulty we at the Democracy Advocate have in writing our section on Corruption, Fraud and Stupidity." There are just too damn many targets of opportunity! However, nothing exemplifies corruption more than the distain the Trump administration has for our justice system. The President has used presidential pardons and commutations to free his friends and those who provide monetary support to Trump enterprises. Since January 2025 he has pardoned over 1,600 people, many convicted of felonies. Most (1,500) are associated with the Capitol attack of January 6th, including some charged with felonies for assaulting Capitol police. Others granted pardons are either folks who provided some form of payment (donations, investments, lobbying fees, etc.) to Trump enterprises, particularly those in crypto-currency and AI; or to former political allies (George Santos, Rudy Giuliani, Michael Flynn, and Roger Stone, to name but a few). The most alarming is the recent pardon granted to Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, leader of one of the largest narco-states in the world. In addition to pardons, Trump has threatened foreign governments who seek justice for criminals in their country. In Brazil, he tried to secure the release of former president Bolsonaro who was sentenced to 27 years for involvement in a plot to overthrown Brazil's democracy. More recently, several prominent Trump supporters (Tucker Carlson and Barron Trump) used pressure to free Andrew Tate from Romania where he was facing multiple changes on human trafficking and rape. Did money change hands? Only the insiders know, but Tate is now back in the United States. For an excellent accounting of the funds to the Trump administration and the donors, check the New York Times story of December 22. Travesty prevails! Americans – speak out against corruption in this administration.

Activist Interviews
Why I Engage

Activist Interview with Reverend Pam Philips
By Katherine Allen

Rev Pam has been the minister at UUC since August 2017. She's been engaged with the Dialogue on Race White Privilege issue group and the Religious Affairs committee of the NAACP. Before coming to the New River Valley, she lived in Charlottesville and worked as a middle school special education / language arts teacher.

1. Why "defending democracy," and why now?
   The first Trump administration made clear that we cannot "trust the system" of checks and balances that I learned about in school. Becoming aware how fragile democracy is was a shock then, so when a small group of folks came to me asking that the congregation take on this cause, I was grateful for their leadership. The avalanche of illegal executive orders and actions since January 2025 made it even clearer that all citizens need to stay vigilant and speak up.
2. What motivated you to attend your first protest? (What was it for? When? Where?)
   My first big protest was probably in Washington, DC for a pro-choice rally in 1989. I remember it especially because my mother was visiting from Oregon and we went together. Even though she was more conservative on other issues, we shared a belief that women should have control over our bodies. I had been to smaller rallies for women's rights, at one of which my UU minister said, "If men could become pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament."
3. In what ways do you build community through social activism?
   Part of my role as minister at UUC has been building relationships with people in the community who share our values, which has led me to attend all kinds of meetings and protests – including my work with the NAACP and the Dialogue on Race, but at other times with Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) and Virginia Organizing. Within the congregation, I hope my sermons and some of our faith development offerings encourage people to work together to build the world we dream about.
4. What is most surprising about the social justice activism you are doing now?
   One of the things that I've realized is that I have to work hard to resist demonizing people with whom I disagree. I catch myself having really dark thoughts when I see certain bumper stickers or yard signs. When I call my congressman's office, I try hard to be especially respectful and kind to the person answering the phone, even while I'm passionate and direct in telling them why I am angry and what I want him to do.
5. What are your "activist hopes" for the future?
   One of my hopes is that more and more people will join the effort. I sometimes wonder what would happen if every single person who opposes an immoral or illegal action of this administration were to call their representatives instead of just complaining about it. Our voices matter.

Opinion – Making Sense of Nonsense
By T Pain

Are We Hungary Yet?

As a candidate, he called for a return to white Christian family values and vilified immigrants and LGBT people. After being elected, he replaced civil servants with loyalists, weakened the independence of the judicial system, used “emergency declarations” focused on reducing crime to make dramatic political changes, made moves to put the media under government control to release propaganda, transformed the universities to force compliance with government expectations, asked students to submit the names of professors who express left wing political opinions, and gerrymandered or changed voting rules to ensure his reelection. One of his closest allies is Vladimir Putin in Russia and he demonizes George Soros as an enemy of the state. Evidence of corruption and self-dealing has accumulated as oligarchs buy up media and his son-in-law has become one of the richest people in the country.

Sounds like Donald Trump, right? No, this describes Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary for the last 15 years. Orbán has been the darling of the MAGA movement with Donald Trump calling him a “great leader” who has “no crime, he's got no problems, like some countries do" (ABC News, Nov 7, 2025). Orbán has had pre- and post-election visits with the president multiple times in Florida and at the White House. He has been a speaker several times at the CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference). In 2022, Kevin Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation (produced Project 2025) stated “Modern Hungary is not just a model for conservative statecraft, but the model. Americans, Brits, Spaniards, Australians—everyone can and should learn from it.” Hungary is serving as a location for collaboration and brainstorming of the extreme political right. In 2022, the first European spin-off of CPAC was created in Hungary and serves as a networking opportunity for American and European far right politicians to work together to develop policies and plans.

Hungary, by all appearances, seems to be serving as the blueprint for Donald Trump’s transformation of the US. Using the Hungarian playbook and having a trifecta of conservative power in the congressional, executive, and judicial branches, the administration has been able to rapidly alter our representative democracy towards a Hungarian-style illiberal democracy, an electoral autocracy where elections occur but power consolidates in the president with a suppression of individual rights and an erosion of political checks and balances.

Although the US has had a democracy for a long time, one might assume that it would be more resilient to authoritarianism than Hungary, which only emerged from post-war Soviet occupation, and thus, had limited experience with democracy. Yet, some political analysts say that Trump has moved so much faster than Orbán (the US has made some of the changes within 9 months that took 9 years in Hungary).

Do we really want to follow the Hungarian model? Hungary scored the worst of all European countries (41 out of 100, transparency.org) on the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2024. Wages are well below the EU average and annual inflation in 2023 was 17%. The population is

shrinking. Fifty-seven percent of Hungarians between ages 16 and 24 expect to move abroad within the next 10 years with an overrepresentation of these being university- educated individuals, which will cause a brain drain. It is difficult to find employment in Hungary because of the weak economy and cultural restrictions on some jobs. The country is viewed as a Russian rump state by most western European countries and has been increasingly isolated from EU governance. This doesn't sound like a worthy goal.

Despite the heavy hand of Orbán in hindering democratic governance, positive signals are developing in Hungary. Although the government officially banned the Pride March planned for summer of 2025, over 100,000 people participated in the march. Hungary will have an election next year in April. This could be the most competitive election in years, partly because multiple opposition groups have compromised to back one candidate. Currently, the opposition candidate, Peter Magyar, is leading in most polls. He is running on an anti-corruption platform. Interestingly, he has recently filed a criminal complaint against the government for running a video that Magyar claims is a deep fake, AI generated video of him saying he would cut pensions. MAGA is clearly enthralled with Hungary as a model for the US. So, to retain our democracy, it would be wise to understand Hungary's transition to an authoritarian regime in order to avoid their fate.

To achieve a greater understanding of Hungary's recent authoritarian history, we recommend the following:

Angeloni, Michael. How authoritarians use crime as a pretext. If you can keep it, Nov 24, 2025
How Democracy Wins, Protecting Democracy
Kirby, Paul, Thorpe, Nick. Who is Viktor Orbán, Hungarian PM with a 14-year grip on power. BBC, Feb 13, 2024
Shapiro, Jeremy, Vegh, Zsuzsanna, The Orbanization of America: Hungary's Lessons for Donald Trump. European Council on Foreign Relations, October 9, 2024
Young and highly educated people are leaving Hungary – as a result of Orbán's policies. The Swedish Development Forum. February 26, 2024

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

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