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An American Democracy Built for the People

Why Democracy Matters and How To Make It Work for the 21st Century

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Introduction and summary

As the United States approaches its 250th birthday, democracy is at a pivotal crossroads that will determine the nation's future. Anchored in the principle that it is created of, by, and for the people, American democracy has survived daunting challenges and produced one of the most successful societies in human history. Most Americans continue to support democracy's bedrock values, such as adherence to the rule of law, respect for fundamental freedoms, and free and fair elections. Aside from the values of democracy, democratic governments also perform better than other forms of government in creating quality-of-life results that can positively transform families and communities.¹

But the values undergirding American democracy have never been fully achieved and are now under active attack by a political minority and wealthy special interests. Simultaneously, many Americans feel that the government is failing to do its job to deliver prosperity and security, especially during a time of economic and social turbulence. These dynamics have resulted in Americans overwhelmingly mistrusting government and viewing it as unresponsive to their concerns.

As dissatisfaction with democracy grows, an appreciable number of Americans are open to autocracy, which the author defines as a form of government ruled by a person or group with no checks or balances on that authority. Younger Americans and persons of color, who are often denied full political power in the U.S. system and disproportionately face economic headwinds, are especially open to autocratic leaders who want to break the system. Autocrats prey on people's despair, stoke race and class divisions, and appeal to nativism. They also cement their power through dangerous extremism and the sabotage of elections. The nation witnessed the perils of extremism on January 6, 2021, when after a free and fair election, insurrectionists violently attempted to block the peaceful transfer of presidential power. This culture of violence reared its ugly head again with two attempted assassinations of former President Donald Trump in 2024.



A series of fact sheets detailing how to apply these democratic principles is available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/series/an-american-democracy-built-for-the-people>.

Despite the challenges society faces, Americans have the individual and collective power to reinvent the democratic experiment. Commonsense reforms exist to create a strong and effective system that gives people meaningful control in charting their course and the actions that their representative government takes to address central issues such as economic prosperity, improved health outcomes, life expectancy, and safety and security while fostering a shared sense of belonging.

This report divides the discussion into three main areas: 1) core values and measurable outputs of democracies, 2) reasons why democracy is failing many Americans yet remains far preferable to autocracy, and 3) a positive path to building a strong democracy and responsive government for future generations.

The battle to build a modern democracy and establish enduring trust in government will not be an easy one, but it remains the essential element to creating a society that can meet the needs of all Americans for the next 250 years and beyond.

When U.S. democracy is weak, it impairs the United States' ability to strengthen democracy around the world.

PART 1

Core values and measurable outputs of a strong and effective democracy

The United States can lay claim to the world’s oldest modern democracy. The Constitution, in effect since 1789, is the longest-surviving written charter of government in the world.² Its first three words, “We the People,” are meant to capture the foundational principle that the government derives its powers from the consent of the governed, whom it exists to serve.

A strong and effective democracy is therefore participatory, and the people control the agenda. Democracy gives every person the power and freedom to help choose the path for their society and the actions their representative government takes to improve their lives. If the people’s government fails to make their lives better, they can exercise their will to hold decision-makers accountable, without being blocked by political minorities or wealthy special interests. At its essence, democracy is the only system that can force government to work for the people. When this occurs, the populace builds an enduring trust in its government, which is essential to its long-term survival, especially during times when some people may be lured by the siren songs of autocratic leaders.

Yet, as history demonstrates, the survival and success of democracies are never guaranteed. Instead, democracies are ongoing experiments that move in fits and starts, needing to adapt to inevitable challenges. They are never perfect, and they never solve all problems. But where democracies are strong and effective, they provide the best available alternative for people to be represented equally by their government and to reach their full potential. In recognition of this fact, in 1947, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously declared, “Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”³

Democracy’s fundamental values

Democracy is much more than just a set of political processes. It has underlying values that are foundational to its success. For thousands of years, people have debated the essential elements of an ideal democracy. Needless to say, no

standardized list exists. But in the context of this report, the author focuses on the following seven values and features:

- A government that fairly represents and involves all people, including those who have been historically marginalized, based on a shared set of values. People must have equal political power and maximum opportunity to participate in a healthy civic culture.
- Free, fair, and accessible elections that reflect the people’s will and allow them to hold elected leaders accountable, including protections for every eligible person’s right to vote and the fair administration of elections that have transparent political party competition.
- Efficient, effective, and honest government that implements policies and delivers services that are responsive to the people and improves their quality of life, as opposed to a government corrupted by wealthy special interests or corporations that spend vast amounts of money, often secretly, to get their desired results.
- Respect for the rule of law and promotion of equal justice, which means legal accountability not only for political leaders but for anyone who tries to improperly rig or corrupt the system, resorts to political violence, or makes communities less safe. This must include an independent court system that upholds the law in a fair and impartial manner, while acting as a check and balance on the other branches of government.
- A loyal opposition that passionately advocates for its policy interests but also respects election results and peaceful transfers of power. Political minorities must have meaningful roles in the system, but they cannot break laws and norms to thwart the will of the majority or use violence to cling to power.
- The protection of people’s fundamental freedoms and human rights, including freedoms of expression, privacy, religion, assembly, and association, as well as the freedom from fear or oppression. Freedoms and rights are the main vehicle for Americans to achieve their full human potential.
- An independent news media focused on informing the public and holding the government accountable. An informed populace—working from objective facts—is essential to building a strong civil society and empowering communities to chart their best course.

If these seven foundational values are meaningfully reflected in a strong and effective American democracy, then, in practice, the government would reflect the wishes of the people. The government would enact policies that the majority desires to improve their lives, deliver efficient and effective services to them and their communities, and protect their freedoms. In the process, Americans would have the tools to engage broadly in good faith with a diverse set of ideas and interests, finding compromises and building coalitions along the way. An evolved democracy of this type could also temper counter-majoritarian forces, which often become more extreme in times of societal advancement and try to bend the system to their will. Yet, as explored below, American democracy is not fully living up to these ideals.

Governments in democratic nations produce more peace and prosperity

Although democracy's foundational values and the related structures of government are designed to create better tangible results for people's lives, do they actually? The answer is yes. Evidence shows that democratic governments, though imperfect, generally produce better measurable outputs than autocratic governments.

These measurable outputs include the following:

- **Economy.** Quite simply, democracies tend to be more prosperous than autocracies. According to one study, countries that switched to democratic rule experienced a 20 percent increase in gross domestic product over a 25-year period.⁴ Democracies also act as a “safety net for the economy,” leading to far fewer negative growth rates and avoiding “the more catastrophic outcomes that characterize many autocracies.”⁵ Data are more mixed on whether democracies have a better track record in reducing income inequality, with some studies saying they do, while others saying they do not.⁶ Nonetheless, the freedom of expression inherent in democracies drives the innovation, experimentation, and entrepreneurship that fuel economic opportunity, as seen, for example, in the high-tech innovation produced in Silicon Valley, California.⁷
- **Health and life expectancy.** Democracies increase life expectancy and reduce child mortality, while also significantly decreasing deaths from noncommunicable diseases.⁸ By contrast, autocracies “have lower life expectancy, less effective health service coverage, and higher levels of out-of-pocket health spending.”⁹

Highly functioning democracies see 94 percent less infant mortality than autocracies.¹⁰ In recent years, democracies experienced lower COVID-19 death rates than autocracies, where leaders “downplayed the pandemic, turned their backs on scientific evidence, spread false information, and failed to take basic steps to protect the health and lives of the public.”¹¹

- **Climate change.** Democracies consistently perform better than autocracies in adopting policies to combat climate change, one of the existential matters of our time.¹² Air quality is better in cities located in democratic nations.¹³ According to the V-Dem Institute, a research organization based in Sweden, “[d]emocracies provide more freedom for non-governmental organizations to educate citizens about climate problems, and exert pressure on governments to take action.”¹⁴
- **Education.** Democracies improve children’s access to education.¹⁵ One study showed that if a country moves from the least to most democratic category, children get 1.3 years more schooling.¹⁶ Another study found that democracies increase secondary school enrollment by almost 70 percent.¹⁷ Moreover, “evidence shows that higher levels of education promote egalitarian gender attitudes but only in democratic societies.”¹⁸
- **Gender equality.** Democracies tend to have greater gender parity than autocracies.¹⁹ And evidence shows that “nations with a combination of higher GDP per capita and higher quality of democracy have the lowest levels of violence against women.”²⁰ Not surprisingly, people in fully democratic countries have 60 percent more equal gender attitudes than citizens in autocracies, and women are more likely to hold key political positions.²¹ Studies have concluded that increased participation of women in politics reduces risk of conflicts and wars.²²
- **Peace and conflict.** Democracies are far less likely than autocracies to fight wars with one another.²³ Popularly known as the “democratic peace theory,” or dubbed by the V-Dem Institute as the “democratic peace axiom,” this theory roots itself in evidence that the spread of democracy reduces armed disputes and wars.²⁴ Democracies are also less prone to civil war and domestic volatility, in part because they channel dissent through nonviolent means and respect the rule of law.²⁵
- **Public goods and services.** Democratic governments are more effective at giving people access to public goods. For example, democracies “provide 23% more safe water access, 35% more immunization to young children, and up to 40% more

electricity access, than autocracies,” while also providing much higher rates of high-speed internet connection.²⁶ Another study found that electoral competition and anti-corruption measures go hand-in-hand with improved social outcomes “by reducing biases in public service delivery.”²⁷

- **Social welfare and human rights.** Democracies enhance social welfare and protect fundamental human rights, contrasted with a broad range of freedoms not traditionally enjoyed in autocracies.²⁸ Based on in-depth research, one report concluded that, “[t]ransitioning from a closed dictatorship to a full democracy leads on average to more than a 100% increase in spending on social protection policies.”²⁹

In sum, the measurable outputs that democratic governments produce for people reinforce the argument that democracy is the best system of government invented by humankind, especially when measured against autocracy.

The United States has experienced a long, slow arc toward achieving a democracy that can effectively represent all Americans, including racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalized communities, while improving people’s quality of life. American democracy has persevered through good and bad times: a civil war; economic expansions and depressions; natural disasters worsened by climate change; and rising income inequality—while outlawing slavery; bringing women, LGBTQ people, indigenous Americans, and immigrants toward full equality; fighting against the scourge of racism; expanding access to affordable health care; and producing major advances in technology. We must acknowledge this history while educating each generation about how a strong and effective democracy can help people realize their full potential, protect their freedoms, and build thriving communities.

PART 2

Democracy is failing many Americans but is preferable to autocracy

As discussed above, a strong and vibrant democracy is the system most capable of giving people the power to chart a path to peace and prosperity. But for far too many, the “American dream” remains frustratingly out of reach, hobbled by a government that seems unresponsive or even hostile to them. Some Americans are increasingly open to trying another system: autocracy. Yet autocracy is an unacceptable alternative that would fail to reflect Americans’ commonly shared fundamental values or deliver the quality of life that Americans desire.

Many Americans are dissatisfied with democracy

Despite the fact that democracy is the best system to reflect Americans’ participatory values and to channel the government to make their lives better, the United States’ broken system is failing too many. For reasons analyzed in this section, there is deep disenchantment across the ideological spectrum with the state of democracy and political institutions, which is unresponsive, antiquated, and too protective of political minority rights—seemingly designed to alienate many Americans.³⁰ This dynamic further erodes confidence in democracy and trust in government—and America itself. Alarming, many Americans now say they are willing to take a different course: jettisoning democracy in favor of autocracy.³¹ But as this section also addresses, autocracy is not a reasonable substitute for a strong and effective democracy.

53%

Percentage of Americans who believe the United States is a poorly functioning democracy

22%

Percentage of Americans who trust their government

Mountains of polling data reveal the depths of Americans' dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. For example, according to a January 2024 Gallup poll, only 28 percent of Americans are satisfied with the way democracy is working, which is a new low—sharply down from 61 percent in 1984.³² An Associated Press-NORC Center poll from March 2024 found that 53 percent of Americans believe the United States is a “poorly functioning democracy.”³³ In fact, Americans are more dissatisfied with their government than are people in almost every other democratic nation.³⁴ It is little wonder that Americans' trust in government is hovering at an abysmal 22 percent.³⁵ Additionally, as discussed further below, younger people and people of color are even more dissatisfied with the state of American democracy, and therefore more open to autocracy.³⁶

Quality-of-life challenges drive disenchantment with democracy

Many factors related to people's lived experiences are causing Americans to be unhappy with democracy.

First, the well-being of far too many Americans is not improving, which means the system is failing them. Economic inequality continues to grow.³⁷ There is an extreme lack of affordable housing in many areas across the country.³⁸ High levels of inflation, which are now steadily receding, and record household debt, along with average salaries that are not keeping up with the rising costs of goods and services, are hurting Americans' overall feelings of financial security.³⁹ As reflected in an April 2024 MarketWatch Guides survey, 49 percent of Americans consider themselves “broke,” while 66 percent report feeling they are “living paycheck to paycheck.”⁴⁰ Moreover, it can be difficult for many people to access government services that are especially needed during challenging times, such as job training or food assistance, due to underfunded or ineffective delivery systems that are unfriendly to users.⁴¹

Quality of life—which includes job opportunities, health care, education, and public safety—can also vary widely across certain regions, sectors, and demographics, with some Americans doing very well and others not able to get by. The protection of Americans' fundamental rights also differs broadly, with many conservative-run states turning back the clock and enacting extreme policies that limit the rights of workers, women, LGBTQ persons, new immigrants, students, and others—while making elections less free, fair, and accessible.⁴²

At the same time, antisemitism, Islamophobia, racism, and homophobia have increased dramatically, causing millions of Americans to feel unsafe every day.⁴³ Discontentment is also driven by the harmful effects of climate change, a fractured media ecosystem, and a profusion of disinformation and extremism.⁴⁴

These fires are also being fueled by cultural and racial resentments, which can be easily triggered among groups experiencing economic decline.⁴⁵ The United States is undergoing profound demographic shifts, especially as the country becomes more racially diverse and urban-centered and less traditional and religious. Americans can be drawn to politicians who stoke their sense of resentment, breed division and distrust, or show support for violent white supremacists, all of which create a permission structure for political violence writ large.⁴⁶ Indeed, the nonprofit public policy organization Demos has observed that “[r]acial and economic harms are intertwined. Wealthy elites exploit racial fears to turn working people against each other and against good government; economic pain fuels racial resentment and facilitates scapegoating.”⁴⁷

In combination, all of these negative dynamics contribute to Americans’ rising levels of despair and unhappiness; skyrocketing drug-related deaths; runaway gun violence, including two assassination attempts of former President Donald Trump in 2024; and the near-lowest life expectancy rates in almost 30 years.⁴⁸ Given the unique challenges facing them, almost half of younger Americans report feelings of depression or hopelessness.⁴⁹ The “American dream” seems out of reach for too many, and a sense of pessimism pervades much of the nation.

The outmoded structures of democracy also increase disenchantment with the system

The government’s challenges in producing a better quality of life for all Americans are rooted in the fact that many underlying institutional structures and other democracy inputs are badly outdated and often fail to fulfill the will of the political majority. These structures and inputs include the following:

- **Elections.** The rules governing free and fair elections are under attack by many extreme conservative lawmakers who have taken aggressive steps to limit voting options, suppress the votes of communities of color and other long-marginalized communities, and make it easier to sabotage elections—which all undermine the will of the people to choose their leaders.⁵⁰

- **Gerrymandering.** Many states are taking unprecedented steps to draw unfair legislative maps for federal and state elections to cement their party’s political power, a practice known as gerrymandering.⁵¹ This exacerbates partisanship and extremism.
- **Electoral College.** Because of the antiquated Electoral College, in two of the last six presidential elections, the United States has elected a president who did not win the most votes nationwide, undermining the principle of one person, one vote.⁵²
- **U.S. Senate.** The Senate is a legislative graveyard for policies supported by broad swaths of Americans—such as sensible background checks for gun purchases, a higher minimum wage, or reproductive rights. This is due to the counter-majoritarian and divisive filibuster that empowers senators from the 21 least populous states—representing only 11 percent of the country’s population and only 7 percent of its Black population—to block almost anything.⁵³ By 2040, 30 percent of the nation, “which is going to be whiter, more rural, and more conservative, is going to elect 70 percent of the U.S. Senate.”⁵⁴
- **U.S. House of Representatives.** Many members of the House are elected in heavily gerrymandered districts, which breeds the extreme partisanship discussed above.⁵⁵ The chamber recently remained completely gridlocked as it endured many weeks of not being able to even elect a Republican speaker, and budget standoffs and threats of government shutdown are now common.⁵⁶
- **Government agencies.** Federal and state agencies—tasked with looking out for people’s well-being—are often underfunded, can become captured by corporations with the resources to overwhelm rulemaking and other agency processes, and sometimes fail to deliver promised services to everyday Americans, such as timely unemployment benefits or nutrition assistance.⁵⁷
- **U.S. Supreme Court.** There is a related crisis of confidence in the antimajoritarian, extremist Supreme Court, with deep negative implications for the rule of law, equal justice, and protection of fundamental rights. Americans’ approval of the Supreme Court has plummeted to near historic lows, with some far-right justices substituting their own partisan agendas for the elected branches of government, ignoring precedents, and seemingly doing the bidding of the billionaires or special interests taking them on lavish vacations.⁵⁸ Three of these justices were nominated by a president who lost the nationwide popular vote and were confirmed by senators who did not represent a majority of the country.⁵⁹ A nonbinding ethics code allows justices, who enjoy lifetime tenure,

to escape transparency and accountability, including deciding cases in which they have conflicts of interest.⁶⁰ It is therefore hard for Americans to trust the independence of a corrupted court that is obliterating long-held rights, such as the right to reproductive freedom, or finding that presidents are above the law.⁶¹

- **Media and news.** The media landscape has changed dramatically in the last few years, resulting in a record low 47 percent of Americans who do not consume news.⁶² Traditional news media—namely television, radio, and newspapers, along with their associated online platforms—often fail to serve the public interest or productively feed democracy, leading to further mistrust of democracy. There is a dearth of useful, objective, civic-minded information that holds institutions and leaders accountable, fosters acceptance of a common set of facts, and enables people to feel invested in their local communities. Lamentably, the government has not yet found an effective way to reach people in that vacuum. Traditional news media sources now operate in a cutthroat business environment that focuses on sensationalist stories, where they must compete with social media or national cable television channels; and state and local news media are disappearing under the strain, with public broadcasting perpetually underfunded.⁶³ It is no surprise that nearly three-quarters of Americans say the news media are increasing political polarization, and almost half of Americans possess little or no trust in the media’s ability to report the news fairly and accurately.⁶⁴
- **New technologies.** New technologies, such as social media and artificial intelligence (AI), also contribute to the gridlock, frustration, and extremism that have developed over the past many years. There is a plethora of ideologically distinct news sources on social media that can circumvent traditional gatekeepers, and online services are now a driving force in most Americans’ lives.⁶⁵ Although social media can provide important spaces for Americans to express themselves, organize, and build communities, people have started to sort themselves into information silos, where disinformation and hate can widely proliferate with the click of a button and go unchallenged.⁶⁶ The platforms also play a crucial role in exacerbating these problems by making algorithmic ranking decisions to elevate and downrank content about certain topics, which further manipulates discourse and skews public opinion in highly nontransparent manners.⁶⁷ Moreover, the advent of generative AI has added new challenges: how to harness this transformative technology productively for the betterment of Americans, including for the delivery of public services, while addressing concerns about disinformation, data privacy, algorithmic bias, workforce disruptions, the cynical manipulation of public opinion, and existential threats.⁶⁸

Due to these broken democratic structures, as well as challenges that exist in the areas of the news media and new technologies, many everyday Americans and their communities lack the political power to ensure that their voices are fully heard and reflected in the government’s work, and they deeply feel that unfair imbalance. For example, in 2023 an Associated Press-NORC Center poll found that 53 percent of Americans believe that views of “people like you” are not well represented by the government; 71 percent think what most Americans want should be highly important when laws and policies are made, but only 48 percent think that is actually true in practice.⁶⁹

53%

Percentage who believe that views of people like them are not represented well in government

71%

Percentage who think that what Americans want should be highly important when laws and policies are made

48%

Percentage who think what Americans want is actually factored into the making of laws and policies

The way the U.S. election system and governmental institutions are structured allows the shrinking right-wing political minority far too many avenues to exert its will over the majority. These counter-majoritarian forces, desperately clinging to a power threatened by changing demographics, are erecting barriers at the federal and state levels designed to lock in political minority rule and thwart broadly popular policies.⁷⁰ According to political scientist Daniel Ziblatt, “We are far and away the most counter-majoritarian democracy in the world.”⁷¹ When partisan elected officials bend laws and shatter norms to retrench political power, it not only degrades the proper functioning of government, it increases tribal divisions in society, often accompanied by rising extremism and violence aimed at perceived enemies, including against election workers or presidential candidates, among many others.⁷²

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Political minoritarianism also thrives in a system that many Americans see as corrupted and rigged in favor of wealthy special interests, corporations, and well-connected lobbyists.⁷³ The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United*

v. Federal Election Commission hypercharged this fundamental misalignment, helping unleash a torrent of political money spent by multimillionaires and corporations, who often shield their election spending via dark money channels.⁷⁴

Some Americans are open to an autocratic form of government

When Americans feel they do not have a meaningful voice in their society and that their government is unresponsive to their needs, it breeds cynicism and extremism. People start to look toward other forms of government to improve their lives.

Although a strong majority of Americans continues to support democracy and its underlying principles, public polling shows that an appreciable segment of Americans is now open to autocracy.⁷⁵ According to a February 2024 poll, 32 percent of Americans would support rule by the military or a strong leader who could act without interference from other governmental branches.⁷⁶ Going a step further, another poll found that 23 percent of Americans agree that “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” up from 15 percent in 2021.⁷⁷

Thirty-two percent of Americans would support rule by the military or a strong leader who could act without interference from other governmental branches.

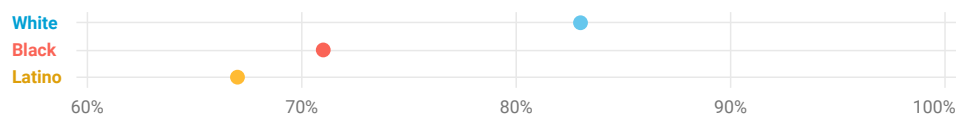
Younger Americans are more likely than older Americans to be open to autocratic government. One 2024 poll found that only about 6 in 10 younger Americans believe it is essential to have a democratically elected government, compared with about 9 in 10 older adults.⁷⁸ Another 2024 poll found that 40 percent of younger Americans agreed that rule by a leader who “can make decisions without interference from the legislature or from the courts” would be a good system of government for the United States, compared with only 27 percent who thought it would be bad.⁷⁹ Some political scientists believe that this generational split makes sense, given that many younger people have grown up in an era of hyperpartisanship and government gridlock, and they cannot recall a time when people from different political backgrounds could successfully interact or where democratic government delivered enough results for them.⁸⁰

Americans of color also have disproportionately negative views about democracy. A January 2023 poll found that although 83 percent of all white Americans say “democracy is the best political system in all circumstances,” only 71 percent of Black Americans and 67 percent of Latino Americans say the same.⁸¹ That same poll found that 21 percent of Black Americans and 20 percent of Latino Americans say that it makes no difference whether the country is a democracy or a dictatorship.⁸² As the U.S. population grows more racially diverse—and will become a majority-minority population by approximately 2045—these findings are flashing red warning signs.⁸³

FIGURE 1

White, Black, and Latino Americans have appreciably different views on whether democracy is the best system

Percentage of Americans who say that democracy is the best system of government in all circumstances, by race/ethnicity



Note: Percentages are drawn from a poll conducted in November 2022.

Source: Craig Helmstetter and Terrence Fraser, “Poll: Majority of Americans endorse democracy, younger generations skeptical,” MPR News, January 18, 2023, available at <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2023/01/18/poll-majority-of-americans-endorse-democracy-younger-generations-skeptical>.

Openness to autocracy is not only an American phenomenon. In nations around the globe, “ordinary people have lost trust in their institutions of government and delivered stunning rebukes to their political establishments,” which have emboldened autocratic regimes.⁸⁴ According to Freedom House’s 2024 annual report, global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023, and “the scope and scale of deterioration were extensive, affecting one-fifth of the world’s population.”⁸⁵ When U.S. democracy is weak, it impairs the United States’ ability to strengthen democracy around the world.⁸⁶

Autocracy is not a substitute for democracy

Some American political leaders with autocratic tendencies have been able to seize the moment to their advantage and exploit political minoritarianism to achieve their goals. Many autocratic leaders promise that they—and they alone—can do whatever is necessary to obliterate the broken system and finally address people’s

grievances. But as discussed above, when autocrats around the world have taken the reins, their governments have lagged democracies on almost every measurable output, while also trampling on fundamental rights, ignoring the rule of law, and hampering people's ability to change their political system.⁸⁷

For example, in Russia, President Vladimir Putin holds complete sway over a government that “has used legal tools to keep opposition political parties and candidates off the ballot, imprisoned activists and politicians, closed or forced out all independent media, and subjugated the judiciary.”⁸⁸ In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his political party have “systematically dismantled the pillars” of democracy by capturing public institutions; assaulting minority rights, especially migrant, Roma, and LGBTQ rights; engaging in aggressive nationalist rhetoric; and attacking the rule of law.⁸⁹ Autocrats in even more repressive regimes exercise their authority to directly crush human rights, such as in North Korea, Rwanda, or Nicaragua, which routinely imprison, torture, or kill political dissenters.⁹⁰

Even in a democracy like the United States, seemingly authoritarian-leaning policies can be pursued or implemented. For example, during the Trump administration, the nation witnessed attempts to weaken the independent news media, an executive order to replace vast numbers of nonpartisan civil servants with political allies, improper attempts to weaponize the U.S. Department of Justice for political purposes, and threats to misuse the military to silence Americans engaged in free speech and protest.⁹¹ In addition, former President Trump's extreme conservative appointees to the Supreme Court joined other justices to strip Americans of fundamental rights, including the right to abortion.⁹²

In 2023, a roadmap for a future U.S. authoritarian government was published as part of a sweeping effort known as Project 2025, overseen by the far-right Heritage Foundation and supported by more than 100 notable conservative organizations.⁹³ As the Center for American Progress has written, if the Project 2025 roadmap were implemented in the United States, it would fundamentally damage American democracy and erode its system of checks and balances by consolidating power in the presidency; weakening the rule of law and accountability; diminishing the independence of public agencies, including the Department of Justice and FBI, which could be weaponized against political opponents; and replacing tens

When autocrats around the world have taken the reins, their governments have lagged democracies on almost every measurable output.

of thousands of nonpartisan civil servants with far-right loyalists, among many other dangerous reforms.⁹⁴ In turn, these destructive changes would substantially harm everyday Americans by reducing their quality of life, risking their loss of fundamental personal freedoms, and making it even harder for them “to have a say in their government or oppose policies they disagree with.”⁹⁵

There is a reason why many immigrants risk their lives to flee autocratic regimes and come to the United States: They seek the promise of a better life for their families in a democratic system. Autocracy is not a substitute for a strong and effective democracy that upholds Americans’ commonly shared values and fosters a government that can deliver peace and prosperity to all.

PART 3

Building a strong U.S. democracy and responsive government for future generations

To foster support for American democracy, reformers must make a convincing case for how to create a strong and effective system for the 21st century. It goes without saying that modernizing democracy is difficult work. This is especially true given the powerful forces aligned against reforms designed to boost the political power of everyday Americans and the control they have over their lives. But the good news is that solutions for U.S. democracy ailments are within reach—and the hard work over many years will pay off.

The framework for any credible plan to reimagine democracy for future generations must be bold, innovative, and make common sense. As discussed above, at its core, a reform plan must be aimed at empowering individuals, families, and communities and protecting their fundamental freedoms.⁹⁶ This only happens when everyone is given an equal voice and is represented by a responsive and effective government acting on their behalf, one that is not subject to the corrupting influences of counter-majoritarian forces or wealthy special interests that rig the rules or foment extremism to protect their power.⁹⁷

But a reform plan must go further and deeper. It must reflect a modernized way of how we see our fellow Americans' roles in society, rooted in racial equality, tolerance, and opportunity for all.⁹⁸ As Demos says, "America's strength comes from our ability to work together—to knit together a landscape of people from different places and of different races into one nation ... [where we] stand up for each other and come together."⁹⁹ No longer would excessive partisanship or tribalism drive the gridlock, frustration, extremism, and threats of violence that have developed over the past quarter century, supercharged by new technologies including social media. Americans' trust in each other and their institutions, including the government, would create a positive, self-reinforcing cycle.

Although there is broad discontentment, a meaningful reform movement starts from a receptive place: Americans are hungering for transformative solutions to remake democracy and government. According to recent polls, close to 6 in 10

Americans say that the U.S. government needs “major reforms” or “a complete overhaul.”¹⁰⁰ Data also show that 84 percent of Americans “think that the level of confidence that we have in the government can be improved, and 86 percent think that we can improve the level of trust we have in one another.”¹⁰¹

States and localities are important engines of pro-democracy reforms, especially where minoritarian forces block progress in Congress or via the presidency. Many of CAP’s recommended solutions, discussed immediately below, have been enacted in states and localities across the nation, often via people-powered ballot initiatives, sometimes in bipartisan fashion. For example, Michigan serves as a recent example for how to strengthen democracy and safeguard it from being thwarted by extremists and counter-majoritarian forces.¹⁰² As analyzed in a 2023 CAP report, Michigan successfully passed a series of pro-voter reforms—through the legislature and ballot referenda—that increased voter registration, made it easier to vote by mail, and formed an independent redistricting commission that drew fair district maps, which have helped grow trust in the state’s government.¹⁰³

A roadmap to reimagining U.S. democracy would focus on the following areas:

- Strengthen free and fair elections.
- Ensure people are fully and fairly represented.
- Reduce the corrupting influence of wealthy special interest money and put more teeth in ethics laws.
- Protect fundamental rights and stop the politicization of the minoritarian Supreme Court.
- Ensure that new technologies enhance democracy.
- Reform the media landscape to empower people.

Strengthen free and fair elections

Lawmakers must enact policies to protect the right of every American to vote in free, fair, and secure elections that cannot be subverted by partisan actors. This is especially important at a time when extremist state legislators across the nation are aggressively attacking election rules to entrench their political power, and the Supreme Court is weakening voting rights.¹⁰⁴

At the federal level, the Freedom to Vote Act, which CAP has discussed in prior publications, is transformative legislation, as is the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore and update crucial parts of the

Voting Rights Act of 1965.¹⁰⁵ These seminal pieces of legislation must form the bedrock of any democracy reform roadmap. The Freedom to Vote Act includes the following policy solutions, among many others:

- Expand voting options by providing access to early voting and mail-in voting and help shorten in-person wait times, while also creating a new statutory right for people to bring legal action if their voting rights are infringed.¹⁰⁶
- Modernize voter registration by ensuring that all voters have access to automatic, same-day, and online registration systems.¹⁰⁷
- Restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated Americans, a right still denied to nearly 6 million people.¹⁰⁸
- Protect election officials and workers, who are under attack from partisan officials and extremists who threaten their lives and jobs based on dangerous disinformation about widespread voter fraud.¹⁰⁹
- Improve election security and make it harder for foreign entities to interfere in U.S. elections, which would strengthen national security.¹¹⁰
- Guard against efforts to sabotage elections by improving protections for election certification, guarantee that mail-in ballots can be processed before election day, and ensure that ballot drop boxes are secure.¹¹¹
- Prohibit states from drawing congressional district maps for unfair political advantage, a tactic used to keep politicians and their allies in power.¹¹² Redistricting reform would help reduce antimajoritarian power grabs, stop rewarding conflict, and help build consensus, especially in the House of Representatives.

Many of these election-related reforms can be and have been enacted at the state level, including passing voting rights acts.¹¹³

Ensure people are fully and fairly represented

Reforms must update outmoded structures of government to allow people to meaningfully choose their elected leaders, responsibly share political power, and modernize institutional rules so that those leaders collaborate on solutions to improve the lives of all Americans. These reforms should include:

- Draw fair and competitive district maps. As mentioned above, new federal and state laws are needed to prevent politicians from gerrymandering districts to keep themselves and their allies in power. Map drawing must be neutral; nonpartisan commissions provide one way to accomplish this goal.¹¹⁴ And maps should be devised so that the ratio of districts closely matches the overall votes in a state; for example, if voters in a state favor Republican candidates by a margin of 60 percent to 40 percent, districts should be drawn to reflect that ratio.¹¹⁵ Redistricting reform would help reduce antimajoritarian power grabs, stop rewarding conflict, and help build consensus, especially in the House of Representatives.
- Restructure how Americans elect their leaders. Americans are tired of the partisan, winner-take-all election system that does not fairly represent them. To fix this, the United States must adopt electoral systems at the federal and state levels that give voters more ways of choosing between a larger number of candidates, which will ultimately help spur consensus-driven politics and policymaking.¹¹⁶ Many of these electoral reforms are found in other democratic nations and a growing number of states and municipalities, including Maine and Alaska.¹¹⁷ CAP has written about a wide variety of potential electoral reforms, including, most recently, open primaries paired with ranked-choice voting, as well as proportional ranked-choice voting, also known as single transferable vote.¹¹⁸
- Elect presidents via popular vote. Voters should directly elect presidents instead of via the Electoral College, a reform supported by almost two-thirds of Americans.¹¹⁹ Apart from amending the Constitution to abolish the Electoral College, states could assign electors based on the national popular vote by joining the National Popular Vote Compact, which provides that if enacted, in states comprising 270 electoral votes, each state would allocate its electoral votes to the winner of the national popular vote.¹²⁰ In a positive development, states representing 209 electoral votes have already joined the compact, including Maine in 2024 and Minnesota in 2023.¹²¹
- Reform the Senate filibuster. The Senate must reform its self-imposed filibuster rules, which have been abused in recent years by a small minority of senators to halt progress on popular policies.¹²² The filibuster is one of the government's most counter-majoritarian and divisive institutional tools, and it is a major reason why Congress is often unresponsive to the will of the American people.

Senators should change the rules to give the political minority meaningful rights to debate and amend legislation, while still providing the majority a path toward a vote on legislation. This would increase incentives to cooperate on shaping policies and ensure that senators are held more accountable for their votes on critical issues instead of abusing filibusters to prevent votes.¹²³

- Grant statehood for Washington, D.C. Congress must end second-class citizenship for residents of the District of Columbia and enact legislation to make it a state. As CAP has written, Washington, D.C.’s, more than 700,000 residents deserve the rights and privileges of statehood.¹²⁴
- Use statewide ballot initiatives. Where state legislatures are unwilling or unable to pass laws reflecting the will of the people, an effective tool—available in 26 states—is for people to mobilize and pass such policies or amend their constitutions directly, via statewide ballot initiatives, such as recently when Floridians passed a higher minimum wage and Ohioans protected abortion rights.¹²⁵

Reduce the corrupting influence of wealthy special interest money and put more teeth in ethics laws

These reforms would help bolster confidence that the government is an uncorrupted, good-faith guarantor of the public good. In order to reduce the power of big money spent by corporations or wealthy special interests, often through dark money channels, the government should:

- Shine a bright light on secret political spending, via federal legislation such as the DISCLOSE Act and the Freedom to Vote Act.¹²⁶
- Institute public financing of election campaigns, including small donor systems using matching funds and/or voucher programs.¹²⁷ These reforms, implemented in many states and localities around the country, would make it easier for people of diverse backgrounds to run for public office while focusing candidates’ attention on the priorities of everyday people in their jurisdictions.¹²⁸
- Stop political spending by foreign-influenced U.S. corporations, whose goals can be at odds with everyday Americans.¹²⁹ In July 2024, Senate and House sponsors filed legislation to ban such spending.¹³⁰

- Establish a stronger system of checks and balances and otherwise limit executive branch abuses of power and corruption, such as by fortifying the protection of the civil service and reforming the Insurrection Act to make it harder for a president to deploy the military domestically to suppress constitutionally protected speech and protest. A broad range of anti-authoritarian reforms are contained in the federal Protecting Our Democracy Act.¹³¹
- Additional reforms, which are contained in the Freedom to Vote Act, include requiring super PACs to be much more independent of candidates they support, strengthening online advertisement disclaimers and disclosures, and restructuring the Federal Election Commission to better enforce election laws in the public interest.¹³²

The federal government should also pass ethics and lobbying reforms, which include, among many other solutions, banning individual stock ownership by members of Congress; requiring presidents, vice presidents, and their families to divest financial conflicts of interest and publicly release their tax returns; prohibiting lobbyists from fundraising for politicians; and banning contributions to members of Congress from entities under the jurisdiction of their committees.¹³³

Protect fundamental rights and stop the politicization of the minoritarian Supreme Court

With Supreme Court decisions undermining the rule of law and eliminating fundamental rights, serious reforms are necessary. Solutions should include:

- Establish term limits for justices, which 68 percent of Americans support.¹³⁴ In July, President Joe Biden announced his support for this reform and called on Congress to impose term limits.¹³⁵
- Impose a binding, enforceable code of ethics on the justices, which would provide a mechanism to investigate alleged ethical violations, strengthen disclosure, and require justices to publicly explain their recusal decisions when they have connections to parties before the court.¹³⁶ In July, President Biden announced his support for a binding, enforceable code of ethics and called on Congress to establish it.¹³⁷

- Passing other reforms for the federal judiciary, including ending judge and forum shopping, expanding mandatory jurisdiction, and establishing a clear standard for how courts should interpret the text of laws passed by Congress.¹³⁸

Ensure that new technologies enhance democracy

America must harness the power of technology to make government processes more efficient, effective, and user-friendly—and better able to help tackle society’s most pressing problems, while not leaving behind long-marginalized communities. At the same time, the public sector and civil society must meet the threats presented by disruptive new technologies such as AI and social media, including the disinformation they can spawn, as CAP has written about extensively.¹³⁹ All of this requires a modern, public interest framework to regulate online services, coupled with new privacy protections and reinvigorated antitrust action. The reforms that should be implemented include:

- The government and social media platforms must take more active roles in combatting disinformation, especially about election-related issues, at a time when many platforms have retreated from earlier measures.¹⁴⁰
- Federal agencies, such as the Federal Trade Commission, should use their authorities to more aggressively promote a healthy social media ecosystem.¹⁴¹
- It is imperative that a standardized framework ensures the responsible use and deployment of generative AI, which must “prioritize user safety, transparency in policy enforcement, and accountability for both developers and deployers.”¹⁴² CAP has discussed detailed proposals to ensure that the development and deployment of AI is based in shared principles that advance these priorities while advancing innovation to benefit every American.¹⁴³

Reforming the media landscape to empower people

Steps should be taken to help reimagine the news media for the 21st century, with the marketplace becoming much more competitive and anchored in the goal of reporting fact-based news. Reforms should include:

- Federal and state lawmakers should provide more funding and prioritize policies that help regrow trusted state and local news outlets, while philanthropic support could fuel nonprofit news organizations.¹⁴⁴

- The Federal Communications Commission and other federal entities should use their regulatory, licensing, and enforcement authorities to help spur a more competitive media marketplace.
 - Political leaders should be widely condemned for threatening the news media when journalists report facts and analyses with which those leaders disagree.
 - Prioritize and fund civic and media literacy education.
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These reforms should be augmented through a complimentary route: an enduring, nonpartisan, people-powered movement that would help establish healthier political norms and build respect for the rule of law.

Together, this suite of reforms—plus others beyond the scope of this report—would radically remake U.S. democracy in ways that Americans are demanding. Importantly, these reforms should be augmented through a complimentary route: an enduring, nonpartisan, people-powered movement that would help establish healthier political norms and build respect for the rule of law. Such a coalition could demand that the loyal opposition respect election results and discourage minoritarian power grabs, extremism, and political violence.¹⁴⁵ This coalition would embody the principle that what binds Americans is far stronger than their differences. A resilient, diverse movement of individuals and communities could also help foster a sense that Americans each belong to something bigger than any one person, and that they collectively must steer the democratic ship through the rough waters ahead.

Conclusion

Despite its many challenges, Americans must not abandon democracy. That route will not solve problems; it will only make them worse. Instead, Americans must join forces to build a strong and effective democracy for future generations and stand as an optimistic example for other nations struggling with similar obstacles. A 21st century American democracy can be designed to finally achieve the goals of the government being truly representative of and answerable to all people, without leaving anyone behind or giving anyone too much power. By implementing an innovative and commonsense set of reforms, the nation can achieve these crucial goals, while reflecting Americans' fundamental shared values and exceptionalism.

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