

# Defending Democracy and Democracies

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## Abstract

The U.S. is confronting its most serious threat to democracy since 1776 when the 13 American Colonies issued their *Declaration of Independence* from British tyranny. The current threat is posed by far-right populist MAGA Republicans. It must be combatted via objective analysis, and via appeals to the full spectrum of democracy-loving Americans. Presented here is an objective, non-partisan analysis that suggests that Democrats, middle Republicans, and Independents would benefit from coalescing around our common interest in preserving, protecting, and defending American democracy. Intrinsic to defending democracy is defending, not only our own democracy, but other threatened democracies such as Israel, Taiwan, and Ukraine. Democracies tend to be peaceful with other democracies, so defending them not only defends democracy, but promotes peace. Also intrinsic to defending democracy is the need to defend against

abuse of digital technologies such as facial recognition, and disinformation campaigns such as those enabled by generative artificial intelligence (AI).



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## American Democracy v. Autocracy

A candidate for the U. S. presidency on 26 July 2024 told his audience *"You've got to get out and vote. In four years, you don't have to vote again, we'll have it fixed so good you're*

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*not going to have to vote*” (22). Afterward he repeated this message on Fox News, thereby confirming that he had not simply misspoken. News reporting indicated that this message left listeners to wonder what he had in mind. Such wondering, and such reporting, take the spirit of fairness in journalism to an unreasonable height.

That such reporting is the height of unreasonableness should be evident from the history of this candidate, a multiply convicted felon for crimes including violent threats and actions, notably rape and insurrection to violently overthrow the U. S. Government, along with numerous anti-democratic and violence-promoting statements. Considered together and holistically, all are consistent with a primary desire, not to perform public service but, by returning to public office, to stay out of prison and block further investigation into his other evident felonies, such as stealing and displaying top-secret U.S. Government documents. The candidate, now in office, has a similar team of associates, rich in felons. He also promised, if elected President, to be a dictator on Day 1. Now elected, he will solemnly, surreally swear to “*preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*”

Democracy and autocracy are alternative social structures, each subject to personal preference. For the indefinite future, however, an aspiring rogue dictator probably could impose autocracy on those governed regardless of their preference. In contrast, democracy offers those governed a choice between these polar extremes. Once democratically made, however, the choice to elect an aspiring dictator is likely to be difficult to reverse, especially if the elected autocrat is bent upon overcoming fragile checks and balances instituted by the *U. S. Constitution* over two centuries ago.

Democracy in America is codified by our *Constitution*. The *Constitution* in turn owes its existence to the 13 American Colonies’ 1776 *Declaration of Independence* from tyranny at the hands of Britain. I am chagrined that, after centuries, our precious democracy again faces tyrants, now in the form of populist far-right MAGA<sup>1</sup> Republicans. I am chagrined that the MAGA candidate and soon-to-be President has polled ahead of President Joe Biden, who will enter history as one of the nation’s most principled and effective presidents.

**What’s wrong with this picture?** The U. S. Constitution, Article 14, Section 3<sup>2</sup> prohibits insurrectionists from holding future office. Yet, Trump publicly engaged in

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<sup>1</sup> MAGA: Make America Great Again

<sup>2</sup> *No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice-President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United*

insurrection on 6 January 2022, to prevent Congress from certifying the 2021 election of his rival, Joe Biden, as President. This failure to uphold the Constitution is frightening, especially given how visibly Trump promoted the storming of the U.S. Capitol, and how well it was documented. Those of us who should have been upholding the Constitution instead allowed Trump to corrupt a sufficient number of pixels to smudge the full picture, notwithstanding how clear it was when viewed with a less microscopic perspective. Attorney General Merrick Garland apparently spent four years sleeping, or maybe treading water, on the job.

As the product of an American upbringing, I am committed to our democratic way of life, which has been formative for me. I think I would be unable to breathe if it were taken from me. As a scientist, I am also committed to rational, evidence-based analysis, belief formation, and decision making. So, in defending democracy for now and the future, I am inclined to enlist science to my side, and to the side of my children, and to the side of theirs.

## **Defending American Democracy**

Defending American democracy requires adaptive national security, balancing adequate strength and power. Strength is the potential amount of force that the nation can exert, whereas power is its responsiveness, that is, speed at which power can be generated and applied. Strength is usually conceived as military assets applied at a trouble spot. However, strength also includes diplomacy, as in application of State Department expertise to an emerging geopolitical challenge. We can be strong like big dinosaurs, but the adaptive value of such strength depends upon our response time, our alacrity: quick or sluggish (pick your dinosaurian analogy).

Letting anemic budgeting compromise military power, or compromise State Department resources including personnel, both weaken our nation. Domestically, our responsiveness to natural disasters such as earthquakes, fires, and hurricanes also contribute to America's strength; letting anemic budgeting or other slashes compromise FEMA likewise weakens the nation.

Geopoliticians distinguish between hard military power vs. soft power derived from good will and our alliances. Both are *potential* as distinct from *kinetic*. Application of power generates kinetic energy, whether in military battle or in eliciting cooperation of other nations on our behalf, such as in trade or support in international bodies such as the United Nations.

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*States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability.*

Essentially, American power equals hard power plus soft power. Both are difficult to quantify, but even so, underinvesting in either weakens the nation. The Trump Administration has adopted a practice, and apparently a policy, of weakening our soft power by alienating our friends and allies. Consistency or inconsistency of such weakening with the Oath of Office sworn by the President and others in public service depends upon its goal(s).

I can conceive of two possible goals. One is to reduce America's power and, consistent with the *America First* mantra, our commitment to serving as the policeman of world order. The other is retribution against Administration enemies, real and imagined, international and domestic. The economic pain inflicted on Americans suggests that the goal is domestic retribution, consistent with Trump's electoral campaign platform: *"I am your retribution."*

How does retribution square with the duty of the president? The U.S. Constitution reasonably omits mention of retribution. The president, however, does have an onus to protect the Constitution. The Oath of Office specifies: *"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."*

Protecting the Constitution metaphorically equates to protecting the American flag. This was manifest in a poem famously written by Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812 while detained aboard the HMS Tonnant, flagship of the British fleet, during a 25-hour attack on Baltimore, which was defended by Fort William McHenry. At dawn, the American flag was still flying. The fort had not surrendered, and the British force withdrew. This stirring story is embodied in *The Star-Spangled Banner*, since 1931 our national anthem:

*... the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,  
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?*

Considering Trump's actions against our Constitution, and resulting cruelties, the national anthem might require modification:

*O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the home of the brave?*

Visualizing American resistance against Britain's kinetic attack on Baltimore chokes me up every time. America's hard power has that advantage: soft power tends to be less dramatic even when it is more significant. Yet, soft power can be highly dramatic, as it was on 29 November 1947, when Jews around the world were glued to their radios during the

nation-by-nation vote that adopted United Nations Resolution 181, and created the State of Israel in 1948.

## **Defend Democracy with Civics**

Civics education defends America's constitutional democracy by sharpening people's ability to detect misinformation, including disinformation and error. The role of civics education, therefore, is to increase citizens' resistance to election strategies that embrace misinformation. Misinformation, I think, may help explain GOP MAGA extremist victories in the U.S. November 2024 elections, including victories of Trump and other GOP populists.

Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin (2024) opined: *"...Trump and his MAGA cult have contempt for governance, lack any sense of obligation to the country's well-being and see power as a means for personal vengeance. The voters will have no one to blame but themselves for the consequences of their choice."* I agree, with an important caveat.

That is, decline of civics education over the past several decades has deprived today's voters of critical skills needed to identify threats to American democracy, as shown by their overlooking explicit indications of MAGA intent. Lack of civics education clearly has deprived Americans of their ability to fulfill their responsibilities to preserve, protect, and defend our democracy. Such skills urgently must be restored. Civics education must be reinvigorated, and voters remedially educated, urgently.

MAGA extremists adopted a detailed (922-page) blueprint, known as *Project 2025* (Heritage Foundation 2023), for subverting democratic government in the U.S., in part via weakening the Judiciary and centralizing power in the Executive Branch of government, that is, in the hands of the President. Public release of this document signaled MAGA confidence in ability of its candidates to deceive voters by distancing themselves from Project 2025 while campaigning, only to adopt it upon election to office. Now that Project 2025 is being implemented, forewarned Americans hopefully will open their eyes, and join with more discerning Americans who recognized the threat earlier. Hopefully, forewarned Americans will have forearmed the nation, and thereby prepared it to defend against the threat.

Civics education, despite its special relevance to MAGA extremists currently, ultimately is a non-partisan priority. It applies to all political parties. Indeed, it broadly applies to all political entities and movements that rely on misinformation over truth, and thereby undermine America's civil, constitutional democracy.

## Defend Democracy with Science

A fundamental lesson of science is that value judgments are not scientific, as they are not falsifiable. Therefore, they cannot be tested via the '*Scientific Method*'. In contrast falsifiable beliefs and hypotheses can be tested scientifically. They are confirmed or refuted based upon evidence, not authority. The *Declaration of Independence*, however, states that certain truths are "*self-evident*," that is, true by declaration rather than by evidence, rather than by science. Those "truths" are value judgments, that is opinions; they are not posited, testable facts of nature.

Unlike myself, the *Declaration* unfortunately is (otherwise) neutral about science<sup>3</sup>. Defending democracy over autocracy is my preferred choice, based upon my own value judgment. If science does not compel me to prefer democracy, why do I prefer it? Why do I defend it? How can I defend it? My answer is, with science, anyway. That's right: with science.

Science, by which I mean here objective analysis, objective reasoning, or objectivity, may be unable to dictate opinions or preferences, but it can evaluate objectively the likely responsiveness of democracy v. autocracy when people's stated needs are used as inputs to the analysis. For example, objective analysis suggests that, for a person like me wishing to choose my representatives, democracy meets my needs better than autocracy. Objective analysis likewise suggests that, for a country of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants who arrived at our shores in search of freedom from tyranny... that is, in search of democracy..., democracy meets their needs better than autocracy.

In short, science (as broadly defined and used herein) shows that, for people like me and for most of our melting-pot population, democracy meets our needs better than autocracy. Science likewise can be applied, for example, to decide whether a democratic v. an autocratic government is likely to be more responsive to people's aspiration to vote. It can be applied to selecting which form of government will facilitate the people's right to choose representation in such government.

One factor sometimes contributing to people's expressed preference for autocracy is their erroneous view that democracy is less decisive and therefore less effective than autocracy (14, 17). This misconception should be addressed by a quick, hard-hitting, play-the-tape-forward civics lesson: People prefer autocracy from the vantage point of *having chosen it*.

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<sup>3</sup> ... although its oldest signatory at age 81, Benjamin Franklin, definitely was not!

This preference among some voters may have contributed to MAGA victories in the November 2024 national elections. The premise that voters choose their government and representation in it is intrinsic to democracy. It will be falsified in the long term, however, if an aspiring rogue dictator prevails in implementing the Project 2025 blueprint. To teach that the autocracy-is-more-efficient premise is false, I suggest shifting to a long-term narrative.

That is: The autocrat, not today's voters, will fashion future governments. Autocracies increasingly will serve the interests of the autocrat, not the voters, not the public. Autocracies marginalize voters. Eventually they may exclude voters from choosing their government and representatives, though not from paying tax dollars to support interests of autocrats that may conflict with their own interests. Those saying they prefer autocracy are unlikely to prefer it if they are educated to understand that, ultimately, they may be excluded from choosing their government, and they are unlikely to be its beneficiaries (14, 35). Hopefully, this perspective may prevail despite the 2024 election outcome, which produced mainly marginal popular vote victories, not popular mandates.

Science likewise can be applied to decide whether a democratic v. an autocratic government is likely to be more responsive to people's aspirations to live in peace v. war. In accordance with '*Democratic Peace Theory*', democracies tend to be peaceful with other democracies, so defending them defends democracy, and is likely to promote peace (7). Wealthy nations are highly vulnerable to wars that may be started by nations that have less to lose, that is, to defensive wars. An autocrat, however, can declare an offensive war on another country without congressional approval, whereas a democratically elected American president cannot. Further, an autocrat can pass the costs of war onto the people. In a democracy, the decision to declare or not declare war resides with elected representatives of the same people who will suffer the consequences of declaring war.

War is costly to national wealth, but not necessarily to the wealth of an autocrat. This is especially problematic in the nuclear era, where ogre dictators such as Vladimir Putin of Russia may have appropriated public funds to establish lavish self-sufficient refuges for the use of himself and his family, with no provision to shelter ordinary Russians. We might like to avoid this developing in the U. S., but we already have at least a lite version of it in the form of fortified refuges to assure continuity of key elements of our government in the event of nuclear war. Given the fundamental reality that war, including nuclear war, may be more acceptable to autocrats than to the people they govern, objective analysis suggests that a democratic form of government improves the odds of peace when compared with autocracy.

## **Defend Democracy by Supporting Immigration**

Our planet has entered an ‘age of depopulation’ (Eberstadt 2024). National birth rates have plummeted to varying degrees globally, often to far below replacement rates, which correspond to a fertility rate of about 2.1 births per female. As a result, national demographics are becoming skewed toward an older age structure, and national populations gradually are transitioning from increasing to decreasing. Eventually, national death rates will exceed birth rates, as populations age and decline. These demographic phenomena are underway globally, to varying degrees nationally.

Eberstadt reported that, by the 1960s, fertility rates fell below replacement in Russia, where 17 million more deaths than births occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union. By 2023, fertility rates were below replacement in all continents except Africa. For example, fertility rates were below replacement by 40 percent in Japan, 50 percent in China, and nearly 60 percent in Taiwan.

These trends are of great concern to many governments for many reasons. Work forces are declining while populations relying upon a productive work force are increasing. Social institutions are likewise evolving, beginning with family. National economic well-being also is challenged, along with national security. Aggressive action to promote births have failed, and the coming age of depopulation seems inexorable. It is the first major depopulation era since the European ‘Black Death’ (bubonic plague) pandemic of the 1300s.

In the age of depopulation, nations may retain their tolerance for grievous casualty rates when defending against attack, as in Ukraine. The question of tolerance for national aggression during a depopulation age remains open. Most notably, Russians’ support for national aggression against Ukraine may falter, and China’s designs on Taiwan may founder if a long and costly campaign is required. Indeed, demographic trends and associated economic challenges presumably factored into the thinking of Xi Jinping, leading him to call for uniting Taiwan under control of the Chinese Communist Party in the near term, by 2027.

*“The United States remains the main outlier among developed countries” with relatively high fertility levels (1.6 births per woman, still far below replacement) and steady flows of immigrants... “Thanks in large part to immigration, the United States is on track to account for a growing share of the rich world’s labor force, youth, and highly educated talent. Continuing inflow of skilled immigrants also gives the country a great advantage. No other population on the planet is better placed to translate population potential into national power—and it looks as if that demographic edge will be at least as great in 2050. Compared with other contenders, U.S. demographics look great*

today—and look even better tomorrow—pending, it must be underscored, continued public support for immigration. The United States remains the most important geopolitical exception to the coming depopulation” (Eberstadt 2024, page 59; emphasis added).

The issue of immigration in the Trump Administration is likely to emerge as the resultant of opposing ethnic vs. economic forces. Trump has made xenophobic, even hateful statements about immigrants of numerous ethnicities and countries of origin. In contrast, he has supported immigration from some wealthy countries on economic grounds, assuming that immigrants, for example, from Scandinavian countries such as Norway are well-educated and well-trained to support high-tech industries in the U.S. This population would be small relative to the millions targeted for deportation. Trump even has made overtures to purchase (or militarily annex) Greenland from Denmark for strategic reasons, but possibly also to provide a sparsely populated destination for exile of immigrants whose home countries refuse to accept them, or threaten to harm them<sup>4</sup>.

### **Defend Democracy with Democrats, Republicans, and Independents**

A diversity of voters across the U.S. political spectrum would rue loss of our democracy if MAGA extremists succeed in their designs (18). Democrats share this concern with Independents and middle Republicans. Republican organizations defending democracy by opposing MAGA-maniacal extremists include (as examples) *The Lincoln Project*, *Defending Democracy Together*, *Republicans for the Rule of Law*, and *Republicans for Harris*. Unified or separately, together we constitute an often-passive, often-silent super-majority.

We are a majority with clout. Americans of all political persuasions who cherish democracy may be unusually pro-active in seeking threat information. We may be unusually receptive to such information originating from trusted sources. Being pro-active, we effectively may experience democracy loss even before it materializes, via fears brought to life by explicit MAGA threats along with our play-the-tape-forward imaginations.

In this sense, before the 2024 election, we constituted a pre-election early-warning system. Unfortunately, our public civics warning failed to overcome its three main challenges. First, it must have established urgency among more complacent constituencies. I imagine that it did this, but not to an effective scale.

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<sup>4</sup> Trump likewise, bizarrely, has refused to rule out military action against two other friendly nations: Canada and Panama, presumably to secure economic and associated strategic advantages.

Second, it must have established credibility. Recent Pew studies found that only 24 percent of voters trust elected officials, whereas 73 percent trust scientists (33). We must use trusted messengers, including effective scientist communicators, to pursue our goals.

Third, trusted messengers must have tailored communications to reach democracy-loving voters across the political spectrum by penetrating the relative passivity of many. That is, messengers must have motivated diverse constituencies to give primacy to a critically important issue that, at first glance, might seem theoretical, nebulous, or unfamiliar. Ultimately, democracy defenders must have transformed passive latent voter support for American democracy to urgent civic action or worried pro-active support, and ultimately to pro-democracy votes. This likewise was done but, ultimately, not to an effective scale.

My premise that voters harbor overwhelming, if latent, support for American democracy is suggested by the 2024 national election in France, held in two voting rounds a week apart (22). Exit polling after Round 1 suggested that Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally Party would prevail. News of surging anti-democratic forces spread. The scare apparently motivated latent supporters to protect French democracy in Round 2. Emmanuel Macron's New Popular Front coalition prevailed, thanks to the early warning.

I did predict with confidence a similar outcome for the U.S., which has just a single Election Day. Even so, the presence of a latent pro-democracy 'silent majority' that can be motivated to vote if threatened is strongly suggested. The time to heed America's earliest early warning was in November 2024; the time to heed the warning still is NOW.

Winston Churchill quipped, *"you can always count on the Americans to do the right thing... after they have tried everything else."* We have tried MAGA Republicans in office, and in courts of law. I had hoped that Democrats, middle Republicans, and Independents would have come together in November to preserve, protect, and defend American democracy. We failed to avoid repeating history and tempting fate. Hopefully, in time, democracy will prevail.

Paul Krugman, winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Economics, lamented that U. S. voters are remarkably reluctant to credit President Biden for their economic well-being. *"President Biden is less unpopular than his peers,"* Krugman wrote... *"If Biden loses in November, it might mean the death of American Democracy."* Economics has emerged among several areas of unjustified voter dissatisfaction, demonstrating the need for improved messaging to defend our democracy going forward (17).

## Changing the Guard: Biden to Harris

President Biden's decision to withdraw from the 2024 presidential election in favor of replacement with Vice President Kamala Harris responded to a current threat to our democratic form of government, indeed to our cherished freedoms. That threat prominently has included the erroneous perception among likely voters that Biden is too old to continue for another four-year term. Of course, this premise itself is flawed: if re-elected, he would have had to continue in office for one day, Inauguration Day, not four years. Biden's highly principled decision to withdraw wisely responded to his diminished electability following a dismal debate performance against his MAGA rival.

Biden evidently was capable of serving out his term as president, notwithstanding his electability problem. Combating the misconception that Biden should have terminated his candidacy and perhaps also abandoned the remainder of his term in office due to his age (35) requires more than a physiology lesson (17). A primary message for Biden and for media communicators striving to defend our democracy during his tenure as President should be that supporting Biden, and later Kamala Harris, supported the youthful, highly competent, accomplished, and diverse Biden Administration. What will happen now that competence itself is abandoned in strategic cabinet and other government positions?

The Nation is complicated. Its management requires delegation of responsibilities to a competent team, not an aspiring rogue dictator. The Biden Administration including its Vice President was young, diverse, and highly effective. Its effectiveness is exemplified by numerous major bipartisan accomplishments, such as confirmation of a Supreme Court Justice (Ketanji Brown Jackson), appointment 217 pro-democracy federal judges<sup>5</sup>, and enactment of the American Rescue Plan (COVID Stimulus) Act, CHIPS and Science Act, Inflation Reduction Act, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Marriage Equality Act, and Safer Communities (anti-gun-violence) Act.

Perhaps the Biden accomplishment that is most significant for our democracy is his victory in the 2020 election. The nation clearly is better positioned today to resist inroads to our democracy than it would have been if Trump had had eight uninterrupted years to hammer away at democratic institutions. Each of Joe Biden's accomplishments listed above has overcome MAGA extremist obstructionism. The Biden Administration has been, above all, a credit to President Biden. Former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, in contrast,

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<sup>5</sup> Trump appointed 234 federal judges who achieved Senate confirmation (Quinn and Hubbard 2024.11.19). As of 19 November 2024, Senate confirmations of Biden-appointed federal judges = 217. Remaining federal bench vacancies available for Biden to fill = 44 --> total potential confirmations = 261, with 14 appointees awaiting confirmation. The federal bench looks to be more resistant to anti-democratic forces, most notably *Project 2025*, on the first day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trump Administration than it did on the last day of the 1<sup>st</sup>.

exemplifies a growing list of former Trump officials who consider Trump “a threat to democracy” (15), recently augmented by *Republicans for Harris* (29).

Vice President Kamala Harris’s presidential campaign reached beyond Democrats. It reached out to the taproots of American democracy. Defending democracy requires communication strategies tailored to the supermajority of potentially receptive Independents, Democrats, and Republicans in our nation’s proud melting pot (15).

This often-silent majority is likely also to support specific imperiled democratic rights such as a free press, voting, and health care decision making (16). News media and political campaigns of all parties seeking to bolster our democracy ultimately must motivate followers of antidemocratic thought leaders to alter their tribal loyalties. As President Biden showed, humorous forms of communication may play an important role, for example by suggesting augmenting the storied lie detector with a truth-detector.

Even highly credible defenders of democracy might fail to persuade by reason alone. To communicators, I additionally suggest highlighting the strength of preferred alternatives. Audiences are more likely to be persuaded when made to feel that they are in good company if they embrace ascendant democratic movements or an existing ‘silent majority’.

### **Defend democracy by voting truth over political correctness**

The vice president candidates’ debate held on 1 October 2024 was marked by GOP complaints about moderator fact checking (31). Washington Post fact checkers found over a dozen false or misleading statements, most by GOP Vice President candidate Vance. Such misinformation might have influenced opinion polls and maybe even the election.

Opinion polls often predict election outcomes poorly, especially if respondents recognize misinformation, but even so agree with it to pollsters. Research from New York University’s Center for Social Media and Politics (32, 34) suggests that most people exposed to misinformation recognize it. Only political extremists were found likely to encounter and also believe misinformation.

The NYU research does not mention polls, but it may have huge implications for their accuracy, especially if candidates from one party spread the preponderance of misinformation. In the present example, Vance refused to repudiate the Big Lie, that the 2020 election was stolen, or that Haitian immigrants have been eating Americans’ pets. If most people recognize such misinformation, as suggested by the NYU research, in future elections, most notably in November 2026, they might punish its purveyors in the voting

booth, even if they failed to disagree in opinion polls. In this upcoming election, all House members and one third of Senators will be up for re-election.

Responding to opinion poll questions involves interacting with a questioner (in person, by phone, or online) who may be distrusted as a stranger intruding on a rightfully private matter. In contrast, voting booths are widely trusted as private. This privacy may unshackle voters, freeing them to vote for truth over crazy political correctness. In this way, voting booth privacy hypothetically could restore sanity among those voters who publicly allowed political correctness to suppress their prerogatives. In this way, privacy potentially could deliver a resounding November 2026 victory for American democracy, though it failed to do so in November 2024.

In connection with November 2024, (erroneously, evidently) saw 2.5 potential reasons for optimism for Harris beating the close polling results:

- 1. As described above, **polling is feared public whereas voting booths are viewed as being more private and therefore safer:** As many people evidently are afraid of Trump, and polling is viewed as less private than voting booths, non-respondents in polls may be a population that is enriched in Republicans and Independents who intend to vote Democratic;
- 1.5. **Polling responses may have overstated support for Trump due to fear of Trump:** A significant fraction of poll respondents saying they would vote for Trump might actually vote for Harris. 1.5 overlaps with 1, so it is not quite 2;
- 2. **Polling is passive, whereas voting is active:** People responding to polls can do so without rising from their chairs, or going anywhere, or doing anything. In contrast, voting requires initiative: get up, go somewhere, request a ballot, etc. People voting therefore must be more motivated than people who simply respond to pollsters: Democrats may have been more fearful of the election outcome and therefore may more motivated than Republicans to vote;
- 2.5. **Enthusiasm for candidates:** Democrats also (separately) evidently had an enthusiasm advantage, which (in addition to election outcome fear) might have motivated a higher fraction of them to go to the polls compared with Republicans. 2.5 overlaps with 2, so it is not quite 3.

## Defend Democracy by Rejecting the ‘America First’ Sham

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat (6) associated the 2016 election with “a swell of ideological ambition,” unlike the 2024 election. Douthat mistook Trumpian brand enhancement in 2016 with ideology (25). *America First* then (in 2016 and for four Trump years) was *America Last*. National Security Council Russia expert Fiona Hill (2017-’19 in the first Trump Administration) testified at Trump’s first impeachment trial that she never once saw him put America’s interests first: “*President Trump is Trump first, not America first.*”

At the July 2018 Helsinki (Finland) ‘Russia-United States’ or ‘Trump-Putin’ summit, Trump self-servingly elevated Russian interests over American intelligence by publicly accepting Putin’s denial that Russia meddled in the 2016 election: “*I don’t know why it would be Russia.*” This decidedly non-ideological ambition exemplifies a century-old phenomenon of far-right populists embracing brutal, often racist foreign dictators (Beverly Gage, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2024; 10).

Dictator-envy is explored by journalist and editor of *The National Interest*, Jacob Heilbrunn, in his 2024 book, *America Last* (11). Trump has embraced past ogres such as Adolph Hitler in Nazi Germany, and present authoritarian leaders in China, Hungary, North Korea, Poland, Russia, and other countries. Heilbrunn suggests that far-right U.S. populists celebrate the evil of such leaders, and envy their leading the good life. Somehow such celebration includes curtailing cherished Americans’ freedoms such as reproductive choice, freedom of expression, and a free press.

The bigger mystery is why voters who expect their elected officials to put *America First* would buy into betrayal of America’s interests, and their own. Unwittingly? Too many voters seem ignorant that *America First* is *Trump First*. Voters must be educated to understand that, as with tipping points in climate change, our democracy risks reaching a tipping point. Beyond it, cherished freedoms may be lost for generations, if not forever.

## Defend Democracy with Low-Information Voters

A poll released by NBC in April 2024 revealed that Trump *“led among those who frequently got their information from social media, cable news, and YouTube”* and *“that Trump most dominated among a subset of people described as ‘low-information voters’”* Bethea (2024; 3). ‘Low-information voters’ are variously defined, but generally exhibit political ignorance, relatively few political observations, and voting (if at all) only in Presidential-election years. Whereas this subset of relatively uninformed, uninvolved voters once might have seemed also unimportant, its composition has been trending rightward. By one estimate, this subset *“may only account for a one- or two-point difference in this election, in the end... “But that could be decisive.”* Indeed it was. In our divided electorate, appealing to low-information voters despite the difficulties is essential.

Low-information voters score high on agreement with the statement *‘Thinking is not my idea of fun’*. Bethea quotes Monica Sheppard of Rome, Georgia, relating her interactions with right-leaning low-information voters: *“‘I love Monica’, [one interviewee] told me. ‘But I think Monica goes directly to sources of information’. This, he suggested, was not the right approach.”* This raises the troubling but important issue: what is the ‘right stuff’ for reaching and influencing low-information voters? One approach is to appeal to their personal economic interests, but strategies for accomplishing this are needed.

The problem most essentially seems to be that low-information voters tend not to be alone. They tend to be embedded in low-information communities (or subgroups within larger communities) that are united in accepting, or assuming, questionable core beliefs. One such belief, for example, is Trump’s invented “rigged jury” conspiracy claim.

On 10 January 2025, Justice Juan M. Merchan imposed on Trump a no-penalty Unconditional Discharge sentence on his 34 felony convictions. That is, Trump was not sentenced to confinement, but was officially labeled a convicted felon on all counts charged. Sentencing occurred *“against the backdrop of the election”* (4). As the sentencing postdated the 5-November 2024 national election, it more importantly impended against the background of Trump’s victory. It impended against the background of his deep-state “rigged jury” claim.

Electing a felon U.S. President is the epitome of voter recklessness for our country. Trump supporters fell into two categories: those who would vote for a felon (anyway), and those who did not believe he is a felon. Here I comment on the latter, toward refuting Trump’s “rigged jury” claim, and (optimistically) dispelling misplaced belief in its merit.

Trump was convicted in 34 sequential felony deliberations, necessarily in each by 100 percent of a 12-juror panel. Before selection, each prospective juror was screened by defense and prosecution attorneys. That is, each juror was selected with 50-percent input by Trump's own defense team, the rough equivalent of each side selecting six jurors.

To be acquitted on any count, Trump needed just one dissenting juror, that is, 8.3 percent of the full jury. In all 34 felony deliberations, however, 100 percent of jurors voted "guilty." The "rigged-jury" belief should cede to the "guilty-defendant" belief, 34 times.

This logical counterargument easily should dispel the "rigged-jury" claim among its believers. However, introducing arguments such as that above, or any new political issue, may be difficult. Doing so successfully requires exposure and receptiveness of individuals to ideas that may be contrary to their communities' consensus core beliefs. Populists might appeal to such beliefs by expressing agreement and/or sympathy with them. They might assure communities (or subgroups) that the populists alone can solve their problems, but only if they elect the populists!

Effective counterstrategies for future elections begin with understanding that civics lessons must be communicated by trusted messengers (13, 18), including messengers matched to specific local audiences. I think the key to reaching and influencing low-information voters is reliance upon messengers who *they* would trust, which probably excludes most scientists. Potentially effective strategies include the following.

--**identify trusted messengers.** To reach and influence low-information voters, identify as agents of change messengers who are locally trusted. For example, clinicians might be enlisted to address disinformation about politically sensitive health issues such as reality of pandemics and effectiveness of vaccines. Contact could be made via online patient portals;

--**Include other trusted messengers.** These could include local leaders, influencers, and celebrities who have credibility in their communities. They more specifically might include barbers and hairdressers, and local athletic figures;

--**Enlist local media.** Partner with local newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels to reach audiences who do not follow national news closely;

- Engage on social media.** Utilize platforms popular among low-information voters including cable news, and YouTube to engage directly with social media participants... that is, ‘fight fire with fire’;
- Participate in local community events.** Trusted agents of change should attend town halls, community meetings, and other events to connect with potential voters;
- Conduct educational programs.** Initiate programs to promote civics education, evidence-based decision making and belief formation, informed voting, and participation in democratic institutions such as candidates’ debates;
- Highlight personal stories.** Use personal stories to share experiences that are likely to resonate with voters. Illustrate potential life-or-death impact of political decisions, for example, relate stories of vocal vaccination opponents who repudiated their beliefs before dying of Covid-19 infection;
- Focus on Key Issues.** Identify issues of particular importance to low-information voters, such as availability of abortions and other reproductive health decision making; and demonstrate how policies address those concerns, and how opponents’ policies threaten cherished freedoms; and
- Use Testimonials.** Feature endorsements and testimonials from individuals who have seen positive changes as a result of the administration’s policies.

A major challenge is to identify the right people possessing the right stuff in each target community. This, in turn, requires intensive campaign ground operations, especially in swing states. In short, Democratic candidates in upcoming elections should make efficient use of their party’s wealth and highly motivated volunteers to identify target communities and reach subsets of potential voters toward transforming latent support into actual votes to defend democracy and protect cherished personal freedoms.

### **Defend Democracy By Staying True To Your Most Wholesome Democracy Meme**

The 2024 national and state elections featured many unaffiliated voters, centrists who “*don’t see themselves reflected in either major party*” (28). True but, in that election,

candidates' personalities dominated over their party platforms. I am reminded of class elections at my high school decades ago. I remember the kids, not their political platforms.

At the risk of assuming too much, I call attention to your own high school days, and to the popular students who campaigned to become your class president. Do you look back on them today as wholesome kids who you respected, liked, maybe even envied? Did they exude wholesome qualities such as morality, competence, openness, inclusiveness, and honesty?

OR: Did they campaign for your vote via bullying, racism, sexism, or other antisocial qualities? Did they threaten to expel foreigners? Were they repulsed to shake hands with you and other student supporters? If they lost, did they claim the high school election was “rigged” or “stolen”?

In my experience, victorious student candidates congratulated their opponents on a challenging race. Unsuccessful candidates graciously conceded defeat, and congratulated their esteemed opponents on their victory. They did not attribute their loss to fraud or “deep-school” opposition. They did not provoke violence in my school.

From past high school elections comes my purest (I know, naïve) present-day meme for electoral competition. It also is my most wholesome meme for American democracy, embodying civics, science, and civility. To defend our democracy, I recommend supporting candidates who, to the maximum feasible degree, personify your most wholesome meme for candidate quality, and who reasonably might be expected to aspire to the time-honored (hopefully not time-worn) democracy meme, to “*preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*”

### **Defend Democracy By Defending Pennsylvania**

Pennsylvania was the biggest November-2024 election swing state, with 19 electoral votes. Winning the close Pennsylvania race would have been hugely favorable for Kamala Harris and American democracy (23). However, an apparently fatal obstacle for both was Harris's cautious past opposition to oil exploration and exploitation via fracking.

With New York and much of the Appalachian Basin, Pennsylvania is home to the oil-rich Marcellus Shale. Fracking in the Marcellus Shale is an economic driver for Pennsylvania. Harris's early-days opposition to fracking nonetheless was wise, protecting public and environmental health from its many chemical contaminants.

In our vaunted legal system, unlike people, contaminants are not accorded the presumption of innocence. Companies whose contaminants might harm public and/or environmental health instead must demonstrate safe limits to earn permits within which they must operate. That is, they are subject to the presumption of guilt.

Today, with more extensive experience, Harris could justify support for fracking, as can future Democratic contenders in Pennsylvania who had opposed fracking in its early days. If regulated to within safe, enforced permit limits, fracking has proven compatible with public and environmental health protection. We will be well-served (so to speak) to invest in Pennsylvania crude, including to maintain our *Strategic Petroleum Reserve*.

Conservative risk management also has proven feasible to the fracking industry (per Michaels and Simon, *Environmental Claims Journal* 29: 253-68, 2017; 27). Fracking therefore suits our energy portfolio, even as we transition to renewables. In Pennsylvania, early fracking critics simultaneously can support fracking, public and environmental health, and democracy going forward.

### **Defend Democracy By Defending Against Artificial Intelligence Risks**

In “*Managing extreme AI risks amid rapid progress*,” Bengio *et al.* (2) highlight downside artificial intelligence risks that must be managed effectively and urgently if posited AI benefits are to be realized safely, especially given rapid progress in AI development. In our current state of inadequate preparedness, they warn, malicious actors could deliberately embed undesirable goals; even well-meaning AI developers inadvertently might embed unintended goals. We therefore must manage risks potentially posed by intended and by unintended consequences of AI development and use.

This accurately conveys the broad AI downside risk management problem. Its proposed solutions, by comparison, are narrower and, I think, inadequately responsive to the nature, scale, and immediacy of the problem (19). In particular, Bengio *et al.* primarily address AI developers and users who reasonably might be expected to comply with protective legal and regulatory risk management controls. In contrast, AI risks needing management most urgently would seem to involve malefactors domestically and abroad who might be expected to flout such controls, currently with impunity.

Warning that “*large-scale cybercrime, social manipulation, and other harms could escalate rapidly*,” Bengio *et al.* propose “*reorienting technical R&D*” and enacting “*government measures*.” Further R&D, they reasonably suggest, is needed to create safe AI products. True, but R&D *already has created unsafe AI products*, such as facial recognition

and deepfake software by China. Proposing further R&D is great, to the point of becoming a mantra, but closing a barn door after its horses already have escaped is not great.

A global suite of actions to manage downside AI risks is necessary as Bengio, *et al.* laudably propose, but nonetheless insufficient as long as their focus remains limited to AI development and user communities. Missing but essential is a broader focus, specifically including potential victims of AI abuse, that is, all of us. What is missing is a proposal for immediate and massive expansion of civics education (13), including education to better prepare people to function defensively and effectively in the now-pervasive digital social media world.

AI developments in China cited above (18) exemplify our vulnerability, as deepfakes appear poised to be deployed toward interfering with elections and undermining democracy in Hong Kong (12), and facial recognition software already has been deployed to oppress the Uyghur population in China (9). Malefactors exist globally, at the national, subnational, and even at the individual level. Likewise, their reach is global, as they often employ international social media platforms. Civics education urgently must warn and defend by establishing a robust civics education presence in every nook and cranny of this brave new digital world.

Civics lessons must be communicated by trusted messengers (13, 18), including messengers matched to specific local audiences. For example, clinicians may be enlisted to address disinformation about politically sensitive vaccine issues to their patients, such as via online patient portals. Ultimately, civics outreach urgently must combat facile complacency and credulity, for example by instilling healthy skepticism of ‘conspiracy theories’ and other assertions that are unsupported by credible evidence. Thus civics lessons must outline civic responsibilities for adoption as prerequisites to belief formation and action taking, including voting.

### **Defending Democracy Requires International Engagement**

Pro-Putin political scientist Sergei Markov at Moscow State University claimed that *“If Putin escalates [nuclear threats against the West before November], then the U.S. will fear nuclear war and Trump will win”* (1). Markov’s worrisome scenario followed Trump’s debate rant: *“you’re going to end up in WW-III.”* NO! If you don’t want WW-III, you want international engagement, not isolationist Trump (24).

Trump and his band of MAGA isolationists have advocated appeasement over engagement. Trump, in his first term as president, weakened U.S. commitment to defend our NATO allies, and demanded that each ally adopt a defense budget amounting to a

minimum of two percent of its GNP. During Biden's presidency, MAGA isolationists in the U. S. House of Representatives undermined Ukraine's defense by delaying Congressional support for months, even though Ukraine, in its defense, used donated aid to wildly exceed American and NATO allies' defense objectives against Russia. In fact, since Putin's invasion, the U.S. contributed just \$94 billion in support for Ukraine, whereas European, Asian, and other partners contributed \$148 billion (Blinken 2024).

Ukraine's bitter experience revealed to the world the true Putin, and motivated expansion of NATO, which admitted Finland and Sweden. A major purpose of American and NATO allies' defense expenditures is to maintain military superiority over Russia, primarily via increasing allied strength. However, Ukraine's defense against naked aggression widened the strength gap to an unprecedented degree via extreme degradation of Russian military power, for a cost of just cents to the allies' defense dollar and euro.

In *"The Perils of Isolationism,"* former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote in the current *Foreign Affairs*: "... revisionist powers are acquiring territory through force, and the international order is breaking down. But perhaps the most striking and worrying similarity is that today, as in the previous eras, the United States is tempted to turn inward" (30).

Like Russia today, Nazi Germany in the 1930s acquired territory in Europe through force. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy failed to prevent war. Instead it emboldened Hitler and provoked WW-II. History therefore suggests strongly that MAGA isolationist appeasers are not potential bulwarks against WW-III. They are appeasement's modern-day Neville Chamberlain.

### **Defending Democracy Requires Defending Democracies: Ukraine**

Democracy faces anti-democratic forces globally, not just domestically. As described earlier, in July 2024 France narrowly escaped a far-right electoral victory that would have undermined democracy in France. Even so, Macron's program of defending democracy in France, the European Union, Ukraine, Israel, and beyond may be challenged by rising division and dysfunction within French society, much as in the U.S.

Democracy received good news, also in July 2024, when Keir Starmer of the U.K. Labour Party was elected Prime Minister. Starmer's decisive victory produces the first British Labour government in 14 years. However, challenges to preserving democracy are ongoing elsewhere, for example in Ukraine and Israel.

Ukraine is facing Russian military aggression in violation of international norms and laws. Russia has made inroads in part because of vacillating commitment of the U.S. and other NATO allies. Yet, the main bulwark against expanded Russian aggression against its non-NATO former Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) is the Ukrainian military.

Xi Jinping of China apparently has refused to provide illegal lethal assistance to his Russian “unlimited partner” Vladimir Putin (20). This refusal has reduced Putin to a supplicant in approaching Kim Jong Un, Supreme Leader of North Korea, to replenish Russia’s weaponry depleted in Ukraine. How will Russia pay?

Possibilities include oil, food, nuclear weapons, and missiles. However, Putin probably cannot pay with nukes or missiles. Xi is unlikely to tolerate Putin augmenting Kim’s nukes in China’s back yard.

North Korea is armed to the teeth, but its economy is too small to sustain Putin’s utilization rate in Ukraine. Putin’s arrangement therefore would gradually deplete Kim’s conventional weaponry. In contrast, the U.S. and NATO allies have military industrial capacity that can counter North Korean conventional arms and ammunition exports, essentially forever.

The significance is illustrated by Japan’s experience after forcing the U.S. into WW-II. Joint Fleet Commander Isoroku Yamamoto was principal architect of Japan’s Pearl Harbor attack. Harvard-educated, Yamamoto feared U.S. capacity to rebuild if not promptly defeated. Our industrial strength indeed sustained the Allies over years of all-out world war.

The U.S. remains too big to fail. With NATO, we must maintain our commitment to defending European democracies by defending Ukrainian democracy. By comparison, Russia, Iran and North Korea have far smaller economies and combined industrial capacity. Russia and its allies, without China, cannot sustain Russia’s Ukraine war indefinitely.

However Putin might justify his monstrous, illegal aggression to the world, I cannot imagine how he might justify it to himself. It already is too tragic to contemplate. Without moral limits, Putin must face economic limits. Russian expansionism therefore must wane as Putin approaches the logical conclusion of his gruesome enterprise. Defending Ukraine is intrinsic to defending democracy in Europe and beyond.

### **Defend Democracy By Defending Israel**

Israel is a democracy that is threatened by anti-democratic forces in its Middle East region. Israel also is the strongest U.S. ally in the region, and is critical to protecting U.S.

interests there. Yet, Israel is under attack, not only by Hamas terrorists, but by anti-Israel forces within the U.S., European, and U.N. community of nations. Defending Israel therefore is intrinsic to defending democracy in the U.S., Middle East, Europe, and beyond (21).

### **Antisemitism and/or Humanitarianism**

Here I address one example of anti-Israel sentiment. Much anti-Israel sentiment is motivated by antisemitism, but the dominant motivation in the example below, I think, is humanitarian (21). Many if not most of Israel's critics rightfully sympathize, as I do, with the many tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza who have been killed, wounded, displaced, starved, and otherwise impacted during Israel's retaliation following the brutal 7-October 2023 Hamas attack that produced some 2000 Israelis killed, tortured, wounded, and/or taken hostage.

Audrey Kurth Cronin (2024; 5) joins much of the world in affirming that Israel *"was fully justified in taking military action after the attack"* (4, page 50). However, she also joins much of the world in condemning Israel for *"the Israeli government's highly lethal response to the ... attack and seeming indifference to the death and suffering of Palestinian civilians"* (page 52). Cronin asserts questionably that Israel's overwhelming military response has alienated its allies along with much of the world.

In contrast, John W. Spencer, West Point chair of urban warfare studies, opined that *"Israel has done more to prevent civilian casualties in war than any military in history, setting a standard that will be both hard and potentially problematic to repeat"* (8, 36). Further, much of the world appears to be aligned with Israel's interest in destroying Hamas. Critics have maintained political correctness by condemning Israel's lethal retaliation, but they largely have refrained from pressuring Israel sufficiently to stop it. A better strategy than defeating Hamas with military force, Cronin judges, would be Israeli force restraint, essentially letting Hamas defeat itself via its unpopularity. I judge this approach to be a proven failure.

### **Assigning Blame for Crimes Against Civilians**

Cronin notes that Palestinian support of Hamas began to deteriorate soon after it took control of Gaza in 2007 (page 60): *"Hamas rules Gaza through oppression, using arrests and torture to suppress dissent... suffering Palestinians are well aware that Hamas built an elaborate tunnel system to protect its leaders and fighters but did nothing to protect civilians"* (page 61). My interpretation: Palestinians at least partially blame Hamas for their plight.

Cronin fails to explain why war crimes against civilians should be blamed on the retaliator, given that much of their gruesome toll is attributable to Hamas's own strategy of vilifying Israel by provoking such retaliation while using civilians to shield Hamas leaders and fighters. Hamas, for example, has used hospitals and schools occupied by civilians including children as bases for its military assets and operations. In similar circumstances, international law assigns responsibility for such crimes against civilians to those placing them in harm's way. Cronin deflects this responsibility issue by positing that, in either case, Israeli retaliation is ill-advised because it has been strategically ineffective.

Contradicting herself, Cronin also notes that Israeli retaliation has destroyed much of Hamas's organization in Gaza (page 63). That hardly counts as ineffective. She suggests that *"instead of trying to kill Hamas leaders, Israel might try negotiating with them on a long-term political solution"* (page 58). However, such negotiations would seem doomed to failure in the absence of overwhelming Israeli military force, which Cronin would preclude, and in the absence of military effectiveness, which she highlights (page 63) but also denies (for example, *"the Israeli war in Gaza has been a strategic disaster,"* page 52).

### **Moral Inequivalents**

Cronin correctly notes that Israeli force restraint would dramatically reduce the scale of Palestinian suffering in Gaza, but she ignores the fact that Israel maintained a force restraint posture for nearly all of two decades of Hamas control. Contrary to Cronin, force restraint did not result in failure of Hamas. Instead it resulted in Hamas attaining its peak strength, including formidable infrastructure of tunnels and weapons sporadically used to attack Israelis. Prolonged force restraint also has increased Israel's vulnerability, so much so that relaxation of vigilance has been condemned internally, with consequences for the Israeli government still unfolding.

If Israel has the right to defend itself, it must have the right to do so effectively. If the results are tragic, which they are, Hamas must be blamed as the chief architect of Israel's need to respond militarily at dual military/civilian locations in Gaza. If Israel could do more to protect civilians without compromising its military success, then some blame is to be shared.

I am not a first-hand observer of the war in Gaza, but I have a keen eye for bias. Here are three moral equivalents explicated or implied by Cronin that exemplify anti-Israel bias: attackers v. defenders, terrorists v. victims, and Hamas v. Israel. These are not pairs of true moral equivalents. Making the distinction is intrinsic to defending Israel, and defending Israel is intrinsic to defending democracy in the Middle East and beyond (21).

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