

THE MIDTERMS WON'T SAVE US

Elections, Authoritarianism, and the Democratic Power We Still Need to Build

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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The danger in placing our hopes primarily in the 2026 midterms is not simply that we may be disappointed in November. It is that we may misunderstand the nature of the crisis itself. What confronts us is not only an electoral challenge, but a long assault on democracy by concentrated wealth, authoritarian politics, and the slow dismantling of the institutions and protections on which working people depend. If that is the threat, then no election by itself can be the answer.

To say that the midterms will not save us is not to say that they do not matter. They do. They matter because who controls Congress affects budgets, appointments, oversight, labor law, voting rights, reproductive freedom, public education, climate policy, and the ability of the Right to move even faster. But elections matter only within a larger struggle. Without deep organization, broad coordination, and a long fight to rebuild democratic power from below, even an important electoral victory will remain partial, fragile, and reversible.

Misunderstanding the Threat

One of the biggest mistakes being made right now is treating the danger as though it were simply another round of hardball politics between two parties. It is not. The country is facing a more organized authoritarian project tied to oligarchic wealth, corporate power, right-wing media, Christian nationalism, racial backlash, and a state apparatus increasingly reshaped to protect power from democratic pressure. That project is not only trying to win elections. It is trying to narrow who counts, who belongs, who has rights, and who gets protected by public institutions.

That project has also been financed and accelerated by the historic concentration of wealth. For decades, billionaires, private capital, corporate lobbies, and anti-labor networks have poured money into dismantling unions, weakening regulation, gutting the public sphere, privatizing public goods, and turning politics into a playground for concentrated money. The erosion of democracy did not begin with one election cycle. It has been driven by a class project that has steadily reduced the power of working people while increasing the power of those who already own and control too much.

That matters because it changes what kind of response is required. If the Right were merely trying to win the next election, then defeating it at the ballot box might be enough. But that is not what is happening. We are living through a broader effort to hollow out democratic life while preserving the shell of electoral procedure. That is why elections alone cannot do the whole job. Voting can deny the Right certain levers of power. It can create room to breathe. But it cannot by itself undo decades of political, economic, and institutional erosion.

Beyond Electoralism

A democratic politics equal to this moment has to reject two bad answers at the same time. The first is cynicism: the claim that elections do not matter, so organizing around them is pointless. The second is electoralism: the belief that winning elections is the main engine of democratic recovery. Both positions are wrong. One abandons the terrain; the other mistakes one battlefield for the whole war.

We need something different. We need a politics that contests elections seriously while refusing to confuse electoral participation with democratic strategy. That means understanding that power is built in workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, unions, civic organizations, media, faith communities, and the everyday institutions that shape how people understand the world and what they believe is possible. Ballots register political strength. They do not automatically create it.

This is one reason every election now feels like the last stand. When there is too little organization, too little shared political education, too little durable local infrastructure, and too little confidence in collective action, every election gets loaded with impossible expectations. People are told that this one vote, this one turnout push, this one cycle will save democracy. Then even when victories come, the deeper conditions remain: weakened labor, captured institutions, concentrated wealth, a battered public sector, and an authoritarian movement still advancing through courts, state governments, media, policing, and private money.

The Power Behind the Vote

What is required now is not less electoral engagement, but more: more organization, more coordination, more political education, more year-round work, and more forms of collective action that extend beyond the ballot box. Without that, elections become isolated episodes in a struggle being decided elsewhere. The question is not whether we should contest the midterms. The question is whether we are building the kind of power that can make those elections matter.

That means labor organizing strong enough to alter local and regional balances of power. It means neighborhood institutions capable of fighting evictions, utility shutoffs, school closures, voter suppression, and attacks on immigrants and public services. It means coalitions that connect labor, civil rights, reproductive justice, environmental justice, education, disability rights, immigrant defense, and democracy work instead of leaving each struggle isolated. And it means building leadership rooted in working-class communities rather than relying on consultants, donors, and campaign professionals to stand in for organized people.

It also means being honest about what has been dismantled. The democratic and administrative state has been steadily weakened, distorted, and in some places turned against the very people it was supposed to protect. Agencies that should enforce labor standards, civil rights, environmental protections, public health safeguards, and consumer rules have been hollowed out, captured, privatized, or weaponized. Public institutions have been made less responsive, less trusted, and less able to defend ordinary people. Reversing that will take far more than taking back one chamber of Congress. It will take sustained struggle to rebuild the actual machinery of democratic protection and public responsibility.

It also means refusing the idea that people are simply voters waiting to be activated every two years. People have to become political actors in a stronger sense than that. They have to be part of organizations, campaigns, alliances, and public life robust enough to defend rights, demand accountability, and force institutions to respond. Without that, democracy becomes a spectator exercise, and authoritarianism fills the vacuum with grievance, fear, and managed resentment.

This is why anti-authoritarian struggle has to be practical and constructive, not merely defensive. It is not enough to stop the next attack if we do not also rebuild the protections, capacities, and democratic habits that working people need in order to live with dignity and power. Defending labor rights, rebuilding public institutions, expanding public goods, protecting the vote, strengthening unions, restoring regulatory capacity, and making government materially useful again are all part of the same fight. Democracy survives when people can feel it in their lives, not only hear about it on election night.

What Would Make the Midterms Matter?

History gives us the same lesson again and again: authoritarian forces are not usually stopped by ballots alone. Democratic resistance becomes possible when elections are backed by organized constituencies, durable coalitions, and institutions that can keep fighting before, during, and after the vote. That is the standard we should be using now. Not whether Democratic candidates can win a good news cycle. Not whether donors feel reassured. Not whether one branch of government changes hands. But whether democratic forces are building the long struggle required to recover rights, protections, and power for working people.

So the real question before us is not whether democratic forces should contest the 2026 midterms. They should, and they must. The real question is whether they are preparing for what comes after. If Congress changes hands, who will push to restore labor rights, expand public protections, rebuild gutted agencies, defend public education, strengthen civil rights enforcement, and reverse the long transfer of wealth and power upward? Who will force those fights when corporate interests, austerity politics, and bureaucratic caution try to narrow the agenda back down again?

The midterms may shape the terrain of struggle. They may block further authoritarian consolidation, open room for resistance, and create better conditions for organizing. But they will not save us unless they are part of something larger: a movement capable of confronting concentrated wealth, rebuilding democratic institutions, defending working people, and sustaining pressure long after the campaign signs come down. That is the task. And there is no shortcut around it.

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