

IF DEMOCRACY GAINS GROUND

Authoritarian Power, Electoral Resistance, and the Fight for a Stronger Democracy

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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A Necessary Caveat

This essay assumes something we should no longer be naïve enough to assume: that the votes are lawfully counted, the result is recognized, and the people who win actually will be allowed to take office. After 2020, nobody gets to call that paranoia. We watched an organized effort to overturn a presidential election, pressure public officials, manufacture doubt about lawful results, and turn the machinery of democracy itself into another battlefield. And the danger is not merely historical. The administration's rhetoric, legal maneuvers, and preparations around the 2026 election make clear that intervention, intimidation, and attempts to bend the electoral process to its advantage are already part of their strategy. So democratic forces cannot prepare only to win an election. We have to be prepared to defend the win.

If counting is obstructed, certification is sabotaged, or duly elected members are prevented from taking their seats, then everything changes. Before we can use the ground we won, we have to make damn sure we are allowed to stand on it.

For the argument of this essay, we assume the election is conducted under law and the lawful winners are seated. That is the hopeful assumption. The realistic one is that reactionary forces may test every weak point they can find. We should prepare for both. But the central question of this essay begins after that fight: if democratic forces do secure real political ground, what are we going to do with it?

Suppose the midterms finally put a hand on the emergency brake. The House changes hands. Maybe the Senate does too. For the first time in a while, the authoritarian machine hits something it cannot simply roll over. Subpoenas become possible. Hearings become possible. Funding can be blocked. Abuse can be dragged into daylight. That would matter. It would matter a hell of a lot.

But before we start hanging banners and congratulating ourselves on democracy saved, we ought to remember what we have been living through.

For nearly a decade the American Right has been teaching us a brutal civics lesson. The old democratic rules do not defend themselves. Norms are paper walls when organized power decides to walk through them. Billionaires can buy more than yachts. Media empires can turn grievance into identity and identity into obedience. Political violence can be winked at, excused, or fed until it becomes part of the atmosphere. And an authoritarian political movement willing to seize and use every lever of power can turn yesterday's outrage into tomorrow's normal.

We should remember something else too. The democracy that existed before this assault was no democratic paradise. Millions of people already lived with little real say over the institutions governing their work, their communities, or their economic lives. Wealth was already translating itself into political power often greater than the votes and views of millions of Americans. Participation was already thin. Whole sections of the country had learned to experience politics the way they experienced professional sports: watch, yell, vote occasionally, then go back to work.

So, if democratic forces take one or both chambers of Congress, good. Celebrate it. Use it. Defend it. But we cannot bullshit ourselves about what happened.

We would not have won the country back. We would have won room to fight.

That distinction is the whole argument of this essay. The authoritarian project would still command the executive branch. The judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, would still sit on terrain reshaped by years of right-wing power—a Court that, for long

stretches of its history, has ruled to diminish democracy and elevate property over people. The staggering concentration of wealth and political influence at the top would still be there in the morning. So would the donors, media networks, churches, legal organizations, political operatives, and millions of voters who have made authoritarian politics a durable force rather than a temporary fever.

And the democratic side would not be the same either. We have learned from building this resistance. Organizations have learned to find one another. Lawyers have worked alongside demonstrators. Local groups have learned what pressure feels like and how to act under it. Millions of people have been reminded of a fact Americans are encouraged to forget: politics is not merely something elected officials do to us. It is something people can do together.

That is the opening. Not restoration. Not a return ticket to 2015. An opening.

The task is to use the ground we gain to build a stronger and more expansive democracy than the one that proved so easy to attack. If the organizations, relationships, habits, and courage built in resistance dissolve after Election Day, then we will have performed one of America's favorite political rituals: win a battle, declare normality restored, go home, and leave the people with money and organization in possession of the field.

I. What Changes—and What Doesn't

Take the ground. Change the fight.

A congressional gain changes real things. It can slow an executive agenda, expose corruption and abuse, control appropriations, and give democratic initiatives room to breathe. Power is power. We should stop talking as though winning power inside government is somehow beneath movement politics. If you can take a lever away from people using it against democracy, take the damn lever.

But a lever is not the machine.

The money does not go home on election night. The increasingly corporatized and monopolistic media system does not wake up pluralistic. The political organizations that spent years building an authoritarian constituency do not fold their tents

because a committee chair changes parties. Electoral defeat can wound an authoritarian project, expose its weakness, and limit what it can do. It does not kill it.

Nor does winning Congress magically return us to the country that existed before this crisis. Executive power has expanded. The courts have altered the terrain. A wider political and media apparatus has spent years teaching people to accept behaviors that once would have produced scandal, resignation, or prosecution as just another day in American politics.

The ground has shifted. Taking it back will require power, not nostalgia.

Resistance built power—if we keep it

The good news is that the struggle has changed democratic forces too. People have made connections they did not have before. Organizations that once lived in separate political neighborhoods have found reasons to cooperate. Legal defense, public protest, and local organizing have begun to overlap.

That matters because organization is memory with a cell phone number. It means that the next time the alarm goes off, people do not have to begin by asking who else is awake.

However, much of this capacity is still scattered across the landscape. We have islands of resistance where we need an archipelago with bridges—hell, maybe a new Pangea. The question is not whether democratic resistance has built anything. It has. The question is whether we can connect what we've built before the urgency fades and everyone is told to return to the regularly scheduled programming.

Pro-democracy forces can win political ground and still lack the organized power to hold it. That is not a theoretical problem. It is how openings get squandered.

II. What Do We Do With the Ground We Gain?

The answer is not to keep everybody permanently terrified and constantly at the barricades. Emergency politics burns people out. The goal is durable democratic capacity: relationships that survive the emergency, political memory that does not evaporate, and enough organization to act before the next five-alarm fire is already licking the roof.

If politics shrinks back to officeholders and election cycles, ordinary people get pushed back into the audience. Meanwhile the organized powers shaping their lives keep working every day. Employers organize; sometimes they conspire. Billionaires organize. Lobbyists organize. Media owners organize. Political operatives organize. Nobody tells them, 'Thanks for participating in democracy. See you in two years.'

If concentrated power never stops organizing, neither can we.

A durable broad democratic front

A durable broad democratic front is one way to refuse that bargain. Not a giant bureaucratic blob. Not fifty organizations surrendering their names, histories, or disagreements to one headquarters. Something simpler and harder: enough continuing structure that labor, civil-rights organizations, community groups, democratic movements, and political allies can think together before the crisis, act together when it comes, and—most importantly—envision and organize for a better democratic future.

In practice, that means unions going to the wall for the rights of minorities, women, immigrants, and other targeted groups—and civil-rights and community organizations throwing their shoulders behind the fight to strengthen unions and workers' power.

That capacity may be needed even to defend an election result. We know what attempted electoral subversion looks like now. We have seen the pressure campaigns, the lies, the search for officials willing to bend, and the willingness to turn democratic procedure into another battlefield. Winning votes is not enough if we are unprepared to defend the count, certification, and seating of the winners.

If we convince ourselves that one extreme administration caused this whole mess, the cure becomes wonderfully easy: throw the bastards out, change the nameplates on the doors, and declare normal government restored. But 'normal' helped build the road that brought us here. The deeper problem is organized power—wealth and reaction on one side, a fragmented democratic public on the other. Changing officeholders will not fix that.

Democratic forces need organized counterpower of their own.

Wealth, taxation, and democratic power

Take taxes. The polite argument says the rich should pay their fair share. Fine. They should. But the democratic argument goes further. More than a century ago, progressive income taxation rested on a piece of common sense that our politics has spent decades trying to forget: people who draw vastly more wealth from a society can be asked to put significantly more back into the common kitty. When fortunes become so large that food, housing, health care, education, and ordinary insecurity simply disappear from the owner's horizon, a higher contribution is not punishment. It is part of the price of living in a society that made such wealth possible.

What the last several decades have given us instead is a political economy increasingly comfortable with fortunes of a scale that previously would have sounded like satire. In 2026 the world produced its first trillionaire. That should tell us something about the direction of travel.

Money becomes lawyers, lobbyists, campaign infrastructure, think tanks, media platforms, foundations, consultants, and the ability to keep pushing an idea long after ordinary people have run out of time, money, or sleep. Economic inequality is not merely an unfair distribution of stuff. At a certain point it becomes an unequal distribution of political voice and rights as members of a democracy.

Unchecked concentrations of economic power become concentrations of undemocratic political power. That is the part of the tax debate usually left out because it makes the conversation impolite. We are not merely deciding how much revenue government needs. We are deciding how much private power a democracy can tolerate before the word 'democracy' becomes a farce.

Artificial intelligence gives us a fresh version of the same problem. A handful of private firms are making decisions that could reorganize work, knowledge, culture, surveillance, and public life at extraordinary speed. The question is not whether the technology is wondrous or terrifying. The question is an old democratic one: who gets to decide, who

benefits, who bears the consequences, and who has enough power to say no?

A genuinely progressive tax system therefore has a democratic meaning as well as a fiscal one. It can reduce extreme private concentrations of power and expand the public capacity to meet common needs. That is not class envy. It is democratic self-defense.

III. From Gaining Ground to Building a Stronger Democracy

A stronger democracy is not simply one where everybody is permitted to vote for the people who will make the important decisions. It is one where more people possess the practical power to shape the institutions governing their lives.

That means rebuilding rules damaged by authoritarian government, yes. But rules alone are not enough. A rule book in a room full of unequal power is a lovely object right up until the powerful decide they can afford the fine, hire the lawyer, own the newspaper, fund the candidate, or wait everybody else out.

Organized people are the democratic answer to organized power. Labor is the obvious example. An isolated worker negotiates with a company.

Organized workers negotiate with power. That difference is not only economic; it is political. A union gives people a collective voice they do not possess one by one. Community organizations and civil-rights organizations can do the same thing in other parts of life.

The democratic problem is not simply that power is unequal. It is that concentrated power wakes up every morning organized. It has offices. Budgets. Attorneys. Data. Lobbyists. Managers. Media. And increasingly it has laws, regulations, and institutional arrangements that reproduce its advantage. Most people wake up with a job to get to, a family to care for, bills to pay, and whatever political energy is left after all that.

Then we congratulate ourselves because everybody gets one vote.

Progressive political leadership must connect governing power to organized democratic power

Progressive elected officials have a special responsibility here. Passing better legislation matters. But if that is where the job ends, we keep

reproducing the same weak political arrangement: elected progressives inside government, organized wealth outside government, and everybody else invited to send an email.

Progressive governing power must be connected to democratic organization in society. That means recurring relationships between movements and elected officials—shared analysis, public action, and the capacity to mobilize around the fight rather than merely applaud the bill.

Neither side should become the servant of the other. Movements should not become campaign decorations for politicians. Politicians should not pretend that winning office makes movement organization unnecessary. The point is connection without subordination.

Representative democracy gets stronger when the representative has organized people behind, beside, and sometimes in front of them. A stronger democracy joins representation to continuing participation, so citizens do more than choose who governs—they help shape the power that governs them.

Greater real political equality

Formal political equality is indispensable. One person, one vote is not a small achievement. But let us not confuse equal ballots with equal political power.

One citizen arrives with a ballot. Another arrives with a ballot, a corporation, a legal department, a lobbying firm, a political action committee, a media platform, and enough money to keep calling after everyone else has been put on hold.

How equal can political citizenship really be when everyone formally gets one vote, but some people can spend hundreds of millions shaping what those votes will decide?

And money is only part of the inequality. Time, security, organization, and resources all shape who can participate effectively in political life. People working two jobs or worrying about rent do not enter politics on the same terms as people whose wealth generates more wealth while they sleep. A democracy is more equal when powerful institutions must face organized people, not isolated individuals.

That is the human meaning of a stronger democracy. People should have more real power over the conditions of their lives. More ability to challenge decisions made over their heads. More ability to stand with others and say: 'Hell no—you do not get to decide this for us simply because you own more.'

If democracy gains ground in the midterms, that is what the opening is for.

It will not abolish authoritarian politics. It will not dissolve concentrated wealth. It will not suddenly weld fragmented democratic organizations into a national movement. But it can give democratic forces better ground from which to do those things.

The first moves after a win should be almost embarrassingly practical. Keep the organizations that fought together talking to one another. Convene a standing democratic front with enough structure to make decisions and act. Connect that front to the elected officials now holding new institutional power so that legislative fights, public mobilization, and defense of the democratic process reinforce one another. Do not wait for the next emergency to exchange phone numbers.

And keep building from below. Democracy has to live somewhere other than Election Day. It has to take root where people work, live, and organize together.

A stronger democracy cannot be built only by coordinating the organizations we already have. It has to keep creating places where ordinary people exercise democratic power themselves.

The capacities built through resistance therefore have to survive the election and become more durable. If they dissipate, the opening will be squandered, leaving authoritarian forces greater room for lawlessness, impunity, and political violence.

The people who built authoritarian power are not planning to go home if they lose an election. They know how to survive defeat by changing the individualism wrapper while keeping the authoritarian product. Anti-union politics and deregulation were sold as 'freedom.' Supply-side economics became 'growth.' Tax cuts that overwhelmingly enlarged fortunes at the top were sold as prosperity for everybody. And attacks on immigrants can be repackaged as nothing more than 'securing the border.' The language changes. The organized power underneath it keeps moving.

So here is the question for the democratic side: why would we go home?

The point of gaining ground is not simply to hold it until the next election. The point is to use the opening to build forms of democratic power that make the next struggle occur on stronger ground.

Win the ground. Hold the ground. Organize on it. And make damn sure the next fight begins somewhere better than the last one did.

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