

**Reflections on American Democratic
Threats and Opportunities:
A pre-Inauguration Baseline**

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Introduction

Whether or not they voted for the winning side, Americans will be witness to tectonic changes in the forthcoming period. The rest of the world – which didn't get a vote – is bracing itself as well. The potential shifts and disruptions are already taking shape through personnel appointments and statements of intent.

This essay presents some forward-looking themes, ideas, warnings and hopes from someone who has worked to promote democratic ideals, accountable good governance, rights-based rule of law and civic engagement outside of the US, in the former Yugoslavia, for over 20 years. Every aspect of American governance, institutions and civil society stands to be tested and strained; their strengths, weaknesses and resilience remain an open question. At the same time, this disruption will provide space for sorely needed progressive populist ideas to finally shatter demonstrably false assumptions about the impacts of neoliberalism and flawed democratic governance that have led to global outrage at the status quo and misplaced trust in strongman leadership. These fissures had been forming over years; deepened with the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath; and were rendered devastating by the impact of the pandemic.

Some of the themes considered here are abstract, some are concrete; some are practical, and some are warnings grounded in experiences seen elsewhere around the world. As a series of discrete yet inter-related reflections, they together form a post-election, pre-Inauguration baseline of ideas and issues to be flagged and further considered and developed over what is likely to be a period of realignment with material and ideological winners and losers. While focused on how these issues and dynamics will play out in the US, our interlinked and interconnected world makes it inevitable that there will be both positive and negative spillover and learning. The question is whether the end result will be more or less democracy and opportunity for more people, or a greater consolidation and concentration of both among a lucky few, in the US and beyond.

I. Democracy is Impossible when Words Have No Meaning

Can democracy survive in an environment in which words have no meaning, politics has become spectacle, and the attention span of citizens is reduced to memes? The answer is clearly no.

We are in a strange situation. There has always been discussion about the selective approach that Donald Trump takes to words and speech (and truth itself), and whether citizens should believe he will do what he says, or “understand” that his words are just to rile up a crowd. If Trump *does* do what he said he would do, then that will be the basis for a fundamental anti-democratic transformation of the government and society that many people never envisioned when they voted for him. However, if he does not do what he said, then we are in a situation where a person can be elected to the United States presidency on the basis of nothing but charisma, therefore fully pulling away from the notion that any policy ideas or platforms have meaning. It would tie the US even more closely to a system in which identity politics related to tribal political party affiliation is the primary factor driving voter choices

If there is a complete divorce between the words said on the campaign trail or in office, or in any public discourse, then there is absolutely no basis to hold any public figure to account. It means the rhetorical link of accountability between leadership and the people is reduced to an unpredictable transactionalism, a house of cards with no basis in reality, dependent solely upon a “vibe” or cult of personality. It would remove any possibility for measuring whether politicians are effective or accountable.

This is all a part of the new authoritarian playbook: creating an environment in which [words have no meaning, truth and lies are viewed as interchangeable and fluid](#), and a new reality can be created at any moment, disseminated instantly via social media algorithms that themselves are a non-transparent black box. The combination of “flooding the zone” mis- and disinformation and a readership in which many make no distinction between journalists working according to journalistic ethics and commentators and self/market-proclaimed influencers, makes the information environment overwhelming. If people can’t possibly track ideas, policies, and the impact they have, governmental (and corporate) accountability are impossible. The political economy becomes based not on public awareness and informed consent, but on influence jockeying in which access to and impact on politics is determined based on your membership in the right tribe rather than your rights as a constituent.

II. The New Identity Politics

It is ironic that the Republican party, which very effectively wielded the accusation of “identity politics” against Democrats who did not really campaign on identity politics, is in fact in the process of building a new tribal identity system that is buttressed by the combination of the right-wing media system, X, Wall Street/Silicon Valley, and the mutated reliance on the old “moral majority” of evangelicals now fortified by white Christian nationalism. Like any team or tribe, it has a name (MAGA), insignia, an information dissemination ecosystem and its own direct (Trump sneakers, trading cards, Bibles) and indirect product lines (consider vitamin supplements and prepper supplies being hawked on AM radio, bro-pods etc.). While for years the mantra has been that the left had “won” the culture (Will and Grace; all the

celebrities who endorsed Kamala Harris), the right has been slowly building its alternatives – and the infrastructure to support and propagate them – while simultaneously feeding appetites for them. For the political disruptors it is a happy coincidence that the spate of action, comic and zombie films pitching good vs. evil distraction may not include direct role parallels, but does prime the public for us vs. them, zero-sum deathmatches. The wrestling and mixed martial arts links also can't be ignored – and were not ignored by the MAGA leadership and faithful.

The expansion of the tent to some Latino and Black voters, especially among men, will be balanced through a kabuki in which the generality of machismo and the selectively deployed language of fiscal responsibility (targeting the poor and vulnerable, not the wealthy) masks the continuing structural racial dynamics. Different messages will be sent to different audiences; the red hat is the uniform that links them though all signs point to policies that will favor the very wealthy elites purported to be the MAGA enemy at rallies (and notably these elites have least internalized or wedded their identities to the physical signifiers of belonging like the hats). It is becoming an identity supported by an ecosystem. Efforts by the Democrats to create a similar and coordinated branded movement would fail unless a party spoiler would arise, like a Bernie Sanders, and fully take over and transform that party, as Trump did the GOP. There are no signs of this happening.

The Democrats and other pro-democracy forces will only be able to push back against this false, billionaire-crafted populism with their own genuine bottom-up populism, grounded in expanded unions, a system-wide anti-corruption movement, and a full-spectrum campaign to show they are the party supporting transparency and a radical change in campaign finance laws and practices. The right-wing media ecosystem will claim money is speech, capitalism is the only value that matters, that Democrats are communists, etc. The good thing is that everyone knows this playbook; it will not be a surprise. The Democrats have to call this out by practicing what they preach and relentlessly calling out the Republicans as the party of Big Money, while also getting the money out of their own party bloodstream.

III. Self-Dealing and Corruption

The unfettered self-dealing and corruption opportunities already coming into shape rival those of the late 19th century Gilded Age, and are accompanied by the same inequality and civic strains. While both parties share the blame in enabling this environment, it is important not to fall into nihilistic whataboutism and false equivalencies. For example, while people may not trust someone like George Soros, there has been poor messaging in terms of examining the kinds of policies and laws any billionaires are supporting/paying for, and whether or not such policies would directly benefit them. There is a big difference between the ultra-wealth lobbying for policies that would cost them money, and those seeking change that would enrich them personally while starving the commons. The idea that billionaires are in themselves an example of [policy failure](#) has begun to be more commonly accepted, but there has still not been an effective public debate on the fact that such wealth is only even possible in a place with secure courts, banking and securities regulation and other pre-requisites. And in turn the myth of individuals doing it “all on their own” retains an appeal that is operationalized by those who

would prefer a system of selective *noblesse oblige* to progressive taxation that funds the educational, transportation and legal infrastructure that enabled their success in the first place. This messaging needs to be developed, simplified and spread, each and every day – that the social contract needs to work for everyone. Dissecting the myth of the US as a virtuous [meritocracy](#) will be a key part of this cultural de-programming.

We can expect a period of overt corruption that has not been seen in generations. The combination of an already demonstrated willingness by the Trump administration to flout norms related to divestment and transparency, together with the host of structural changes related to money in politics, the Supreme Court’s [re-definition of corruption and bribery](#), the open oligarchs season most visibly symbolized by Elon Musk, and the gradual degradation of the functioning of and trust in the justice system will create a cocktail appealing to the opportunistic and dangerous to those without access, or to those who still have morals that define such institutionalized theft as just not right. It is certain that many citizens who voted for Trump will say, “well, politicians have always been corrupt.” This devalues the seriousness of what we can expect to happen. It is also exactly what people who seek a disengaged and pliant citizenry want to hear.

IV. Public Asset Stripping and Private Accumulation

We are likely to see efforts to enable and enact a huge shift in wealth from the public to the private, through tax cuts and a wave of privatization that many people may not have thought possible in a country already so privatized as the United States. The fact that there is already talk about further [“commercializing” the National Weather Service](#) should be seen as a bellwether; Michael Lewis warned about this and other threats in his book, [The Fifth Risk](#). One can also imagine other elements of society being privatized, ranging from the postal service, to schools through elimination or neutralization of the Department of Education as well as the slippery slope of vouchers and defunding, and perhaps more public utilities. In addition, everyone should keep their eyes open for efforts to privatize land that is currently held by the federal government; one can easily imagine federal lands being de-federalized and given to state ownership in the name of “states’ rights and federalism,” but then quickly being sold at rock-bottom prices to cronies at the state level for mining, data mining, or other exploitation. Musk himself has an interest in the progressive weakening of or capture of NASA and its centers. Is this what working-class people really wanted to see when they cast their vote for Trump and his team?

While those who follow such issues will be reminded of privatization and the rise of [oligarchs in the post-Soviet space](#) and beyond, this needs to be explained in a way that’s accessible to non-specialists and which draws on their lived or aspirational experience of some sort of commons being used to benefit a local community. The language of “public-private partnership” will likely be used, with words harkening back to Reagan and the post-Reagan neoliberal consensus in many ways cemented by Bill Clinton; however, as seen elsewhere, this will be used by a chosen and well-connected few extracting value from public resources for their own limited private gain. Opponents of this wealth transfer need to explain that in the absence of independent institutions, independent oversight, transparency and guardrails, public-private partnership is a euphemism for private capture of the public birthright.

V. The Revolving Doors of Influence and Access – Government and Media

How can Democrats, progressives, or citizens who simply stand against what is happening, explain that there is a fundamental difference between the close cooperation clearly visible, for example, between Fox Media and the Republican Party and very soon a Republican-led government (perhaps nowhere more clearly than with the proposed nominee for Secretary of Defense), on the one hand, and the “mainstream media,” or even the more center-left media and social media outlets, on the other? The fact that Biden's first press secretary Jen Psaki went to work for [MSNBC](#) after two years in that job is certainly fodder for citizens shrugging and saying “they all do it.” However, it needs to be made clear that the difference is one of scope and degree in terms of active cooperation and strategic collaboration.

The Democrats and frustrated Independents would be wise to begin to push back against the revolving media/government door, framing this dynamic as a form of “made in America” state/party propaganda. Most Americans don’t really know what propaganda is, and would never think they are susceptible to it; in fact the subtle impact of messaging and advertising on Americans for decades has not only *not* provided Americans with antibodies, but has primed them for reception of anti-democratic infections. The Musk/X factor will simply amplify this.

While this is a time in which checks and balances, ethics and regulations are going to be undercut and weakened, and while the revolving door between government and lobbyists has been spinning more quickly due to a weakening of norms and rules against it, a similar revolving door related to paid media engagement needs to be acknowledged. There was a missed opportunity when [NBC rescinded a job offer](#) made to the previous head of the Republican Party, Ronna McDaniel, following internal discord and protest. What was never really made clear was that she was not being “canceled” in terms of her ability to be *on* a TV show. She just wasn’t going to get *paid* for being a talking head on TV. Being contracted to deliver partisan, opinion-focused appearances in the media is what makes it different. It is reasonable to suspect that most Americans make no distinction between someone who goes on the media for free as an expert to talk about an issue, and those who are paid pundits. This distinction needs to be made clear, and the Democrats and Independents need to lead on it, no matter how much it hurts their own pocketbooks as well.

Much has been written about rebuilding trust in the media, and support for independent media is a basic part of the [US’s own development toolkit abroad](#). A fundamental issue should be whether or not media organizations are actively seeking to deceive people, by spreading lies or half-truths, by never fact-checking or issuing retractions, and by deliberately failing to make a distinction between reporting the news, and commenting on it. This has become harder as the line between reporting and opinion has blurred, and as online “influencers” with no requirement for professional ethics have changed the playing field. As a first step, the mainstream news – CNN and the like – need to get out of the “politics as sports and entertainment” mentality. No more countdown clocks, breaking news for regular news, and chyrons aimed to sensationalize.

The decline and [fall of local media and the subsequent impact on democracy](#) at every level has been studied following more than two decades of the cumulative effect of deregulation, the Internet and predatory market forces. This gap feeds into other trust gaps at the local level. When people never meet

local journalists covering issues in their community, they lose sight of the fact that journalists are just like them, living on their street, sending their kids to school, and just trying to do their job and report on the facts of what is happening. They then see that the average journalist is not a wealthy jetsetter like they may see on TV. The lack of truly local journalism also means that there is no feeder system to take journalists who enjoy the trust of a local community to move up to higher-level regional or state papers, a process that if built on direct knowledge and trust can help to build trust among those journalists as well. The entire pipeline has been broken, just as grassroots community journalism was dying, and news as a commercial product was becoming nationalized. When the system is broken, systemic reform is needed.

VI. “Trump Didn’t Start Any Wars”

A common trope has been that some people have supported Trump because they claim that “no wars were started by Trump.” Breaking down this claim is important. Most notably, this mentality is a result of the disastrous wars started by George W. Bush in Afghanistan and, with even more devastating result, Iraq and in turn much of the Middle East. The notion that the US engages in wars where there is oil has been a subsequent conclusion. (It’s worth remembering that Trump’s own in-character and opportunistic assessment of mistakes in Iraq boiled down to him saying [“we” should have “taken” the oil.](#))

Trump’s international record was a net negative. He claimed he wanted to pull troops out of Afghanistan, and made a deal with the Taliban at, of all places, Camp David, but then not only failed to pull out troops but criticized the Biden administration for doing so. On his watch the war in Yemen escalated with devastating impact on innocent civilians, but also enabling greater Iranian influence through support for the Houthis and affecting shipping channels in the Red Sea. The Abraham Accords used transactionalism to “normalize” relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia (among other countries). This “normalization” was sufficiently shallow that it ignored the Palestinians, thereby maintaining the febrile “no war, no peace” status quo which catalyzed the October 7 attacks by Hamas, confirmed the transactional [behavior of Saudi Arabia](#) on the issue of the Palestinians, and boosted Israel’s own right-wing forces in a way that reduced the chances for peace, increased the likelihood of more settlements and reduced the quality of that country’s democracy even further.

Some [laudable airstrikes in Syria](#) aside (in response to undeniable atrocities), Trump’s first administration failed to engage to end that continuing conflagration, further enabling Russia’s own interests there (influence that began under the Obama administration which repeatedly enabled the crossing of “red lines”). In the run-up to the December 2024 fall of the Assad regime, his instinctive reaction was one of [isolation](#), with him then referencing [Russia’s abandonment of Syria](#). He did nothing to deter Russia from putting more mercenaries (through the Wagner Group) in various parts of Africa, both making the region even more amenable to Al Qaeda or ISIS offshoots, and allowing Moscow to continue to test new war tactics in real life. In spite of rhetoric about being “tough on China” he did nothing to prevent that country’s own territorial [maritime encroachments](#), did nothing constructive to help to trace the origins of Covid (rather the opposite), and failed to speak out against the incarceration,

forced economic exploitation and cultural [destruction of the Uighurs](#).

He may not have started any new wars, but he also did not end any, nor implement a foreign policy that makes the US and its allies more secure. His obsessive praise for and envy of dictators comes far more naturally than his rhetoric on allied, democratic leadership; this messaging is not missed by the dictators themselves. Even further, while Europe did finally begin to invest more in defense during his tenure, his words and actions showed his contempt for values-based allies in NATO and Europe, undercutting the very post-World War II alliance that enabled decades of wealth to be amassed on both sides of the Atlantic. The final nail in the coffin of that decades-long Euro-Atlantic relationship could be marked by his promise to end the war in Ukraine [“in one day.”](#) His vision of “peace” likely means forcing Ukrainian capitulation by giving up large chunks of territory as well as important aspects of its sovereignty; perhaps promising money that would feed into American reconstruction contracts, while holding a ceremony in the Rose Garden with Putin triumphant and Zelensky a supplicant. While simple language and false promises are a natural elixir for people struggling at home and taught to think of the “others” who are taking “theirs,” capitulation and abandonment is not victory, and ending a war by rewarding an aggressor makes everyone – including Americans at home and abroad – less safe.

VII. Selective Isolationism and Transactional Engagement

We are likely to see a new and destructive American foreign policy based on selective isolationism and transactional engagement, defined more by press events than any semblance of coherent policy. Trump’s administration will seek to convince the American people that isolation makes sense - but only if monetary gain is not on the table. And this will cut the legs under countries and people trying to throw off their own authoritarian or oligarchical shackles.

Soft, values-based power – arguably already in decline since 9/11 and then the financial crisis, through both Republican and Democratic administrations – aimed at populations will be even more eclipsed by elite dealmaking, generating a non-virtuous cycle. Those who still appreciate foreign policy based on [comprehensive security](#) (let alone the era of thinking about the idea of a [responsibility to protect](#)) need to learn how to explain that transactional isolationism will not make people safer, enhance their professional and financial prospects or reduce their day-to-day precarity. And they need to be ready to point out that preaching isolationism while making business deals with authoritarians reduces not only our moral credibility but hurts US security and economic prospects in the long run.

There will also be an increasing securitization of American soft power as well as hard power, and a turn to situational vs. valued-based deterrence. In this case a desperate optimist would say that even securitized engagement (for example, supporting youth educational programs overseas to purportedly counter violent extremism rather than just because it is generally good for any society) provides a continued entry point for democratization and development work. However, based on experience this could also [feed the same violent extremism dynamics](#) purported to pose a risk, targeting populations seen to be “to blame” while [dealmaking with the very anti-democratic leaders](#) who enable the conditions in which extremist recruiters seem to be the only ones offering an explanation for the rot and

theft people see around them.

It is going to be far more difficult to claim to be able to support democracy promotion globally when so many cracks within the US system are now clearly on display. The comprehensive security ideal is being replaced by transactional and short-term realpolitik.

All of the elements in the democracy promotion toolkits that have been the core of, for example, USAID's ideas and work – free media, independent judiciary, citizen participation, transparency in governance, anti-corruption, FOIA etc. – have either been degraded or are now being systematically undermined in the US. In addition to USAID and recipients of their funding being potentially subject to direct threat of having funds and support cut, Americans abroad doing work like this will need to fundamentally change their approach and language. We/they will have to at long last shift to the notion that democracy is an ongoing process of perfecting imperfect approaches and systems, and that [learning must go in both directions](#). Practitioners will have little traction or even respect working with partners in other countries unless there is a humbler approach grounded in [mutual learning](#).

VIII. Explaining and Personalizing Project 2025

The Project 2025 bait and switch is stunning in its hypocrisy, yet not surprising. In the summer, as more information about the more than 900 pages of [Project 2025](#) began to make the policies and intentions clear, [Trump claimed to have no idea](#) about it or the people behind it. Of course, the overlap between Trump's first administration and constellation of advisors and Project 2025 was substantial. And following his electoral win, when announcing his cabinet and key appointments, it was the height of cynicism but also predictable that he would propose co-author [Russell Vought to lead the Office of Management and Budget](#). It is doubtful that people who voted for him because of the price of groceries know just what is included in this sweeping and detailed vision. And it is precisely because its authors and supporters know the majority of working people would not support most of the ideas that Project 2025 was obfuscated and undersold.

Nancy McLean's book [Democracy in Chains](#) (2018) appears more and more prescient, as she explained the long and dedicated effort by handfuls of elite actors to reverse the democracy-widening gains of the mid-20th century to instead favor a model that would ensure lasting elite wealth and dominance. Thus the title – through hacking constitutional provisions and longstanding norms, and removing guardrails and checks and balances, America could continue to have a democracy, albeit one in chains. This aim is not uniquely American; Viktor Orbán's Hungarian model is being touted by his supporters in Europe as well as those in the US who envy the mix of Christian nationalism culture wars and a rules-free crony political economy. (The road map to this system was well described by Bálint Magyar's [Post-Communist Mafia State](#).)

Project 2025 was written by those steeped in the very neoliberal, business-first (only?) mentality at the real root of popular dissatisfaction, fused with Christian nationalism both cynical and believed through the "prosperity gospel" innovation. One of the more interesting tensions that will play out and may or may not be resolved will be between the two dominant factions in MAGA Republicanism – the free-

market capitalist libertarians, vs. the popular anger, allegedly pro-worker “just re-build the factories” camp. The latter either didn’t vote for the former, or have been led to believe their trickle-down libertarian falsehoods.

In spite of the Republican victory at many levels of governance, this coalition demonstrates from the onset some schizophrenic characteristics. On one side is Wall Street, adjacent businesses and private equity funds, business owners and oligarchs who want to cut regulation, slash taxes, and enable a rules-free environment to pursue short-term gain and lock in long-term advantage. These are the people who will be thinking more about quarterly earnings reports and profits than long-term investment strategies, let alone of the impact on communities of their investment plans and agendas; in recent years this focus on shareholder value at the expense of long-term investment has been clear. On the other side are the national populists espousing the more cultural elements of MAGA, often seeking some form of redress for the social and economic dislocations of the past 40 years, though through inward-looking cultural tropes rather than disruptive systemic economic shifts.

Reconciling these two elements will not be easy, particularly once legislative proposals begin to be developed. Perhaps the darkest scenario would be a Trump administration that destroys democratic oversight while empowering a traditional and tech oligarchy, to be followed by the Christian nationalism of a Vance administration feeding on the even greater pain and indignity of the voter by echoing a Viktor Orbán/Vladimir Putin call for a retreat to a traditional, patriarchal community and family approach to life, leaving the federal/national/economic spheres to the wealthy few to exploit as they please.

[Lawyers and activists are girding](#) for the coming struggle. But all those opposed to this vision of the US need to figure out how to articulate for people who may not even know what the words “authoritarian” or “oligarch” really mean how the pursuit of or fulfillment of this project would affect their lives. How to explain to people who have been marinated in the myth that success belongs to the individual, that the rich owe little to society, or that low taxes for the rich make sense since “someday I might be rich,” *that they would do better* if there were more solidarity? And at the same time, Democrats and Independents need to be able to articulate a fairer vision of a social contract to answer the question, “but what change are YOU offering?” It was heartening to recently see [the ideas of the philosopher John Rawls](#) noted in a New York Times op-ed, showing that at least some intellectual churn is happening.

IX. An Opportunity to De-bunk the Myth of Trickle-down Economics?

Citizens and politicians opposed to the incoming administration’s vision for the country would do well to really take on the intertwined concepts of trickle-down economics and manufactured scarcity, which together enabled a solidarity-destroying machine that facilitates wealth accumulation among the few, while the rest are blamed for not working hard enough. Trickle-down economists theorized/fantasized that cutting taxes on corporations and the rich would catalyze so much economic growth that the cuts would pay for themselves and even render social welfare programs obsolete. [This did not happen](#). Instead, it made the very notion of taxes political poison, ballooned the national debt and increased inequality.

The idea of [manufactured scarcity](#) incentivizes hoarding and competition even in a society with a high GDP like the US. It is essentially the opposite of seeing society as a whole in which everyone has a stake. If someone else is getting subsidized medical care, then *my* medical care is at risk; if someone else is getting school aid, then my kids must be getting shafted, and so on. It feeds accelerated social atomization, making collective action far more difficult. It make it possible to avoid questions like, “why is the tax base today so much less progressive than in the ‘50s?,” or “why does the wealthiest country in the world have so much poverty?”

The Republicans are still winning by selling trickle down economic fantasies even though that has been proven false for decades. How is this still so? Opposition voices need to simply explain these concepts, without shying away from illustrating how they are used to increase the wealth of the richest while dividing people against one another as everybody seeks to grab and hold onto “theirs.” The combination of trickle-down economic dogma and manufactured scarcity is a key element of right-wing populism and scapegoating. Until those drivers are revealed to be the manipulative shell game that they are, the greater the inequality and social fractures it enables will become.

There is already a crystal meth-like high coursing through the veins of the markets. The looming Trump tariffs, if actually levied, will have short-and long-term impact on consumer prices that will go far beyond the household budget pain felt by people who voted based on the price of eggs. This needs to be contrasted with the insecurity people have on all big-picture economic issues – health care, child care, education and retirement/elder care. The rich don’t need this social supra-structure. In fact, they may again aim to privatize social security, claiming it makes sense by pointing at the bull market runs, and never the bears. In this recent period, it was easier for the media to capture people expressing their frustration about the price of groceries than the price of health and elder care – those issues are so overwhelming and far off that people living day to day – everywhere – focus their attention on their immediate needs. The oligarchs will exploit that, again and again. It should not come as a surprise that ordinary people (not the wealthy) are already being [primed to brace for “hardship.”](#)

In a normal functioning society people and businesses should want predictability. The language of capitalism should be used in support of a social safety net – in the absence of confidence entrepreneurship is available only to the rich, and a few lucky exceptions that prove the rule. Those opposed to an economy and society that work only for a very few need to articulate an alternative.

X. Federal and State Rights – Operationalized Schizophrenia

After years of Republicans dominating the language space with rhetoric about “states’ rights”, we can expect to see a new approach. States’ rights will only be seen as legitimate and constitutional if they are in support of the conservative agenda. States won’t be able to make decisions about gun control, environmental regulations, abortion, or other issues without hearing that there are overriding constitutional concerns or federal interests. We are going to see an increasing level of assertiveness on these issues; and this is not unrelated to gerrymandering at the state level to ensure Republican governing majorities often in spite of the popular vote (consider [Wisconsin](#)). In spite of [a court decision](#)

[confirming California's vehicle emission standards](#) setting role, this continues to rankle MAGA disciples who need to oppose such steps to reinforce their narrative that there is no link between fossil fuels and climate change. While California won that legal battle, additional challenges should be expected, including different forms of pressure to weaken industrial, labor or environmental policies that will be summarily dismissed as “woke” or “ideological.”

The role of state governments and governors will be critical, and a certain amount of schizophrenia is already evident, for example, in [Missouri](#), where voters voted in support of a number of center or center-left ballot initiatives on issues related to abortion and a minimum wage, while voting *in* politicians who are openly opposed to these policy preferences. Democrats and Independents should exploit these rifts where they can; however, they have to overcome the distaste people in red states have for the Democratic label.

Some people think the US skirted the risk of civil war with Trump's clear and uncontested win of the presidency. However, people should recognize the seeds of civil war are sown and take root in a much more boring and bureaucratic way. (The dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 90s did not start with shooting; it began years before with heightened and increasingly politicized debates about federal vs. distributed power, and the economic dynamics therein, which fed the emergence of a new breed of media, political and ethnic entrepreneurs.) And in the US, this new kind of federalist tension will feed polarization. For example, a true test could be when a blue state, most likely California, first protests against federal mandates that would weaken environmental rules. California could choose to ignore the federal regulation, which would show yet more disregard for the rule of law. But then this could also create a pretext for federal retribution. While business, tax and economic fights like this would be fought in meeting rooms or courthouses, the space where we might see police/troops used in support of the enforcement of federal laws opposed at the local level would likely first be related to migrant detention, civic protest, the homeless, etc. – issues that will be framed by the right as “woke” and therefore illegitimate.

XI. Justice Only for the Powerful

The impact on the justice system and rule of law cannot be underestimated, as it is so multifaceted at this moment. While cases against Trump related to national security crimes and alleged tampering with the 2020 elections are being dismissed not due to lack of evidence or standing but the norm of not pursuing cases against a sitting president, the fact that American voters voted in a convicted felon in the process of appealing that jury decision shows the extent to which voters will shrug off some kinds of criminal activity. This is happening at the same time as violent crime, as opposed to white collar crime, is constantly noted as a top concern in spite of it [being on the decline](#). The difference in treatment and framing of white collar and other crimes cannot be delinked from race, class, and urban/rural outlooks. Local media constantly covers local (often urban) crime. White collar/financial crime is less reported – in part because it is increasingly less prosecuted. Defunding and understaffing the IRS and SEC will make getting caught even less likely, and therefore make risk-taking and malfeasance more potentially tempting and profitable. This institutionalizes and empowers one form of theft among the powerful,

while focusing on incarceration and fear among the poor, or among the poor who have developed shadow illicit economies in the absence of real opportunity. It's an economic turn on the [apocryphal saying](#) that one death is tragic while a million deaths is a statistic; stealing a box of razors is a crime, while stealing or defrauding millions is just the economy.

There needs to be a way to have a discussion in simple terms about whether or not the money and power of government should be used to ensure opportunity and justice for the strong or the weak. Social justice advocates need to avoid the pitfalls of, for example, decriminalizing shoplifting, or otherwise ignoring that sort of crime of desperation and opportunity. However, they also need to radically increase their talk about white collar crimes, corruption, and tax evasion. And people need to watch to see if the justice officials who were building and prosecuting cases against Trump are suddenly themselves pressured, mobbed and accused of the crime of doing their job.

XII. Counting on an Uninformed, Distracted and Frustrated Electorate

When Trump famously said, ["I love the poorly educated,"](#) it would have been more accurate for him to have said, "I love the uninformed." Following Trump's winning a plurality of the popular vote, [one can no longer say that this is not what Americans are all about](#) (as Biden often did). While tens of millions of people rejected Trump and the MAGA cult/movement, tens of millions of people reflected on the first administration, considered the likely policy priorities, weighed the rhetoric and decided this is what they want. However, it's also fair to say that a lot of people did not think about the policy details of what they were voting for; they just wanted to vote against a status quo they saw as unsatisfactory. Or they voted based on a vibe.

And again the disconnect between the grassroots, angry, anti-elite populist messaging and the incoming Trump administration being stocked with those very elites from the billionaire class is striking only in its predictability. This could be the bait and switch of the century; a move possible when words don't matter and there is no sense of meaning or truth or accountability.

For years the right, either for religious reasons or secular and self-interested financial reasons, have sought to shut down or severely curtail the powers of the Department of Education. In the federal system, the Department of Education has a limited but important remit, especially in places where barriers to educational access reflect deeper historical roots. The rationale for it being a perpetual target includes lingering resentment about the federal government desegregating schools (not only but especially in the South), a belief that the issue should only be handled by the states without regard to educational access or outcome issues, and conservative religious interests and retraditionalization agendas in general. Trump's nomination of Linda McMahon, a manager from the world of professional wrestling, seemed designed to insult anyone who thinks education matters. It is difficult to conclude whether the country would be worse off with the Department of Education eliminated, or re-shaped into a political tool and weapon that serves anti-democratic agendas.

There is little surprise that this is again already a talking point. Any discussion about the need for civic education, or media/digital literacy education will be immediately labeled as the demands of "the woke"

seeking to indoctrinate kids. There will likely be talk of weakening the teaching of the humanities and social sciences (which equip children with critical thinking skills), and more talk about turning schools into jobs training mills – essentially another transfer of wealth into private pockets as it should be the job of companies to hire well-educated young people and then train them to do the job for which they are hired. The gap in education, culture and expectations between blue and red states could further diverge. Those in support of the role of public education in a democratic system need to recalibrate their education policy and messaging to refute claims that they are controlled by teacher union agendas more than learning outcomes. However, they should also closely follow efforts to remove university diploma requirements from public sector jobs that may not in fact need them, [like in Pennsylvania](#). Good jobs in which people can earn a good living and live in dignity don't always require a four-year college degree, and this reality needs to be not only acknowledged but respected.

XIII. Towards Unaccountable and Oligarchic Techno Dystopia?

The tech sector is going to be given even more leeway to “move fast and break things” despite all the damage that we have seen this approach cause. There will be less and less stomach for even talking about the impact that technology has on people and communities. Do people want energy intensive crypto mining in their community? Do they want driverless cars, delivery drones and delivery robots? Why can a few people throw these into society without having enabled and secured informed consent? If coining terms is a first step in acknowledging a trend or problem, the rise of the [brologarchy](#) is an early warning of the potential damage that can be done by the combination of unchecked tech leaders working hand in hand with political leaders to exert influence on society free from the constraints of regulation or accountability. This has been called out as a “[tech coup](#)” that threatens democratic governance.

People – perhaps especially including MAGA devotees – are frustrated, marginalized, and alienated by the social change they have seen happening around them for a generation. They feel they have no control. That no one asked them. That this is all being imposed on them without ever having a chance to consider and consent to such changes. This frustration needs to be harnessed. With Musk at the head of Trump's informal advisors he provides a rare public and recognizable tech target for criticism and policy positioning. However, this will require that all politicians (including the Democrats) disentangle themselves from sweeping-in Silicon Valley (and other) tech money, embrace the notion of responsible regulation and public consultation and consent, and show through their words and actions they support society over brologarch dominance.

XIV. Can American Democracy Continue on the Basis of Women's Unpaid Labor?

Much has been made of the widening gender gap in American politics – and reflected in trends such as the brologarchy and associated podcast and radio guys. In the 21st century, how have male and female ways of looking at basic social and economic policy managed to diverge so much? The conservative framing vision of the role of government and social welfare is increasingly pitting men versus women,

with little regard to how some policies could benefit society *as a whole*. It will be telling to see how socio-economic issues and the consequences of austerity on social support programs will be framed, and whether opponents of the administration's agenda manage to demonstrate that measures to gut the already thin social welfare fabric would likely result in even greater reliance on the unpaid labor of the women who are [at the core of the formal and informal care economies](#).

The amplification of the macho approach to private and public masculinity cannot be viewed without a counterpart in some presumed nostalgia for a "traditional" approach to femininity, and the [backlash](#) against modernity. It's hard not to think that the manipulation of status anxiety, and of nostalgia for a real or imagined past (most often, and ironically, the 1950s with its era of strong unions and [a 91% top tier tax rate](#)) will have the greatest impact on women and girls, who if not scapegoated are bundled in to the basket of changes that many people – often, but not solely men – have found discomfiting. Do families really think that authoritarian, caudillo-style, big man politics will generate a different outcome than it has in so many other countries in authoritarian decline? And how can opponents of the backlash more effectively message on this policy in a way that framing cannot be simply smeared by the right as "nanny state" policies or even "Communist ideology," but as constructive social policy needed in the 21st century to ensure all people can reach their potential? This is a conversation that will need the support of unions across the board, and that itself should unabashedly harness the power of nostalgia for a policy era when there *was* less inequality.

XV. Is this a Development or Democracy Problem?

Fiona Hill's book, [There is Nothing for You Here](#), is a nice exploration of the threats to opportunity over the past 50-odd years in the UK, US and perhaps counter-intuitively, Russia. It was a good read, and she very effectively diagnoses the illness and its signs and symptoms. (The style of the book is autobiographical but also often quite academic, and therefore not always as easily digestible as another book with some similar echoes, JD Vance's [Hillbilly Elegy](#).)

In her recommendations, she provides a number of actions and strategies she thinks could address the roots of inequality and lack of opportunity that have undergirded the rising populist movements and distrust in the status quo and elites. Her proposals include investment in education, opportunity grants, community centers, university support, mentorship programs and other such initiatives. However, considering the barriers to such an approach in the US it was frustrating that she didn't explore the role of mostly Republican leadership in not only voting against such endeavors, but poisoning rhetoric about them by painting such issues as socialist, as nanny-state overreach, or otherwise undesirable.

Her good ideas address the signs and symptoms of the illness, not the illness itself, because none addresses the democracy deficit that has enabled the forceful erosion and defunding of such programs. In the case of the US, the "starve the beast" approach to undermining and slashing government has become the Republican default since the emergence and sociopolitical mainstreaming of Reagan, Grover Norquist and other anti-government advocates for decades. (In the UK this "austerity" approach has had [devastating effect](#).)

Hill's proposals suggest that she sees that the US has a *development problem*, when in fact it has a democracy problem. It is a democracy deficit that has fueled spiraling inequality and democratic dysfunction: laser-focused, tech-enabled gerrymandering; an imbalance in population and the structure of the US Senate and electoral college; a Supreme Court appointment approach that has been weaponized as a partisan tool; and last but certainly not least the corrosive and immoral impact of dark money in politics that has made democracy into a product. Tackling money in politics needs to happen first; then the road to reform in support of more even development and opportunity on the other issues will be far, far easier.

XVI. If Institutional Guardrails Fail, Popular Mobilization as a Necessary Corrective

Much is being made about the fact that this was the first Republican presidential win of the popular vote in over two decades. Many gains were made at many levels. Trump's 312 electoral votes handily beat Harris's 226. And looking at a map with so much red is eye-catching. But as the counting was completed it became clear that Trump did not receive 50% of the votes. [As of mid-November, Trump had received 49.94%, and Harris 48.26%](#) of the popular vote – hardly the beating it was initially made out to be, and certainly not an overwhelming mandate of the people. This was not a pronounced electoral drubbing as seen in the UK earlier in 2024. It's interesting to ponder how different American voting patterns might be if there were a parliamentary system that might be more able to reflect the nuances of interests and ideas.

There will be many Americans who neither embrace nor want the policies that will roll out after January 20 – among those who did not vote for Trump, but also among those who did but suddenly feel they were misled. What guardrails are left after years of deregulation, the subtle creep of the [unitary executive theory](#), which claims the President has sole power over all executive institutions and agencies (thereby robbing them of their independence), court packing with anti-government jurists, and Trump's evident scorn for any limits to his presidential power? As the institutions of the federal government can be expected to be grossly undermined, it is important to look at what options remain. Peaceful yet determined citizen resistance will be needed. But there will be debates on the extent to which this should happen on the street vs. through citizen engagement and pressure on their officials at the local level – in their towns, state assemblies and in front of their House and Senate constituency offices, or through [citizens' assemblies](#). In some places this will likely be routine, while in other places it could heighten tensions, lead to counter demonstrations, and in the worst case result in violence.

If one of the last guardrails will be civic protest, plans to paint these people as “enemies from within” and agitators have been underway by Trump for some time; it's not a far stretch to imagine that intended or unintended violence and damage, or provocateurs put into these crowds to provoke aggressive behavior, will be used as a pretext for harsh crackdowns. The potential for not only local police but possibly also the National Guard and even the US military to become involved in an increasingly non-democratic America is a looming reality. It will be important for citizens who oppose change in policy and personnel to approach this carefully. Marginalizing groups who might be willing to use violence is important; as is keeping an eye out for outside agitators. Visibility of community leaders

and faith leaders will be important, as will families, children, and pets – to show a non-threatening face of the concerned.

History shows that intentional or unintentional violence will capture the most media attention, while images of people on streets peacefully protesting will likely receive less coverage. We can expect that the news – especially but not only the right-wing media ecosystem – will focus on the outliers and the violent. People need to consider what is happening outside of the picture frame or video, and not allow their view to be manipulated in such a way that they stop thinking about the issues that brought the people out onto the street in the first place. Such engagement will be vitally necessary, as democracy will need to trickle up to begin to address the top-down threats facing the country.

XVII. The Struggle and Focus Going Forward

Solving a democracy problem is inherently political. The extent to which development and general human welfare has been allowed to degrade is a result of and a reflection of the democracy deficit that enabled it. The structural weaknesses in the US system, and the erosion of norms, have enabled this democratic decline.

Unfortunately, there have already been signs that many people, including activists, are feeling exhausted, signaling that being engaged in these issues, particularly since 2015, has led to fatigue. Even if, for example, rallies or demonstrations around the time of Trump's inauguration will be planned, it's difficult to imagine that they would attract the same numbers or attention. Even more, it's easy to imagine that some people may have already heard about plans for retribution, and may want to avoid a real world environment like the rage they are seeing on X. These people may choose to keep their head down.

For anti-democratic authoritarian regimes, fatigue and hopelessness are the point. They and the circles around them seeking to become more wealthy and more powerful want the average person, the majority of the population, to [tune out](#). They want people to be cynical and frustrated, and to think that it has always been this way, and nothing can ever change. They want people to be ill-informed, and distracted by skeptical political infotainment. They want people to see a few high-profile performative televised events, and forget a few years down the road that those events were never accompanied by actual legislation or bills that ultimately affected their communities.

Fighting this fatigue requires many strategies. One is a simple act of seeing reality and remembering history, and looking back to movements that were truly impactful (women's suffrage, civil rights) where one can see that it took decades or generations of concerted involvement to effect change. The short-term, clicktivism approach and mentality is what is new. While online tools can help, they are just that – tools. They cannot be allowed to be perceived as replacing the in-person engagement – in living rooms, in town halls, in pubs and diners – the real organizing that is required by a civil society. What Timothy Snyder calls [corporeal politics](#).

Second, Americans have much to learn from citizens in other countries who have been doing this same kind of work for years. There has never been a more crucial time for democratic values-based citizens to

engage in exchange in every direction. People need to seek out these opportunities, and foundations and patrons who recognize the importance of pushing against authoritarianism need to be encouraged to support this engagement.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, people need to know what it is they are organizing and working for. Particularly in center or center-left movements, contrary to right-wing authoritarian movements, there will be splintering of interests and agendas (and this will be amplified and exaggerated or even falsified by certain media). There will be less willingness for people to put aside nuances and fall in line. There will be some people who don't want to compromise. This is OK; in a democratic system many different people have and prioritize many different interests. But this is precisely why the overall bonding glue of taking the money and corruption out of political life is so critically necessary, as that could provide the energy and reform to the major democratic structures that is absolutely necessary for any other citizen interests or agendas to have any hope of success.

There is a need for strategic and tactical thinking. Prior to January 20, there is time to shore up some defenses, even if doing so it is understood that they will be dismantled by the new administration immediately. The dismantling itself would contribute to contemporary narratives and historical retellings of this period of grave democratic risk. After January 20, an anti-corruption agenda can be an alternative narrative and vision.

A full-court press aimed at putting in guardrails – and also setting some outlines for a new narrative – is needed at the federal and state levels.:

- If there is any possibility or hope to if not institute more guardrails, checks and balances prior to January 20, then to take a long-needed yet also symbolic stance, the Biden administration should issue Executive Orders with the aim of setting out an anti-corruption, anti-money in politics agenda, which at minimum would require that the new administration would repeal them. These could include:
 - Transparency on money in politics/campaign financing (perhaps inspired by the [DISCLOSE Act](#))
 - Mandatory disclosure of tax returns for anyone working in appointed executive positions
 - Mandatory disclosure of tax returns for anyone working in a formally announced advisory capacity to the executive branch (like Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy in “DOGE”)
 - Prohibiting or highly restricting hiring family members as either paid staff or free advisors (the Democrats desperately need to lead an anti-nepotism push to take the “But JFK appointed his brother” retort off the table)
 - Pre-emptively protecting union organizing and confronting so-called “right to work” laws; this would also set the tone for strong pro-union values messaging later

Should (or more likely, when) Trump immediately repeal(s) these, Democrats, Independents, and other pro-democracy forces should begin a media offensive that in simple terms asks the administration why they don't believe in transparency, anti-corruption, etc.; this would at a minimum help to put the new administration on the defensive and ensure an alternative media narrative.

In the longer term the structural sources of democratic decline need to be tackled head-on. The root of all of these problems and stressors is money in politics that is unaccountable and untraceable and has made elections more about money than ideas. While Citizens United opened the floodgates, there had been creeping influence leading up to it. In addition to it being far more heavily proscribed, regulated, and transparent, there is a need for citizens to remember that *it doesn't have to be this way*.

While some reforms have been talked about for years, they should be bundled together so that there will be a clear anti-corruption and anti-self-dealing campaign. This should include independent redistricting at the state level to end the polarizing impact of gerrymandering; Supreme Court reforms related to ethics but also changing an appointment process that, by being based on death and "lucky" timing in terms of appointment potential, has turned into an unaccountable and illogical political tool; and guardrails to limit the manipulation of the Senate's "advise and consent" role, whether that includes abuse of recess appointments or failure to hold hearings on nominees.

Other reforms can be more explicitly aimed at taking money out of politics. This can link together many themes: inequality, self-dealing, union busting, the rise of monopoly capitalism, etc. This will not be easy for the Democrats who have themselves fallen into or have been seduced by the allure of money in politics. Many (or even most) of them are so accustomed to constant fundraising on the job that they themselves may have forgotten that it should not have to be this way. Further, they, like the Republicans, have often come to like the perks that come from fawning lobbyists, or the post-term consultancies and board positions. But this is the defining democratic issue of our time. Kleptocracy and democracy are incompatible, and it will soon be clear which of these options the wealthy among Trump would prefer to protect.

It will be necessary to find a way for the Democrats to begin to safely yet unilaterally disarm in terms of dark money and anti-democracy practice in order to make the difference between the parties more stark. Action at the state level could prove useful, as could broad-based messaging as this could be appealing to Independents. This needs to be values-driven and visible. Post-election emails constantly asking for money are just not helpful in restoring faith in American democracy. People shouldn't have to pay to play. There are many options that are both necessary to reverse democratic rollback and, being directly understandable to voters could re-energize a larger swathe of the population:

- A constitutional amendment against to roll back/counter Citizens United
- Set up expert groups (extra-institutional while the minority party) to look at revolving doors between government and lobbyists/companies, and between government and media, and to determine what a reasonable "cooling period" should be
- Build on public anger about the very visible and self-interested Elon Musk, making him the face of otherwise less visible wealthy political donors

- Support a steady drumbeat asking representatives why they do not support the transparency elements of the DISCLOSE act aimed at ensuring that people understand where money in politics is coming from and where it is going. This kind of information should be a basic right in a democracy (and is a requirement in terms of non-profit reporting requirements), and in the lingo of capitalism, such information is needed for consumers to make a decision that is informed. (The fact that [the ACLU has been against some of the relevant draft legislation](#) can be seen as a benefit to Democrats and Independents, and force them to hone and make a persuasive public and legal case.)
- Closely cover and aggressively disseminate info on anti-union activity. In a healthy democracy union interests that reflect working/middle classes should be bi-partisan.
- Point out that taking on money will be in line with citizens' stated interest in independent candidates; [Dan Osborne's senate run in Nebraska](#), where he was defeated only after a late game infusion of external GOP cash, can be a peg. Successful independent candidates will continue to be the exception that proves the rule unless campaign finance reform becomes reality.

The language of “disruption” will be common over the next four years. Disruption doesn't need to be bad if it is in service of the majority rather than a wealthy minority, and if it is considered rather than mindlessly destructive. All of the democratic deficits noted here (and more) do need to be fixed to reduce inequality, expand opportunity and create conditions for greater social cohesion – all requirements for a functional rights-based and accountable system. The question is whether the US will learn from its own history, as well as the ongoing experiences of people fighting kleptocracy around the world.