Pro-democracy Organizing against Autocracy in the United States: A Strategic Assessment & Recommendations

Prepared for Social and Economic Justice Leaders
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Executive Summary

Many groups in the US are focused on preventing the further rise of authoritarian forces by raising alarms about authoritarian power-grabs in key states; by building financial, legal, and electoral strategies to advocate for democratic practices and outcomes in state and national politics; and by scenario-planning responses to contested election outcomes in 2022 and 2024. This urgent and important work must continue and intensify in the coming months. This report aims to expand the conversation to also prepare for effective organizing and mobilizing in the aftermath of a nationwide authoritarian transition, should one occur after the 2024 election.

This report proposes nonviolent resistance strategies and support systems that could be relevant for protecting local communities and subjugated groups, and for informing a broad-based pro-democracy struggle under a hypothetical authoritarian administration. We suggest some immediate investments in infrastructure that could support effective pro-democracy organizing and mobilizing, both today and in the event of authoritarian decline or consolidation across all branches of government. An effective strategy will:

- **Build and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democracy united front** that continues to push for structural/institutional reforms and contest for power, even after authoritarianism has appeared to consolidate. The coalition should use ongoing local, county, state, and national elections as flashpoints by which to build a resilient and expansive pro-democracy movement, document election malfeasance, and promote anti- authoritarian platforms, reforms, and talking points for campaigns to take up at all levels of government.
- **Protect, hold, and build local and community power through alternative institutions** to address urgent communal problems, protect minority rights and lives, reinforce an oppositional pro-democratic culture, develop leadership, and build capacity for collective mobilization when needed.
- **Build pressure to induce defections** among those loyal to the autocrat or authoritarian alliance, including through widespread economic noncooperation and labor action.
- **Prevent, deter, and strengthen resilience to increased threats of state or paramilitary violence** through strategic planning and organized and disciplined actions, including building a capacity to anticipate, induce, and exploit defections; broaden inclusive participation; document paramilitary networks; publicize abuses; and demand local accountability.

The first element of the strategy builds on existing efforts to expand and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democracy united front that uses scheduled elections as an opportunity to message and engage, organize and mobilize a growing base of participants. If the US began to careen more precipitously toward authoritarianism at the

national level, the country would most likely resemble an electoral autocracy – one in which semi-competitive elections take place to preserve a semblance of legitimacy, but in which other features of democracy, such as rule of law, separation of powers, press freedom, and civil rights, are weak or nonexistent. Despite institutional rigging, elections remain crucial focal points for mobilizing robust collective action in electoral autocracies and for building healthy alternative (i.e. opposition) parties poised to take power. Pre-election nonviolent protests in authoritarian regimes are strongly associated with the defeat of authoritarian incumbents and the ushering in of democratic transitions.

A second element of the strategy is to continue building community power through alternative institutions, which can ultimately render authoritarian institutions and forces irrelevant and illegitimate in day-to-day life. The more opposition groups are able to establish and maintain political autonomy, prevent the local enforcement of unjust laws and policies, and provide services directly to their communities, the more obsolete authoritarian forces will become relative to pro-democratic ones. Here, the primary work of pro-democratic forces will be to gradually yet decisively build alternative institutions – such as economic cooperatives, fresh food and public health provision, mutual aid, community safety, strike funds, and other forms of cooperation – that dramatically reduce the reach, harm, and pseudo-legitimacy of the authoritarian state.

The third core element of the strategy is to continually divide and pull apart the authoritarian coalition by inducing defections within its pillars of support – this includes corporations, business and economic elites, media, party officials and staff, civil servants, security personnel, cultural influencers, foundations and philanthropists, religious leaders, organized labor, and other elite and local authoritarians. To do this, pro-democracy forces will require a deep well of nonviolent tactics beyond street protests that can build pressure without increasing risk, especially toward minority populations and targeted groups. Pro-democracy activists will require timely information regarding the sectors, institutions, and prominent individuals most closely aligned with the autocratic movement, inside information regarding potential wavering of loyalties among key insiders, and information regarding potential overlap in social networks with more neutral and/or pro-democratic forces. This requires, and ultimately goes beyond, effective coalition building.

The fourth core element of the strategy requires building and maintaining resilience and momentum even as repression and coercion or violence escalate. Movements can be more resilient when they find ways to make repressive episodes backfire – that is, when they are able to exploit the moment to demonstrate the autocrat's weakness or hypocrisy. This requires rapid publicization of verified claims of violence, anticipation and rejection of the opponent's attempted cover-up, and a consistent narrative that violence directed at the movement only takes place because the movement is winning.

Bolstering emerging pro-democratic coalitions, developing workable contingency plans, and engaging in widespread popular education regarding the threats of nationwide authoritarianism should continue where these efforts are already underway. However, the organizational infrastructure to develop and implement a nimble strategy in the event of an authoritarian transition does not currently exist in the United States. And, while scenario planning of malign outcomes, such as coups and institutional collapse, has taken place, few coalitions have gamed out potential resistance scenarios. Thus, we recommend building a united front that can provide the basis for a resilient, nationwide, pro-democracy coalition of local, state, and national left and center-left forces. The united front should have capacities in communications, education, training, intelligence, community power-building, scenario-planning, conflict resolution, and diplomacy.

In building this infrastructure, urgent investments include:

- Convening at least five cross-cutting, strategic-planning and trust-building intensive summits of grassroots and grasstops groups interested in forming a united front for multiracial, cross-class, feminist democracy defense.
- Developing a multi-pronged communication system to engage, inform, and inspire people from all walks of life to invest in and expand American democracy.
- Building an opposition power map.
- Engaging in extensive scenario and strategy planning among united front members and their constituencies.
- Developing and delivering a large-scale popular education and training apparatus with a shared curriculum.
- Establishing a global network of democracy movements, which builds alliances with prodemocratic movements, organizations, and national leaders abroad.

In the event of a democratic collapse at the national level, the united front must immediately implement key steps toward a rapid and sustainable resistance response. These include:

- Implementing a multi-year strategy to contest, monitor, and mobilize the pro-democratic united front during election windows, beginning in 2025.
- Leveraging labor and social reproductive power on a massive scale.
- Activating a nerve center for coordinating credible communications, collective assessments, and communicating tactical moves, and for responding to disinformation and crackdowns.
- Training, equipping, and deploying volunteers to document and publicize abuses.
- Mobilizing legal assistance and public pressure to secure swift releases from prison.
- Implementing organizational security plans, and preparing to move people and assets to safehouses or, in some cases, abroad.

- Implementing succession plans when leaders are indisposed, compromised, jailed, or killed.

If it is not necessary to deploy the full power of the anti-authoritarian united front, it can demobilize without doing any harm – perhaps having strengthened communities and democracy along the way. However, if it is needed, investing in the infrastructure to support an anti-authoritarian united front now will help the country and communities to weather the storm of darker days to come.

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Introduction

The world is in the midst of a "Third Wave of Autocratization."[1] Countries swept up in the current "democratic recession"[2] follow a pattern: nationalist, right-wing populist leaders win electoral power, either by seizing control of established parties or by creating their own parties, which become electoral juggernauts. Once in power, they consolidate control in the executive branch and abuse power persistently and incrementally in a way that "divides and disorients their opponents."[3] They use divide-and-rule tactics within their own parties and nationally to secure their hold on power, particularly by manufacturing and exploiting identity-based cleavages and by attacking and weakening other institutions, such as the news media, legislature, courts, and civil service.[4] Importantly, such autocratic leaders are often deeply popular, obtaining formidable electoral support and emboldening anti-democratic extremists within the country to mobilize on their behalf. In cases where countries began to backslide into authoritarianism but reverted to democratic rule, this was largely due to effective mobilization by pro-democratic civil society.[5]

Over the past seven years, the United States has exhibited the key features of the third wave of autocratization. Authoritarianism is not new to the United States; the country's national leadership has variously neglected, tolerated, or emboldened ethnonationalist autocratic enclaves since its founding.[6] In spite of the country's dubious history of authoritarian laws, policies, and practices, movements within the United States have also forged a rich historical tradition of resisting authoritarianism and promoting components of multiracial feminist democracy.[7] More recent experience with organizing and mobilizing demonstrates that the US currently has the talent, knowledge, and experience required to implement effective strategies to organize community power and mobilize broader resistance to authoritarian rule in the near-term.[8]

However, in the US today, what progress had been made toward realizing a multiracial, cross-class, feminist democracy has been threatened by ascendant authoritarian forces. The MAGA faction of the Republican Party holds formidable electoral power in an increasing number of states, including in former blue strongholds such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. A

[1] Repucci and Slipowitz 2022; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Maerz, et al.. 2020; Boese, et al 2022; Burows and Stephan 2015.
[2] Diamond 2015, 2022.
[3] Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Coppedge 2017.
[4] McCoy and Somer 2019.
[5] Haggard and Kaufman 2016.
[6] Mickey 2015; Grumbach 2022; Grumbach and Michener 2022.
[7] We use the term "multiracial feminist democracy" and similar phrases to refer to a broad tent conception of progressive democracy that seeks to not only protect the rights of racial, religious, ethnic, and gender minorities and women in US history, but also to correct for and vision beyond their historical and ongoing legal or social subjugation. A narrower conception of multiracial feminist democracy could also be adopted as the explicit and protected equality of all people, regardless of race or gender, as citizens and stakeholders in a rights-based democracy. Both are threatened by far-right authoritarianism.
[8] Pressman, et al. 2022; Buchanan, et al. 2020; Fisher 2019; Rubin 2021.

significant proportion of the population rejects the legitimacy of the current presidential administration based on the former president's fabricated claims the election was "stolen." Political scientists generally agree that the current polarization within the United States is largely caused by radicalization within the Republican Party, whose MAGA faction unapologetically—and with few exceptions—has promoted an exclusionary vision of a white nationalist, Christian, patriarchal nation.[9] Extremist politicians and legislatures aligned with the MAGA faction[10] already dominate numerous populous states in the country, such as Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina. And MAGA candidates have already won gubernatorial or senate primaries in key states such as Ohio, Nevada, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and beyond. In many of these states, they have consolidated Republican control of government through gerrymandering, purging their own party (particularly through primaries run by aggressive loyalist candidates), and by maximizing political control over putatively apolitical appointed offices, from sheriffs and judges, to county clerks and secretaries of state.

Many pro-democracy groups are already responding or developing strategies to respond to anti-democratic laws and practices in states that have reverted into authoritarian political control, and organizing to prevent further power grabs. Much of that work focuses on voting rights, civil rights litigation, and attempts to bolster pro-democracy candidates at the polls. All of this work is vital and must continue and intensify over the coming months and years. However, it is possible that such efforts will not soon be able to overcome the substantial institutional advantages that the MAGA faction already enjoys in numerous states, or the minoritarian institutions within state and federal government that provide the MAGA movement disproportionate access to power (e.g. gerrymandered electoral maps, the Electoral College, the Senate, the filibuster, and the Supreme Court). These anti-democratic institutional advantages could give the authoritarian wing of the Republican Party a firm grip on all three branches of federal government—the White House, both chambers of Congress, and the Supreme Court—and control over an even greater number of state and local governments within the next three years.[11]

If the US began to careen more precipitously toward authoritarianism at the national level, the country would most likely resemble an electoral autocracy–one in which semi-competitive elections take place to preserve a semblance of constitutional legitimacy, but in which other features of democracy such as rule of law, separation of powers, press freedom, and civil rights are weak or nonexistent. This is the most common form of authoritarianism in the world today, and it is a typical regime type among countries in which authoritarian movements and parties

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[9] Hacker and Pierson 2015; Grumbach 2022.

[10] For our purposes, we define "extremist politicians" as those who subscribe to the "Big Lie," advocate overtly authoritarian policies such as restricting ballot access or gerrymandering to exclude Black voters in particular, restricting political expression and protest, promoting Christian nationalism or white supremacy, and using or promoting violent or hateful rhetoric toward the news media, political opponents, intellectuals, and others they brand as "enemies of the state."

[11] The GOP currently holds a trifecta in 23 state governments, with divided governments in 13 states.

https://ballotpedia.org/State_government_trifectas#Trifecta_status_over_time.

within a democracy are the primary drivers of backsliding.[12] Although authoritarian leaders in the country may ultimately delay or cancel elections, thus consolidating full authoritarian rule, this would likely not occur in the short- to medium-term. However, electoral authoritarian regimes often amend or rewrite constitutions, extend term limits, and significantly alter the institutional underpinnings of a once-democratic multiparty republic. The US has ample experience with electoral autocracy; many Black Americans living in Deep South experienced electoral autocracy during the Jim Crow era, for instance.[13] Numerous states in the US today—Florida, Texas, Ohio, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Georgia, and elsewhere—already display clear features of electoral autocracy.[14]

It is therefore vital to begin to imagine what the social, cultural, economic, and political landscape might be in the aftermath of a nationwide authoritarian breakthrough—and what might be required for effective pro-democracy organizing and activism in such a landscape. This study explores nonviolent resistance strategies that could be relevant for protecting local communities and subjugated groups and informing the next phase of pro-democracy struggle under a hypothetical authoritarian administration.[15] Over the course of our research, we did not encounter substantial forethought about the implications of a full-scale authoritarian takeover at the federal level, although many organizers were certainly concerned about preventing the further consolidation of authoritarianism in their states. Those organizers who had deeply considered the potential implications of an authoritarian transition in the US included those who have experienced authoritarianism in other countries or in US states that have undergone severe democratic backsliding in recent years. Overall, most groups and organizations were focused on preventing MAGA victories in state-wide and national elections, rather than responding to an authoritarian transition should it occur despite best efforts.

In this report, we focus more on the latter potentiality. We summarize historical examples of resistance to some far-right regimes both in the US and abroad, as well as lessons learned under the Trump Administration. We explore what might be needed in a potentially more repressive, volatile, and geographically complex context, focusing primarily on noninstitutional and movement actions, such as mass mobilization, civil disobedience, various forms of noncooperation, and ways to use state and local government power to protect peoples' and communities' rights, freedoms, and security. The study did not engage in scenario-planning

[12] Boese, et al 2022, p. 12.
[13] Mickey 2015.
[14] Grumbach 2022.
[15] In line with this scope, the research informing this report involved two synergistic elements: (1) semi-structured not-for-attribution interviews with 31 social movement leaders and organizers from across the US, which took place remotely between November 2021 and February 2022; and (2) a review of the scholarly literature on ways that mass movements have prevented or responded to supremacists' rise to power globally and within regional or state-level contexts in the United States, and reasons why some such movements have been defeated. These interviews were anonymous and were not recorded, nor have we included any direct quotations in this report; instead, the report synthesizes key points and recurring themes.

regarding how such an administration would likely come to power, nor which levers of oppression it might pull first. Rather, we took stock of the current capacities, gaps, and barriers regarding sustained nonviolent resistance in the US in the event that such a shift takes place.

Ultimately, we recommend a four-pronged strategy that can ensure ongoing, effective pro-democratic mobilization even if a nationwide authoritarian transition takes place. Moreover, we recommend a number of immediate investments toward an anti-authoritarian united front that can build and win power over the longer term, whether or not authoritarian leaders achieve majority control of both houses of Congress and the White House in 2024. This is not a defeatist assessment. Instead, we offer a blueprint for developing an infrastructure that can empower pro-democracy organizing over the long-term, regardless of what comes next.

Pro-Democratic Mobilization: A Brief Review of Top-Down and Bottom-Up Efforts

Although there is no perfect analogy for contemporary US politics, important patterns from earlier global waves of autocratization are instructive. The first wave of autocratization occurred in the 1930s, when numerous democracies succumbed to elected fascist movements, which usurped power and installed totalitarian regimes. The second wave occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, largely driven by coups and armed revolutions, which tended to install dictatorships. As such, the current wave of autocratization is more like the first, in that the vast majority of autocratic backsliding has occurred because of illiberal movements winning power through elections, and then usurping power through a variety of institutional and semi-legal means.

Several academic works shed light into how democratic countries facing illiberal challenges from within were able to defend democracy against them. In 1930s, fascist movements and parties actively used the rights and guarantees of democracy–or "play the democratic game"–to bring democracy to collapse. Political scientist Giovanni Cappoccia puts the problem this way: "the 'enemy' is not only *ante portas* (at the gates)...they are also *intra moenia*, that is, inside the citadel of democratic political institutions….the vanguard of the antisystem movement may sit in parliament while the rank and file commit violent acts in the streets."[16]

Fascist parties gained significant electoral ground in numerous democracies during the interwar period, ultimately winning and then usurping power in several key countries.[17] But the leaders of three countries–Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Finland–were able to effectively stave off serious

[16] Capoccia 2007, pp. 4-5.

[17] The United States was not among these; although it has had robust fascist and white supremacist movements (including during the 1930s), these movements have never succeeded in *fully* capturing either of the two major parties in the US at the national level. However, they have sown divisions within both parties and have succeeded in elevating authoritarian leaders who have established or maintained authoritarian enclaves in various states. See Mickey 2015.

fascist party challenges through a series of assertive accommodative and coercive measures intended to divide and conquer these parties. Czechoslovakia and Finland were the most aggressive in doing so. They variously banned antisystem parties; created explicit electoral barriers or thresholds that prohibited fascist parties from winning significant seats in elections; passed special legislation giving the government expanded powers to protect public order against fascist violence; provided the executive branch authority to review and approve mayoral election results; restricted fascist propaganda, symbols, and uniforms; withheld permits to assemble; denied access to state radio or media outlets; arrested or searched the homes of fascist leaders; made direct appeals to public opinion to resist fascism; made policy concessions to more moderate right-wing factions; and created alternative organizations that could incorporate some far-right elements. Fascist parties in Czechoslovakia, Belgium, and Finland were effectively defeated internally; these three democracies only collapsed later, following the Nazi invasions and occupations of Czechoslovakia and Belgium and the Soviet invasion of Finland.

Cappoccia acknowledges that civil society groups may have had an indirect impact on these outcomes by mobilizing electoral support for democratic political parties and encouraging them to stand up for democracy. However, decisive government action to defend democracy against antisystem challenges was necessary to defeat these movements–and winning elections was the primary way through which pro-democratic groups captured or maintained the power to implement these aggressive and controversial steps. For instance, civil society groups did mobilize to resist the rise of fascism in Germany. However, without the emergence of a center-left anti-authoritarian coalition that could contest the fascist party at the polls, civil society mobilization was insufficient to prevent the Nazi's electoral victory, or the alliance between Nazi and conservative factions within the country.

Histories of resistance within countries that did succumb to fascist rule are sobering. In the immediate aftermath of far-right autocratic takeovers, these regimes commonly invoked emergency powers to ban opposition parties, expel opposition politicians from existing offices, jail or kill politicians, union leaders, and minorities in mass detentions, censor the press, and centralize command over police, paramilitary, and military forces, from the village level up.[18] Vigilante denunciations of suspected "enemies of the state" became common. In the case of Nazi Germany, the national government quickly and effectively upended the federal system by eliminating independent state governments and bringing all administrative and security services under the direct control of the central government.

The current far-right movement in the US is likelier to turn to electoral autocracy rather than the totalitarianism of the Nazi regime. At the national level, this could include emergency decrees banning protests and certain forms of speech, or invoking security forces for domestic policing; lack of legal redress and consolidation of executive power, including loss of Court independence;

[18] Shirer 1961; Hett 2018; Sullivan 2016.

and persecution of party insiders and outsiders. At the state level, MAGA-aligned politicians and legislative majorities could also further diminish the influence of opposition party officials; persecute oppositionists; pass laws that criminalize speech, assembly, and protest; further cut state funding to programs and services to harm and disempower poor and marginalized communities; and turn a blind eye to hate crimes and vigilante violence directed at oppositionists and marginalized individuals and groups. Such measures accord with the US's own history with prior waves of nascent democratization and authoritarian backsliding in the Deep South, along with contemporary trends in numerous US states that have experienced a wave of democratic backsliding since 2010.[19] However, it is prudent to prepare for many eventualities, including the possibilities that emergency powers could be invoked by aligned state and national leaders to bar the Democratic Party from competing in elections; to abolish state governments or bring them so closely aligned with the federal government that they are no longer autonomous from it; to jail or kill key opposition, media, labor, and religious figures; and to censor or shut down independent media entirely. It is also possible that law enforcement and armed forces become more centralized and overtly aligned with authoritarian figures at state and national levels.

Yet it is also important to note that resistance has existed and endured in every authoritarian regime in the world–even in Nazi Germany. There, the resistance was fully underground and often was carried out by people whom the Nazi regime viewed as "protected" (such as Aryan women).[20] In other countries that had been occupied by the Nazis or allied fascist groups, resistance was much more well-established owing to the ability to build on existing political organizations that were not necessarily known to the foreign occupiers, common language, and shared sense of national identity.[21]

In Chile under the fascist regime of Augusto Pinochet, organizers and activists discovered ways to build alternative, underground sources of power that were difficult for the regime to detect and suppress. Despite widespread repression against organized opposition parties, labor unions, and leftist political organizations, pro-democratic forces built a coalition of families of the disappeared, striking workers, clergy, small business owners, and independent political groups. Rather than march in the streets, they banged pots and pans within their homes; built mutual aid networks, legal assistance, strike funds, and support for families of the disappeared; engaged in work stoppages and slowdowns; developed communications networks and political education; and waited for opportunities to oust Pinochet from power. Women whose brothers, sons, fathers, uncles, and other loved ones had been disappeared by the regime engaged in subversive performances of Pinochet's patriotic national dance ("la cueca") in front of the presidential palace. The opportunity to oust Pinochet came when he decreed a national referendum to revise the constitution to extend his term in power. The pro-democratic coalition seized on the

[19] Mickey 2015.
[20] Semelin 1993; Stoltzfus 1996.
[21] Foot 2016.

opportunity and drew on this coalition's resources and relationships to successfully organize a decisive "No" vote. Pinochet attempted to convince his inner entourage to simply ignore the results of the referendum and allow him to stay in power. Seeing the writing on the wall, however, his military advisors told him that he was finished.

Similarly, the white supremacist apartheid regime in South Africa prevented black South Africans from voting, excluded black South Africans from most land ownership, banned formal pro-democratic political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC), killed or imprisoned prominent opposition leaders, and committed numerous massacres against black students and protesters who were demanding their rights. But over several decades, a coalition of trade and labor organizers, civil rights groups, journalists, and other pro-democracy forces began to wield people power against the regime. The coalition put economic pressure on potential reformers within the ruling party to defect from it and to support an orderly transition to more democratic, representative rule. This approach involved an international strategy of mobilizing transnational solidarity networks to pressure multinational corporations to divest from South Africa's economy, pressure countries and international institutions to sanction South African government officials, and encourage countries to ban goods imported from South Africa. Over time, the country became so economically isolated that it became extremely reliant on domestic markets for economic viability. However, the coalition also implemented a domestic strategy of boycotting white-owned businesses; mobilizing general strikes; establishing alternative institutions such as economic and food cooperatives in black townships; and organizing marches and parades to maintain an oppositional culture. In time, the anti-apartheid coalition succeeded in eliciting defections within the white business community and, ultimately, within the ruling party, which elected a reformer. He unbanned the ANC, initiated negotiations with the ANC and other opposition groups, and ultimately agreed to hold the country's first elections in which black South Africans could vote. These developments resulted in a landslide victory for the ANC, which saw its erstwhile-imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela sworn in as the country's first democratically elected president.

And, of course, many of our readers will be familiar with the many waves of mass movements that pushed for greater democracy in the United States—expanding citizenship rights, extending the franchise to all adults, and establishing or defending an impressive array of rights and protections for women, children, workers, racial and ethnic minorities, and sexual and gender minorities, and others over the past century—confronting and often overcoming deeply entrenched, white supremacist, reactionary forces along the way.

Beyond the immediate ouster of autocratic regimes like Pinochet's in Chile, Botha's in South Africa, or the Jim Crow system in the Deep South, the way that mass movements resist authoritarianism is closely tied to the types of regimes that emerge in the aftermath of the struggles. For instance, gender-inclusive campaigns that rely primarily on nonviolent resistance

strategies have historically led to more durable, egalitarian, democratic breakthroughs than gender-exclusive or armed campaigns.[22] Multiracial and multiethnic campaigns are more likely to succeed and to lead to more egalitarian outcomes, as well.[23] Campaigns built on long-enduring organizational infrastructure are more likely to result in durable democratic transitions than campaigns that mobilize large-scale resistance without such structures.[24]

Effective, pro-democratic nonviolent resistance movements therefore typically build four key capacities: large-scale, diverse participation; the ability to elicit defections among the opponent's pillars of support; the ability to maintain organizational discipline and resilience as violence against the movement escalates; and the ability of the movement to innovate new tactics beyond protest—especially methods of noncooperation and the establishment of alternative institutions.[25] Campaigns that have relied on nonviolent resistance strategies were significantly less likely to be targeted by extreme levels of state-sponsored or state-sanctioned killings, such as genocides or politicides.[26] Extreme levels of repression against protests are far less likely to succeed in suppressing movements when the movements have built significant institutional or organizational infrastructure.[27]

We return to these elements later. Next, however, we assess the current landscape of pro-democratic mobilizing and organizing in the US with regard to these essential capacities.

Pro-Democracy Mobilizing and Organizing in the US Today

The United States has a well-established tradition of resisting authoritarianism and promoting multiracial feminist democracy, particularly during the 20th Century. Feminist, antifascist, Black, Chicano, Indigenous, labor, queer, and immigrant rights movements have all achieved numerous successes over the past 150 years. What progress has occurred in terms of gender and racial equality flows largely from these movements; the backlash to such movements shows how threatening they have been to white supremacist, patriarchal visions of the nation.

Building on these legacies, after Trump's election in 2016, numerous coalitions and "tables" emerged to resist his agenda and protect vulnerable communities from violence, marginalization, and in many cases, deportation. Coalitions like Fight Back Table emerged to try to coordinate strategy across different progressive groups. Large-scale, disruptive, civil disobedience among affected communities had notable impacts. In particular, protests organized at various US airports in response to Trump's "Muslim Ban" in early 2017 demonstrated that swarming tactics could sometimes yield immediate results. The energy generated from the Women's March,

[22] Chenoweth and Marks 2022.
[23] Bogati, et al. 2022.
[24] Kadivar 2022.
[25] Schock 2055; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Chenoweth 2021.
[26] Chenoweth and Shay 2022; Perkoski and Chenoweth 2018.
[27] Sutton, et al 2014.

which demonstrated a mass mobilization capacity, was largely channeled into local Indivisible Groups, which began to emerge in the hundreds and thousands across the country. Similar mobilization methods were repeated to prevent the GOP from ending Obamacare. Indeed, during Trump's presidency, the US experienced its largest ever mass mobilizations in the Women's March, the youth-led March for Our Lives, and the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprising, which itself was the largest and broadest mass mobilization in US history.[28] Other notable mass mobilizations included Families Belong Together, the Science March, and LGBTQ rights marches. Such mobilizations were almost exclusively nonviolent in means.

State and local organizers developed important tactics and capacities during this period. For instance, immigrant-led organizations pressured members of Trump's corporate advisory committees to step down, and several high-profile members resigned their positions. During the 2020 Racial Justice Uprising, some organizers directly intervened with local governments, encouraging them to negotiate with community and movement leaders. Others have had success organizing coalitions and mobilizing to get insurrectionists or their supporters to resign public office. This was done, for example, in Washington State, where a state senator resigned after the state GOP removed his office resources, staff, and committee assignments. He decided not to run again. Civil litigation, particularly as far-right paramilitary activity steps up, has also been an important tool in some cases. In many places in the US, local organizers established robust networks for sanctuary for people at risk of detention and deportation. Rapid response capabilities expanded in many parts of the country. When COVID-19 hit, mutual aid networks expanded in their scope and scale, demonstrating the capacity for alternative institutions to develop quickly and efficiently to meet urgent community needs.

As the country approached the 2020 election, a common narrative emerged that Trump's presidency–and the MAGA faction more generally–was an existential threat to multiracial democracy in the US. Although many people had long experienced this threat, the narrative became more widely accepted by mainstream institutions during the summer and fall of 2020. This narrative coalesced because of careful study of alternative scenarios suggesting that Trump was likely to attempt to use the power of the state to remain in office, whether or not he won the election, and that a contested election was the most likely scenario regardless. The shared narrative facilitated the emergence of a strong negative coalition, which was willing to use litigation, mobilization, and the threat of large-scale mobilization to prevent or respond to a potential coup.

Many local organizers engaged in extensive voter registration and get out the vote efforts, as well as efforts to organize seamless and transparent election administration, such as recruiting volunteer translators, poll workers, and monitors to ensure the poll lines allowed for everyone to vote. Multiple organizations like Protect the Results, Count Every Vote, The Frontline and

[28] Pressman, et al. 2020; Buchanan, et al. 2020.

Election Defenders, Joy to the Polls, Choose Democracy, Hold the Line, and others launched collaborative efforts in advance of the election to prepare for the possibility of an attempted coup. Such preparations involved virtual and in-person trainings in nonviolent direct action, local organizing, scenario-planning, media engagement, and other methods. For many, the main function of these trainings was to give people a sense of calm and self-efficacy, as well as a place to channel their anxieties and discipline both personal and collective responses to Trump's attempted coup. This is a key lesson in discouraging despair and helplessness, and encouraging sustained action and engagement. Mainstream institutions also stepped forward to insist on a fair election, such as big business, numerous professional associations, and former Secretaries of Defense, who legitimized resistance to the potential coup.

In 2020, Democrats won the presidential and Congressional elections despite a strong showing for Trump and the GOP. However, Biden's victory was not exactly an Electoral College blowout, indicating that the MAGA faction still has a powerful grip on political life in the US. Moreover, Donald Trump immediately began contesting the results, effectively initiating a coup attempt. Many state and local organizers had prepared for resistance to this possibility by interfacing directly with election administration officials in their counties and states, anticipating GOP tactics, and responding to them immediately. This preparation paid off in places like Detroit, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and elsewhere, where local organizers mobilized rapid response to try to protect poll-counting places to ensure that every vote was counted, amidst an onslaught of pro-Trump protesters trying to interrupt proceedings. For instance, after the election in Michigan, when it became clear that several GOP-appointed members of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers might not certify the election results from Wayne County, organizers live-streamed the public meeting. Once the *Washington Post* and other news outlets picked up the live-stream, one GOP member abstained and the other voted to approve the certification. Later, when President Trump appealed to GOP Michigan legislators to vote against the certification of Joe Biden, local groups rapidly organized protests against defying the people's vote, directly confronting those legislators at the airport.

A key development was the decision made by Fox News election analysts to call the election for Biden on November 7th, which tipped the public discourse in Biden's direction and demoralized significant elements of Trump's campaign staff. But Trump's persistent efforts to promote the "Big Lie" that the election was stolen only deepened the ongoing crisis in multiracial democracy in the US. The January 6th Capitol Attack was but one step in Trump's sustained attempt to maintain and tighten his own grip on power. The MAGA faction that supported the "Big Lie" on that day has only become more deeply embedded in the GOP since then, solidifying the party's embrace of authoritarianism. The party has obstructed Biden's agenda in Congress, upended local and state primaries and elections, scored generation-rattling wins through Supreme Court decisions, replaced recalcitrant GOP election administrators, and threatens a roaring comeback in 2024.

Thus, even recent experience with organizing and mobilizing demonstrates that the US currently has the talent, knowhow, and experience required to implement effective strategies to organize community power and mobilize broader resistance to authoritarian rule in the near-term. However, it is also clear that the pro-democracy organizing efforts in 2020 came somewhat late in the process. Moreover, numerous barriers and challenges could affect attempts to mobilize large-scale, nonviolent resistance in the event of an authoritarian transition in the US.

First, there is no established, organizational infrastructure that can facilitate sustained collective action across a multiracial, multiclass constituency. Nor is there a centralized roster or map of existing allied organizations at the local, state, or national levels. This is, in part, because there are no active muscles for a united front orientation with independent parallel power within the US. Infrastructure in red states is not well-resourced, as many Democratic Party elites have largely ceded such areas to the GOP. There is a generalized lack of trust between local, state, and national organizers attempting to cooperate over the long-term. In general, it is difficult to work in coalition during moments of real risk, particularly because progressive organizers are not "wartime generals," and people and groups across the movement and nonprofit space face unequal risks. The legacies of white supremacy in the US have left little basis for trust across difference.

Second, institutional leverage with which to influence formal politics is shrinking because of minoritarian institutions at the national level (e.g. the Electoral College, Senate, the filibuster, and the Supreme Court); effective organizing (and, in some cases, gerrymandering) by the GOP within numerous states; the alignment between powerful interest groups such as police unions and the GOP; and anti-democratic moves within GOP-controlled states.

Third, economic strain poses a barrier to effective pro-democracy organizing, particularly among the working class and working poor. For many working-class people, the late COVID economy was the best they had ever experienced. Rising inflation, stagnant wages, and market volatility have been extremely damaging for the Democratic Party, and the MAGA faction of the GOP has been very aggressive in promising a return to economic prosperity. Ongoing economic strain may therefore lead to decisive GOP victories in both 2022 and 2024. The business class may allow or openly align with authoritarianism to avoid engaging seriously with the demands of organized labor. Working-class discontent, inflation, and economic stagnation all threaten big business. As a result, the current climate is fertile ground for divide-and-conquer politics, and building a multiclass, multiracial coalition may be extremely difficult.

Fourth, the current ecosystem of nonprofit organizations creates constraints and incentives that discourage collective action against authoritarianism. Fundraising is a continual stressor on an annual basis, and most nonprofits face pressure to focus on their core issues rather than the core

pillars of democracy. This is constrained by funding, reputation, and organizational inertia. Moreover, it has led to a sense that many nonprofits are divorced from their core constituencies because they tend to follow philanthropic priorities. Ultimately, most nonprofits assume that our institutions still work and will continue to do so. There is little shared realization that IRS scrutiny has not been used against the whole progressive ecosystem but could be.

Fifth, there are numerous culture clashes between – and within – the forces of the right, left, and center. The nature of the core culture problem varies across constituencies. Some diagnose the primary problem as one of mobilizing where the democratic coalition is already strong, without bolstering the edges. Others see a tendency to engage in soul-searching rather than having an action plan, along with a tendency to focus on in-group approval, which creates high barriers for entry, rather than focusing on how to build long-term strategies for victory. Still others see the core cultural problem as one in which the intellectual left takes up too much oxygen within the broader progressive movement. Ultimately, there has been no effective nation-building project or cultural production that has emerged as a counterweight to the MAGA project.

Similarly, the far-right dominates a robust informational and media ecosystem. Social media algorithms promote enclaves or "bubbles", and disinformation and conspiracy theories spread to a greater degree than accurate information through social media platforms. In most rural areas, local newspapers are gone, and even TV news can be blacked out. As a result, internet or radio may be the only information that people get, particularly if they work in sectors that require them to drive, work in shops, or work outdoors all day. The far-right has mastered the use of these information ecosystems by creating faux-news content (e.g. they mix immigration "news" and Big Lie propaganda with traffic reports, local sports scores, notices about lost dogs, and other information that is useful for locals). Moreover, few organizations are prepared for the possibility that companies like Meta or Twitter could turn their apparatuses over to the government, or the extreme vulnerabilities this development would create across their networks.

Sixth, there is a growing skepticism about the power of nonviolent resistance and an impulse among some of the left to arm themselves. In general, opinion polls suggest an alarming expectation of large-scale violence among both liberals and conservatives in the US.[29] The rise of the organized, armed right raises the specter of widespread communal violence or targeted killings alongside state terror. Concerns about security and paranoia regarding expanding surveillance have slowed many organizations down. At the same time, there is little robust infrastructure for deradicalizing and deprogramming members of the far-right. These realities are accompanied by a sense of collective despair, fatigue, and trauma among organizers across the progressive ecosystem. What is needed is a clear and convincing nonviolent strategy that can be effective in a highly polarized society. Methods such as silent marches, the development of alternative institutions, and various forms of noncooperation may be less polarizing than street

[29] https://zogbyanalytics.com/news/997-the-zogby-poll-will-the-us-have-another-civil-war.

demonstrations. Future research could help to further identify the types of approaches that could help to build power and apply pressure to pillars that support the authoritarian regime without further polarizing the populace in the current context.

There are also key points of disagreement among progressive organizers that are not necessarily barriers or challenges, but nevertheless raise unresolved questions that are important for situational awareness. First, various organizations assume fundamentally different theories of change, particularly regarding the value of organizing and mobilizing traditions. Some bemoan the dominance of mobilization culture over organizing power. Others point out that mass mobilization requires a theory of which decisionmakers to impact, but that developing such strategies can be a contested and disputed process. Despite the tensions between these approaches , they are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily have to oppose one another. Organizing empowers communities to take action based on a shared concern. Yet without finding ways to assert pressure, including through mobilization, such organizing can fall short of realizing shared goals. Organizing is required to build power; mobilizing is often required to wield it. Therefore, it is crucial to develop relationships and coalitional strategies that combine the strengths of both organizing and mobilizing traditions, rather than seeing these as opposing and incompatible approaches.

Second, the current relationship between state-based and national progressive organizations remains tense. Many state-based organizers do not want national organizations building strategy; instead, they want them to provide resources and support when it's needed. However, it is also important to note the "nationalization of local politics" in the US over the past four decades.[30] Moreover, many of the most effective and knowledgeable local organizations are networked via national associations, unions, and community and political organizations. The far-right does have a national strategy that aligns with local and state-level organizers; countering this strategy will also require alignment and coordination between states and national groups.

Third, many organizers have an extremely ambivalent relationship with current Democratic Party leadership. This concern is increasingly acute as many establishment Democratic lawmakers seem to believe that they will lose the House in 2022 but regain a House majority in 2024. They do not seem to believe that the threat to democracy is real and imminent. Moreover, the Democratic Party tends to focus on a national strategy at the expense of local and state-based strategies. This is because of the concentration of Democratic power in select blue states and cities, whose constituents pool their resources nationally to focus on where they can have the greatest impact elsewhere. Yet this approach neglects the most important power centers in determining the course of the country's future–local and state governments, where the rules of democracy have been redrawn to favor the GOP.

[30] Hopkins 2018.

Finally, an ongoing tension relates to whether to build a vision that appeals more to the center or the left. Strong center-left coalitions were crucial in staving off fascist challenges within democracies in the 1930s. For their part, establishment figures on the center-left and center-right tend to be averse to sustaining deep partnerships with groups on the progressive left. Moreover, center-left unity is highly controversial across progressive groups within the US today. For many community organizers, the Democratic Party's current policy objectives are not progressive enough. For others, the Democratic Party's progressive platform mostly looks symbolic (including, for instance, on police reform and fighting the culture wars) as opposed to meeting urgent material needs. As a result, they see many working-class people (including working-class people of color) shifting away from the party.

Across the global historical record of anti-fascist resistance and authoritarian collapse, there are no direct parallels to the deep federal tradition of US democracy. Its longstanding, decentralized and multilevel institutional form poses unique challenges for building a well-coordinated pro-democracy movement. But it may also mitigate against the consolidation of fascist or authoritarian power in the short term. Several of the wealthiest and most populous states, like New York and California, which are lynchpins in the national and global economy, have been in the firm control of center-left Democrats and seem less likely to acquiesce to an authoritarian regime overnight. At the same time, centrists have succeeded at the executive level in states not traditionally controlled by their party (such as Gov. Andy Beshear in KY, Charlie Baker in MA, and Larry Hogan in MD), suggesting potential bridge-builders or "first responders" in the event of an electoral vote heist by rogue governors or secretaries of state in 2024.

In the context of a widespread anti-authoritarian resistance movement, it will be crucial to pull these strategic structural levers – blue cities and big states – to maintain and expand spheres of influence or control, while also attending to the communities most affected by democratic unravelling in authoritarian strongholds. A pro-democracy coalition that ignores red states and counties will likely fail. Careful scenario planning and deliberately coordinated coalition work will be essential to maximizing the country's democratic potential and activating centrist pillars of support, while putting out fascist fires. The barriers, gaps, and tensions among pro-democracy forces discussed above inform our approach regarding strategy and our recommendations regarding the infrastructure required to enable it.

A Strategic Approach for Pro-Democracy Organizing in the US

Under an electoral autocratic system, there would be multiple potential avenues for continued pro-democracy mobilization and collective survival in the event of an authoritarian takeover in 2024. A pro-democracy movement with an effective strategy will build diverse participation (including across racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, regional, and ideological lines); elicit defections; maintain resilience and discipline; and innovate new methods of nonviolent resistance. In this case, such a strategy should specifically:

- **Build and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democratic united front** that continues to push for structural reforms and contest for power, even after authoritarianism has appeared to consolidate. The coalition should use ongoing local, country, state, and national elections as flashpoints by which to build an every-stronger pro-democracy movement, document election malfeasance, and promote anti-authoritarian platforms, reforms, and talking points for campaigns to take up at all levels of government. It will by necessity have to address some of the anti-democratic practices entrenched in the current two-party system in ways that maximize participation and buy-in among voters, on the one hand, and scope for defections or fragmentation in the authoritarian party, on the other hand.
- **Protect, hold, and build local and community power through alternative institutions** to address urgent communal problems, reinforce an oppositional pro-democratic culture, develop leadership, and build capacity for collective mobilization when needed. Communities of care can serve as powerful points of entry for convening across ideological lines or in fragmented neighborhoods, providing alternative sources of belonging toward democratic nation re-building.
- **Build pressure to induce defections** among those loyal to the autocrat, including through widespread economic noncooperation and labor action.
- **Prevent, deter, and strengthen resilience to increased state security force or paramilitary violence** through organized and disciplined responses, including building a capacity to anticipate, induce, and exploit defections; broaden inclusive participation; document paramilitary networks; document and publicize abuses; and demand local accountability.

The first element of the strategy would be to build and maintain a large-scale, multiracial, cross-class, pro-democracy united front, and to use scheduled elections as an opportunity to engage, organize, and mobilize an even larger pro-democracy base of participants. In electoral autocracies, it is possible—even plausible—to continue pushing for structural reforms that increase representation, autonomy, and power. Such efforts should be calibrated state by state to discern the most promising possibilities state by state. In a recent study of 371 episodes of liberalization between 1900-2019, political scientists found that reforms to election administration tended to lead to democratic transitions in the long term.[31] In particular, achieving reforms that make election administration more autonomous within electoral autocracies can be crucial for initiating broader democratic reforms in the longer term.

[31] Edgell, et al, 2022.

In the meantime, however, elections remain crucial focal points for mobilizing robust collective action–both prior to elections in which a unified opposition has successfully mobilized a committed base of supporters around candidates who commit to democratic values and practices, or following elections that are overtly fraudulent or unfair to opposition parties.[32] Indeed, pre-election protests in authoritarian regimes are strongly associated with the defeat of authoritarian incumbents and the ushering in of democratic transitions.[33] This is partly because the occurrence of elections is somewhat predictable, allowing opposition groups more opportunities for coordination, preparation, and anticipation of key moments in which to mobilize pro-democratic action. Moreover, voting itself is a deeply personal form of political expression, making perceived irregularities, fraud, or disenfranchisement potential motivators for diverse segments of the population to resist election theft.[34] (However, recurrent election rigging, including through gerrymandering or technical forms of disenfranchisement, can have a dampening effect if people come to believe their vote doesn't matter. The implication is that there must be electoral wins at local and state levels to maintain engagement, and sustained enfranchisement and voter protection efforts to hold space for opposition voting.) Bolstering norms and practices of democratic political participation in the midst of autocratic rule emboldens political engagement and participation by opposition groups and individuals, leading them to expect and ultimately demand representation. Indeed, the most durable democratic transitions have taken place in the aftermath of decades-long oppositional organizing, which helped communities to build the organizational infrastructure, leadership, and norms by which to build and contest for power over the long term.[35]

The US's federal system provides further opportunities to maintain or compete for political power in ways that can both empower and protect communities regardless of authoritarian power grabs at the national level, particularly in blue states whose institutions and economic power are dominated by pro-democratic forces. Moreover, the highly decentralized nature of US institutions means that local, county, and state elections can remain deeply competitive even in states where autocratic forces appear to have consolidated; local wins and upsets for pro-democratic groups in such settings can provide hope, inspiration, and a replicable playbook to pro-democratic forces elsewhere. Ultimately, and over time, pro-democratic forces may build sufficient power in enough states and locales to win back institutional majorities, in spite of gerrymandering and other attempts to eliminate political competition.

Finally, using elections as a focal point from which to build power to resist authoritarianism is also consistent with pro-democratic opposition groups' demands, which involve more genuine and egalitarian political representation, free and fair elections, checks on centralized executive power, and accountability to voters. Research shows that the public expects people making

[32] Tucker 2007; Beissinger 2007; Bunce and Wolchick 2006.
[33] Kadivar 2017.
[34] Tucker 2007.
[35] Kadivar 2022.

liberal and progressive claims to adhere to norms of fairness, justice, and equality; when they are perceived to deviate from these norms, they lose sympathy and support even among their core supporters.[36] (This is in contrast to public reactions to white supremacists; people expect white supremacists to behave violently and to use exclusionary rhetoric, and thus they do not lose sympathy or support when displaying these tendencies and can gain acclaim for even small and cynical displays of inclusion.) Thus, even unfree and unfair elections nevertheless provide critical opportunities for pro-democratic forces to build power, political participation, and support to advance their claims.

A second element of the strategy is to build community power through alternative institutions, which ultimately render authoritarian institutions and forces irrelevant in day-to-day life. Many dissident movements in Eastern Europe, organized under Soviet occupation and Soviet-backed authoritarian regimes, used this strategy. In Poland, for instance, opposition groups resisted the state's propaganda and control over education by organizing "flying universities," or underground schools, to build popular education free from autocratic influence. The more opposition groups are able to establish and maintain political autonomy, prevent the local enforcement of unjust laws and policies, and provide services directly to their communities, the more obsolete authoritarian forces will become relative to pro-democratic ones. Effective organizations build community power, meet people's immediate needs, and occupy governance vacuums where they exist. Here, the primary work of pro-democratic forces will be to gradually yet decisively build alternative institutions–such as economic cooperatives, fresh food provision, public health institutions, mutual aid, community safety, strike funds, and other forms of cooperation–that dramatically reduce the reach, impact, and legitimacy of the authoritarian state.

The third core element of the strategy is to continually divide and pull apart the authoritarian coalition by inducing defections within its pillars of support–corporations, business and economic elites, media, party officials and staff, civil servants, security personnel, cultural influencers, foundations and philanthropists, religious authorities, organized labor, and the like. Organizing and movement strategies should continually put social, economic, and political pressure on key pillars, starting with those most likely to defect (or desert) from the authoritarian regime.[37] To do this, pro-democratic forces will require a deep well of tactics beyond street protests that can build pressure without increasing activists' exposure to risk. Strike actions, go-slows, and union organizing are likely to be the beating heart of effective coercive resistance. Pressure on domestic and multinational corporations based inside and outside the US and household-level boycotts could be required to break an authoritarian coalition. Pro-democratic forces will also need to recognize that no pillars are monolithic, and that there are always opportunities to induce defections and noncooperation among many people residing within these pillars. As such, pro-democratic oppositionists will require timely

[36] Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018.
[37] Chenoweth, Hocking, and Marks 2022.

information regarding the sectors, institutions, and prominent individuals most closely aligned with the autocratic movement, inside information regarding potential wavering of loyalties among key insiders, and information regarding potential overlap in social networks with more neutral and/or pro-democratic forces.

Under electoral autocracy, violence will undoubtedly increase, since it is a key tool of authoritarians who seek to suppress, subvert, and terrorize potential oppositionists through state or paramilitary violence and harassment. **The fourth core element of the strategy therefore involves maintaining resilience and momentum even as violence escalates.** Police, military, and paramilitary forces are decentralized in the US, with most security personnel operating within a highly localized command structure. In the event of an authoritarian power grab at the national level, the most relevant centralized security forces available for domestic deployments–such as unconstitutional suppression of protests—include the National Guard, DHS and Border Patrol, FBI, and US Marshals. There are numerous other law enforcement agencies within the federal executive whose current legal authorities are limited but could be illegally commandeered by an autocratic regime (e.g. the ATF, IRS Criminal Investigation unit, etc.) and which could create serious legal headaches for opposition groups, particularly those with 501(c)3 status. However, the most immediate sites of coercion for most people would be at local levels, with police departments and sheriffs being the most relevant enforcers of new laws or biased interpreters of policing mandates.

The membership and operations of paramilitary and militia groups also tend to be quite localized but nationally networked with demonstrated willingness to travel across state lines for violent action. This can create vulnerabilities for activists, organizers, and opposition groups since militia-affiliated community members can easily glean intelligence and situational awareness regarding their plans and activities and disseminate these to a broader audience. However, it also creates opportunities for activists, organizers, and opposition groups who can likewise more easily discover, discern, and potentially deter the activities of militia and paramilitary groups.

The movement should document and publicize paramilitary networks, document and publicize abuses by police, and demand local accountability for crimes. It should also build a local capacity for rapid response to arrests (e.g. mobilizing legal assistance and protests at incarceration sites), extrajudicial violence (e.g. mobilizing journalists, medical teams, and legal assistance), and succession plans (e.g. clearly-designed lines of effort for movement organizers and leadership, as well as processes to replace them if compromised). Pro-democratic forces should also prepare to respond to infiltration or allegations of infiltration; an effective response among many nonviolent pro-democratic movements of the past was to accept some degree of infiltration as both likely and not an existential threat, since the movement is united and has nothing to hide.

Finally, movements can be more resilient when they find ways to make repressive episodes backfire–that is, when they are able to exploit the moment to demonstrate the autocrat's weakness. This requires rapid publicization of verified claims of violence, anticipation and rejection of the opponent's attempted cover-up, and a consistent narrative that violence directed at the movement only takes place because the movement is winning. In other words, this requires winning the information war. When successful, such efforts can demoralize the opponent's supporters and help the movement maintain a focus on the righteousness of their demands rather than the fear induced by the violent episode itself.

Crucial Capacities of an Anti-Authoritarian Movement

Implementing the above strategy in practice will be context-responsive as circumstances unfold, especially in different geographic regions and at different geopolitical levels.
Activists, organizers, and people in pro-democratic islands should be particularly aware of the exigencies and realities of resistance in authoritarian-consolidated spaces.

However, the organizational infrastructure to develop and implement a coordinated but nimble strategy in the event of an authoritarian transition does not currently exist in the United States. **We therefore recommend developing a united front–a resilient, nationwide, pro-democracy coalition of local, state, and national left and center-left forces.** This will require a general secretariat with a federated structure that takes full responsibility with a clear, central, and relational glue. It will also require a large-scale organizing of resources to create a resource bank that can fund legal support, strike relief, training, political education, and other support for chapters to organize and mobilize people.

In addition to material resources, the united front should develop seven key capacities—in intelligence, community powerbuilding, scenario-planning, communications, education, training, conflict resolution, and diplomacy—that can strengthen its ability to develop and implement a context-informed strategy. Specifically, a successful united front must:

> Possess an **intelligence** capacity that allows for the timely gathering, vetting, and analysis of information regarding the opponents' likely capacities, strategies, and movements. In the immediate term, a key step would be the development of a multilevel, multisector power map that identifies key pillars of the authoritarians' political and financial support, identifies and warns about potential threats, and helps to induce defections at the local, state, and national levels. Several groups already have anti-Klan or anti-white supremacy maps. However, comparable resources do not exist in all 50 states, nor does there exist a greater sense of movements' potential influence over potential pressure points in all 50 states. The power map should also highlight key enclaves of potential pro-democratic power, such as blue states that also contain substantial economic might. The power maps should provide clear reference points for which individuals or organizations would be

most likely targeted–organizations with resources that are nationally-visible and symbolically important (e.g. NAACP, ACLU, etc.). They may also provide guidance as to which types of entities are less likely to be targeted with witch hunts (e.g. LLCs).

Maximize **community powerbuilding,** politically but also practically, at the local and state level, and empower local neighborhood and community groups to build **alternative institutions** for economic, social, and security-related mutual aid. On the nonviolent resistance side, this means developing thick ties with neighbors, friends, and community leaders who are prepared for collective action in the event of large-scale crackdowns. Collective strategies could include, for instance, developing mutual aid networks, safehouses, and in-person communications trees that are not easy for authorities to track. On the institutional side, this could also involve training and supporting people who run for public offices that remain open or contestable (e.g. school boards, state legislature, city councils), even when winning is unlikely. This can help to build a base that can grow, since supporting candidates often helps to boost political participation and build capacities for larger-scale mobilization. Communities could also be empowered to use civil litigation as a means of generating accountability for abuses. They should also build or further develop legal and community resources that can be deployed as rapid responses to get people out of detention; build safehouse networks; use local, state, national, and international legal precedents to litigate; and continually contest elections. Blue states should be prepared to step up in protecting liberal and progressive policies and architecture in their states, to the fullest extent possible.

Engage in extensive **scenario planning**, tailored to relevant locales. In particular, the united front should develop popular education regarding how to tell if an election has been stolen or is being falsely contested. There should also be a prepared communications strategy regarding the possibility of the 2024 election outcome being decided by GOP-held statehouses.

Establish a **nerve center for winning the information war**. The nerve center would receive and distribute communications across the united front, coordinate credible information, collective assessments, and tactics, experiment with effective responses to disinformation and crackdowns, and develop strategies to gain access to and leverage over the news media. The nerve center should be connected to centralized hubs, nimble to crackdowns and shutdowns, and popularly understood as a key resource during times of crisis. Moreover, the nerve center should build the capacity for rapid response monitoring and documentation of potential crimes and abuses. Recruiting digitally native youth, journalists, tech assets, and people who have developed effective strategies to mitigate or respond to disinformation will be key to harnessing the capacities that already exist in

American society in this arena. The united front might need to possess its own communication infrastructure so they cannot be seized.

Develop the capacity for large-scale, coordinated **noncooperation across sectors**. This includes building connections with civil servants who can subvert or delay the consolidation of power. There should be dedicated groups working with elected officials and civil servants at the local, state, and national level.

Develop a large-scale popular **education and training** apparatus, involving basic information about how to stop a coup, the strategic logic of nonviolent resistance, how to participate in nonviolent action, and conflict de-escalation. Such trainings should explain clearly and convincingly the way that nonviolent resistance can be effective in a highly polarized society, and they should emphasize the futility of using armed struggle to fight an authoritarian regime. There should also be training on information literacy, encouraging people to avoid sending or falling for clickbait, verify sensational news before taking action, and pursue measured and useful analysis and calls to action. Finally, trainings should be available for making sure internal systems are as secure as possible among key united front organizations and operatives (e.g. using VPN, multi-factor authentication, and keeping knowledge management systems upgraded). There are numerous existing guides and resources available to build an effective training infrastructure; these could be collated and disseminated immediately.

Build and sustain a **conflict resolution** capacity, to assist with breakdowns in trust; disputes regarding authority or process; disagreements regarding tactical or strategic decisions; addressing and repairing harms; and other potential tensions or conflicts that arise within the united front. As others have argued, meaningful links between peacebuilding, negotiation, and civil resistance strategies could be especially helpful in building and sustaining this capacity.[38]

Mobilize **international allies** in defense of US pro-democracy forces. This could involve pressure on foreign governments to sanction or divest in multinational corporations that are part of the authoritarian coalition. For example, in South Africa's transition, global pressure on the business sector (alongside widespread economic noncooperation, strikes, and boycotts of white-owned businesses organized by black oppositionists within the country) was pivotal in forcing the single-party, white supremacist regime to the negotiating table. Transnational relationship-building can also help to generate plausible affiliations and resources abroad for people who need to flee the country with their families. The united front may also want to invest in servers, data storage, backups, and other assets that are located in safe places outside the country.

[38] Stephan and Roig 2022; Bloch and Schirch 2019.

Immediate Infrastructure Investments for an Anti-Authoritarian United Front

There are numerous ongoing efforts to build or strengthen pro-democracy coalitions, undertake strategic planning, and build popular education regarding the threats of authoritarianism in the US. To bring these efforts into alignment, and to establish an effective united front, some immediate investments are required. Specifically, we recommend:

- **Convening at least five cross-cutting, intensive strategic planning and trust-building summits of grassroots and grasstops groups interested in forming a united front for multiracial, cross-class, feminist democracy defense.** These convenings should focus on relationship- and trust-building, conflict resolution, alignment, and problem-solving among community, state, regional, and national organizations and movement leaders. The ultimate aims of these convenings should be to establish a common vision; build a functional federated structure with agreed accountability and dispute resolution mechanisms; identify which communities are likely to be immediately at risk in the context of authoritarian backsliding; and authorize inclusive and broadly representative groups of trusted servants who can lead the united front in developing and implementing strategies and plans. The primary purpose of the united front at the grassroots should be to enhance horizontal communication and skills-shares, organize mutual aid and support, and direct resources, where needed, to support urgent state and local requests in authoritarian hotspots. The structure of the united front might therefore be an upside-down pyramid, with frontline community and state-based organizations providing the bulk of the situational awareness and strategic priorities of the united front, and national organizations coordinating strategies, resources, and support as requested. This bottom-up structure can ensure accountability and responsiveness to the groups and communities most immediately harmed by authoritarian backsliding. These convenings should happen as soon as possible to allow for the time to build an effective coalition built on mutual trust. By 2024, the united front should have developed partnerships capable of implementing a multi-year strategy with reasonable confidence. The organizational structure should be engineered to protect financial assets (eg distributing funds assets across different states within the federated structure) and ensure that key public-facing figures have significant legal resources and protections.

- **Developing a multi-pronged communication system to engage, inform, and inspire people from all walks to invest in and expand American democracy.** This should be a priority outcome from the summits, with a mandate for experimentation and innovation to reach new audiences with a compelling pro-democracy message. Cultural and regional reference points should build a sense of belonging and solidarity, as well as agency and empowerment among diverse stakeholders. The authoritarian-leaning right-wing media ecosystem has exploded in popularity and has found a way to hold together inchoate ideas and otherwise opposed identities. A successful pro-democracy communication

counter-strategy will similarly cater to diverse audiences without undermining fundamental values of, e.g., inclusivity, accuracy, transparency, and representativeness of a wide range of constituents with both common and divergent interests.

- **Building an opposition power map.** The power map should be multilevel, multisector and identify key pillars of the would-be authoritarians' political, financial, social, paramilitary, informational, and cultural support. This would be a 50-state (+ DC, PR, Guam, and VI) power map, nested within a broader nationwide map. Although this would be a complex undertaking that would require research, coordination, and dedication, such a resource would enhance the development of effective strategy–particularly with regard to expanding a constituency, recruiting new partners, building alliances, and inducing meaningful multisector defections at the local, state, and national levels.

- **Engaging in extensive scenario planning, including the movement's own tactical innovation and action sequencing, among united front members and their constituencies.** These scenarios should focus on variations in state and federal outcomes animating different scenarios, and should focus on promoting an effective narrative, organizing communities to make concrete demands, mobilizing to induce defections, and withstanding counterattacks. These planning exercises should help united front members to stay one step ahead regarding power grabs in different locales, while also helping people to internalize the basic logics of popular resistance. Scenario-planning should also help community, state, and national organizations to prepare for the possibility of violence or terror directed at movement leaders and their networks, as well as succession plans for holding their groups and movements together in such contingencies.

- **Developing and delivering a large-scale popular education and training apparatus with a shared curriculum.** This could focus on basic information about how to stop a coup, the strategic logic of nonviolent resistance, organizing one's community, and how to participate in nonviolent action where one is situated. It could also provide modules on digital security, information literacy, and community safety, for those for whom such issues are especially acute. Prior to the 2024 election, a key objective could be to develop and disseminate materials that could assist pro-democracy organizations in conducting an internal security audit, so that they can identify and address key vulnerabilities in advance of the election.

- **Establishing a global network of democracy movements,** which builds alliances with pro-democratic movements, organizations, and national leaders abroad. This will begin the process of building trust and relationships with potential international allies who could possibly act in defense of US pro-democracy forces. The network should also cultivate alliances with US-based activists who have already been organizing in

authoritarian enclaves within the US, such as activists associated with Black and Indigenous movements. The network could also provide opportunities for sanctuary, exit, and asylum when necessary.

Activating the United Front in the Event of an Authoritarian Takeover in 2024

In the event of a democratic collapse at the national level, the united front must immediately implement a series of key tasks as the first steps toward a rapid and sustainable resistance response. Many are difficult to prepare for but are nonetheless important to anticipate. As a result, they also highlight key projects or lines of effort for the anti-authoritarian united front to take up prior to the 2024 election. These include:

- **Implementing a multi-year strategy** to mobilize the pro-democracy coalition to contest and monitor elections, beginning in 2025.

- **Leveraging labor and social reproductive power on a massive scale.** If the 2024 election is contested, and a constitutional crisis or an illegal power grab ensues, preventing the consolidation of authoritarianism at the national level is crucial. While street protest can be both ineffectual and highly risky during authoritarian power-grab, large-scale, coordinated noncooperation (e.g. general or limited strikes, no-shows, boycotts and divestment, and withdrawal of reproductive or care work) across sectors has been highly effective in other contexts. However, noncooperation (such as strikes) can also be costly to individuals and communities who suffer material hardships as time passes. Communities involved in economic noncooperation often require strike funds, access to food, free health clinics, childcare, disability services, and other forms of hardship assistance. Neighborhood watch groups, community centers, and mutual aid associations can be a useful starting point for preparing for such episodes of extended hardship. They could be organized and equipped in advance, perhaps in collaboration with local chambers of commerce or other small business owners who are willing to support them. Transnational solidarity networks could also be activated to begin imposing economic costs on pro-authoritarian businesses in the US.

- **Activating the nerve center** for coordinating credible communications, collective assessments, and communicating tactical moves, and for responding to disinformation and crackdowns. This center could receive and verify data, intelligence, and information gleaned from local monitors and inform united front leaders regarding significant developments that might activate different strategic maneuvers. The nerve center should also serve as the primary news outlet for pro-democracy forces. Information should be vetted and promoted in local forums rather than primarily relying on major news outlets like the *New York Times*. Such news should be available on AM/FM radio, podcasts,

internet and print media, social media, and television. Additional distribution formats could include phone trees, neighborhood walks, and community clubs.

- **Training, equipping, and deploying volunteers to document and publicize abuses.** Credible, verifiable information is a powerful tool in legitimacy-based conflicts. United front members should train and equip thousands of volunteers nationwide who can safely monitor, document, and disseminate potential crimes and abuses.

- **Mobilizing legal assistance and public pressure to secure swift releases from prison**. The organization of bail funds, legal aid, and rapid response teams can help when community members and movement leaders are detained.

- **Implementing organizational security plans, and preparing to move people and assets to safehouses or, in some cases, abroad**. There may be circumstances in which lives can be saved through exiting the country. Connections should be established that can provide urgent pretexts for exiting the country (for instance, guest lectures or fellowships abroad), with visa and travel support to those who need to flee. Servers, data and documentation, and financial assets may also be more secure abroad.

- **Implementing succession plans when leaders are indisposed, compromised, jailed, or killed**. Movements are much more likely to persist, win supporters, and succeed when they anticipate state-backed violence, organize clear succession plans and maneuvers, and remain resilient even as opponent regimes attempt to terrorize their communities.

Conclusion

This analysis does not propose a quick fix for American democracy, nor an easy path to reform and renewal for its institutions. But maintaining a longer term mindset is key to building a resilient infrastructure for combatting authoritarianism in the US today and in the future. Over the past 122 years, the most robust and durable democratic transitions were brought about after nonviolent campaigns that lasted a decade or more.[39] This is true of watershed pro-democratic reforms in American history, including the struggles to abolish slavery, to expand citizenship rights, to give women the right to vote, and to extend equal rights to Black Americans, among others. If it is not necessary to deploy the full power of the anti-authoritarian united front, it can demobilize without doing any harm – perhaps having strengthened communities and democracy along the way. However, if it is needed, investing in the infrastructure to support a united front now will help the country and communities to weather the storm of darker days to come.

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[39] Kadivar 2017, 2022.

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