

ANTICIPATING AND COUNTERING NARRATIVES THAT THREATEN DEMOCRACY

We have been living for the better part of a decade with concerns over dark money in politics (brought into the mainstream by the 2010 *Citizens United* decision), gerrymandering and voter suppression (unleashed by the 2013 *Shelby County* decision), but it was not until 2020 that journalists, pundits and voters began to frame the political issue of the day as a “crisis of democracy,” or variations on that theme.

For Democrats, Independents and Republicans outside the MAGA camp, evidence of “democracy under threat” came flooding in shortly after election day 2020:

- the Big Lie, first deployed on election night, though it had been foreshadowed for months leading up to the election;
- election denial (and polling showing significant percentages of Republicans believing that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president, that Donald Trump had won the 2020 election and that use of violence might be appropriate to redress the theft);
- threats to election workers;
- election audits (recall the cyber ninjas);
- the January 6th insurrection followed that evening by the objections to certification; and
- the revelations from the January 6th committee hearings, including what David Graham, staff writer at The Atlantic, [referred to](#) as the “paperwork coup” (the multiple efforts to overturn the election).

Republican legislatures obliged in contributing to legitimate fears by, in effect, using the litany of reforms that propelled record-breaking voter turnout in 2020 as the checklist for targets of voter suppression legislation. A significant number of Republican candidates obliged by running in 2022 on election denial platforms.

Ironically, going into the midterms, concerns about democracy were present across the political spectrum, but for very different reasons:

- for Democrats, many Independents and some Republicans, the best proxy for the litany of assaults during the Trump years on democratic institutions, democratic norms and democracy itself was the direct outgrowth of the Big Lie - election denial; and
- for MAGA Republicans, the unravelling of democracy presumably started with the steady drumbeat of efforts in their eyes, first, to question the legitimacy of Trump’s 2016 Electoral College victory (recall the repeated response of Trump advisor Boris Epshteyn to questions about Russian interference, Russia, he maintained, did not affect the outcome) and, then, to remove Trump from office. The liberals obliged by criminal and civil investigations, two impeachments and the perceived brazen theft of the 2020 election (animated by multiple conspiracy theories).

Where are we today?

Midterms Takeaways

Now that we are safely on the other side of the midterms, though once again contemplating an election that many see as existential, the general consensus is that the threats to American democracy can fairly be said to have receded since the 2022 midterms. Many commentators, however, are quick to add that the threats are not gone,¹ and voters seem to agree. An [NPR/PBS News Hour/Marist National Poll](#) (December 2022) found 83% of Americans (compared to 81% in January 2021) believe there is a serious threat to the future of America's democracy, and the partisan divide remains as stark as ever (84% of Democrats and 38% of Independents blame the Republicans and 80% of Republicans and 49% of Independents blame the Democrats).

Widespread violence, interference with electoral processes and refusals to concede (with a few notable exceptions) did not materialize in November 2022. In key races for offices that will oversee the 2024 elections, election deniers lost, but due to the paucity of truly competitive contests, some election deniers did win (in Alabama, Indiana, South Dakota and Wyoming), and a significant number of the House members and all eight of the Senators who objected to certification of the presidential election on January 6th were re-elected. A majority of House leadership positions were awarded to election objectors, and according to a [tally](#) by The Daily Beast, there are now more election deniers in the House GOP caucus (145) than there were election objectors in the House on January 6th (139). Governors DeSantis and Abbott won re-election – both have the authority to select secretaries of state and both previously named officers who refused to affirm Biden's election or assisted in the effort to overturn the election. (See [analysis](#) in Bolts (November 2022).)

Moreover, the Republican Party has not repudiated its election deniers or broken with those who incited the January 6th insurrection. Far from it. Rep. Jamie Raskin, [speaking](#) on the floor of the House last week and calling out “shocking nihilism about what's true and what's false,” decried GOP House members who continue to advance the Big Lie and downplay the significance of January 6th. He was reacting to Speaker McCarthy's decision to provide Tucker Carlson with access to thousands of hours of footage from the insurrection, who then defended insurrectionists by characterizing the attack as “mostly peaceful chaos” – “a tourist visit.” The GOP will now investigate the January 6th committee, in a probe chaired by a House member who led a tour of the Capitol the day before the insurrection.

Michael Waldman, President and CEO of the Brennan Center for Justice, commenting on the Brennan Center's [February 2023 Voting Rights Roundup](#), [noted](#) that voting rights are continuing to expand in blue states and are continuing to contract in red states. The report found that, to date in 2023, state legislators have pre-filed or introduced:

- **150 restrictive voting bills** (in 32 states) - legislation is categorized as restrictive if it contains one or more provisions that would make it harder for eligible Americans to

¹ A [post](#) by Ian Bassin and Ben Raderstorf of Protect Democracy (November 2022) cites an [assessment](#) by the Authoritarian Threat Index of democracy in the United States – on a scale of 1 (healthy) to 5 (total dictatorship), the United States after the midterms scored 2.1 (in the zone of significant threat), down from 2.6 in October. (Of the six indicators – treatment of media, executive constraints, elections, civil liberties, civil violence and rhetoric, rhetoric (disinformation) scored the worst (2.7)). The four-year likelihood of democratic breakdown stands at 19.2%, down from 29% in October.

register, stay on the voter rolls, or vote as compared to existing state law. These bills represent an increase from the number of restrictive bills introduced at the same time in 2021 and 2022, indicating that lawmakers are using the same playbook from the past two years to make it harder to vote.

- **27 election interference bills** (in 10 states) - legislation is categorized as election interference if it increases opportunities for partisan interference in election administration or results, or it threatens the people and processes that make elections work. These include proposals to create entities controlled by the political branches of government for the prosecution of election crimes; enable political actors to prompt, initiate or conduct audits of any election; impose new criminal penalties on election officials for routine election administration; or impose state-wide bans on the use of machines to count ballots.

Two of the more radical proposals include a Texas bill that would allow presidential electors to disregard state election results and a Virginia bill that would empower a random selection of residents to void local election results.

- **274 expansive voting rights bills** (in 34 states) - legislation is categorized as expansive if it contains one or more provisions that would make it easier for eligible Americans to register, stay on the rolls, or vote as compared to existing state law. While 274 is fewer than the number of bills introduced by this time in 2021, it is more than twice the number introduced by this time in 2022.

The widening gulf between blue states and red states underscores the need for Congress to pass voting rights legislation and establish a national voting rights baseline. It is, as Waldman notes, “a tale of two countries.” A regional divide as well as a partisan one. Last year, despite amending the Electoral Count Act and despite the fact that the last time the Voting Rights Act was reauthorized in 2006, it passed the Senate with 98 votes and was signed by President George W. Bush, Congress was unable to pass a voting rights bill, even with a Democratic majority in both the House and the Senate (due to the filibuster and the inability of Senate Democrats to agree to break it).

According to the [Brennan Center for Justice](#), since 2021, legislatures in 21 states have adopted 42 restrictive voting laws. These include voter ID requirements, reductions in same-day registration, reductions in early voting options, purges of voter rolls, and closures or relocations of polling places, which have a disproportionate impact on voters of color and [young voters](#).² According to a consortium [report](#) published by Protect Democracy, States United and Law Forward, all told, there have been 400 legislative proposals put forward that increase the risk of voter subversion (legislation that increases the possibility that election outcomes would not reflect the will of the voters), 24 voter subversion laws became law or were adopted in 2022 (in 17 states), and the states posing the greatest risk of voter subversion in 2023 are Florida, North Carolina and Texas (where executive branch leaders – governors, secretaries of state and attorneys general are more likely to engage in election subversion and where legislature is likely to pass laws increasing the risk of voter subversion).

² I note that Cook Political Report political analyst Dave Wasserman urges caution in referring to “voter suppression,” for being too broad in its coverage. He notes that swing voters may endorse (or at least not be troubled by) voter ID laws, which would dilute opposition to more insidious restrictions on access.

Millions of voting age Americans continue to be excluded from voting under criminal disenfranchisement laws. According to the [Brennan Center for Justice](#), 26 states bar voting on the basis of past criminal convictions.

The Supreme Court is yet to issue its ruling in *Harper v. Moore*. At issue is a North Carolina congressional district that is heavily gerrymandered in favor of Republicans. The North Carolina supreme court struck down the redistricting plan under the North Carolina constitution, and the proponents of the plan appealed to the Supreme Court based on Article I of the Constitution. They argue that federal election rules are made in each state by the state legislature and, therefore, a state constitution cannot override decisions of the legislature when it comes to federal elections. Even if the Court denies the appeal, the fact that the case is even being heard, and that at least three Justices might be favorably inclined to find in favor of the plaintiffs, should all give us all pause.

How Voters See It

Interestingly, according to polling undertaken *following* the 2022 midterms by End Citizens United, 59% reported that protecting democracy and voting against extreme candidates were each an “extremely important factor” for voting decisions, ahead of inflation (53%) and *Dobbs* (47%).

- Among Democrats, protecting democracy and *Dobbs* were cited by 73% and voting against extreme candidates was cited by 69%.
- Among Republicans, protecting democracy was cited by 45% and voting against extreme candidates was cited by 51%, while inflation was cited by 80%.
- Among Independents (under 50), protecting democracy was cited by 50% and voting against extreme candidates was cited by 53%. Over 50, the percentages were 55% and 58%.
- Among Democrats, Democratic candidates’ willingness to stand up to threats to democracy was as significant a factor as was abortion (43%), and was particularly important for Black men (46%).
- Among Democrats, support by the Republican candidate for Trump and the Big Lie was a greater concern (47%) than the candidate’s opposition to abortion (30%).

Why is this Important?

Speaking last month at the CPAC conference, Trump laid out his scorched earth strategy to regain the White House – while his targets included Democrats, the “fake media” and RINOs, the ultimate target is democracy. “Today,” he intoned “I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution.” “This is the final battle.” He continued, “For seven years you and I have been engaged in an epic struggle to rescue our country from the people who hate it and want to absolutely destroy it. We are going to finish what we started. ... We will demolish the deep state.” In a tweet on Saturday predicting an imminent arrest, in words echoing his invitation to Washington on January 6 (“Be there. Will be wild.”) and his calls from the Ellipse to march to the Capitol, Trump called on his supporters to “take our nation back.”

While we might all wish that the 2022 midterms would usher in a return to normalcy, that is wishful thinking. Here we have an ex-president obsessed with vengeance and personal

vendettas. As Jennifer Ruben, in her [op-ed](#) following the CPAC conference, noted in response to the timid responses to Trump’s speech, much of the media and the Republican leadership are making the same mistakes they made in 2016. They are normalizing Trump and not calling out the threats posed by Trump to democracy. Ruben asks of presidential hopefuls and other senior Republicans if they are unwilling or unable to stand up to Trump today, how can we expect them to do so going forward?

The impact of MAGA extremism is by no means limited to elections. Across the country, MAGA-inspired skirmishes in the ongoing culture wars are politicizing races for school boards, and inspiring bans on books in classrooms and libraries, as well as threats of prosecuting teachers.³ These are by no means hallmarks of a healthy democracy.

Adrienne LaFrance, [writing in](#) The Atlantic (“The New Anarchy – March 2023), charts a trajectory of increased political violence, citing an ADL [study](#) showing openly white-supremacist activity increased more than twelvefold between 2017 and 2021 and a 2022 UC Davis [poll](#) that found one in five Americans believes political violence would be “at least sometimes” justified and one in 10 believes it would be justified if it meant returning Trump to the presidency.

LaFrance notes that officials in government and the military believe the United States will see an increase in political violence in the run-up to the 2024 election, and her three years of research indicate that the potential for political violence is strongest in the Great Lakes, the rural West, the Pacific Northwest and the South.⁴ Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Georgia, she notes, keep coming up. Some of the key lessons she has tracked – the tendency of societies to ignore obvious warning signs of endemic political violence until

³ A Legal Defense Fund [report](#) summarizes the extent to which public education in Florida has been “taken hostage.” The Report cites HB 7 (the Stop W.O.K.E. Act), which restricts discussion around certain topics related to race and gender in Florida public schools; HB 1557 (the Don’t Say Gay Law), which bans lessons and instructional materials related to gender identity and sexual orientation for students in kindergarten through third grade; and HB 1467, which has recently led to the removal of classroom books in public school districts due to its requirement that reading materials undergo a sustained review and preapproval process before students use them.

HB 1467 has [engendered](#) chaos, confusion and fear, as teachers, librarians and other school officials overcompensate to avoid felony charges. These take their toll on students, parents, teachers and administrators, with teachers leaving the profession in Florida public schools, including public universities, and those that remain removing books from course lists, declining to address certain topics and drastically reducing any public commentary. (See [ProPublica report](#).) Ironic, is it not, that while Republican leaders cannot countenance steps to protect children from gun violence, they are shameless in undertaking a 21st century version of book burning.

⁴ These are areas where extremist groups already exist, militias are popular, the gun culture is thriving and hardcore partisans are colliding in close elections in battleground races. These, as LaFrance explains, exacerbate the underlying conditions for political violence, namely high wealth disparity, declining trust in democratic institutions, perceived victimhood, partisan estrangement fed by identity politics, rapid changes in demographics, the prevalence of conspiracy theories, violent rhetoric that dehumanizes the “other,” a sharply divided electorate and a sense of impunity.

too late, that violence can take on a life of its own and that national leaders can be complicit and seek to harness political violence for their own ends – underscore why the fragility of democracy needs to be addressed.

The challenge, notes LaFrance, from the perspective of countering the threats, though is that violent extremists are not driven by an agenda that invites negotiation, or that lends itself to persuasion or concession. So where to start? The other challenge is that Americans tends to underestimate the threat of political violence – for some, it is the natural default to normal, for others it is the loss by a number of election deniers in the midterms and yet for others it is too sporadic to be a national threat. Yet, the evidence is there: mass shootings targeting immigrants, the LGBTQ communities and Jewish communities – to date in 2023, the number of mass shootings is at an all-time high.⁵

LaFrance also notes that three factors distinguish the current forms of political violence from past examples, thereby compounding the threat: the access to military grade assault weapons, the promotion of conspiracy through social media and media figures such as Tucker Carlson, and the fuelling of scepticism in elections and other democratic institutions by national leaders for their own power grab. Republican leaders are complicit, from election denial, to refusing to condemn the January 6th insurrection or to re-characterize it as a benign expression of free speech, to support for “patriots” and “political prisoners” arrested at the Capitol.

Election administrators report that the threats against election officials and elections remain, and the level of threats against members of Congress has surged. A recent Pew Stateline article by Matt Vasilogambros (“The Fight Against Election Lies Never Ends for Local Officials”) [notes](#) that election officials still face harassment and violent threats, as some candidates who lost in November continue to make false claims, and conspiracy theories around drop boxes and election equipment continue to “saturate social media.”

Election officials continue to face significant disinformation efforts, catalogued by Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold in a conversation with me last month. Efforts to combat threats have been stymied by departures of a number of election officials and other election administrators in recent months in the face of continued harassment, disinformation, burdensome (and frivolous) information requests and lack of support from law enforcement, confirmed to me in respect of Arizona by Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes.

And, let us not forget, that notwithstanding resounding electoral messages in support of reproductive freedoms last November, while some states, including California, Michigan, Kansas and South Carolina, have, since *Dobbs*, explicitly protected legal access to abortion,

⁵ On November 30, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [issued](#) a National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin noting that the United States remains in a heightened threat environment. Among other trends, DHS noted that while violence during the midterms was isolated, it remains vigilant that heightened political tensions could contribute to individuals committing violent acts based on “personalized grievances.”

In the meantime, House Judiciary Committee Chair Jim Jordan has subpoenaed the former executive director of the since disbanded DHS Disinformation Governance Board (an admittedly poor choice of name for a unit intended to curb disinformation aimed at American citizens and infrastructure) as part of his probe of how the federal government has been “weaponized” against conservatives.

14 states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia and Wisconsin, have enacted sweeping bans on abortion and seven states have in place laws that pave the way to severely restrict or ban abortion (but are on hold) – namely Arizona, Indiana, Iowa, North Dakota, Ohio, Utah and Wyoming. In some states, like Florida, abortion is legal but there is no explicit right based on the state constitution or state court decision.

A Survey of the Literature

With a broad consensus on the dangers of political violence, support for anti-democratic candidates and hyper-polarization, social scientists, political scientists and other experts agree that diagnosing the threats to democracy is one thing, but finding ways to address these worrying trends is another. Thomas B Edsall, in a New York Times [op-ed](#) (“Meet the People Working on Getting Us to Hate Less” – February 2023), notes that what some refer to as “affective polarization”⁶ – best reflected by the support for election denialism and state legislative efforts to empower politicians to overturn elections – has led to a plethora of research on the correlation (or absence thereof) between levels of political animosity and support for democratic norms and standards.

Breaking down animosity, anti-democratic sentiment and political violence

Against the backdrop of a growing academic consensus, at least pre-2022 midterms, that American voters are unlikely to punish candidates of their preferred party that break democratic norms (*see e.g.*, [“Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States”](#)), a group of universities led by Stanford, MIT, Northwestern and Columbia set out to find out why and to identify what might motivate voters to elevate country over party. The resulting “mega study,” the [Strengthening Democracy Challenge](#) (“SDC”) (*see* [Press Release](#) and the [Paper](#)) assessed the efficacy of 25 tactics (so-called “interventions,” ranging from conversations via quizzes, to short videos⁷) to achieve three outcomes: reducing partisan animosity,⁸ reducing support for anti-democratic sentiments and reducing the acceptability of political violence. Interventions, they found, tended to reduce the levels of political animosity.

⁶ “Affective polarization” is deemed by [one political scientist](#), Lillianna Mason, to occur when the fusion of partisan social identity with racial, religious, sexual and cultural identities produces “an emotional type of polarization that cannot be explained by parties or issues alone.”

⁷ One popular intervention was the joint political [ad](#) by two opposing candidates for Utah governor, Spencer Cox (a Republican) and Chris Peterson (a Democrat) in which they jointly committed to accept the election outcome and a peaceful transfer of power. Another was a 2017 UK [ad](#) for Heineken entitled “Worlds Apart.”

⁸ According to a [Pew Research Center](#) study (August 2022), 72% of Republicans view Democrats as more immoral and dishonest than other Americans, while 63% of Democrats view Republicans as immoral and 64% view Republicans as dishonest. There has been a pronounced increase in partisan views over the past six years. A 2016 [study](#) found that Americans’ partisan voting is more influenced by negative attitudes towards the other party than affinity for candidates of their preferred party. The authors of the SDC study [conclude](#) that this animosity can lead voters to tolerate unethical conduct leaders of their preferred party.

Reducing partisan animosity, however, did not necessarily reduce support for anti-democratic candidates or for political violence. In fact, a separate [study](#) by political scientists at Berkeley, Dartmouth and Yale rejects the notion that reducing the level of political animosity would meaningfully bolster democratic norms and accountability. There appears to be lower correlations among the three outcomes, calling for distinct strategies to deal separately with each threat and a recognition that anti-democratic sentiments and pre-disposition to violence may be tougher to tackle.⁹ This may also suggest that the focus on partisan animosity may have obscured deeper attitudes underlying anti-democratic sentiments and violence. As David Graham [observed](#) in “How to Save Democracy (The Atlantic – October 2022), to see the challenge facing the country, consider the growing popularity among Republicans of the argument advanced in support of minority rule that America is a republic, not a democracy ([outlined](#) in George Thomas’ “‘America is a Republic, Not a Democracy’ is a Dangerous – And Wrong – Argument” (The Atlantic – November 2020).

Rural resentment

Thomas Edsall, in a Washington Post [op-ed](#) (“The Resentment Fueling the Republican Party Is Not Coming From the Suburbs”), surveys the literature on anger and resentment felt by rural voters towards the Democratic Party that is driving a regional realignment. Among the case studies of rural realignment, he cites the role of that realignment in Ron Johnson’s 2022 Senate win in Wisconsin. That victory was largely due to support in white rural Wisconsin. The counterweight to GOP gains in rural America at the expense of Democrats is the unprecedented popular support for Democrats in the suburbs.

Interestingly, one study Edsall cites (by [Justin Gest](#)) concludes that the diminution of partisan economic differences between Democrats and Republicans accentuated the cultural differences, which is consistent with suburban-rural decoupling. This, in turn, he concludes reinforces ideological and affective polarization, which is further accelerated by the separation of Democrats and Republicans in community, work and local government settings, and as “conflict and hostility become embedded in the structure where people live, the likelihood increases of seeing adversaries as less than fully human.”

GOP moves to be the party of chaos and disruption

Returning again to the takeaways from the midterms, while election denialism took a hit and the margin of victory for Republicans was far smaller than anticipated, the Republicans nonetheless took the House. While one might say that is democracy in action, it is reasonable to question whether the combination of brinksmanship over the debt ceiling and the performative politics surrounding the House investigations is good for democracy. Edsall in another Washington Post [op-ed](#) (“You Don’t Negotiate With These Kinds of People – January 2023) looks to the literature to underscore his conclusion that the GOP has transformed itself from the party of low taxes, conservative social and cultural policies and

⁹ As summarized by Talib Visram [writing](#) in Fast Company (“Inside a ‘mega-study’ on election denial, polarization and violence – and how to stop it” – August 2022), the right has engaged in far more anti-democratic actions and political violence than the left, and while studies have shown that the latent potential for political violence is as high among the right as among the left, it is Republican leaders and candidates that are capitalizing on this propensity.

unrestrained capitalism into the party of “blatant chaos and disruption,” with the balance of power having shifted in less than a decade to the Freedom Caucus.

This shift to extremism is seen as being driven by racial and cultural changes that cause Republican politicians and voters, in the words of Neil Siegel in his [paper](#) “The Trump Presidency, Racial Realignment and the Future of Constitutional Norms” (2021) “to perceive an existential threat to their continued political and cultural power – and, relatedly, to deny the legitimacy of their political opponents.”

The adversarial view of Democrats comes at a time when the shift in the GOP away from policy goals to anti-liberalism – where what unites the factions of the party is opposition to Democrats – is now complete. In effect, as Ezra Klein noted in his New York Times [op-ed](#) (“Three Reasons the Republican Party Keeps Coming Apart at the Seams” – January 2023), the Democrats have become the establishment, and the GOP the anti-establishment. Again, not conducive to a functioning democracy.

Call to Action

If, as the literature suggests, unpacking the crisis of democracy means focusing on partisanship, anti-democratic tendencies and acceptance of violence, then we should be thinking along multiple lines. The authors of the SDC study [have suggested](#) two approaches to reducing political violence. The first is to correct misconceptions about the “other party” and the second is to enlist political leaders to publicly denounce political violence. At the very least, trusted elites, including business leaders, have a role to play, particularly if the joint public service style ads across the aisle are the exception rather than the rule. (I addressed the role of business, most recently, in a January 2023 briefing note, available [here](#).)

While much attention has been paid to the role of social media platforms in amplifying disinformation and hate, I draw the following from the literature. First, whatever the platforms are amplifying they are not creating the messaging and, regrettably, their amplification is operating in a target rich environment, given prevailing attitudes among voters. Second, if interventions can work, if only to reduce political animosity, then is there a role for social media platforms to disseminate these interventions? Think of it as a public service announcement – PSAs worked for seat belts. And, third, we need to make far better use of alternative channels such as YouTube.

Drawing on the results of the SDC study, there appears to be a benefit to being far more explicit in calling out what can happen when the rule of law collapses. The study found that many voters, on their own, simply are not making the connection. This conclusion was buttressed by reactions to images of societal instability and violence after democratic collapse in several countries, including Russia, Turkey, Venezuela and Zimbabwe, followed by footage of January 6th, accompanied by narration highlighting the potential for democratic failure in the United States. Interestingly, while this intervention decreased political animosity and support for anti-democratic candidates, it increased support for political violence, because according to the authors of the SDC study, Republicans have embraced January 6th as acceptable.

LaFrance too calls for challenging those actively working to undermine democracy. She includes those who cloak their efforts to weaken democratic institutions in the language of democracy and the conspiracy theorists who use the rhetoric of finding the truth to actually

obscure the truth. For example, it is important to communicate that the First Amendment does not protect violent or unlawful conduct, even if the speaker intends to express an idea (*United States v. O'Brien*) and does not protect speech that incites imminent violence or lawlessness (*Brandenburg v. Ohio*). Threats of violence and harassment are not protected by the First Amendment, and may violate federal and state criminal laws. Neither the First nor the Second Amendment protects private armed paramilitary groups. (See [Georgetown Law Fact Sheet](#).)

Coming at the issue from a polling perspective, End Citizens United concluded based on their polling data that when voters articulate concerns about democracy what they really mean is that they have no voice and feel powerless to effect any meaningful change. For Democrats that extended to abortion and January 6th. For white voters, fears over democracy are recent – *Dobbs*, January 6th and election denialism, while among Black voters, particularly Black women, their participation in American has always been under attack. Interestingly, when asked to drill down on threats to democracy, a majority cited government corruption and influence of money in politics (53% overall – 42% of Democrats and 66% of Republicans). This then led End Citizens United to the following conclusions:

What democracy means	How voters define it
Voices being heard	Elections being accurately counted and respects Politicians who care about people, not special interests Corporate interests should not be able to buy elections
Preservation of existing rights	Abortion Voting rights Safety in communities Secure borders
A functioning government	Rejection of extremism Rejection of polarization Meaningful action to address the economy

Concluding Thoughts

We again are in what portends to be febrile election cycle.¹⁰ There is every reason to believe that election deniers who lost in 2022 will be on the ballot again in 2024, which will be a very different electoral landscape than 2022, in part because it is a presidential cycle, and in part because Trump is likely going to be on the ballot.

Just as it was a failure of imagination to anticipate that Trump would try to remain in office no matter the outcome of the 2020 election, so too must we be vigilant about the potential threat of a surge in political violence (which could be prompted, for example, by one or more indictments of Trump) and be pro-active in messaging and other interventions to shore up democratic institutions and processes as well as the people who stand behind those institutions and processes. We need to be mindful that quite aside from how voters may feel, the MAGA playbook incorporates multi-pronged efforts to corrode the system – they all intersect, and incidentally, the efforts are part of a broader global disinformation and

¹⁰ For a sneak preview, see Frank Bruni’s [op-ed](#) (“Anti-Gay? Anti-Science? Antisemitic? Run for Governor of North Carolina!”) on the likely GOP nominee for the North Carolina gubernatorial race. Governor Roy Cooper will be termed out.

disruption campaign – as Michelle Goldberg very recently [reported](#), Florida could start to look a lot like Hungary, and it is not accidental.

While no doubt, a significant proportion of voters sent a strong signal last November about democracy, the country continues to face crises in democracy, and we can ill-afford complacency. Key to countering the threat will be to call out both the threats and the consequences. Media has a significant role to play, as do candidates running in support of democracy, who will have to find the messaging that works.

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