

HOW TO DEFEND DEMOCRACY  
by Roger Myerson, January 2026

America's major political parties have long experience in developing strategies to win elections, but different strategic priorities may be needed when the goal is to defend democracy against an authoritarian challenge. There are serious questions about whether protests and lawsuits against unconstitutional extensions of executive power can restrain a would-be authoritarian president who has broad popular support in much of the country. These questions would not arise, however, if we could just assume that voters everywhere would reject any leader who threatened to undermine the political system in which their votes can decide who governs. A supreme national leader would fear to violate the constitutional guardrails of democracy if doing so would cause people in his essential political base to distrust him. So democracy becomes vulnerable when large groups of voters do not perceive any real benefits from democratic political competition. To understand how democracy can be defended, we need to think more deeply about why people should value democracy.

The basic political argument for democracy is essentially the same as the economic argument for free markets. Just as consumers can benefit from competition among suppliers in any market, so voters should be able to benefit from competition among parties to offer better public service. Even a voter who generally prefers one particular party should expect that elected leaders from this preferred party would not work as hard to maintain good government services if the leaders did not have to worry about competition from an opposing party. If everyone always recognized this basic point, then the defense of democracy would be easy, because people everywhere would rally to defend the system of multiparty democratic competition against any would-be authoritarian leader. But there are two significant factors that can make this basic point obscure or inapplicable for many voters: demagoguery in the voters' preferred party, and strategic neglect from the other party.

*Why people may undervalue democracy*

We may use the term demagoguery here to describe political rhetoric in which the speaker tries to characterize his opponents as completely untrustworthy, whether it is because they are fundamentally malevolent or corrupt or just deluded, so that voters should only trust the speaker and his party.<sup>1</sup> When a political leader uses such rhetoric, the leader is essentially denying the benefits of democracy for his followers. If the demagogue's opponents should never be trusted, then what benefit could anyone expect from maintaining their right to compete for

power in free and fair elections?

The defense of democracy requires us to combat such demagoguery and clearly affirm the basic truth that voters' ability to choose among rival political parties is what compels each party to compete for voters' support by promising better government. For voters to retain their power of political choice, they should never let any politician tell them to always distrust his opponents. The demagogue's big lie, that people should trust only the demagogue's political party, should be recognized as a ruse to trap people under one-party domination.

To avoid demagoguery ourselves, we cannot say that people should *never* believe statements from a politician who has used such rhetoric of demagoguery. Logical consistency would require us to counter his falsehoods one at a time, even while he can simply tell his supporters to disbelieve everything that we say. Such principled restraint in countering demagoguery is appropriate when the demagoguery is just rhetoric, protected by freedom of speech. However, we may appropriately argue that voters should never trust any leader who has blatantly acted to violate basic constitutional provisions and guardrails of democracy. Voters who agree with ideas that this leader has advocated should be urged to support other politicians who advocate similar ideas but have not acted to undermine the vital institutions of democracy.

But even when voters are not blinded by demagoguery from their preferred party, they may still find reasons to conclude that the other party is not responsive to their concerns. Under the American system of constitutional democracy, a party can win control of a legislative chamber by getting a majority of votes in just over half of the districts, and so parties have tended to focus their resources on campaigns in the districts that seem closest to flipping. Within any district, a party's efforts to increase voter turnout are best concentrated in the areas where most voters are favorable to the party. These electoral incentives have brought America to a political equilibrium in which each party strategically neglects much of the country. In recent years, vast expanses of rural America have been largely abandoned by Democrats. There are now twelve states that have no Democratic representation in the 119th US Congress, and another eight states have no Republican representatives.<sup>ii</sup>

Such neglect of large regions becomes a dangerous strategy, however, when constitutional democracy itself is at risk. When large groups of voters believe that only one party is really paying attention to them, they may feel no real stake in our system of multiparty democratic competition, and so they may support their elected leader in shaking off democracy's inconvenient constitutional constraints. With such mass support, an unprincipled president could subvert democracy while portraying his actions as democracy's ultimate fulfillment.

Thus, the defense of democracy against an authoritarian challenge may require political priorities that are fundamentally different from the standard playbook for winning elections. When the goal is to defend democracy in America, it is vital to ensure that Americans everywhere can see the benefits of having two parties competing for their votes. From this perspective, we may ask, what should the Democratic Party do today?

*What the opposition party can do*

First and foremost, the Democratic leadership can no longer afford to leave millions of voters in Republican-dominated areas believing that nobody in the Democratic Party is listening to them. These are voters who could be encouraging their Republican representatives in Congress to join in bipartisan defense of basic democratic norms. The legacy of strategic neglect must be reversed and replaced by a strategy of working to provide better political alternatives for voters in all 50 states.

But rebuilding trust where it has been lost will require real efforts to reach people in the communities where they live. To lead this local outreach, the Democratic Party will need a strong roster of candidates for local offices, including local representatives to the state legislature. The essential goal of this outreach will be achieved when voters in these Republican strongholds see that they can benefit from competitive Democratic candidates offering valuable alternative perspectives on local issues, even if few of these Democrats ultimately get elected. The cause of democracy will be stronger when the voters have been reminded that their hopes for better public service, even from a Republican-led government, can depend on their ability to vote for competitive Democratic candidates in the American system of constitutional democracy that we are trying to preserve.

Representing voters means listening to them and responding to their concerns, not just to the concerns of national party donors or professional political consultants. So the Democratic Party today must identify itself as the party that does not just march to its leaders' commands, but that everywhere supports candidates who focus on their local voters' concerns, with a commitment to work for practical solutions in a broad coalition. It is okay to have candidates who are democratic socialists in New York and gun-rights supporters in Utah, if this is what the local voters want.

To recruit strong local candidates in every part of America, the Democratic Party will need effective local party organizations in every county. Local party leaders at the county level generally tend to favor a broader distribution of campaign resources, compared to the narrower

focus on a few pivotal districts that may seem advantageous for winning power at the national level or at the state level. Institutional reforms that strengthen the collective voices of county-level party organizations could help the Democratic party to make a commitment to limit the strategic neglect of many rural areas across the country.

As a first step in this direction, local leaders of county-level Democratic organizations in Republican-dominated areas could be encouraged to form a national network for sharing best-practice ideas for reaching more people in their communities.<sup>iii</sup> Their communities are on the front line for the defense of democracy in America today.

Democratic candidates everywhere must be able to assure local voters that their local concerns can also be heard by the higher-level leadership of the Democratic Party. People cannot be expected to trust a party that has no effective mechanism for communicating their local concerns to its national leaders. From this perspective, it is particularly problematic that almost a quarter of the US states now have no voice at all in the Democratic congressional caucuses, where the Democrats' national political agenda is largely shaped.

To ensure that views from these Republican-dominated red states are not ignored, the House Democratic Caucus could invite these states' Democratic parties to designate a recent congressional candidate to serve as a liaison with the House Democrats.<sup>iv</sup> Bringing such nonvoting representatives of red-state perspectives into the congressional Democrats' deliberations would be a strong signal of the Democratic Party's commitment to work for people in every part of America.

### *Lessons from democratic state-building abroad and at home*

The challenge of defending democracy against authoritarianism raises questions that may seem new and unfamiliar in the context of American domestic politics, but we may gain some perspective by recalling lessons from recent American efforts to develop strong democratic political systems in other countries.

When policy-makers planned foreign state-building missions with the seemingly benevolent goals of installing a democratically elected government, it was easy to hope that these goals could be achieved as soon as the people in the target country had an opportunity to choose new national leadership in a free and fair election. Unfortunately, this simple theory of centralized state-building has been severely dashed in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a geographically extensive country, a leader who has won a majority of votes in a national election might still be seriously distrusted by people in large parts of the country. People could be concerned about the

possibility of the nationally elected government asserting its power to control or suppress vital forms of local leadership that people have come to trust in their communities. Democracy will be destabilized if there are extensive regions where such concerns cannot be addressed.

The key lesson that US policy-makers learned too late in these foreign state-building missions is that efforts to maintain a democratic political system can fail when local politics is ignored.<sup>v</sup> Even in countries that have no tradition of democratic accountability for national leaders, traditional institutions generally have ways of ensuring that local leaders' authority depends on broad respect from people in their community. A strong democratic political system must be well rooted in local politics throughout the nation.

To understand how a successful democratic system can maintain its essential connection with local politics throughout a large nation, there is no better example than the United States itself.<sup>vi</sup> The government of the United States was first established in 1776 by a congress of delegates from thirteen provincial assemblies, each of which consisted of representatives elected by their local communities. From these roots, two core principles of democratic federalism have remained fundamental in America's constitutional development: the primacy of Congress in the national government, and the principle of federal power-sharing that leaves substantial public authority in the hands of locally elected local governments.

The primacy of Congress helps to ensure that locally elected congressional representatives from every part of the country can express the concerns of their constituents in the high-level policy deliberations of the national government. When it functions well, Congress can be an effective mechanism for gathering information about how major national decisions could affect important local concerns in all the widespread communities that the members of Congress represent. Its information-gathering effectiveness can be reduced, however, when national party discipline makes members of Congress feel that conforming to their party's ideological positions must take priority over representing the interests of their constituents in legislative negotiations.

From the beginning, the primacy of Congress over the executive branch of government has been sustainable because the members of Congress have been recognized as representing the wider population of voters through a democratic process of popular election. If competitive elections were eliminated in a transition to authoritarianism, the President could continue to govern unconstrained, but the influence of Congress would decline, as there would be little or no reason for officials in the executive branch of government to defer to the will of legislators who were just appointed by the authoritarian government itself. So the primacy of Congress in

America's democratic system has given its members collectively an institutional motivation for maintaining the democracy of their elections.

The US federal system has also been designed, since the American Revolution, to guarantee that autonomously elected state and local governments would retain a substantial share of authority in the provision of local public goods and services. So even in regions where many people may feel alienated from the coalition that exercises decisive power at the national level, local majorities could still have confidence that their local government would be democratically responsive to their concerns. Thus, federal power-sharing has strengthened America's system of constitutional democracy by ensuring that every part of the country always has a majority of voters who can see some tangible benefits of democratic accountability in government at some level, local or national.

#### *A renewed commitment to democracy*

The challenges of defending democracy demand that we understand democracy and its benefits more deeply. We must recognize that people can get a stake in democracy that is worth defending when more than one party shows a competitive commitment to providing better government that addresses their concerns. So the best defense against an authoritarian challenge should include a good offense, competing for votes in the would-be authoritarian leader's base by supporting candidates who can reach out to people in the communities that have favored him. Democracy is strengthened when each major party performs its essential functions of listening to voters in every part of the country and representing their interests in the deliberative bodies that formulate laws and policies of government.

In American democracy, the most important of these deliberative bodies must be the US Congress. But a strong democracy also requires preserving America's vital constitutional system of federal power-sharing, to ensure that people in every part of the country will also benefit from competitive democracy in their local governments.

Such arguments for the value of representative democracy and federal power-sharing have been familiar in American political discourse from the founding of the Republic in 1776. Thus, if we can meet the challenges of defending democracy in America today, we may forge a renewed commitment to the core principles of federal democracy that have guided this great nation's political development so well for 250 years.

*Endnotes:*

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- <sup>i</sup> Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy* (2017).  
<<https://theexperimentpublishing.com/catalogs/fall-2017/demagoguery-and-democracy/>>
- <sup>ii</sup> Eric Ostermeier, "Number of single-party state congressional delegations reaches 70+ year high," *Smart Politics* (Nov 25, 2024). <<https://smartpolitics.lib.umn.edu/2024/11/25/number-of-single-party-state-congressional-delegations-reaches-70-year-high/>>
- <sup>iii</sup> Roger Myerson, "Democrats should remind local red-state voters they still need two parties," *The Hill* (Oct 8, 2025). <<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/oct2025note.pdf>>
- <sup>iv</sup> Roger Myerson and Kael Weston, "Democrats need to start winning elections in all 50 states," *The Boston Globe* (Jan 29, 2025).  
<<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/01/29/opinion/democrats-50-state-strategy-congressional-caucus-dnc/>>
- <sup>v</sup> Roger Myerson, "Local politics and democratic state-building," *Journal of Democracy* 33(4):62-73 (2022). <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/866642>>
- <sup>vi</sup> Roger Myerson, "The strength of US federal democracy," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 5:178-189 (Autumn, 2015).  
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573598>>

*This note is available at:* <<https://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/defend2026.pdf>>