**May 24, 2022**

**Saving American Democracy: Current Threats and Responsible Responses**

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Introduction

1. American democracy is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, as Lincoln said in his Gettysburg address on Nov 19, 1863. This proposition, stated in the Declaration of Independence, is a self-evident truth which grounds the ongoing experiment in democratic self-rule, “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Lincoln). The American proposition or public philosophy rests on the conviction that our democracy is founded on “a body of objective truth, universal in its import, accessible to the reason of men, definite, defensible.” Worked into the “texture of institutions,” they offer hope that men may dwell in dignity, peace, unity, justice, well-being, freedom (Murray, *We Hold* *These Truths* pp. vii-xii).
2. We face the greatest threat to our democracy since the Civil War. Current threats include: cultural spiritual threats such as attacks on truth and structural political threats such as state legislatures overturning election results.
3. All of us have a responsibility to help save democracy, for example, by voting intelligently.

I.Cultural and Spiritual Threats

A. Attacks on Truth

1.The Big Lie: before the 2020 election President Trump said it was rigged and afterwards claimed it was stolen. According to most polls around 30% of Americans believe this, including some 70% of Republicans and 26% of independents. Important Republican leaders have said publicly the election was free and fair Including former attorney general Bill Barr and minority leader Mitch McConnell. Most Republicans running for office in 2022 have supported the Big Lie, including J.D. Vance running for Senate in Ohio.

2. John Courtney Murray, back in the 1960s, warned that democracy was under attack by “barbarians” who do not respect truth and prefer demagoguery to dialogue. Barbarians “undermine rational standards of judgment” and “corrupt the inherited intuitive wisdom” by “creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment” which “destroys the “confidence of the people” and leads to an “impotent nihilism.” Murray thought that society can be “rescued from chaos only by a few who understand the disciplines of civility and are able to sustain them.” We can all help by engaging in civil conversation, which demands listening to others and respecting their distinctive outlook. Beneath the surface civility of the 1950s, Murray detected hidden “structures of war,” deep differences among citizens with different world views and histories.

3. Vaclav Maly, leader of the Czech Velvet Revolution and Auxiliary Bishop of Prague, advised Americans to fight for the truth and not give in to falsehood (interview in Prague, 1992).

B. Voter Apathy (CAP study)

1. In 2020, nearly 160 million Americans voted, (about two-thirds of eligible voters, and 8% higher than 2016), despite the pandemic. This is about 66% of eligible voters and 53% of young voters (age 18 to 29) also up 8%.

2. In 2020 almost 80 million eligible voters did not vote, about one-third, making U.S. turnout rate among the lowest of Western democracies (over 90% in Australia where it is compulsory).

3. Reasons for not voting: disillusioned with the process; my vote does not matter; divisive rhetoric by politicians; contentious campaigns; influence of big money; lack of transportation; no time off work; long waits in line.

4. Overcoming apathy: offer civics courses in high schools and make special efforts to get youth into the habit of voting; promote involvement in civic activities. Throughout the year: door to door canvassing; use social media to promote voting; get churches and other social organizations to encourage registration and voting; encourage people, especially youth, to get involved in civic life: for example, participating in marches for justice or rallies to protect the environment.

C. Individualism cf Robert Bellah *The* *Good Society*

1. Individualism that celebrates the free market as the vehicle for making America the most prosperous country, overriding the political goal of making the U.S. the greatest democracy which promotes equality and cares for the less fortunate.

2. We now have a great disparity between the very rich and the majority middle class who are struggling financially and who resent or oppose state efforts to be help the poor and expand the national safety net. “The tyranny of the market” does not deliver the promised happiness and personal satisfaction and hinders participation in the democratic process.

3. We have to retrieve the civic virtues celebrated by the Founding Fathers (Jefferson and Madison) which promote the common good, including self-reliance, industriousness and patriotic love of country.

4. Creating a more robust democracy should be our national goal which offers the best chance of redeeming the promise of America (p. 109).

D. Distrust of government cf Jan, 2022 Governing article “Can Federalism Save Democracy?” by Professor Donald Kettle

1. Recent polls of Americans: 64% say our democracy is “in crisis and at risk of failing;” 25% say it is critical to save democracy; 39% trust the federal government to handle domestic problems; only 24% trust Washington to do what is right most of the time.

2. Trust is higher in state government (57%) and local government (66%). “The more local the more trusted.” The principle of subsidiarity holds problems should be dealt with at the lowest level, turning to the higher levels of government only when necessary (CST).

1. There are growing troubles at local levels: 19 states have passed restrictive voting right laws; there are growing battles in school board meetings over critical race theory (CRT) which is actually not taught in grade or high schools.
2. Some authors claim we are on the edge of civil war.
3. The article argues that our best bet to survive is to concentrate on encouraging and improving local government starting by promoting civility at school board meetings.
4. The term “federalism,” in the U.S. context refers to sharing of power between the federal and state governments. The Framers sought to establish a unified national government of limited power while maintaining certain powers for the states, in fact all those not given to the federal government by the Constitution (Tenth Amendment).

E. Authoritarianism cf Brookings Institute

1. Almost 25% of Americans think having a dictator (a strong leader who doesn’t have to deal with Congress or elections) could be a good way to run our country.

2.The Founding Fathers feared too much power in one person.

3. Civic engagement is the glue that holds self-governance together.

4. Some suggestions:

 a. Stay informed: read reliable sources; talk to someone who does not share your view; learn more about the Constitution.

b. Vote intelligently: make a voting pact with family or friends; volunteer to work at a polling place; drive people to the polls.

c. Participate: write a letter to the editor; advocate for civic education in schools; join a political party; help a candidate running for office.

d. Help build community: collect food; donate blood; clean up a park, river or lake; host an exchange student; volunteer to help veterans, youth, elderly, teachers; mentor a student; coach a team.

e. Get social: host a picnic or block party; attend a political debate; invite friends to your home to watch a documentary on a current issue.

F. Weakened Communities Center for American Progress (CAP) Report on The Pro-Democracy Movement published Feb, 2021 after interviewing around 25 faith leaders. The authors noted that white supremacy is the “biggest threat to American democracy.” They also noted the power of the “Religious Right” pointing out Franklin Graham’s support of the Big Lie even after Jan 6th. They identify five common values which can be interpreted as grounding various moral obligations.

1. Building a more inclusive democracy is a religious based moral responsibility which should be practiced by civic and faith communities.

2. Believers must continue to work to include Black Americans completely in our democracy especially because they were excluded at the founding; only got the right to vote in 1870 with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment; that right was restricted by Jim Crow laws (a character in Minstrel shows that made fun of blacks), that were in effect until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. With new restrictive voting laws today, faith communities must work even harder to include black Americans.

3. Form strong communities to counter the threat to democracy by individualism, which, according to Sister Simone Campbell of Network “hollows out democracy.” Christianity can promote individualism by putting so much emphasis on saving one’s soul to the detriment of creating the Beloved Community in this world. In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” Dr. King wrote “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

4. Faith leaders are called to participate in the political process but not in a partisan way. They should be prophets of resistance and not chaplains to the regime. Policy positions should be guided by faith convictions and not partisan politics.

5. Believers must recognize the urgency of the moment. Jan 6 reminds us of the fragility of our democracy and the responsibility of faith communities to protect it. This existential crisis has produced a spiritual hunger and an opportunity for religious traditions to provide spiritual nourishment. Christian theology distinguishes optimism, which is hard to find in today’s troubled world, from hope based on God’s power to subdue all the demonic forces and the divine promise of the final victory of good over evil.

G. Harsh Political Rhetoric “Nine Rules for Civility from the Catholic Tradition “ David Zubik, Bishop of Pittsburgh, June 2018 in *America*

1.Listen to others, be attentive to their feelings, perspectives, beliefs.

2. Start by identifying what we hold in common, points of agreement and then discuss differences.

3. Recognize the right of contending groups to exist and speak in the public forum as guaranteed by the First Amendment but denounce hateful ideologies, such as white supremacy, antisemitism and Islamophobia.

4. Show respect for persons who disagree with us while expressing our own view.

5. Work for inclusion of all members of society, especially minorities and marginalized.

6. Distinguish facts and opinions. The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.”

7. We need passionate discussions about values.

8. Do not assume or impute motives.

9. Be self-critical. Civil dialogue can help us clarify and in some cases modify our view.

II. Structural and Political Threats

1. Refusing Certification cf Center for American Progress (CAP) report

1.Partisan officials might refuse to certify the results of a close election, for example, in 2020, the four member Wayne County Board of Canvassers (Detroit, MI) at first was tied on whether to certify the Biden victory, then 2 members under pressure voted yes to certify, but soon after tried to rescind their vote but could not by law. The grand plan, devised by lawyer John Eastman, included battleground states submitting an alternative list of electors, which seven states actually did (two provisionally) paving the way for Pence to refuse certification and throwing the election into the House where Trump would win.

2. CAP argues that we need federal legislation to avoid this. They support the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act but that is stuck in the Senate. Republican senator Susan Collins is chairing a 16 member group of senators trying to reform the ambiguous 1887 Electoral Count Act so that it is clear that the vice president cannot change the results of the presidential election. Ohio senator Rob Portman can be contacted on this issue at 202-724-3353.

B. Tampering with Votes

1. Trumpian election workers who openly hold conspiracy theories could intimidate voters or tamper with results.

2.There is a nationwide movement to get Trump supporters in positions of influence as precinct officers and poll workers at the same time many veteran poll workers are leaving their posts.

3.The Freedom to Vote Act, stalled in Congress, has provisions to mitigate these threats: poll watchers must stay at least eight feet away from voters; require a paper record of every vote; prevents state officials from arbitrarily removing local election officials except for gross negligence.

C. Congress might overturn the Electoral College Results

1. Right after the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capital, 147 members of Congress voted against certifying the election.

2. U.S. Department of Homeland Security described the 2020 election as “the most secure in modern history.” Despite more than 60 lawsuits and many post-election audits and reviews, there was never a shred of evidence of electorally significant fraud.

3. Reforming the vague Electoral Count Act of 1887 could limit possibility of frivolous objections.

D. Our Two Party System is Broken, preventing bipartisan approaches and helpful compromises *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop* by Lee Drutman

1. The Founders worried about factions destroying democracy.

2. Historically the Federalist party, led by Alexander Hamilton, supported a strong, central government. In 1800 they were defeated by the Jeffersonian Republican Party. The two party system as we know it goes back to the Civil War period when Abraham Lincoln was elected the first Republican president in 1860 ending the dominance of the modern Democratic Party, founded by Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), which supported state’s rights and appealed to southern whites. Today the party positions have changed with the Democrats supporting strong civil rights legislation and Republicans passing laws restricting voting opportunities.

3. Drutman argues for a “multi-party system” which will help save our democracy, lower economic inequality, make parties stronger, raise voter turnout, make compromise more desirable and citizens more satisfied with democracy.

4. To move in this direction: have open primaries, term limits (4 for Reps, 2 for Senators), stricter campaign finance laws; multi-member congressional districts.

E. Problems with our Election Procedures *Election Meltdown* by Richard Hasen

1. He sees four things that undermine confidence in our elections: voter suppression; use of partisan election officials to decide questions and disputes; Russian cyber-attacks; Trump’s incendiary rhetoric and refusal to accept the results of a free and fair election.

2. With the ongoing power of Trumpism we can no longer take for granted the peaceful transition of presidential power.

3. Responsible responses: making voting more accessible; creating independent commissions to decide questions and disputes; greater vigilance against foreign interference.

F. Suppressing the Vote *Uncounted* by Gilda Daniels

1. The 1965 Voting Rights Act worked well for almost five decades to enable African Americans in the South to register and vote.

2. In 2013, the Supreme Court in the Shelby County v. Holder case by a 5 to 4 vote ruled that states with records of political discrimination no longer had to get advance approval from Washington before changing legislative boundaries, election law or voting procedures.

3. Within days of the decision, southern states moved to make voting more difficult: eliminating polling places and closing them earlier; tightening requirements for a valid ID; purging voting rolls for failing to vote in previous elections; not allowing persons released from prison to vote.

4. Spurred on by Trump’s constant refrain that the 2020 election was stolen, many states have enacted legislation restricting access to the ballot.

5. Daniels believes that the suppression trend will be reversed by litigation, legislation, social media, community funding and religious alliances.

F. Overestimating Extremists *Why We Avoid Politics* by John Bing

1. We tend to overestimate the number of extremists in both parties, especially unmovable Trump supporters (66% of Republicans accept the Big Lie). This makes many people reluctant to participate in political debate.

2. Actually citizens who identify as Republican are around 25-30 percent of the adult population and not all of these support Trump. According to Bing, this means that only about 17% of Americans are hard core Trumpers.

3. Democracy requires debate and discussion of important public issues in an effort to clarify positions and search for common ground.

4. There may be more opportunities for such conversations than we surmise and we can all help save democracy by seizing more of them.

G. Threat of Insurrection *The Jan 6 Insurrectionists Aren’t Who You Think They Are* by Robert Pape, professor of political science at University of Chicago, published January, 2022

1. Based on a national survey of 2,000 American adults, conducted by NORC and the University of Chicago, Pope estimates that there are about 21 million, (somewhere between 13 and 28 million), Americans who hold that Biden is an illegitimate president and that the use of force to restore Trump to office is justifiable. They are “a significant part of mainstream America” and are a dangerous threat to our democracy. About 42% watch conservative news like Fox and 32% watch CNN.

2. Of the first 716 people arrested or charged for Jan 6 more than half are business owners or have white collar occupations including doctors, lawyers, architects and accountants. Only 7% were unemployed and only 14% were members of militias such as the Oath Keepers or extremist groups like the Proud Boys. More than half live in counties won by Biden where the white share of the population is declining.

3. The national survey shows 75% of respondents hold the “great replacement” belief, popularized in the U.S. by Tucker Carlson, that liberals are furthering white demographic decline by immigration policies. Charlottesville “Jews will not replace us.” The gunman accused of mass murders in Buffalo, cited “the great replacement theory” in his lengthy manifesto.

4. The 2022 election season is a “tinder box which could easily explode into violence.” Citizens should ask every candidate whether force is justified to restore Trump to office.