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Strengthening Democracy by Design: Challenges and Opportunities

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Strengthening Democracy by Design: Challenges and Opportunities

Abstract

In 2014, the Journal of Public Deliberation published an essay, "Democracy by Design," a framework for a more aspirational, stronger democracy and approach to civic learning. Here, the authors update and reissue Democracy by Design along with a report on the status of the four foundational attributes of a strong democracy, one that is participatory, free and equal, educated and informed, and accountable and justly governed. The authors argue that American democracy faces multiple challenges reflecting declines in democratic norms and practices, for example, growing inequality, weak and unequal civic education, widening polarization, and the rise of undemocratic forces in some segments of American society that are seemingly unchecked by political leaders. Stopping democracy's decline calls for efforts - some deliberative and some more activist - by both public officials and everyday citizens. Citizen-driven efforts will prevail only if contextualized in broader knowledge and understanding of democracy's design and health.

Author Biography

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Keywords

Democracy, Political Participation, Deliberation, Governance, Civic Education

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This special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* explores the threat to democracy from growing authoritarian tendencies globally and in some segments of American society. The editors ask: can civil and reasoned deliberation serve as an effective antidote to forces that threaten democratic ideals and practices, or do the current political conditions call for more aggressive responses? These are reasonable questions to ask. In his farewell address, President Barack Obama quoted the first president of the United States, George Washington, who called on Americans to guard democracy with "jealous anxiety" (Los Angeles Times, 2017). President Obama hit on an essential truth; democracy requires maintenance. It is not inevitable nor is it self-sustaining. Democracy is only as strong as the passion and commitment of everyday Americans (referring to residency, not citizenship status).

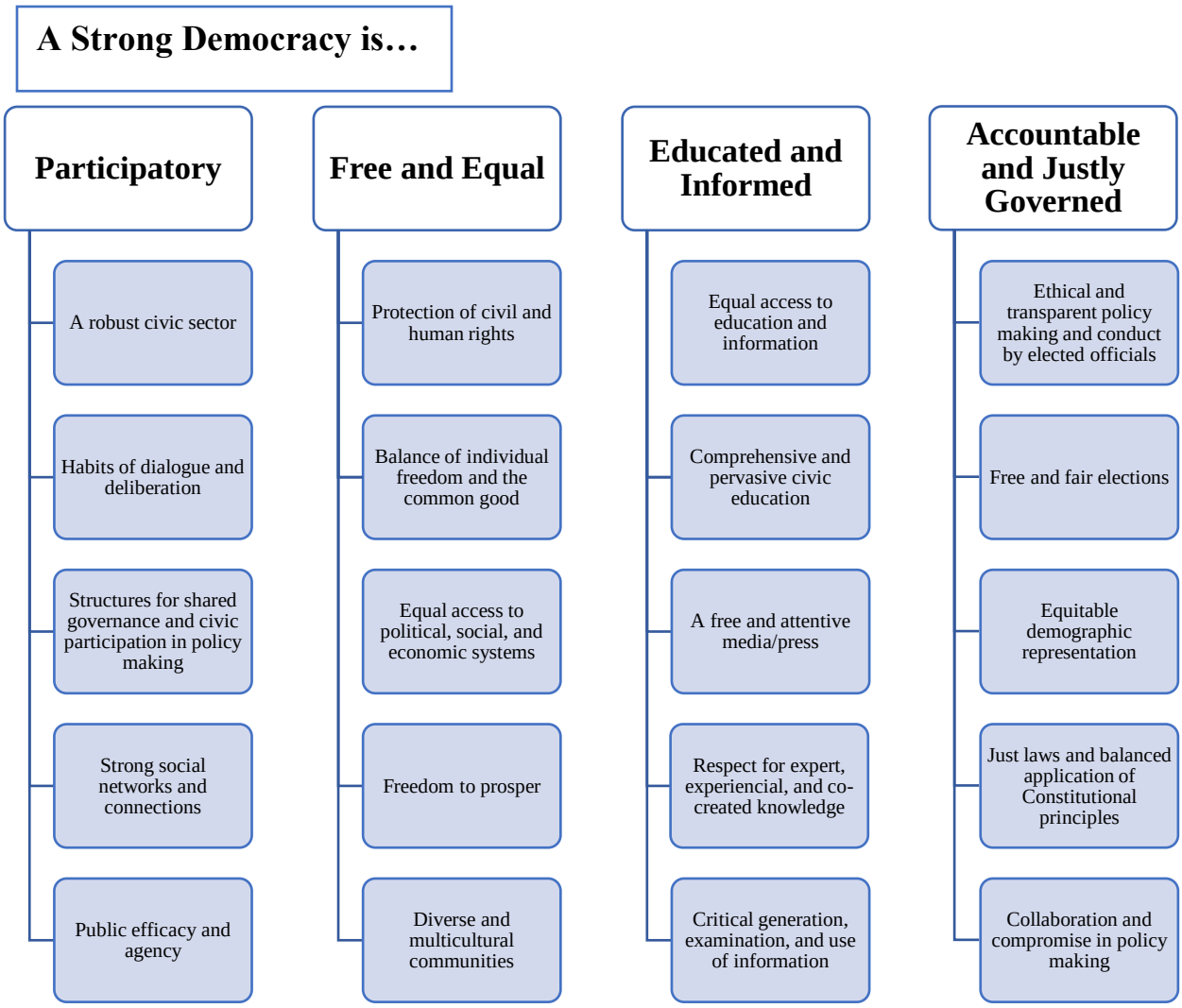
As noted in the introduction to this issue, it is easy to find scholarly and popular commentary about "dying," "decaying," and "backsliding" democracies. If, however, deliberative participation by Americans is a solution, then perhaps a threshold question is: do Americans know enough about what it means to live in a democracy— and about the evidence of its decline—to respond appropriately?

As an ideal and concept, *democracy* sometimes feels amorphous, and therefore unattainable as a goal. More challenging, democracy is both a form of governance and a set of principles and practices that guide community life. Perhaps the place to start is with a framework for an ideal, strong democracy first, followed by information about the health of elements in the framework. This article offers both – a framework and a report. It is intended to provide fodder for political discussions and action on the health and future of democracy in the United States.

Democracy by Design: A Framework for a Strong Democracy

In 2014, the *Journal of Public Deliberation* published a special issue of invited essays on the "state of the field" of public dialogue and deliberation. That issue included an essay, "Democracy by Design," that offered a relatively simple framework for a more aspirational, strong democracy (Thomas, 2014). Based on a series of discussions among civic organizations engaged in democracy-building work, the framework in Democracy by Design was offered as an approach to postsecondary civic learning. *All* students would learn a set of attributes that

constituted a framework for a strong democracy. Each attribute was also supported by dimensions, examples of practices that each student could master through study and experience. Democracy by Design was presented as a proposal, subject to critique and revision, particularly additional practices for each attribute. Since 2014, both academics and practitioners have offered suggestions for improving the framework. The updated framework is reflected in Figure 1. (To see the original framework and a review of the changes, see Appendix.)



The language "by design" was selected to emphasize that it is an integrated framework, not disconnected, independent mechanics. The attributes and dimensions are meant to work together – for example, equitable representation is dependent on equal access to political systems.

Selected Threats to a Strong Democracy

This section offers more description of the four key attributes of a strong democracy, followed by threats to each. It does not provide an exhaustive evaluation, but it reviews some of the most critical threats.

Participatory

In a strong democracy, people participate in and shape the social, political, and economic systems that affect their lives. In other words, a strong democracy is *participatory.* It is structured in ways that enable and encourage civic participation, and at the same time, people *want* to be engaged. They believe they can catalyze social and policy change, and government structures view them as valuable contributors to shaping policy. Participation includes traditional political activities (e.g., voting, running for office, writing an op-ed, contacting an elected official to express a viewpoint) as well as action outside of the political system (e.g., community organizing, activism and protest, and dialogues to effectuate change). Challenges to participation include low voter turnout, declines in the nation's civic health, and deepening political polarization.

Voting

One way to measure participation in democracy is by examining the most basic form of engagement: voting. Among the 32 developed democratic countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. ranked 26th in voter turnout after the 2016 election (DeSilver, 2018). Around 60% of eligible voters vote in presidential elections and roughly 42% vote in midterm elections (Leighley & Nagler, 2014, p. 21), although the 2018 race exceeded that by an estimated 8 percentage points (McDonald, 2018). There are many reasons why people do not vote, including structural barriers and intentional suppression, inconvenient or mystifying processes, strict identification requirements,

disillusionment with the candidates or political system, lack of trust in government or parties, lack of information, and apathy.

Just as important as *whether* Americans vote is *which* Americans vote. Whites are overrepresented as voters (File, 2015, p. 13). Young Americans turn out at lower rates than older Americans (File, 2017). And, more than 80% of high-income Americans vote, compared with barely 50% of their low-income peers (Leighley & Nagler, 2014, p. 1). The demographics of the nation's elected officials reflect this dynamic. The Washington, D.C., political news source Roll Call estimates the median net worth among members of the current 115th Congress to be about $511,000 (Hawkings, 2018); that figure far outpaces the net worth of the median American family, which the Federal Reserve found to be $97,300 (Bricker, et al., 2017). Inequality in racial, gender, and age-based representation also persist. Non-Hispanic-or-Latino Whites comprise 61% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) and 90% of elected officials nationwide. Meanwhile, a record number of women will serve in the 116th Congress, but they will still only make up 24% of the 541 voting and nonvoting members of Congress (Center for American Women and Politics, 2018). These patterns of race, gender, and class underrepresentation have policy consequences. Not only do politicians serve the preferences of their supporters above those of nonvoters (Leighley & Nagler, 2014), they also cater to wealthy constituents (Franko, et. al. 2016). On the other hand, when people from historically underrepresented groups do get elected, their interests can be better represented. Several studies indicate that increased Black political representation leads to increased responsiveness to Black citizens and preferences (Broockman, 2013; Preuhs, 2006).

Voting is a mechanism for holding political leaders accountable for their actions. When elected officials cater to their base or to special interests, rather than to their entire constituency, they lose the trust of voters which, in turn, dissuades participation. While the 2018 election outcomes suggest increased interest among Americans in holding elected officials accountable, it is too soon to know whether that interest reflects an outlier or the start of a trend.

The nation's civic health

In the late 1990s, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam warned of declines in the "civic health" of the nation. Captured by the image of Americans preferring to "bowl alone" rather than in leagues, he warned that the nation was losing its social

capital, the capacity of people to live and work together to solve community problems. In response, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) worked in partnership with the Corporation for National and Community Service, academics, and thought leaders to develop an approach to measuring civic health by evaluating how people connect with each other through religious, service, social, or work-related groups; how people connect with neighbors and families and how much trust they have in each other; charitable giving; volunteerism; voting; staying informed about local needs and politics; political participation; and trust in institutions.

In 2017, using language coined by Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Felicia Sullivan (2017) at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), NCoC issued a report entitled "Civic Deserts: America's Civic Health Challenge," that identified communities without opportunities for civic engagement (Atwell, Bridgeland, & Levine, 2017). The authors conclude that, only 28% of Americans—an all-time low—say that they belong to any group with leaders who are both accountable and inclusive (p 21). In 1970, 54% of Americans either attended church regularly or belonged to a union, or both. By 2012, that proportion had fallen to 34%. At the same time, Americans face greater social isolation because they increasingly live alone, lack social support and a network of friends, and do not belong to community organizations (p.25). These conditions result in geographic areas devoid of opportunities for civic and political engagement. While civic deserts exist in urban and suburban areas, 60% of young people in rural areas reside in "civic deserts" (p27).

Polarization

Much has been written or studied regarding the state of discourse; growing divides between partisans; divides along racial, gender, urban-rural, and other lines; and what Katherine Cramer (2016) called "the politics of resentment." In their personal lives, Americans gravitate to homogeneous communities, social experiences, and work environments where they find others who share their social identity, values, and viewpoints (Bishop & Cushing, 2008). According to the Pew Research Center, partisan polarization has worsened in recent years. About 52% of Republicans view Democrats as closed-minded; that figure is 47% and 45%, respectively, for "immoral" and dishonest" (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). A significant number of Democrats (70%) view Republicans as closed-minded, 42% view Republicans as

dishonest, and 35% view Republicans as immoral (Doherty & Kiley, 2016). In 2016, 91% of Republicans viewed Democrats unfavorably, and a staggering 58% viewed them "very unfavorably." The attitudes of Democrats toward Republicans are comparable: 86% and 55%, respectively (Doherty & Kiley, 2016).

Partisanship also correlates with race. Among Black Americans, 84% either identify with or lean toward Democrats, while 8% identify with or lean toward Republicans (Doherty, Kiley, & O'Hea, 2018, p. 7). Similarly, 63% of Hispanics identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party, compared to 28% for Republicans (Doherty, Kiley, & O'Hea, 2018, p. 8). Meanwhile, more Whites affiliate with or lean Republican than Democrat: 51% to 43% (Doherty, Kiley, & O'Hea, 2018, p. 7).

Although the Democratic party consists of a diverse coalition of Americans, it is decidedly the preferred party of college graduates (Freedlander, 2018). In 1994, voters with college degrees preferred Republicans over Democrats 54% to 39%; now, those numbers have flipped (Freedlander, 2018).

Some commentators have gone so far as to say that the Republican party is viewed as racist (Ehrenfreund, 2015; Boot, 2018). Political scientists have demonstrated the significance of racism, sexism, and xenophobia as drivers of the outcomes of the 2016 presidential election (Schaffner, Macwilliams, & Nteta, 2018). Democrats and left-leaning independents, particularly those who are younger and college educated, are socially liberal (in favor of LGBTQ and abortion rights, for example) and support social services, government regulation of banks, and environmental regulations to address climate change. They also they consider diversity and minority representation as a strength (Freedlander, 2018). The results of the 2018 election highlighted stark differences between the parties in terms of diversity and inclusion (Thomas, 2018).

Ironically, polarization increases political interest and participation, including voting (Dodson, 2010). The question remains, how much division is *too much* division? The compromising middle is shrinking. This cripples a governing system that requires compromise and collaboration.

Free and Equal

In a free and equal democracy people can pursue their personal aspirations, but also understand that they share responsibility for each other, their communities, the nation, and the globe. People not only participate, but they have *equal* opportunities to shape the social and political systems that affect them, with equitable outcomes. Threats to a free and equal democracy imperil political equality. Although there are many dimensions to this challenge (housing, health care, and environmental insecurity, for example) in conceptualizing the original framework we chose to address three large, structural problems: how political campaigns are financed, income and social inequality, and mass incarceration. There is also a growing crisis of White nationalism in the United States which, while obviously related to the present section on freedom and equality, also has implications for governance, ethics, and responsibility. For that reason, we have decided to address it in the later section on accountable and just government.

Political equality and campaign finance

In the United States, as long as individuals or corporations do not directly coordinate with campaigns, they can spend freely to influence an election via advertisements or other means of promotion (Potter & Morgan, 2013). Shapiro (2015, p. 204) writes that, especially after Supreme Court decisions like *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) and *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) loosened restrictions, the influence of money in American politics skews control of the public agenda to those with "massive war chests." That is, the very issues we discuss as a polity are determined or disproportionately influenced by those who spend enough to secure meetings and have their voices heard by politicians.

Money or donations can increase political access or otherwise influence politicians and policy (e.g. Kalla & Broockman, 2016; Bartels, 2008; Powell, 2014; Gillens & Page, 2014). Two prominent studies connect campaign donations from wealthy interests to less redistributive economic policies (Bonica, et.al., 2013; Flavin, 2015). Powell and Grimmer (2016) demonstrated that corporations and business PACs strategically donate as a way to gain access.

Economic and social inequality

Severe income inequality exacerbates the impacts of a campaign system that favors the wealthy. According to the World Inequality Report,

> Income inequality in the United States is among the highest of all rich countries." The share of national income earned by the top 1% of adults in 2014 (20.2%) is much larger than the share earned by the bottom 50% of the adult population (12.5%). (Alvaredo, et.al., 2018, p. 78)

Relatedly, educational achievement varies widely by school district, with students in some districts outperforming others by more than four grade levels, a difference that is "very highly correlated with the socioeconomic characteristics of families in the local community," (Reardon, 2016, p. 12). Educational gaps by race and ethnicity, while improving, remain large, and at current rates of progress would still require 50 years to be eliminated (Reardon & Fahle, 2017, p. 21). Even that modest improvement is not reflected in the gaps based on a proxy variable for poverty. When compared with higher income students, test scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) have remained stagnant for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Hansen, et.al., 2018).

Diamond and Morlino (2004, p. 27) claim it is nearly impossible to achieve political equality in the face of massive wealth and status inequity. Dahl (2006), looking at why political inequality might increase in the U.S., pointed to the tendency of economic inequalities to produce political inequalities. In a widely cited study, Houle (2009) found that while inequality does not cause a democracy to become more authoritarian, it does create the conditions that allow for, and increases the probability of, a backslide away from democracy.

Freedom and mass incarceration

The U.S. incarcerates far more of its people per capita than other countries, with 698 people incarcerated per 100,000; by contrast, the United Kingdom incarcerates 139 per 100,000 and Canada incarcerates 114 (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). The United States has around 5% of the world's population and about 20% of its prison population (Lee, 2015; Walmsley, 2016).

Michelle Alexander and John Pfaff have both written books about the role of race in mass incarceration. Alexander (2012) influentially dubbed the systematic incarceration of Black Americans a "new Jim Crow" and implicated the War on Drugs in the rebirth of a racial caste system in the United States. Pfaff (2017) points to unequal representation and the power of prosecutors rather than the War on Drugs as the primary causes but agrees that race is a key part of the story. According to the Sentencing Project, "people of color make up 37% of the U.S. population but 67% of the prison population," (Criminal Justice Facts, 2017). Overall, African

Americans are more likely than White Americans to be arrested; once arrested, they are more likely to be convicted; and once convicted, they are more likely to face stiff sentences," (Criminal Justice Facts, 2017). Once out of prison, the formerly incarcerated face significant, intergenerational social and economic disadvantages (Western & Pettit, 2010). In 12 states, people convicted of a felony face some sort of restriction of their right to vote after incarceration, from waiting periods, to petitioning governors for reprieve, to lifetime bans (Felon Voting Rights, 2017).

Educated and Informed

In an educated and informed democracy, some measure of equity in education must be present; that is, people should largely have the same opportunities to receive educations of equal quality. This includes attention to civic learning. Ideally, people follow the news and can identify and refute misinformation. Knowledge is co-created by experts and practitioners. The nation supports and values a free press; the media is fair and independent. We see several challenges to mechanisms for cultivating an informed citizenry: the lack of adequate civics education, an unequal education system, declines in trust of the media, and the difficulty in discerning fact from "disinformation."

Weak public education and the lack of civic education at the K-12 levels

A 2017 survey conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania found that only 26% of the more than 1,000 respondents knew all three branches of the federal government, a significant decline from 38% in 2011 (Annenburg Public Policy Center, 2017). The 2015 iteration of the same study, the last year in which this question was asked, reported that 30% of respondents did not take a civics or government class in high school, up from 23% in the first year of the survey, 2011 (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2015). And while the average score on the NAEP's national civics test has increased for 8th-graders since 1998 (mostly among lower and middle-income students), that score is still well below proficient, with only around 23% of 8th-graders demonstrating civic proficiency in 2010 and 2014 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015).

The decline of civic education is compounded by the threat of unequal education. Today, schools are severely unequal. At grade 12, according to the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) report on *Status and Trends in Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups,* the White-Black achievement gap in reading was larger

in 2015 than in 1992: 30 points to 24 points (Musu-Gillette, et al., 2017). In 2017, the National Student Clearinghouse researchers released a *High School Benchmarks* reports comparing the rates of graduation and matriculation in college. The report found that only one in five high school graduates from high-poverty schools complete college within six years. About 27% of White students who entered college dropped out within six years, compared with 45% of Black students and 35% of Hispanic students; Asian students left school at a rate of 20% (Shapiro, et al., 2017).

Often funded by property taxes, local public schools are under-resourced in low-income, often majority-minority areas, and well-resourced in wealthy, whiter areas. White students are more likely than Black students to be placed in Advanced Placement classes or gifted and talented programs (Groeger, Waldman, & Eads, 2018). Nationally, Black students are more likely to be suspended than White students (Groeger, Waldman, & Eads, 2018). Many school districts have uneven distribution of Black and White students across schools (Groeger, Waldman, & Eads, 2018). These are serious deficits in a society that seeks a healthy economy, communities, and democracy. A more equal education system, and one that prepares its students for citizenship, should be a priority of those that pursue a better democracy.

Disinformation and fake news

Further complicating Americans' ability to be properly informed about political affairs is the proliferation of so-called "fake news." Disinformation, the more formal term for "the use of half-truth and non-rational argument to manipulate public opinion in pursuit of political objectives," is said by the National Endowment for Democracy to serve multiple and complex purposes: it can distract, obscure the truth, inspire consumers to certain actions, and shape the long-term environment for information and media (Jackson, 2018). Disinformation is not just meant to convince people that something false is true; rather, by distracting and obscuring, it confuses the consumers and undermines factual reporting. In fact, 64% of Americans say completely made up news causes "a great deal of confusion" around the basic facts of current events (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016).

By now, disinformation propagated by bad actors during the 2016 election is notorious, but the problem of voter misperceptions[1] due to media, social or otherwise, is not a new one. One 2008 analysis showed a negative association between watching Fox News and accepting global warming, despite the scientific community's near-unanimous acceptance (Feldman, et. al, 2012). The left is not immune to partisan media manipulation Consider, for example, the 9/11 conspiracy theories which argued that President Bush or someone in his administration was responsible for those attacks, a theory more likely to be supported by Democrats than Republicans (Stempel, Hargrove, & Stempel III, 2007).

One core problem might be partisan motivated reasoning, which describes a process by which individuals form attitudes based on the goal of "protecting one's partisan identity," (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014, p. 237). Disinformation plays into the tendency toward motivated reasoning which, in a fiercely divided partisan climate, can prove debilitating. But Faris, et al. (2017, p. 21) argue that technical solutions to flagrant disinformation (e.g. mandating that Facebook edit the news that appears on the website) would only be "working on the margins of the core challenge;" to truly tackle the problem of misperceptions writ large, we need substantive change in political culture, power, and norms. For the moment, paired with the decline in civic education, the proliferation of flawed information creates a significant threat to democracy because people cannot agree upon the condition of society and the problems that need solving, let alone how to solve them.

Trust in the media

In 2018, only 23% of Americans said they trust newspapers, only 20% trust television news, 20% said they trust television news, and only 16% trust internet news (Gallup, 2018). Other reports paint a more positive picture: reflecting a significant jump since 2016, 55% of Americans trust in national network news, 59% trust in national newspapers, and 47% trust in online news outlets according to the Poynter Media Trust Survey (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018, p. 6). These numbers break along party lines, with Republican trust in the media at 23% and Democrats at 86% (p. 2). Forty-two percent of Americans say that the news media

[1] Flynn, et al. (2017, p. 128) define misperceptions as "factual beliefs that are false or contradict the best available evidence in the public domain," with one possible origin being misinformation in the media. The National Endowment for Democracy defines *mis*information as, generally, "the inadvertent sharing of false information," (Jackson, 2017). Of course, disinformation also causes misperceptions and the line between it and misinformation is often blurry and hard to identify.

fabricates stories "about half the time," "most of the time," or "all of the time." The Poynter survey report (p. 4) said:

> One of the most striking findings from the 2017 survey was the high proportion of the public was willing to join President Trump in calling the press an "enemy of the people" (31% overall, including 63% of Trump supporters).

The problem is exacerbated by questions about the veracity of U.S. political leaders. PolitiFact reported that 69% of President Trump's claims rate as "mostly false," "false," or "pants on fire" (PoltiFact, 2018). According to fact-checkers at the *Washington Post,* in his first year as President, Donald Trump made 2,140 false claims, and in the first six months of 2017, the number of false or misleading statements doubled to 4,229 (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2018).

A strong democracy needs an independent, trustworthy press to check false claims by politicians. In its 2018 report, Freedom House, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that monitors freedom, democracy, and human rights globally, noted a "slow decline" in U.S. democracy due to concerns over money in politics, legislative dysfunction, and inequalities in the criminal justice system. It also warned that, in 2017, "the deterioration accelerated" partly due to reduction in government transparency, a pattern of false statements by the administration, and verbal attacks on the media, which, combined, could negatively impact an independent press.

Accountable and Justly Governed

The fourth Democracy by Design attribute concerns the integrity of government and political systems. In a strong democracy, elected officials and government systems are held accountable by the people. Policymakers behave and make decisions in ways that are ethical and transparent. A nonpartisan, independent judiciary adheres to Constitutional principles and the rule of law. Elections are accurate, fair, ethically administered, and free from outside interference. Ideally, U.S. structures and systems of government are accountable, transparent, ethical, just, and, trustworthy.

However, today in America, public trust in the federal government is at its lowest point in 50 years. According to a January 2018 NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll, only 25% of Americans say they have "a great deal of confidence" or "quite a lot"

of confidence in Congress; the presidency fared better at 43% (Montanaro, 2018). In May 2018, the Center for American Progress and Hart Research Associates reported that trust in government "has cratered," and only 14% of Americans believe they can trust the government "to do what is right" all or most of the time, (Halpin, et. al., 2018). Similarly, according to Edelman's 2018 "trust and credibility" survey, the U.S. government "had the steepest declines (14 points) over the past year, and fewer than a third of Americans believe that government officials are credible" (Edelman Intelligence, 2018, p. 7).

Electoral integrity

Americans have good reasons to have doubts about aspects of the country's electoral and political systems. For example, voter suppression in the United States, which has often been tied to racist efforts to keep African Americans from the polls and classist attitudes toward people who did not own property or had less formal education, persist in various forms.

Chief among them may be partisan gerrymandering, the process by which partisan legislatures redraw districts in a way that strengthens their electoral chances. This differs from, though is often connected to, racial gerrymandering, which is redistricting to reduce the power of racial groups irrespective of party—though in practice, given the racial gaps in party preference explored in a previous section, the aim and effect is largely the same. The Brennan Center criticizes partisan gerrymandering as antidemocratic, noting that politicians can use it to "stifle their political opponents' power and keep themselves in office," (Brennan Center for Justice, 2018). If politicians are choosing who votes for them, they are escaping at least some measure of accountability. Court cases regarding Republican gerrymanders in Wisconsin and North Carolina, and a Democratic gerrymander in Maryland, all have the potential to shift the legal playing field on the issue in the coming years (Li, Wolf, & Lo, 2018).

Other suppression tactics focus more directly on the process of registering and voting. First, after years in which most electoral reforms were aimed at easing voter access, voter identification laws have become increasingly prevalent in recent decades (Biggers & Hanmer, 2017). According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2018), "A total of 34 states have laws requesting or requiring voters to show some form of identification at the polls." The strictest of these laws require a photo identification and, if a voter lacks ID when they go vote, the casting of a

provisional ballot and extra steps after the election in order to have the vote counted; this is the case in eight states (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018). Voter ID laws have an uncertain effect on turnout. While a recent overview found null-to-modest impacts on turnout (Highton, 2017), other studies find that whatever impacts there are fall disproportionately on racial minorities (see Hopkins' (2018) journalistic overview; also, Henniger, Meredith, & Morse (2018) and Fraga & Miller (2018). Disenfranchising voters is unethical and antidemocratic, no matter the impact.

A second suppression tactic targeted at the voting and registration process is the purging of inactive voters from the rolls. While cleaning voter rolls is an important task in election administration, some purges are done illegally or incorrectly, imposing unnecessary burdens on many voters (Brater, et. al., 2018).

A third tactic is the closure of polling places, which increases the costs (e.g., time or transportation) for voters in particular areas to get to the polls. Poll closures can respond to legitimate reasons like a decreasing demand for in-person voting locations thanks to early voting, and they can be done responsibly; however, after *Shelby County v. Holder*, the requirement that the federal government clear such changes in states that have historically suppressed voting rights, often on the basis of race, is no longer in place, allowing some of these closures to happen without needed oversight (Simpson, 2016).

Racism as a political weapon

The section on freedom and equality referenced the growing crisis of White nationalism. While this is clearly a problem of inequality, it's also a problem of government accountability, justice, and ethics.

Racism in the U.S. has a long, depressing history with a pattern of progress (abolitionist movements, emancipation, and Reconstruction) followed by populist, racist responses (Jim Crow laws, *de jure* discrimination), followed by a new wave of anti-racist progress (desegregation and increased access to schools and universities, businesses, and housing, the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s, affirmative action, and the election of a Black president) tempered by a backlash of *de facto* discrimination, mass incarceration of Black men and an unequal criminal justice system, and structural racism, a form of passive racism veiled by support for

individualism and meritocracy. Racism has always been a central problem for U.S. democracy and our leaders must be accountable for addressing it.

The newest wave of racism manifests in the proliferation of hate groups and hate crimes. White supremacist recruiting and action on college campuses is also on the rise. The Southern Poverty Law Center called 2016 the year of "electrified" White supremacy, and 2017 was worse (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). For example, Identity Evropa grew from one chapter in 2016 to 15 in 2017 (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). The Right Stuff expanded from 4 chapters to 25, while simultaneously spawning new groups like Identity Dixie and Vanguard America (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). This growth is paralleled by murders motivated by racial and ethnic hatred: the August 2017 Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, VA, where a White supremacist plowed his car into the crowd, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others; mass killings at a Black church and a synagogue, and other successful and attempted homicides, including the pipe bombs targeting prominent Democrats (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). In June 2018, the Anti-Defamation League reported 292 incidents of White supremacist propaganda that attacks Blacks, Jews, Muslims, nonwhite immigrants and the LGBTQ community, a 77% increase from 2016-17 (Anti-Defamation League, 2018b). In July 2018, the League issued a follow-up report tying White supremacists to misogyny and "anger and loathing towards women," (Anti-Defamation League, 2018a) Scholars and journalists have tied this movement to the online radicalization of young White men, often in spaces that initially organized around anti-women ideas (see, for example, Alfano, Carter, & Cheong, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Hawley, 2017).

The growing prominence of hate-based ideologies and groups is a national crisis that calls for a strong rebuke from political leaders, yet after the Charlottesville rally, President Trump famously noted that there were "fine people on both sides." (Gray, 2017). The Southern Poverty Law Center ties the Trump campaign and administration to the escalating crisis of hate (Beirich & Buchanan, 2018). While President Trump did not *create* racism and sexism, he won the election in part by capitalizing on increasing racial and ethnic polarization (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2017). Elected officials in the United States should be accountable to the diverse population they serve, and just leaders would take steps towards solving the resurgent crisis of white nationalism.

Democratic Renewal

Levitsky and Ziblatt's popular *How Democracies Die* (2018) provides ample evidence of the slow erosion of democracy globally. Chronicling the collapse of democracy in some European and Latin American countries, the authors point to parallels in the United States and blame political elites for taking advantage of resentment and fomenting cultural division and populism. They also see political elites, not everyday Americans, as the solution. New political leaders need to stop practices by partisans that delegitimize their political adversaries and, instead, restore integrity in government, abate rising economic and racial inequality, and restore norms of mutual respect and compromise.

Who is responsible for restoring democratic principles and practices in the United States? Will change result from top-down reform or from civic efforts on the ground? What Levitsky and Ziblatt overlook is the power of the public to act to preserve democratic principles and practices, but it is hard to be optimistic about either approach on its own.

For political elites to stop democratic decline, they first need to understand the threats to democracy, and then they need to take responsibility for reversing democracy's trajectory. That means changes in how elected officials govern. They would need to establish and use structures for communicating with, listening to, and being responsive to their stakeholders. They would need to be more transparent about the information they use and their rationale for policy choices. They would need to collaborate and compromise with their adversaries. Underlying these changes is a call for elected officials to relinquish or at least share power voluntarily. Most will not, unless forced.

To force political elites to reform, everyday Americans need to understand what a strong democracy looks like, why it matters, and then hold elected officials accountable through civic participation. The overall purpose of citizen participation is to enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions, thus overcoming the problems faced by representative democracy, especially when dealing with intractable problems, multifaceted issues, and fragmented policy environments (Fazi & Smith, 2006).

Civic participation can take many forms: from voting or even running for office, to helping a neighbor or donating to charity, to organizing, and protesting. It can also involve participating in deliberative forums designed to raise awareness, strengthen relationships across difference, build community, break down polarization, and collaboratively solve public problems.

One cause for optimism may be recent increased levels of political engagement. For example, more everyday Americans, civic organizations, and elected officials are paying attention to improving electoral integrity. In Florida, where the state would not allow polling places on college campuses, activists sued, and the state reversed its position (Martin, 2018). In Georgia, a plan to close polling locations in a predominantly Black county before the 2018 midterms drew national outrage, prompting the county to reverse its plans (Fausset, 2018). In the 2018 midterm elections alone, several ballot initiatives expanded voting rights: Floridians extended voting rights to 1.4 million convicted felons; Maryland, Nevada, and Michigan made it easier to register and vote; and Michigan, Colorado, and Missouri limited politicians' ability to gerrymander district lines (Hakim, 2018). And of course, Americans voted at historically high rates in the 2018 midterm election.

Currently, the momentum is with more activist, legal, and legislative forms of engagement – protest, organizing, litigation, ballot initiatives, and policy reform – and not with deliberative forms of decision making and social change. And that may be appropriate, given the wide range of issues plaguing democracy and the need for immediate reform. When the conditions that exist today of income and racial inequality or a lack of reciprocal interest in compromising, then deliberative approaches may not yield change. That said, all forms of engagement matter. Disaggregating the challenges—so that, for example, some people and organizations work on income inequality while others work on campus finance reform—may be the best approach.

Also, challenges of polarization, distrust of people with different perspectives and lived experiences, and disregard for norms of shared responsibility and inclusion call for public discussions that include relationship building, perspective taking, compromise, and collaboration. For that, deliberative methods may be effective, but only if they are contextualized in broader knowledge and understanding of democracy's design and health by both everyday Americans and elected officials.

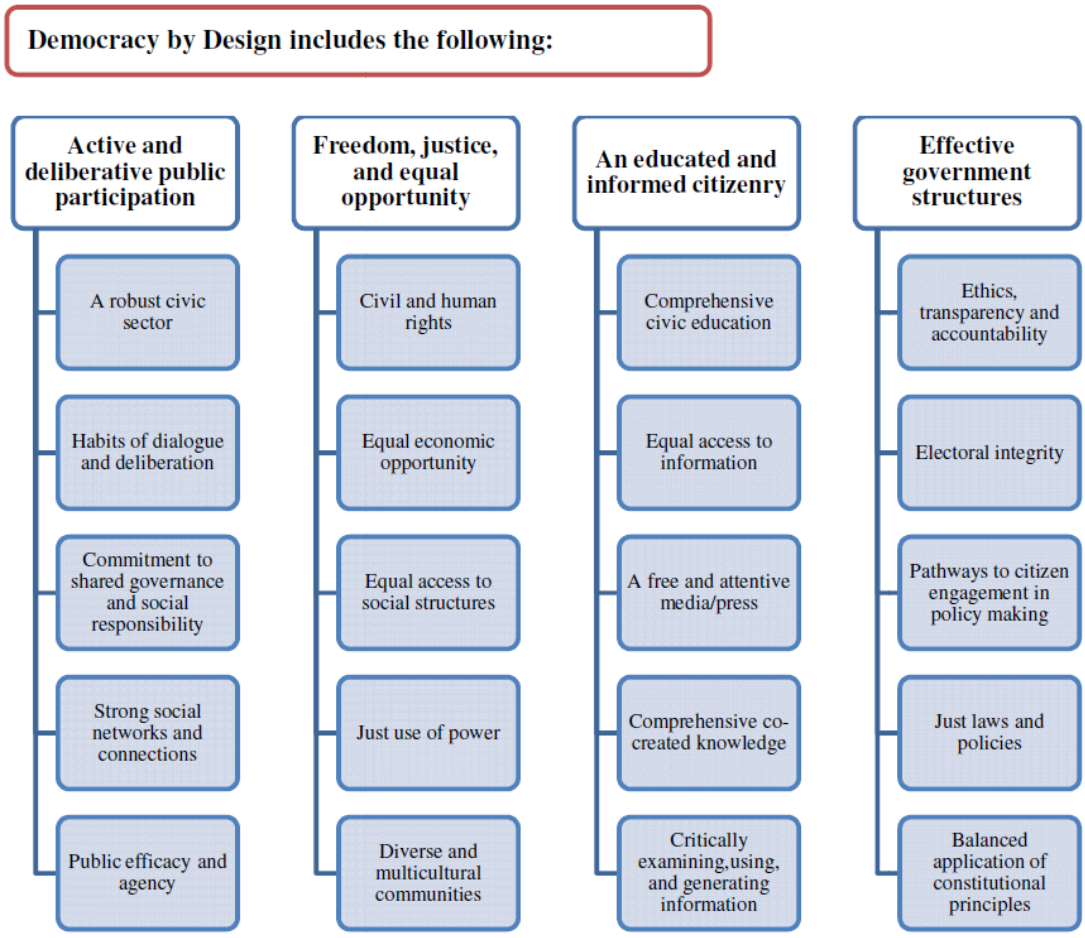
Democracy by Design was originally intended as a relatively accessible approach to civic learning in higher education. Ideally, students would learn the attributes of a strong democracy: one that is participatory, free and equitable, educated and informed, and governed with accountability and transparency. Students would then study and experience practices related to one or more attributes. This paper summarizes democratic problems linked to multiple disciplines and perspectives. All students can find something that interests them enough to increase their understanding of what a strong democracy looks like, and the role they can play in making democracy work.

It may be possible, and necessary, to expand the application of Democracy by Design to elected officials, party leaders, teachers, nonprofit organizations, the media, scholars, and thought leaders. The urgency exists: declines in democratic principles create voids that allow for authoritarian and repressive leaders to gain power. That should be of concern to American politicians on both sides of the aisle and to everyday Americans alike.

Appendix: An Updated Democracy by Design Framework

First published in 2014 in a special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* on the "state of the field," Democracy by Design provided a relatively simple framework for a more aspirational, healthier democracy (Thomas, 2014). The ideas in Democracy by Design emerged from discussions at a series of convenings that took place over several years called *Strengthening our Nation's Democracy.* Organized by civic organizations America*Speaks*, Demos, Everyday Democracy, the Kettering Foundation, and by faculty from Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Innovation and Governance, these gatherings brought together a broad group of reformers on the front line of democracy building in the United States. Representatives from around 85 civic organizations participated in discussions on deficits and inequality in citizen (a term used in this article to denote residency or membership in a community, not legal status) participation, challenges to effective and collaborative governance, doubts about electoral integrity, the movement to increase public dialogue and deliberation, and civil rights advocacy. The meetings catalyzed relationships and collaboration across the democracy reform community. Although the *Strengthening our Nation's Democracy* discussions concluded by 2010, participants reviewed and commented on drafts of this framework before its publication in 2014. Each attribute was supported by "dimensions," or practices to illustrate an attribute's application.

The original purpose of Democracy by Design was to suggest an approach to college student civic learning and engagement in democracy. Ideally, all students graduate understanding the four essential attributes and having studied and engaged deeply in one or more dimensions. Democracy by Design was envisioned as a work in progress, open to discussion, critique, and improvement. In this appendix, we explain the changes and rationale for each change to the framework. The original Democracy by Design is reflected in Figure 2, below.



Since the first published version of this framework, both academics and practitioners have suggested amendments. Most suggestions concerned language: align the attributes grammatically (all adjectives rather than some adjectives, some nouns); simplify; replace vague terms like "effective;" and clarify some dimensions. In response, we edited the four attributes of a strong democracy:

Original	Revised
Active and deliberative public participation	***Participatory***
Freedom, justice, and equal opportunity	***Free and Equal***
An educated and informed citizenry	***Educated and Informed***
Effective government structures	***Accountable and Justly Governed***

Other changes were made in response to changes in the political climate and reports of growing threats to democracy. Under *Participatory,* "Commitment to shared governance and social responsibility" was changed to "Structures for shared governance and civic participation in policy making." This kind of engagement ranges from voting to activism. At the same time, we removed "Pathways to citizen engagement in policy making" from *Accountable and Justly Governed* to make room for "Collaboration and compromise in policy making." These changes underscore the collaborative nature of governance between elected officials and citizens. While everyday people should want to participate in policymaking and social change efforts, that participation should result in solutions that reflect their involvement. In other words, people should raise their voices, and those with positional authority should listen and be held accountable.

Under *Free and Equal,* "Equal economic opportunity," "Equal access to social structures," and "Just use of power" were combined and relabeled "Equal access to political, social, and economic systems." Under *Accountable and Justly Governed,* we also clarified the importance of the rule of law and just policies.

We added "Freedom to prosper" in response to stagnation middle-class income, with the resulting wealth inequality, and perceptions that political systems privilege some and not others. We include this under *Free and Equal* because, although freedom is a fundamental, deeply held value, it is inconsistently understood and enforced. A birthright for some Americans and not for others, freedom has d to be fought for by women, Black Americans and other people of color, the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, some faith communities, and some immigrants. Freedom can also mean the right to participate in the political process—the right to vote, protest, and express dissatisfaction with the public policies or politicians, for example. Finally, freedom can be tied to the right to prosper, for example, through the freedom to organize for fair business practices.

Perspectives on freedom change. Fifty-five years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that places of public accommodation—in this case, lunch counters—violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment when the owner refused to serve Black customers (Peterson v. City of Greenville, 1963). Yet in 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted the free exercise clause of the Bill of Rights as the right

of business owners to refuse to serve a gay customer (Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission, 2018).

These situations highlight unresolved tensions between freedom and equality. While people may be technically free, they want more—or more equal—freedom. When one group demands more freedom, another group may feel threatened or believe that their freedoms are being curtailed. As a result, freedom and equality can look like a zero-sum game. The question facing Americans is whether they must choose between freedom and equality, which is why we made this tension more visible in the framework.

Under *Accountable and Justly Governed*, we made many changes.

- "Ethics, transparency and accountability" was changed to "Ethical and transparent policy making and conduct by elected officials" to highlight the need for ethical behavior on the part of elected officials as individuals.
- "Electoral integrity" was changed to "Free and fair elections."
- "Just laws and policies" and "Balanced application of Constitutional principles" were combined and changed to "Just laws and balanced application of Constitutional principles."
- We added, "Equitable demographic representation" to underscore the need for more representative governments.
- We added, "Collaboration and compromise in policy making," to focus attention on growing partisan gaps and breakdowns in the federal legislative process.

We are grateful to people who used and commented on the original Democracy by Design framework, and welcome continued discussion and critique.

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