

***CAPITOL OFFENSES: JANUARY 6TH 2021  
& THE ONGOING INSURRECTION***

**PRA STATE OF THE RIGHT REPORT**

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Snapshots from the insurrection at the U.S Capitol on January 6, 2021.  
(Credit: Blink O'Fanaye/Flickr.com)

## Introduction: The Insurrection Isn't Over; Neither is the Attempted Coup

The January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol provided the bloody final chapter to Donald Trump's term as president, as "stop the steal" loyalists from all over the country answered their commander-in-chief's call to prevent certification of the 2020 election results. In the attempt, the mob—a stand-in for the MAGA nation that believed then, as now, that the election was stolen—assaulted and wounded more than 150 law enforcement personnel, one of whom died of the injuries and four of whom died by suicide soon thereafter. (The rioters suffered at least two violent fatalities.) But the end of the Trump presidency was by no means the end of the MAGA movement, just as the systematic dismantling of liberal democracy did not begin - or end - with the storming of the Capitol building. The most significant features of J6<sup>1</sup> persist in ongoing efforts to advance both the spirit and goals of the insurrection. Even as the more blatantly criminal members of the mob faced arrest and prosecution in 2021, the former president and his accomplices remain unindicted and the anti-democracy maneuvering and conspiracist demagoguery that animated the election season continue unabated. The first anniversary of the Capitol storming is an occasion to take stock of the robust current state of America's insurrectionist, anti-democratic factions, those that would sooner dispense with democracy altogether than lose their hold on power.

Reporting, prosecutions, and Congressional Select Committee hearings over the past year have made abundantly clear that the J6 insurrection was but one facet of multiple efforts by the Trump team to keep Congress from certifying their defeat. The violent mob of MAGA warriors was evidently intent on forcing then-Vice President Mike Pence to reject or delay certification of the Electoral College results, or to punish him for failure to do so.<sup>2</sup> But the most seri-

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1 Herein we use "J6" as an umbrella term for the January 6, 2021 insurrection, with its storming of the Capitol building, as well as legal and legislative efforts before and on that day to negate the results of the 2021 presidential election. These coup attempts, part and parcel of the events of J6, are not adequately captured by terms such as "insurrection." Indeed, the disproportionate focus on the rioters of January 6th has at least partially obscured the role of suit-and-tie seditionists and their systematic undoing of obstacles to minority rule.

2 A fraction of the January 6 MAGA mob, whipped up by Trump's rhetoric, chanted "hang Mike Pence" as it stormed the Capitol building. Later Trump commented that the chant was "common sense," since "the people were very angry." (Rashika Jaipular, "Trump Said It Was 'Common Sense' for Capitol rioters to Chant 'Hang Mike Pence,'" Indianapolis Star, November 12,

ous threats to American democracy that day weren't limited to the harrowingly cinematic episodes captured by rioters' smartphones and the Capitol's closed-circuit cameras. The attempted coup d'état turned on the Trump team's ability to convince election officials and legislatures in key states to produce alternate vote tallies or electors' slates. Ultimately, team Trump failed to consolidate sufficient power to accomplish these schemes prior to January 6, 2021. However, the unrelenting pursuit of minority rule is ongoing, and it turns on several strategic components:

- State capture by an authoritarian coalition;
- Erosion of democratic institutions (courts, elections, press, etc.); and
- Formation and mobilization of a loyal mass constituency – a new nation to sanctify a new kind of state.

Among the most alarming developments of recent years, beliefs long associated with a fringe of White nationalists and conspiracy theorists are now widely accepted. The roughly 37 million registered voters<sup>3</sup> who believe the presidential election was stolen comprise the core of a mass base for the politics of ethnonationalism. Along with the architects of anti-democracy strategies, this “MAGA nation” threatens to usher in a new period of racist and patriarchal authoritarianism.

Its rhetoric<sup>4</sup> aside, the behavior of the Biden/Harris administra-

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2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/11/12/donald-trump-rioters-chanting-hang-mike-pence-common-sense/8594353002/>.) Even as his supporters were storming the Capitol, Trump tweeted: “Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!” (Brett Samuels, “Trump Attacks Pence as Protesters Force Their Way into Capitol,” The Hill, January 6, 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/532942-trump-attacks-pence-as-protesters-force-their-way-into-capitol>.)

<sup>3</sup> According to a November 2021 PPRI poll, 68% of Republicans believe that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump (“completely agree” = 40%; “mostly agree” = 28%). Among those registered as Independents, the percentage who completely or mostly agree that the election was stolen is 26%. (PPRI Staff, *Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey*, Public Religion Research Institute (PPRI), November 1, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.) This equates to approximately 24.75 million Republicans plus 10.9 million Independents, or 36.65 million people. (“Partisan Affiliations of Registered Voters,” BallotPedia.org, July 2021, [https://ballotpedia.org/Partisan\\_affiliations\\_of\\_registered\\_voters](https://ballotpedia.org/Partisan_affiliations_of_registered_voters).)

<sup>4</sup> President Biden has called voting rights “the single biggest issue” for his administration. (Maureen Groppe and Bart Jansen, “Biden Puts Voting Rights at Top of Agenda, Shifting Focus as Hopes Dim for Build Back Better,” USA Today, December 16, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/12/16/biden-signals-new-emphasis-voting-right-legislation/8923640002/>.) In his inaugural address Biden spoke of the January 6th insurrection, its causes, and the bold action necessary to overcome deep social and political polarization: “here we stand, just days after a riotous mob thought they could use violence to silence the will of the people, to stop the work of our democracy, and to drive us from this sacred ground”, and “we must reject a culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured”, and “the answer is not to turn inward, to retreat into competing factions, distrusting those who don't look like you do, or worship the way you do, or don't get their news from the same sources you do... We must end this uncivil war”, and “We face an attack on democracy and on truth. A raging

tion is not that of a government moving decisively to reverse the erosion of procedural democracy in the wake of a narrowly averted coup. There is little indication of a viable strategy to secure even the threshold requirements for a democratic society (i.e., the people elect their government), never mind the fundamental cultural and systemic transformations necessary to achieve the transition to a just and inclusive multiracial democracy. Biden's anemic interventions significantly increase the chances that his administration will be remembered as a brief interregnum, one that lulled too many into complacency.

**ITS RHETORIC ASIDE, THE BEHAVIOR OF THE BIDEN/HARRIS ADMINISTRATION IS NOT THAT OF A GOVERNMENT MOVING DECISIVELY TO REVERSE THE EROSION OF PROCEDURAL DEMOCRACY IN THE WAKE OF A NARROWLY AVERTED COUP.**

Far from reversing the fortunes of aspiring authoritarians, 2021 bears witness to impunity for J6 power players and the relentless forward march of far-right movements and politics. How are these trends likely to continue into 2022 and beyond? This report places the vote(r) suppression trends we have seen in 2021 in context, offering an assessment of the ways in which culture war organizing and rhetoric and organized intimidation form a package, no part of which can we afford to ignore. While many of the particulars are unknowable, what follows is our assessment of current trends, the challenges they are likely to pose, and some strategic options for social justice and pro-democracy forces.

## **The MAGA Coalition Endures, Hardens into An Authoritarian Bloc Pursuing Minority Rule**

Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election brought his coalition to the breaking point. Vice President Mike Pence, a prominent [Christian nationalist](#) leader, refused to delay or deny certification. Key media mouthpieces for the president, such as Fox News' Laura Ingraham, desperately sought to have Trump call off the violence he had unleashed against the joint session of Congress. Even House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Trump loyalist, was, however briefly, taken aback by the insurrection, phoning up the President only [to report-](#)

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virus. Growing inequity. The sting of systemic racism. A climate in crisis.. Now we must step up. All of us. It is a time for boldness, for there is so much to do." (White House Briefing Room, "Inaugural address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.," [Whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/), January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>).

edly be told, “Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are.”

Remarkably, despite these fissures and the subsequent scrutiny brought on by the events of January 6th, the MAGA coalition of White nationalists, Christian nationalists, libertarian opportunists, and laissez-faire deregulators has held together, and even consolidated. Those like McCarthy and then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell who initially recoiled, quickly returned to the MAGA fold. From his base at Mar-a-Lago Trump reorganized his coalition, still commander-in-chief of his imagined, emergent nation and—like a latter-day Jefferson Davis—accused but not tried for treason.<sup>5</sup>

Far from retreating from the excesses of Trumpism, the post-J6 coalition has hardened into an authoritarian bloc, pursuing a strategy predicated on the conclusion that they (did not and) cannot win a free and fair national election. As Bob Wing, the author of Toward Racial Justice and the Third Reconstruction, incisively observes, “Since the 2000 presidential election, it has become evident that the Republicans cannot win without suppressing voters of color, and the Democrats cannot succeed without unleashing those voters.”

In the wake of Trump’s failed coup attempts, state-level GOP figures—supported by the national leadership—are achieving their goal of making it harder for people to vote, and easier for state legislatures to overturn election outcomes and to strip state courts and professional election officials of their power to expand access to voting and guarantee fair elections. This systematic dismantling of election integrity sets the stage for the coup next time. Put another way, the dominant MAGA faction of the GOP is engineering the necessary conditions for a transition to White minority rule.

This baking-in of MAGA goals and ideology into the GOP continues a racist political trajectory that goes back at least to the Goldwater campaign of 1964. It parallels the 1980s and ’90s ascendance of the Christian Right as a major force within the GOP, fixing anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQ, and related “culture war” planks into the party platform. For its part, today’s Christian Right, once plausibly allies of convenience with a MAGA movement that has delivered unprecedented gains for Chris-

## THE DOMINANT MAGA FACTION OF THE GOP IS ENGINEERING THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR A TRANSITION TO WHITE MINORITY RULE.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States (1861 - 1865) was indicted for treason but never tried because of the fear that he would be able to prove to a jury that secession of the Southern states was legally justified. (“Confederate President Jefferson Davis Captured by Union Forces,” History.com, last modified May 7, 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jefferson-davis-captured>.)



tian nationalism, is increasingly caught in the gravitational pull of ethnonationalism.<sup>6</sup> The Family Research Council, a decades old bastion of Christian Right politics, is now all-in for building a border wall and censoring any reference to systemic racism. The Alliance Defending Freedom (right-wing evangelicals' ACLU) drafted the Texas lawsuit (joined by 17 other states) that aimed to overturn the election. In these and other ways, the movement has remained true to its origins in resistance to school desegregation, advancing an agenda of cultural and state capture in order

<sup>6</sup> Christian Zionist stalwart John Hagee has been vocal on his opposition to Muslims in the U.S. and immigration more generally, as has Pat Roberson. Even as the evangelical movement focuses ever more recruitment attention on communities of color, the Christian right becomes more enmeshed in MAGA politics of ethnic-nationalism and White minority rule. (Steven Gardiner, "End Times Antisemitism: Christian Zionism, Christian Nationalism, and the Threat to Democracy," The Public Eye, Winter/Spring 2020, <https://politicalresearch.org/2020/07/09/end-times-antisemitism/>.)

A row of flags lining the grounds of the U.S. Capitol building. (Credit: Tyler Merbler/Wikimedia Commons)



to enforce their patriarchal gender and racial order.

The post-J6 MAGA coalition has channeled the insurrectionary energy of the Capitol storming into a collection of interlocking culture war campaigns—critical race theory, trans rights, the right to protest, abortion access, and election reform—that shape its state legislative, legal, and messaging agenda. This structural and narrative architecture could lead to success in 2022 and 2024 where the coalition fell short in 2020.

## Looking Ahead: 2022 and Beyond

We should be prepared for both continuity and innovation from the Right in 2022 and beyond. Below are PRA's topline advisories for what to look out for in the coming year. These are less "predictions" than extrapolations from current trends and assessment of the likely consequences.

### **BLOCK THE VOTE(R)**

First: As the 2022 midterms approach, we should expect an intensification of vote(r) suppression. Nineteen states have [passed](#) laws that make it harder for people to vote. At least five states have [pre-filed bills](#) ahead of the coming legislative session that further restrict access to the franchise, including limits on vote by mail, with another 245 similar bills filed in 2021 that could be taken up again in 2022.<sup>7</sup> States are drawing new lines for congressional and state legislative districts using 2020 census data. While both parties may seek their own advantage ("gerrymandering"), Republicans control the process in 6 of the 14 states where the 2020 election was decided by less than 10 points and Democrats in only one, with the rest being drawn by independent commissions.<sup>8</sup>

The consequences of vote(r) suppression and gerrymandering will become apparent in November 2022 elections. We are likely to see more Republican legislative supermajorities, even in relatively competitive states, yielding yet another round of election law rigging ahead of the 2024 Presidential election. Redistrict-

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<sup>7</sup> The five states with pre-filed vote(r) suppression bills are Florida, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Tennessee. (Nick Corasaniti, "Voting Battles of 2022 Take Shape as G.O.P. Crafts New Election Bills," *New York Times*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/04/us/politics/gop-voting-rights-democrats.html>.) All five are Republican "trifecta" states, where the GOP controls both houses of the legislature and the executive branch. ("State Government Trifectas," *BallotPedia.org*, January 6, 2022, [https://ballotpedia.org/State\\_government\\_trifectas](https://ballotpedia.org/State_government_trifectas).)

<sup>8</sup> Nick Corasaniti, "G.O.P. Cements Hold on Legislatures in Battleground States," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/25/us/politics/republican-redistricting-swing-states.html>.

ing and vote(r) suppression will likely contribute to a Republican House majority in the 2022 midterm elections. The GOP would be able to block progressive legislation at the federal level, further elevating the strategic significance of state-level policy making.

## **WAGE CULTURE WAR**

Second: The ramped-up “culture war” of 2021—centered on abortion, teaching about systemic racism in public schools, and transgender people—will continue in 2022. Which issues become central will depend on emergent events. Likely candidates include:

Intensification of anti-abortion activity as the Supreme Court prepares to rule on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, a [case](#) that could eviscerate, or even overturn *Roe v. Wade*. If *Roe* is further weakened, but not overturned, we can anticipate a hard push at all levels, including legislation designed to test the limits of the new normal and [increased violence](#) and intimidation against providers. If *Roe* is overturned, “trigger laws” will [come into effect](#) in at least 12 states that would ban most abortions outright and another nine states either have pre-*Roe* bans that were not enforced or laws that would place major restrictions on abortion.

Increased opposition to public health measures related to COVID-19. This will likely include coalitions of far-right factions, for example anti-vaxx, anti-government, anti-public health mandate, and paramilitary activists. These actions would be given talking points by right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation<sup>9</sup> and [amplified](#) by MAGA-allied media outlets like Fox News and YouTube channels. Such anti-public health organizing and narratives might look like recent activity in [New York](#) and [Idaho](#).

Continuing rhetorical attacks on “Critical Race Theory” (CRT). The anti-CRT campaign against public schools teaching the reality and consequences of systemic racism that generated [protests and acts of intimidation](#) at school boards and debates in state legislatures in 2021 will likely continue in 2022. The success of anti-CRT posturing in the McAuliffe/Youngkin Virginia gubernatorial contest of November 2021 could make it a staple of political campaigns in 2022. The dangers of these narratives exceeds their [actual influence](#) in voter decision-making. Anti-CRT rhetoric evokes underlying fears of demographic change—the so-called Great Replacement—and has mobilized various

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<sup>9</sup> A search for “COVID-19” on the Heritage Foundation website (heritage.org) turns up over 200 site-internal articles (January 4, 2022) with titles like “It’s the Holiday Season. Time for Another COVID-19 Pandemic Panic?” and “Blame Government, Not COVID-19, for Supply Chain Collapse.”

factions of the Right, including the [Christian Right](#), [White nationalists](#), and the wider MAGA coalition, with the more openly racist factions pushing the boundaries of discourse.

The Great Replacement myth and its variants will likely become even more prevalent in public discourse about who is a real American. The political and cultural fight over the meaning of the United States' changing demographics is just beginning and may become more explicit, with arguments about racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and partisan majorities supplementing more circumspect (if still racist) references to supposed immigrant impact on public health, economics, and safety, as well as anti-Black and anti-Muslim calls for surveillance and punitive policing. Prominent media figures such as Tucker Carlson are already pushing Great Replacement conspiracy theories, [echoing and amplifying](#) White nationalists like Nick Fuentes and his [America First](#) movement. These White nationalist ideas are in turn [adopted with only cosmetic adjustments](#) by MAGA-GOP circles.

Anti-trans agitation and organizing are set to continue at high levels. 2021 was a [record year](#) for anti-trans legislation and violence, and 2022 may see efforts to use anti-trans legislative battles to mobilize and motivate the MAGA base. This could look a lot like the GOP [anti-marriage equality campaign in 2004](#), reconfigured for anti-trans state-level fights. [Kentucky](#) and [Arizona](#) Republicans have already pre-filed anti-trans bills to be considered in the 2022 session. At the cultural level, anti-trans narratives represent the [cutting edge of gender essentialism](#), which is not disconnected from Great Replacement-like fears of changing values on the Right.

## ***POLITICAL VIOLENCE***

Third: Direct threats from vigilante, paramilitary, and ideologically motivated groups and single actors is the least predictable type of political activity. As we write, in the closing days of 2021, a mass shooting incident was perpetrated in Denver, Colorado by a hyper-misogynist [influenced](#) by the Manosphere and the [Wolves of Vinland](#), a racist, misogynist, and neo-fascist group. The perpetrator, who was [killed by](#) a Lakewood police officer after shooting her in the stomach, was also a novelist who apparently named several of his real world victims in his books.

This shooter committed shocking acts of political violence that will predictably be admired (and even imitated) by others in misogynist and neo-fascist circles. Misogynist and neo-fascist ideas are in turn embedded in the more mainstream MAGA notions of Left and liberal attacks on men and [masculinity](#),

White people, and America. The shootings are not an automatic consequence of this cultural demagoguery, but the demagoguery and calls to action serve as ideological priming, shaping a world in which the attacks become an ultimate acting out of the ideas promoted in far-right ideas.

It is not only single perpetrators who are shaped by ideas related to militarized forms of hyper masculinity and “defense” of a homeland under threat from changing culture and demographics. A few things to look for in 2022 with respect to vigilante and paramilitary threats and violence:

Increasing orientation toward (and commodification of) “prep” activities in anticipation of major social upheavals. Some commentators have suggested that militia-style groups like Oath Keepers and Proud Boys are now in decline, disrupted by J6 prosecutions and their own cooperation with the FBI. The new thrust of paramilitary organizing, often led by special forces veterans forming cults of personality, is toward militarized preparation for imagined impending bad times. The politics of these formations often center on Second Amendment issues and notions of personal liberty, but mobilization to other issues in 2022 remains an open possibility.

Far-right confrontations with racial and social justice protesters, which declined in 2021, could resurge. Last year’s decline tracked the ebb in racial justice protests and the end of the presidential election cycle.<sup>10</sup> Data are not yet available for all of 2021, but incidents through June 2021 suggest a steady number of armed demonstrations.<sup>11</sup> Should high-profile social and racial justice protests resume in 2022, perhaps in response to vote(r) suppression that produces MAGA electoral victories, we should anticipate armed far right counter-protests.

Incitement from political leaders—either former-President Trump or others attempting to assume his mantle—could spark an increase in “scripted violence.” We saw this in Trump’s calls for action on the campaign trail in 2016, his support for the Unite the Right crowd, his call for the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand

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<sup>10</sup> According to the U.S. Crisis Monitor analysis of 2020 far right acts of political violence and paramilitary activity, there were over 2,350 right-wing demonstrations in 2020, with three distinct periods of activity: (1) in response to COVID-19 measures, (2) in response to racial justice protests, and (3) following the election and in the run up to January 6. There is no corresponding data for previous years to compare, but careful tracking was initiated by ACLED and others in, including PRA, because of what was perceived as unusual levels of activity in 2020. (US Crisis Monitor, “US Crisis Monitor Releases Full Data for 2020,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)/Bridging Divides Initiative, February 5, 2021, [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACLED\\_BDI\\_USCM2020Release\\_2021.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACLED_BDI_USCM2020Release_2021.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> ACLED and Everytown, Armed Assembly: Guns, Demonstrations, and Political Violence in America, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)/Everytown For Gun Safety Support Fund, August 2021, [https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Report\\_Armed-Assembly\\_ACLED\\_Everytown\\_August2021.pdf](https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Report_Armed-Assembly_ACLED_Everytown_August2021.pdf).

by” in a 2020 debate, his defense of Kyle Rittenhouse, and his instigation of the January 6 insurrectionists. Smart money says Trump will, health permitting, run in 2024. Either way we should anticipate incitement by far-right political figures and the further normalization of political intimidation and violence.

Flanking law enforcement: The acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse suggests that far-right vigilantism may receive greatest sanction when acting in alignment with law enforcement and against racial justice organizing.<sup>12</sup> Whether and how the Rittenhouse verdict influences far-right violence is something to watch.

Doxxing and elicitation of violence against public health officials, school board members, and racial justice leaders seems to be increasing, and poses a serious threat to participation. Both 2020 and 2021 saw activism that had been centered in the more remote corners of the internet—the Boogaloo movement for example—move into the real world.

In addition to its immediate consequences, far-right political violence may trigger increased surveillance, militarized law enforcement, infiltration, and incarceration by the state. The FBI, Justice Department, DHS, and local police should do their jobs—responding to crimes and acting quickly in response to credible threats—but the deeper problems are cultural and political, and we cannot police our way out of them. Progressives should heed the calls of Muslim and Black racial justice organizers to resist labeling far-right violence as “terrorism” and “extremism,” so as to interrupt the cycle of further securitization and racialized policing that ultimately contribute to the problem of creeping authoritarianism.

## **A PRINCIPLED AND PRACTICAL PROGRAM FOR PRO-DEMOCRACY FORCES MUST GRAPPLE WITH THE TWIN PRIORITIES OF BLOCKING THE FURTHER CONSOLIDATION OF POWER BY RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITARIANS, AND BUILDING A GOVERNING COALITION CAPABLE OF DELIVERING A JUST DEMOCRACY.**

### ***PROGRESSIVE STRATEGY: BLOCK AND BUILD***

While it’s beyond our present scope to explore countermeasures to the specific trends and threats identified above, we wish to raise a few questions of broad strategic significance to averting

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<sup>12</sup> This is in contrast to the 725 people charged in connection to J6, including 70 who have already received some kind of sentence. (Keith Alexander, “Prosecutors Break Down Charges, Convictions for 725 arrested So Far in Jan. 6 Attack on U.S. Capitol,” Washington Post, December 31, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/31/capitol-deadly-attack-insurrection-arrested-convicted/>). Or, for that matter, the guilty finding in the case of the three White vigilantes found guilty of murdering unarmed Black jogger Ahmaud Arbery. (Russ Bynum, “3 Men Charged in Ahmaud Arbery’s Death Convicted of Murder,” AP, November 24, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ahmaud-arbery-georgia-brunswick-f2549024973cdcc757c02bd0a07bf5cf>).

authoritarianism and building a just and inclusive democratic society.

A principled and practical program for pro-democracy forces, including liberals and progressives, must grapple with the twin priorities of blocking the further consolidation of power by racial and religious authoritarians, and building a governing coalition capable of delivering a just, multiracial democracy. For both, progressives must acknowledge the current limits of our own power. Block and build approaches will sometimes be in tension, but neither can succeed without the other. And progressives cannot currently accomplish either by themselves. Progressives have not built governing-level power, and so, are in need of coalition partners, not all of whom can be expected now—or ever—to align with emergent visions and agendas for a just society.

On the (potentially creative) tension between building long-term, transformational power and fighting with the urgency of now, we offer the following reflection by Working Families Party national director [Maurice Mitchell](#), “there is wisdom in people’s organizations that are building long-term power and wrestle with the contradictions of attempting to build left grassroots organizations. There is also wisdom in individuals in movements, especially people who are newly politicized because they are not boxed in by the limitations of existing organizations or, frankly, they are so early in their development that they are not cynical about the possibilities of radical change.”

## **INTERNAL CHALLENGES**

Among the various obstacles to adopting block and build strategies capable of overcoming racial and religious authoritarianism, three closely related problems concern us here:

- Disorientation with the Three-Sided Struggle
- Confusion about how to fight a culture war
- Discomfort with a pro-democracy stance

## **THREE-SIDED STRUGGLE**

In our experience, progressives have tended to imagine that they are in a two-sided fight: the majority of “the people” (have-nots, etc.) on one side and organized power (government and/or corporations) on the other. A more useful [schematic](#) is the three-sided conflict. Social justice campaigners must contend with both the dominant institutions, which for the most part

are trying to maintain the status quo, and the social, cultural, and political forces trying to make the society less inclusive, less democratic, and less just. This social movement Right is also in contest with both justice movements and with dominant institutions that they regard as insufficiently aligned with their priorities. White nationalists assail the government and dominant institutions for being insufficiently White supremacist. Christian nationalists bemoan the insufficiently patriarchal social order. Law and order “patriots” claim the right to act out armed vigilante fantasies against both social justice activists and office holders who fail to agree with them. Libertarian activists and militiamen decry as “socialist” or “totalitarian” the most modest of safety net programs seen as benefiting the undeserving.

**A THREE-SIDED FIGHT MODEL HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT RIGHT AS MADE UP OF OVERLAPPING FACTIONS BROUGHT TOGETHER BY A DESIRE TO GAIN AND HOLD INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND TO CHANGE THE RULES OF THE GAME SO THAT THEIR GAINS ARE HARD TO REVERSE.**

One could caricature the last forty years in America as a drama in which liberals and progressives have fought hard yet won less and less from governing institutions that increasingly enacted agendas of the Right. The social movement Right has pulled the Overton window (the range of political ideas considered acceptable in mainstream society) so far towards itself that ideas once the province of overt White supremacists (especially the profoundly anti-Black framing of “welfare reform” and the “war on drugs”) became bipartisan common sense. The Christian Right pushed its “family values” agenda—meaning opposition to reproductive rights, human rights for women, and the basic humanity of LGBTQ people—into the central platform of the GOP. Meanwhile, centrist Democrats responded not with a defense of justice and progressive values, but with formation of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a body dedicated to holding onto power by appealing to White conservatives, openly attacking progressives, and compromising with Right.

Trump’s 2016 election awakened many progressives and liberals to the scale of power built by the social movement Right, but habits die hard. Progressives have had difficulty adjusting to a more expansive power map that takes the Right seriously. One expression of this partial adjustment: the tendency for progressives to think of the Right as a monolith, rather than as a complex ecosystem of cooperating and competing movements and interests, and to craft umbrella terms (e.g., “religious political extremists,” “radical right”) more useful for denouncing one’s adversaries than for explaining or competing with them. A three-sided fight model helps us to understand the social move-



ment Right as made up of overlapping factions brought together by a desire to gain and hold institutional power—that is, win elections, shape policies, stack the courts, and to the extent possible change the rules of the game so that their gains are hard to reverse. This model can inform strategies for defending ourselves from direct attacks, identify and exploit wedges in our adversaries' coalition, effectively advance justice-oriented policies, and bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. These are new muscles for many on the Left; they must be exercised if we are to compete.

## **CULTURE WAR**

The reflex position of many progressives is to default to economic justice—or at least nominally universal programs such as Social Security and Medicare—and promote policies designed to soften the damage done by extreme inequality. Too often along the way we cede the culture war to the Right. As a matter of justice, a more democratic economy is a must. As a strategy for building a governing majority in the midst of a **culture war**, the Left's economic justice agenda has proven...insufficient.

Right-wing movement politics has turned hard toward “cultural issues,” an uncomfortable terrain for many progressives. We see Republican-dominated legislatures spending an entire session debating “**critical race theory**” and “**trans athletes**” rather than allocating COVID relief funds. Progressives rightly critique the bigotry of these attacks, but often revert to the flawed assessment that such cultural issues lead people to act against their own (i.e., narrowly economic) self-interest. However, these culture war issues are central to White and Christian nationalist appeals to a shared identity, to real (not merely “false-consciousness”) self-interest in their campaign to “make America great again.” Progressives—as yet unsuccessfully—attempt to outflank the Right's culture war with economic populism.

**PROGRESSIVES NEED A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROGRAM FOR A MORE EXPANSIVE “WE, THE PEOPLE” THAT REFLECTS OUR VISION, EXPANDS OUR RANKS, AND COMPETES WITH MAGA NATION.**

To build mass support for a **just, multiracial democracy**, tens of millions more everyday people would have to see themselves thriving in that future. For most, that involves experiencing a cultural connection to the ideas, issues, and movements preparing the way. Progressives need a social and cultural program for a more expansive “we, the people” that reflects our vision, expands our ranks, and competes with MAGA nation. In answer

to the Right's "we, the people" founded in exclusion, we need to envision and practice a collectivity capable of supporting (and, indeed, one that insists upon) a non-racial national identity, and a just, feminist, religiously plural, and multiracial democracy.

## PRO-DEMOCRACY STANCE

Many progressives understand that racial, religious, and gender domination – both cultural and systemic – are not creations of Trumpism. These oppressive hierarchies are foundational to the settler colonial project that evolved into the United States. They are features, not bugs, of what has passed for American democracy—what some aptly dub the white republic. Such bigoted hierarchies are likewise foundational to the current U.S. (and global) economic system. They facilitate the theft of land, life, and labor that drives the relentless accumulation and concentration of wealth in the pockets of an ever-smaller and -richer elite.

Over the last few years, the severity of these arrangements has crashed upon the consciousness of masses of relatively comfortable Americans via the political ascendance of unabashed champions of domination, pandemics of racist violence and disease, and climate catastrophes wrought by extractive capitalism. Indeed, authoritarianism scarcely becomes a topic of mainstream discussion unless comfortable classes sense curtailment of their own agency. The dramatic recent spate of crises has brought death and havoc to the lives of millions more who needed no reminding of the inequities of a society that has long treated them as disposable. Black communities have, in particular, suffered disparate COVID consequences in terms of paid leave, testing access, positivity rates, ICU admissions, and deaths.<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop of systemic oppression and exploitation, we are confronted with the imminent threat of state capture by ethnonationalist authoritarians. Similar tragedies are unfolding in countries all over the world. Many justice-minded people perhaps understandably ask themselves (if not always aloud): Why fight to defend this system that calls itself democracy? The one that gaslights us with declarations of equality, but criminalizes our survival strategies, stigmatizes us for whom we love and how or whether we worship, locks millions of us in cages, polices our reproduction, enriches the few and immiserates the

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<sup>13</sup> An analysis of cumulative covid-related deaths through March 2, 2021 by APM Research Labs found that deaths per 100,000 were highest among Indigenous people (256 per 100,000 population) and Black Americans (176 per 100,000). This compares to 150 per 100,000 White Americans. (APM Research Lab Staff, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.," APM Research Lab, March 5, 2021, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.)

many, and rarely defends us from the violence of vigilantes or those sworn to protect and serve. Some go so far as to ask: Should democracy even be my goal, and our goal as a human community? After all, this system already looks headed for collapse; as awful as the near-term results could be, why not let it fall?

A robust critique of structural racism, patriarchy, or capitalism lends itself to skepticism of American democracy and the modern nation state system. Liberals are more likely to adhere to the mistaken belief that American democracy is a pendulum that swings now towards equality and freedom and then towards inequality and domination, but ever returns to a reasonable if imperfect gravitational center.

Each of these types of reaction denies the current national (and global) march of authoritarianism. Each invites complacency that cedes ground to political violence, minority rule, and the White nationalist agenda of ethnic cleansing.

The inherent stability of U.S. democracy is of course an ahistorical myth. V-Dem Institute (a Swedish democracy watchdog group) classifies the U.S. as an autocratizing country – a category that grew from 6% to 34% over the ten years between 2009 and 2019. According to V-Dem’s ranking system (based on such indicators as press freedom and free and fair elections), by 2001 most countries in the world were autocracies, accounting for 54% of humanity. By 2021, the global population share living under autocratic governments had grown to 68%. The threat is large and growing.

Our simplest response to skeptics of a pro-democracy stance is this: letting what currently passes for democracy burn to the ground is not dismantling oppressive systems. It’s turning them over to fascists. We cannot win a just society without first defeating ethnonationalist authoritarianism. Some will no doubt find it difficult to accept any assessment that requires the humility to admit that we simply lack sufficient power to achieve, in the near term, the fundamental social, economic, and ecological transformations that any moral response to current conditions demands. To succeed, progressives need to block authoritarianism and play the long game for social transformation.

**OUR SIMPLEST RESPONSE TO SKEPTICS OF A PRO-DEMOCRACY STANCE IS THIS: LETTING WHAT CURRENTLY PASSES FOR DEMOCRACY BURN TO THE GROUND IS NOT DISMANTLING OPPRESSIVE SYSTEMS. IT’S TURNING THEM OVER TO FASCISTS.**

## How We Got Here: Impunity, And A Slow-Motion Coup in The Making

It has often been noted in the days since January 6, 2021 that the Justice Department’s focus has conspicuously been on such high-profile actors such as Jacob Chansley, the “QAnon Shaman,” who was sentenced to 41 months in prison for his role in the attack—rather than the politicians who helped to spark the insurrection. Congressional co-instigators included U.S. Representatives Paul Gosar (R-Ariz.), Lauren Boebert (R-Colo.), Mo Brooks (R-Ala.), Madison Cawthorn (R-N.C.), Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.), Louie Gohmert (R-Texas), and Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) Then there’s the former president and his inner circle—who whatever conversations they may or may not have had with the January 6 organizers, were engaged in systemic efforts to use partisan pressure and dubious legal maneuvers to stage a coup under the nominal cover of law. These efforts included the aforementioned pressuring of Vice President Pence to block certification of the Electoral College results, maneuvering to get key states to seat alternative electors, challenging the legitimacy of votes counts in court (61 of 62 dismissed, the last in Pennsylvania limited ballot correction to three days after the election), and instructing Georgia’s top (Republican) state election officials to find more votes for him.

Despite an all-too-brief moment of outrage, during which a campaign endorsed by then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell against party ultranationalists appeared possible, GOP leadership has endeavored to whitewash the whole affair. In the immediate aftermath of the assault, then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell referred to the events of January 6 as a “failed insurrection,” saying, “they tried to disrupt our democracy.” McConnell uttered this unequivocal truth in the shock of the moment, leading to ongoing efforts by Trump to have him replaced as Minority Leader. This, even though McConnell quickly and vocally endorsed Trump as a potential 2024 nominee and organized Republicans in the Senate to reject creation of a 9/11-style commission to investigate the insurrection. Republicans who dared to hold former President Trump accountable faced censure, with Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) pointedly removed from party leadership. Cumulatively, these actions amount to a kind

**BY SLOW-MOTION COUP, WE MEAN THE PROCESSES BY WHICH REPUBLICAN-DOMINATED STATES ARE USING LEGISLATIVE MANEUVERING TO CONSOLIDATE ONE-PARTY CONTROL, RESTRICT THE ELECTORATE, AND ESTABLISH THE MECHANISMS FOR MINORITY RULE AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.**

of qualified immunity for MAGA loyalists who back insurrection, and work to undermine the electoral process. This baseline impunity facilitates further efforts at a slow-motion coup.

By slow-motion coup we mean the processes by which Republican-dominated states—at least 23 where the GOP holds both houses and the Governorship, accounting for governing 41.8% of the U.S. population—are using legislative maneuvering to consolidate one-party control, restrict the electorate, and establish the mechanisms for minority rule at the national level. As Barton Gellman, one of the keenest observers of the authoritarian threats posed by the Trump administration in the 2020 election, recently noted in *The Atlantic*:

*“For more than a year now, with tacit and explicit support from their party’s national leaders, state Republican operatives have been building an apparatus of election theft. Elected officials in Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and other states have studied Donald Trump’s crusade to overturn the 2020 election. They have noted the points of failure and have taken concrete steps to avoid failure next time. Some of them have rewritten statutes to seize partisan control of decisions about which ballots to count and which to discard, which results to certify, and which to reject. They are driving out or stripping power from election officials who refused to go along with the plot last November, aiming to replace them with exponents of the Big Lie. They are fine-tuning a legal argument that purports to allow state legislators to override the choice of the voters.”*

The particulars are alarming. At least 19 states have passed 33 laws that make it harder to vote in the first three quarters of 2021. As voting rights champion Stacey Abrams observes, the new laws “allow the subversion of democracy which is again why the Freedom to Vote Act is so essential.” At least 216 bills that would make partisan manipulation of election administration easier were introduced in 41 states during the first half of 2021. Even those bills that fail to become law, or face legal challenges, reveal the massive campaign underway to subvert the most basic preconditions for democracy.

Moreover, even the courts—designed to be a counterbalance to undemocratic overreach by partisan legislatures—have come under attack. In the months since January 6, at least 153 bills were introduced in state legislatures to limit the power of state courts to adjudicate election disputes or intervene in response to partisan gerrymandering, 19 of which passed in 14 states.

Personnel is often policy. From [Michigan](#) to [Georgia](#), Republican election officials who refused to rig the 2020 election for Trump have been replaced or now [face MAGA challengers](#). In sum, the authoritarian Right is moving to neutralize any democratic office or institution it has as yet failed to capture.

## MILITARY MATTERS

As we approach the first anniversary of the events of January 6, 2021, security state veterans and experts warn that the attack on the Capitol was a harbinger of increasing polarization, political violence, and even civil war in the United States. As many as 30% of Republicans claim that violence is justified to save the country.<sup>14</sup> This, however, is an opinion poll, not a militia head count. It is important to right-size the threats we face and avoid the trap of thinking that only worst-case scenarios warrant robust response.

The most immediate threats come from a combination of a culture shift toward acceptance of authoritarian nationalism and political maneuvering intended to undermine democracy. These dangers are supplemented by paramilitary violence in support of autocratic leaders. Nonetheless, we should consider the warnings from military insiders and what they mean for those prepared to fight for justice and democracy.

On December 17, 2021, three retired generals (Paul D. Eaton, Steven M. Anderson, and Antonio M. Taguba) took to the pages of *The Washington Post* to [warn](#) that the persistence of current trends toward partisan polarization within the military could yield a successful coup, “next time.” Had a significant fraction of the security state heeded then-President Trump’s call to arms with the same enthusiasm as the [regime loyal](#) (but state disloyal) insurgents who stormed the Capitol building, the outcome might have been a successful coup—rather than a few hundred MAGA stalwarts left hanging out to dry. These generals warn that “the potential for a total breakdown of the chain of command along partisan lines—from the top of the chain to squad level—is significant should another insurrection occur.”

The takeaway here is that the government should better prepare to defend itself. The generals call on the Justice Department to do its job to hold those who inspired the insurrection accountable and the Defense Department to get its own house in order: “war-game the next potential post-election insurrection or coup attempt to identify weak spots.” The same logic

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<sup>14</sup> PPRI, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack?” Public Religion Research Institute, November 1, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/press-release/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

applies across a range of institutions, including, of course, policing—but also organizations outside the security state, including left and center left groups that need to take the threats of autocracy and political violence seriously. The more so because defaults to security state solutions—policing, surveillance, incarceration—only push us toward authoritarianism.

At least **10%** of those arrested for their roles in J6 had military experience or were currently serving.<sup>15</sup> More disturbing, and potentially more dangerous, a number of high-ranking officers have signed off on the stolen election big lie. Besides the high-profile **Michael Flynn**, a group of 124 retired admirals and generals **published an open letter** in May 2021 questioning the results of the 2020 election.

As the three retired generals pointed out in their op-Ed, a break in the chain of command or split in the military is far more likely to happen if there is both the appearance of popular support and at least the semblance of legality. The significant number of people charged for their alleged (or now in many cases admitted) role in the Capitol attack (**726 as of this writing**, the official list is **here**) creates a populist gravitational pull—and some political cover—for sympathetic members of the military, and we add, MAGA-aligned politicians across the country. With respect to the military, while the exact degree of risk threat is unclear, there is reason for serious concern.

**THE JANUARY 6TH INSURRECTION  
AFFORDS A VALUABLE WINDOW ONTO  
THE FORMATION AND MOBILIZATION  
OF A LOYAL MASS CONSTITUENCY,  
FOR TRUMP'S RESTORATION AND THE  
REDEMPTION OF THE WHITE REPUBLIC,  
A NEW NATION TO SANCTIFY A NEW  
KIND OF STATE.**

Despite the “civil war” talk proliferating in mainstream media, as of this writing a hard coup led or abetted by military leaders using intimidation or violence to secure the presidency of a preferred candidate does not seem likely. By contrast, a soft coup, where authoritarian nationalists use the control they have over state legislatures to manipulate election results, combined with a split military and fear of violent paramilitary actors, could well compromise resistance to the installation of a president who lost the popular vote and won the Electoral College only through egregious voter suppression and partisan interference with the count. That is, the very tactics Trump attempted, prematurely, in 2020. (The state-level groundwork hadn't yet been laid.)

15 According to the Census Bureau, about 7-percent of the U.S. population are military veterans (Jonathan Vespa, “Those Who Served: America's Veterans from World War II to the War on Terror,” Census Bureau, June 2, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/acs-43.html>.) Thus, veterans as a group were slightly over-represented among those arrested for J6 related offenses (10-percent).

## **FROM CHARLOTTESVILLE TO THE CAPITOL: CULTURE WAR & A MASS BASE FOR RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM**

The January 6th insurrection affords a valuable window onto the formation and mobilization of a loyal mass constituency, for Trump's restoration and the redemption of the White republic, a new nation to sanctify a new kind of state.

The assault on democracy since J6 has not been limited to legislation that makes voting harder for Black, Brown, immigrant and other voters seen as unlikely members of MAGA nation, and easier for partisan legislatures to decide which votes won't count. MAGA-aligned state legislators, supported by right-wing think tanks and media, have introduced and passed a startling number of culture war laws since January 6. These include attacks on teaching about the past and present existence of systemic racism ("Critical Race Theory"), restricting access to abortion, anti-protest laws, laws targeting trans rights, laws restricting the power of executive branch officials to protect the public health, and [attacks on immigrants](#). The culture war legislation and related policy fights—for example at school board meetings—are an anchor for activism and narrative conflict, sometimes including [threats of violence](#), mobilizing the MAGA base.

The culture war legislation and policy fights that the coalition of authoritarians, ethnic nationalists, economic libertarians, and the Christian Right pushed out in 2021 is not anywhere near as distinct from the insurrection and coup of January 6 as it might seem. The culture war narratives define the boundaries of an imagined "real America"—an emergent MAGA nation to whom the government must answer. From the MAGA nation point of view, the insurrection and attempted coup were not assaults on the democratic institutions of the United States, but defense of the legitimate president and the real America from traitors and enemies by any means necessary. That the formula here—a kind of populist and nationalist authoritarianism in which a chosen leader embodies the will of the real people—is fascistic should be lost on no one. This was explicit in the pre-insurrection rally at the Ellipse, where Trump [told](#) his supporters that "if they don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

**THE CULTURE WAR NARRATIVES DEFINE THE BOUNDARIES OF AN IMAGINED "REAL AMERICA"—AN EMERGENT MAGA NATION TO WHOM THE GOVERNMENT MUST ANSWER.**

Though not every MAGA activist is a hardcore White national-



ist or theocrat, their message is clear: “real Americans” excludes Black people, racialized immigrants, and indigenous peoples—or at best confers provisional citizenship on those who offer unqualified support for White Christian rule and the centrality of “traditional values.” Queer, trans, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people can expect nothing but hostility from a government run by representatives of this nation. People must not expect reproductive justice or bodily autonomy. “[Religious freedom](#),” an inherently [progressive value](#), is twisted to mean the freedom of certain types of Christians to turn their beliefs into law and sanction the resistance of those who disagree. The “public good” has to be subordinated to private goods in order to resist “socialism.” Public health measures threaten liberty, but [openly carrying military-style weapons](#) at public events is freedom, not [intimidation](#)—at least when those packing are members in good standing of the MAGA nation. Culture war laws and policies target specific communities—immigrants, trans folk, women, Black and indigenous Americans, but the consequences are much wider, and not just for justice. Both targeted communities and progressive allies will inevitably see the enactment of such policies as failures of both justice and democracy and, absent a viable counterstrategy, repress participation and make effective progressive coalitions that are much more difficult to form.

One key idea that animates much of the culture war activity is the Great Replacement fraud. A staple of White nationalist circles for [decades](#), it has been pushed into widespread, [open use](#) among MAGA-aligned [media](#) and [politicians](#). The basic idea is that White people are being systemically replaced by non-White immigrants and their descendants. White nationalists argue that they are being replaced as a racial population and in terms of cultural, economic, and political domination—and this is being done intentionally, by Jews. The emergence of the Great Replacement fraud in MAGA-aligned space, of course, follows on the more or less [wholesale adoption](#) of anti-immigrant movement rhetoric and policy in the Trump administration.

Census Bureau projections show that sometime in this century, the population of single-race-identified non-Hispanic White people will no longer be a national majority.<sup>16</sup> The political meaning of these demographic changes is something that social movements and politicians are constructing and contesting. By the time “Replacement” rhetoric shows up on Fox News talking head Tucker Carlson, the idea is only slightly euphemized, but still recognizable: a Democrat [plot](#) to replace “legacy Americans

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<sup>16</sup> According to The Census Bureau those who identify as single race, non-Hispanic White will drop below 50% of the U.S. population by 2044. (Sandra L. Colby and Jennifer M. Ortman, Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 260, March 2015, p. 9, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>.)

with more obedient people from far-away countries.”

While the role of regime-loyal paramilitaries and street fighters like [Oath Keepers](#) and Proud Boys has drawn appropriate media and congressional scrutiny, one of the most striking features of the January 6th rioters is how different most of them are from the sort of avowed White nationalists who staged the 2017 [Unite the Right](#) demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. Of the 700+ insurrectionists arrested so far after January 6th, 87% had no discernable affiliation with a militia or White nationalist group. A similar number were gainfully employed—almost half of these as business owners or in other white-collar jobs. They were more MAGA than militia. As the old civil rights saying goes, not everyone at the lynching is a member of the Klan.

What animated the Capitol stormers, if not affiliation with far-right groups? Academic studies of the January 6th insurrectionists have found [fear of Great Replacement](#) to be a “key driver” of the insurrectionist movement and the single most reliable predictor for belief that political violence was justified to stop the steal. (Belief in QAnon was also predictive.) In polls, over 50% of Trump voters and Republicans [believe](#) that “minorities are favored over Whites.” Roughly half of Republicans [agree](#) that “non-Whites will have more rights than them in future.” More than half of those arrested in connection with J6 lived in counties that Biden carried in 2020,<sup>17</sup> and one study found that the odds of sending an insurrectionist to DC was six times higher in counties where the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites was in decline.<sup>18</sup> That is, insurrectionists came from increasingly multiracial—and frequently “blue” or “purple”—counties where far-right Great Replacement narratives encountered White cultural anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

The mobilization of thousands of MAGA adherents to DC, hundreds of whom attacked the Capitol or assaulted law enforcement officers, is a chilling testament to the success of the White nationalist movement at cultivating and animating fear of

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17 Robert A. Pape, “Understanding American Domestic Terrorism: Mobilization Potential and Risk Factors of a New Threat Trajectory,” Chicago Project on Security and Threats, April 6, 2021, slide 16, [https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas\\_insurrectionists\\_online\\_2021\\_04\\_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009](https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas_insurrectionists_online_2021_04_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009).

18 Robert A. Pape, “Understanding American Domestic Terrorism: Mobilization Potential and Risk Factors of a New Threat Trajectory,” Chicago Project on Security and Threats, April 6, 2021, slide 3, [https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas\\_insurrectionists\\_online\\_2021\\_04\\_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009](https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas_insurrectionists_online_2021_04_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009).

19 One measure of Great Replacement belief is agreement with the statement that “non-Whites will have more rights than them in future”—about 50% of Republicans in their findings. (Robert A. Pape, “Understanding American Domestic Terrorism: Mobilization Potential and Risk Factors of a New Threat Trajectory,” Chicago Project on Security and Threats, April 6, 2021, slide 46, [https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas\\_insurrectionists\\_online\\_2021\\_04\\_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009](https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas_insurrectionists_online_2021_04_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009).) This agrees with other polls indicating that over 50% of Trump voters and Republicans believe that “minorities are favored over Whites.” (Philip Bump, “More Than Half of Republicans Think Minorities Are Favored over Whites in the United States,” Washington Post, June 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/29/more-than-half-republicans-think-minorities-are-favored-over-whites-united-states/>.)

replacement in the broader population. J6 was a festival of violence in defense—or advance—of the White (Christian) republic enacted by people, all but a few of whom would almost certainly disavow any formal belief in White supremacy.

In order to put January 6, 2021 into perspective, it is useful to think about what has changed in the political culture, how the Overton window shifted to facilitate the insurrection. Many of these shifts have endured, reshaping the contours of contest with anti-democracy forces. Some key indicators to consider include the following:

- 65% of Americans believe that expressing racist beliefs became more common under the Trump administration, and 45% indicated it became more acceptable to express such beliefs.<sup>20</sup>
- 82% of Fox News Viewers, and 97% of the OANN and NewsMax viewers believed that the 2020 election was stolen. This compares to about two-thirds of Registered Republicans, 30% of whom also believe that violence would be necessary to redeem the situation, jumping to 40% for those who get their news from OANN or NewsMax.<sup>21</sup>
- As of mid-2021, 54% of Americans support a ban on teaching “Critical Race Theory” in public schools.<sup>22</sup>
- Mixed opinions about trans rights indicates actively contested values and considerable tension. A solid majority support trans people serving in the military (66%), but only 34% support trans kids playing on sports teams of their gender.<sup>23</sup>
- The percentage of Americans who believe that “God has granted America a special role in human history” has decreased for all party affiliations between 2013 and 2021

## **THE MOBILIZATION OF THOUSANDS OF MAGA ADHERENTS TO DC, HUNDREDS OF WHOM ATTACKED THE CAPITOL OR ASSAULTED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS, IS A CHILLING TESTAMENT TO THE SUCCESS OF THE WHITE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AT CULTIVATING AND ANIMATING FEAR OF REPLACEMENT IN THE BROADER POPULATION.**

20 Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, and Kiana Cox, “Race in America 2019”, Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>.

21 PPRI, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 1, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

22 Chris Kahn, “Many Americans embrace falsehoods about critical race theory,” Reuters, July 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/many-americans-embrace-falsehoods-about-critical-race-theory-2021-07-15/>.

23 Scottie Andrew, “Most Americans support trans military members but oppose trans athletes, a new poll finds,” CNN, May 27, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/27/us/gallup-trans-support-military-oppose-sports-trnd/index.html>

but remains at 68% for Republicans.<sup>24</sup>

- Only 29% of Republicans say that American culture and way of life has improved since the 1950s, though there was an increase during the Trump administration to almost 40%, dropping precipitously at the end of 2020.<sup>25</sup>

Any number of other indicators could be cited, but in short, the activated base for authoritarian measures to implement minority rule has grown substantially. The numbers who support political violence are particularly troubling, but the culture war commitments are liable to mobilize supporters and continue to move the Overton Window. This constitutes an emergent nation, ready to bring about and sanctify a new kind of state.

The mass base for this new nation-state project is a high percentage of those who voted for Trump in 2020, about 74.2 million people. The [percent of those Trump voters](#) who think the election was stolen is 68%, amounting to tens of millions of Americans. Most of these people do not see political violence as the solution, but they are still a considerable force motivated by MAGA politics of ethnonationalism and Christian nationalist concerns. This base is mostly post-organizational, operating independently of named groups, but still looking to thought leaders and influencers, Trump included, to shape their politics.<sup>26</sup>

## Our Paths Forward: Elements of a Winning Strategy

If progressives can overcome the internal obstacles to adopting a block and build stance, here are a few strategic elements that could inform our paths forward:

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<sup>24</sup> PPRI, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,”

<sup>25</sup> PPRI, “Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 1, 2021, <https://www.ppri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/>.

<sup>26</sup> The idea of “post organizational” networks refers to the increasing proportion of participants who are politicized and mobilized through more-or-less anonymous online networks. In these virtual spaces—that can include legacy media as well as social media—people take in the ideology and some are recruited to real-life activities, including spreading the word, attending protests, and in some cases engaging in acts of violence. Note that, for example, according to the Chicago Project on Security and Threats has found that only about 13% of those arrested for their January 6 actions at the Capitol were part of an organized, named group—militia or otherwise. (Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, “The Face of American Insurrection: Right-Wing Organizations Evolving into a Violent Mass Movement,” Chicago Project on Security and Threats, July 2, 2021, slide 12, [https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas\\_insurrectionists\\_online\\_2021\\_07\\_02.pdf?mtime=1625859171](https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas_insurrectionists_online_2021_07_02.pdf?mtime=1625859171).)

## UNITED FRONT TO BLOCK RACIAL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITARIANISM

Neither the Left alone nor the fractious progressive/liberal coalition, is currently strong enough to defeat ethnonationalist forces. We need a united front against racial and religious authoritarianism. Veteran labor and racial justice organizer [Bill Fletcher Jr.](#) believes that effective fightback requires “building of the politics of a new majority.” He continues, “This means anti-racist politics, for sure, but more specifically, the building of a popular democratic bloc of forces that unites in fighting for the so-called Third Reconstruction, i.e., a fight for structural reforms in the current system as laying the foundation for moving towards a more fundamental social transformation.”

The Left, broadly speaking, has to recognize that the fight against far-right authoritarians and ultranationalists cannot be won without a broader coalition. After the J6 insurrection, longtime labor and community organizer [Lauren Jacobs](#) spoke out about the need for a [united front against authoritarianism](#). Jacobs, whose build strategy is centered on democratizing management of the economy, explains: “There may be different class groups or formations that we don’t totally agree with on everything but they’re right on some big questions—No, we’re not going to do Nazis in power, and, No, we’re not going to throw thousands of people out of their homes and into the streets.” She compares the militancy of the January 6th insurrectionists to that of 1930s autoworkers who braved batons and tear gas to occupy factories and build workplace power. “The other side just had a major advance in terms of its own organizing project,” she says. Progressives should understand the transformational (if regressive) power of that scale and intensity of militancy.

Black Lives Matter co-founder [Alicia Garza](#) speaks powerfully to the alliance building opportunities made possible by the syndemic of Trumpism, the pandemic, and racialized police violence—“a period that has been deeply personal to millions of Americans and residents of the United States, and that has them more tender or sensitive to what is going on.” Civic Courage Prize recipient [Eric Ward](#) emphasizes the need to expand the forces arrayed against White nationalism. “For myself, if I find that I’m spending time in rooms of people I mostly know and who mostly agree with my assessment of crisis and opportunity, I figure I’m not doing my

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job. If we're not growing, we're losing."<sup>27</sup> He adds, "In many arenas the Right has built too much power for us to win in head-to-head contests. We have to learn to open new fronts that favor our chances of aligning forces. We have to learn how to leverage victories from a relatively weaker hand."

In the off-cycle elections of November 2021, voters in Sequim, a politically "purple" town of 8,000 on the northern tip of Washington state's Olympic peninsula, [unseated a city council majority](#) that was aligned with its anti-vax, QAnon-quoting mayor. The far-right takeover of Sequim had been spurred by anti-Indian backlash, activated by opposition to a proposed tribal opioid addiction clinic. Community members put up candidates who rode to victory over the QAnon and militia contingent on a program of good governance and outrage over the capricious firing of the town's city manager. This type of broad-based effort to dislodge the Far Right from power should be studied for its lessons and replicability.

Advocacy for united front strategy has been growing among many seasoned organizers who reject the either/or choice of electoral and policy work on the one hand and political education and base building on the other. Mijente cofounder [Marisa Franco](#) emphasizes the importance of building sufficient independent power that progressives have real leverage and not merely moral suasion within broader coalitions, including with liberal and centrist players. Civic engagement [organizers Anthony Thigpen and Jon Liss](#) call for a focus on building united front coalitions at the state level to block the Right and as a step towards building "governing power." "On a state-by-state basis," they argue, "there is a unique imperative to creatively build united fronts to take on Trumpism." Not just to elect more "people like us" to office, they argue, but to build organizational strength and governing-level power by means of a multi-racial and -class movement grounded in the leadership of people and women of color justice organizers.

United Front work is not for the faint of heart. The weak hand (and, on some significant matters, weak will) of the Biden administration and Democratic Party has widened rifts between progressive and liberal factions of the still nascent anti-authoritarian coalition. Centrists openly attack the racial justice wing of the coalition (e.g. [blaming racial justice movements](#) for the party's poor showing at the November polls.)<sup>28</sup> Seemingly entranced with nostalgia for Cold War bipartisanship, the Biden administration shows signs of a doomed quest

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Ward, personal conversation with authors, December 15, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Center for American Progress' Ruy Teixeira and Columbia University's John McWhorter typify this position.

to recapture the long-lost, midcentury bipartisan “liberal consensus” by foregrounding competition with [China](#) and [Russia](#). The progressive wing rightly refuses to return to the status quo ante politics of “inclusive neoliberalism,” militarism, and implicit compromise with ethnonationalism.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND STRATEGY FOR THE LONG ROAD TO A JUST MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY**

Given the dire circumstances of the current conjuncture, it’s worth recalling that fifty years ago the U.S. Right had suffered enormous defeats and had to go back to the drawing board to chart a course toward recapturing the culture and governing power. The defeat of *de jure* White supremacy, along with the rise of women and queer liberation movements, anti-war militancy and related challenges to structural inequality in the U.S. and abroad delivered a nadir period for the champions of White supremacy, patriarchy, economic inequality, and empire. This crisis on the Right triggered an organized counterattack that has grown and evolved over the past fifty years, bringing us now to the precipice of authoritarianism and ecological collapse. While the trajectory is horrifying, there are important lessons here for progressives and liberals about how to play the long game.

In an influential 1971 memo, Chamber of Commerce attorney (and future Supreme Court justice) [Lewis Powell](#) decried attacks on the American free enterprise system and called for an aggressive, long-term campaign to build a governing coalition for the forces of hierarchy. As much as anyone, Powell was key to launching a movement that would call itself the New Right. New Right strategists reorganized the cultural and political terrain of the United States, pulling the most racist and reactionary voters into a single political party, activating previously apolitical evangelical conservatives, and patiently forging a coalition among constituencies who long eschewed any sense of common interest and even refused to be in the same room together. Today, these disparate sectors carry each other’s standards and comprise the nucleus of the coalition for American autocracy.

As analyst Peter Montgomery [observes](#), the now infamous Powell Memo:

*“sparked a massive investment in right-wing infrastructure building by conservative funders and strategists, many of whom came to be called “The New Right.” Among them were Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie and Howard Phillips. These strategists started building the institutional infrastructure that*

*still undergirds the right-wing movement, through powerful organizations like The Heritage Foundation... they worked to bring conservative evangelicals into their political organizing, hoping that social issues and a “pro-family” platform could help secure their commitment to the Republican agenda.”*

At our own nadir moment, progressives should look beyond the current arrangement of alliances to envision potential governing coalitions of the future. Given the inevitability of continued counterattack, a durable coalition capable of social and economic transformation will require more than narrow electoral majorities. Some questions to consider:

Given the high religiosity of Americans, and dismay among many socially conservative Christians with the overt racism of Trump and the MAGA phenomenon, what are the best long-term prospects for progressive religious organizing? PRA Senior Research Analyst Fred Clarkson notes that there may already be a [pro-choice religious majority](#) in America, but you might never know it given the lack of infrastructure to realize its potential.

How will we win a plurality of White people to our project of multiracial democracy? (What is the prophetic story and role for White people as partners in ending White supremacy?)

How, as we build our imagined future polity, will we ensure leadership from the communities that have borne the brunt of our systemic cruelties and have the most to gain from freedom and inclusive democracy? Marginalized and oppressed communities, repeatedly called upon to serve as parachutes for democracy—but seldom as pilots—deserve and demand more.

Given liberal philanthropy’s poor track record of long-term investment in power-building infrastructure for social transformation, what financial/philanthropic resources can be captured and sustained for our project?

## ***A FIGHT-THE-RIGHT FIELD TOOLED TO SUPPORT ‘BLOCK AND BUILD’***

By all appearances, the Biden administration has not deviated from the norm of regarding the far-right threat as limited to a handful of “extremists”—as though Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers could overthrow an election independent of the authoritarians in Congress and state legislatures, courthouses, and in the insurrectionist media. Averting authoritarianism means taking on power players, not just putting a few dozen



brawlers and dangerous vigilantes in jail. Yet, the best resourced watchdog groups and most ready at hand frameworks for describing and denouncing ethnonationalism—“hate,” “extremism,” “terrorism,” and “radicalization”—all direct our attention away from mainstream institutions and powerful systems of domination and control. These models privilege political centrists and activate policing and national security apparatus in ways that have historically reinforced state surveillance, [racialized policing](#), and [political repression](#) of dissidents.

We need an alternative, justice-oriented fight-the-right research and strategy infrastructure that can flank and serve transformational democracy movements and united front formations. Such a field should align as much of the broader anti-bigotry research and advocacy infrastructure as possible around this purpose and decenter centrist “extremism” models. The field should be responsible for shifting national narratives about the U.S. Right and related anti-democratic movements, and—in partnership with front-line groups and coalitions—for developing, testing, and facilitating alignment around strategies to stop and reverse autocratization.

## Justice and Democracy in the Balance

The end of the Trump administration, marked by the former president’s efforts to stay in power after losing the election, is in some ways like the beginning of his presidency: extreme weather events that draw our attention to underlying climate change. Various factions of the Right—including Christian nationalists, White nationalists (whether the explicit type or those who dress their racism in cultural garb), and the libertarians willing to make alliances with both—have been working for decades to subvert democracy and secure their power. Trump’s failure to hold on to the White House shows that the machinery of authoritarianism is not yet fully assembled.

This is hopeful. It means those of us committed to justice have a chance to respond. Biden’s election offers us a window of time to regroup and recalibrate. We have to be very clear: this is not a fight we can afford to lose. The bulk of the action, for the moment, has shifted to state legislatures, the courts, and the

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building of MAGA nation. The multifold failures of our society are being directed toward fear of changing values and changing demographics. Values are changing—particularly as they relate to gender, sexuality, and relationships. Demographics are changing. The country is becoming less White (as currently defined) and people are justly proposing that we, as a nation, end the practice of making “White” and “Christian” the default components of what it means to be a citizen.

Those most afraid of changing values and demographics are a minority. They can only hold onto power through subverting democracy. This requires presenting themselves as less dangerous than they are in order to extract compromise and complacency from non-authoritarians. Once in power, they will only be able to hold it by authoritarian means. As history shows us, by the time there is a consensus that fascism—or authoritarianism—is upon us, it is usually too late to prevent. It’s the “premature” anti-authoritarian (or antifascist) that matters. This is our continued call to arms.

This memo is intended to offer some insights into how we got to where we are and what we are likely to see from various factions of the Right in the coming year, as well as to inform strategy debates about where to go from here. We often hear the critique that democracy isn’t real, that it’s a smokescreen for the ruling class or White supremacy. There is often the implication, even when unstated, that democracy is not worth defending, that we might as well let it burn. While we agree that what currently passes for democracy falls desperately short of our standards of justice, fairness, and democracy, we argue in the strongest terms that rebuilding from the ashes isn’t a viable option. The real choice is between transforming what we have or handing power to twenty-first century fascists.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Steven Gardiner, PRA Research Director, started researching and writing in opposition to the politics of bigotry, violence, and authoritarianism in the early 1990s and, in 2004, received a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Cornell University. He has taught more than twenty different courses at eight universities in the United States, Pakistan, and the UAE. Selected publications include “White Nationalism Revisited: Demographic Dystopia and White Identity Politics (Journal of Hate Studies, 2006) and “End Times Antisemitism: Christian Zionism, Christian Nationalism, and the Threat to Democracy” (PRA, 2020).

Tarso Luís Ramos, PRA Executive Director, has been researching and challenging the U.S. Right Wing for more than 25 years. At PRA, Tarso has launched major initiatives on antisemitism, misogyny, authoritarianism, White nationalism, law enforcement, the Far Right, and other threats to democracy. Ramos is a sought-after public speaker and his work has been featured in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Time Magazine*, among other outlets.

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