
A MORE PERFECT UNION

The Jewish Imperative
to Protect and Strengthen
American Democracy

A MORE The Jewish Partnership
PERFECT UNION for Democracy

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Section One: Introduction

Jewish people have been present in what is now the United States of America since at least 1654¹ and have, since that time, participated actively in the democratic process. As far back as the Revolutionary War, the Jewish community has organized and advocated for a liberal democracy that protects the rights of individuals and minorities. In fact, in sermons and through advocates like Philadelphia merchant Jonas Phillips, we petitioned the Constitutional Convention in support of what became Article VI of the U.S. Constitution, which granted Jews, for the first time, the right to hold federal office.²

This type of activism has contributed to a fuller expression of American democracy and it has also directly benefited the Jewish community. Indeed, as a “subject people for most of [our] history,”³ Jews in America had and continue to have a strong self-interest in a system of governance in which checks and balances insulate us from the whims of our rulers. As Kenneth Wald notes, “lacking sovereignty and agency” throughout history, “rulers could and did expel

Jews when in need of a scapegoat, promote physical attacks on their communities, [and] tax Jews at rates that effectively impoverished them.”⁴ By and large this has not happened in America, at least not solely based on religious belief, and much of that is due to the moderating forces of a robust and pluralistic democracy.

Often taken for granted, it is this robust democracy that underpins all other questions about Jewish life in America. Conversations about how to educate Jewish children, how to protect our physical spaces, how to support the state of Israel, how to build vibrant communities, are all predicated on a singular assumption: that we live (and will continue to live) in a society where minority religious communities have the stability and autonomy to thrive.

This stability has not always been the case in our people’s story, and we know from countless experiences that history does not move only in the direction of progress. As Jews, we have a vested – indeed, existential – interest in the preservation of American democracy, and we ignore the warning signs of its decline at our peril.

Among democracy watchdogs, there are well-founded fears that we will confront politically-motivated violence and the subversion of American elections in 2024.⁵ Writing in *The Washington Post* shortly after the 2020 Presidential Election, Robert Kagan argues that Joe Biden’s presidency, far from being the end of threats to American democracy, may represent just a temporary interregnum in its downward spiral. At one point Kagan states simply: “Today’s arguments over the filibuster will seem quaint in three years if the American political system enters a crisis for which the Constitution offers no remedy.”⁶ Barton Gellman, writing in *The Atlantic*, puts it even more succinctly: “The prospect of this democratic collapse is not remote.”⁷

The threat is tangible: where democracy wanes, extremism rises⁸—and extremism and anti-Semitism are old friends around the globe, and in this country, too.⁹ Indeed, on both ends of the ideological spectrum, “American extremists incorporate antisemitic tropes and narratives in every level of their worldviews,” using them to build their movements and justify violence.¹⁰ In fact, the George Washington University Program on Extremism recently named anti-Semitism a crucial link in the shift from non-violent activism to violent extremism.¹¹

We are seeing it already: data gathered and released by the American Jewish Committee shows that one in four Jewish Americans experienced an anti-Semitic incident in 2021.¹² This threat continues to escalate; the Anti-Defamation League reports that anti-Semitic incidents increased 36% in 2022 as compared to the previous year.¹³ For Jews of Color subject to the intersections of anti-Semitism and other prejudices including racism (in the larger world and in Jewish spaces¹⁴), this threat is particularly acute.¹⁵

Our hope in producing this research is to inspire and then support a robust, bipartisan, collaborative Jewish partnership in defense of democracy, joining similar efforts from business interests like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce,¹⁶ as well as labor, faith, and government sectors.

We welcome your insights and, more importantly, your action to protect and strengthen American democracy.

Section Two: Democracy In Context

When we refer to "democracy," we mean a political system characterized by a government that is elected through free and fair elections, that rules through the consent of the governed, and that is constrained by the rule of law with robust protections for the rights and liberties of all citizens.¹⁷

In a liberal democracy, such as we have in the United States, this system includes a near-sacred (though amendable) Constitution, a formalized separation of powers among government branches, the power of public opinion to hold leaders accountable, legal protections for individuals and groups, a market economy that respects private property, and a wide-ranging set of social and political norms that reinforce formal institutions.¹⁸ **It is this democratic system and the processes that it enshrines, not the outcomes it produces, that protects minorities like the Jewish community and enables this country to pursue the neverending work of becoming a more perfect union.**¹⁹

Because they are often not explicit, these social and political norms merit additional attention. Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, for example, describe the central importance of "forbearance,"²⁰ or the restraint by both political parties not to use "temporary control of institutions for maximum partisan advantage."²¹ When Senator Mitch McConnell used his power as Majority Leader to prevent consideration of Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland in 2016,²² he was within his legal right as Majority Leader, but he was not practicing forbearance. He was playing "constitutional hardball," essentially defined as applying the "letter of the law" in conflict with the "spirit of the law,"²³ and prioritizing partisan advantage over the healthy functioning of the system.

Another norm is "concession," whereby the losing party gracefully acknowledges defeat, signaling to their supporters that they have lost an election and the contest is over. Losing parties have all kinds of incentives *not* to concede, but in a democratic system they do so because they "value the institution of the government more than they value control of the government."²⁴ Yet another example of a democratic norm is mutual toleration,²⁵ whereby members of each party treat each other with civility and recognize one another as legitimate opponents.²⁶ Both former President Donald Trump and his 2016 challenger Hillary Clinton have struggled with these norms, with the latter referring to Donald Trump as an "illegitimate president" as recently as 2019.²⁷ Former President Trump, as we know, has repeatedly falsely claimed that his loss in the 2020 presidential election was due to large-scale voter fraud; he and

many of his allies continue to pursue the disproven narrative that Joe Biden was falsely elected.²⁸

These norms represent a prioritization of process over outcome and are the essential connective tissue of stable and lasting democracies.²⁹ Indeed, the creation and emphasis of these and other democratic norms at the turn of the last century has played a central role in the drastic decrease in politically-motivated violence over the last 120 years. For reference, one congressman was murdered every seven years between 1859 and 1905.³⁰ Today, such a level of political violence is almost incomprehensible.

Section Three: Threats to Democracy

As noted, there is growing consensus across the academy and public policy sphere that American democracy is under significant threat from several directions.³¹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to effectively document every existing threat; instead, we will focus on two issues – one immediate and one long-term – that present the greatest potential impact on the American Jewish community, followed in the next section by potential mitigating strategies.

To effectively make this case, we will begin by detailing the long-term threat: a pervasive decline in democratic culture across American society manifesting in, among other things, the rise of toxic polarization and declining public support for democracy. We will then turn our attention to the most immediate threat to American democracy: coordinated efforts underway to subvert the 2024 national election using tactics from the 2020 and 2022 election cycles.

3.1: Declining Democratic Culture in America

Writing in the *Journal of Democracy*, Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk detail a number of current trends that indicate a decline in regime legitimacy³² in the United States, explaining that “even as democracy has come to be the only form of government widely viewed as legitimate, it has lost the trust of many citizens who no longer believe that democracy can deliver on their most pressing needs and preferences.”³³

Consider these data points:

- Between 1995 and 2016, the number of Americans who say it would be “good” or “very good” for the “army to rule” rose from one in 16 to one in six.³⁴
- According to World Values Survey data from 1995-2014, more than one-quarter of American millennials deem it “unimportant” for citizens in a democracy to “choose their leaders in free elections.”³⁵

- Only about 3.5% of Americans are likely to switch their vote from a candidate of their own party even after seeing that candidate do or support something explicitly anti-democratic.³⁶
- Nearly 40 percent of likely voters said in a September 2020 Hofstra University poll they would support state secession if their candidate loses in the presidential election.³⁷
- Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has proposed establishing a “Florida State Guard,” essentially a military force with allegiance solely to the state of Florida and its leadership.³⁸

While ubiquitous American support for the *idea* of democracy is considered “conventional wisdom,”³⁹ in reality we are seeing individual citizens reject or resent many of the norms and institutions necessary for actual democratic *governance*.⁴⁰ In fact, Americans – especially young Americans – are less convinced they can effectively influence public policy and are more open to exploring authoritarian alternatives than at any other time in the last 100 years.⁴¹

This is not unique, as support for authoritarian “strongman” governance has grown in democracies around the world, based at least in part on the notion that they can more easily and effectively get things done⁴² (often, of course, at the expense of the rights or protections of minority communities). One need only look to the rise in Congressional gridlock in this country to see one source of this frustration.⁴³

Another challenge to democratic culture is a broad decline in “media freedom”⁴⁴ including the ability of a free and *trusted* press to ensure accountability and transparency as well as provide an avenue for civic engagement and education.⁴⁵ Several trends in the past few years have undermined this role, including the privatization of the news industry,⁴⁶ the decline of local newspapers,⁴⁷ and the conglomerating of news outlets into partisan empires,⁴⁸ as we see with cable television’s CNN and FOXNews.

We also see the intentional targeting and sowing of distrust for the press which is usually associated with authoritarian regimes. The now ubiquitous term “fake news,” popularized by former President Donald Trump, typifies this trend. We know from events in Venezuela, Ecuador, and other declining or former democracies that as public attacks on the press come from the government or other influential actors, a “self-censorship” process takes over in other outlets too fearful of retribution to report freely.⁴⁹

The cultural divide in newsrooms is also reflected in the electorate, where “toxic polarization” is on the rise. Toxic polarization, the metastasization of regular and expected forms of political polarization in a two-party system, arises where people stop seeing each other as opponents and begin seeing each other as moral or cultural enemies.⁵⁰ In a recent report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the United States is highlighted with the highest rating of toxic polarization by a significant margin, outranking 51 other comparable countries.⁵¹

Even our consumer behavior is affected. Research on the impact of “lifestyle politics” on purchasing patterns show realities as simple and as stark as conservatives buying Wrangler blue jeans because liberals buy from Levi Strauss.⁵² A recent *New York Times* column by Thomas B. Edsall highlights seven studies on the topic from across political psychology, behavioral science, economics, sociology, and political history, leaving us with one crystal clear insight: “the electorate as a whole is moving farther and farther apart into two mutually loathing camps.”⁵³

Shadi Hamid, writing for *The Atlantic*, describes it aptly: “Policy debates that might have otherwise been boring—over COVID-testing protocols or the cost of the Build Back Better bill, for example—have become part of an apocalyptic battle between the forces of good and evil.”⁵⁴ In this culture war with origins in disagreements over how to approach increasing racial and religious diversity in America, even the appearance of dialogue between parties can create a sense of moral taint on either side.

We are also seeing partisan identities merging, albeit imperfectly, with cultural identities⁵⁵—for example, the common and incorrect notion that all Jewish people support the Democratic Party⁵⁶—creating even less likelihood or tolerance for compromise while increasing our isolation and mistrust of one another.⁵⁷ According to research by Lillianna Mason of Johns Hopkins University's SNF Agora Institute, Americans are no longer interested in living in neighborhoods with people who do not share their political views.⁵⁸ According to Wendy Wang of the Institute for Family Studies, marriages between members of different parties are becoming a thing of the past.⁵⁹

We see these trends playing out internally in the Jewish community as well. One need look no further than Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation’s Rebuilding Democracy Project to see what is at stake.⁶⁰ As Rabbi Michael Holzman describes it, “the vitriol of national campaigns...had provoked a new kind of derision and intolerance among members of the community” leading to a decline in participation and sense of shared identity. Coupled with increasingly challenging administrative questions, their “synagogue governance simply broke.”⁶¹

This problem extends beyond synagogues into every facet of communal Jewish life. Amy Melnick-Scharf, writing for the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond, shares how “the constant social media compulsion to fear and hate those of different opinions or backgrounds is threatening to drive [their] community apart.”⁶² An article by Daphne Kaplan and Mischa Trainor, high school students at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland, laments the toxic polarization in Jewish classrooms leaving students feeling frustrated, targeted, and disengaged.⁶³

This animus and social distance creates a powder keg in which elected officials are repeatedly allowed – and even incentivized – to violate democratic norms that previously enforced a greater sense of decorum and higher purpose in politics.⁶⁴ This breakdown of civility then

provides an approval structure for supporters, often on extreme ends of each party, to further push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable.⁶⁵

3.2: Immediate Threats to the 2024 Election

It is with this context in mind that we turn our attention to the most immediate threat to American democracy: active and coordinated efforts to undermine the results of federal elections, especially the 2024 Presidential Election. While interconnected, we have broken down these threats into three main concerns:

- The co-opting of power over election outcomes by partisan state legislatures
- The political targeting of nonpartisan election administration roles and workers
- The tangible threat of politically motivated violence between citizens or by the state

3.2.1 The Co-Opting of Power Over Election Outcomes into Partisan State Legislatures

In 2021, state legislatures in 41 states introduced more than 180 bills to consolidate election authority in their own hands.⁶⁶ Included in these bills are provisions to limit the ability of local election officials to serve the needs of voters, give partisan actors like state congresspeople more power over election outcomes, provide state legislatures power to directly intervene in election-related lawsuits, and, in some cases, require unnecessary and highly partisan audits of county-level voting results.⁶⁷

To bring this into relief: A bill enacted in Georgia will now allow “a partisan majority of the State Electoral Board to remove and replace local election administrators” at will.⁶⁸ It also grants the legislature power to name the chair of this State Election Board, subjecting this quintessentially nonpartisan function to partisan oversight.⁶⁹ A bill was introduced in Arizona to allow the state legislature to disregard the popular vote entirely and send a slate of electors of their choosing to Congress.⁷⁰ While the Arizona bill failed,⁷¹ efforts continue to pass legislation overhauling previously nonpartisan aspects of election administration across a staggering 166 bills in 36 states.⁷²

Some state legislatures have also taken aim at the independence of state-level judiciaries. In 2021, 12 bills in nine states explicitly targeted the role state courts play in election administration.⁷³ For example, Kansas’ H.B. 2332 – which became law in July of 2021 – prohibits “the modification of election laws other than by legislative process.”⁷⁴ This weakens the courts’ ability to respond to novel situations and apply the law in new contexts, such as in a public health crisis as we experienced during the 2020 election.

These power grabs in the aftermath of the 2020 election were made possible in part due to the long-outdated complexity of the federal Electoral Count Act, which in theory governs how to resolve disputes related to state electors once they are sent for certification.⁷⁵ Bipartisan talks in following years culminated in the landmark Electoral Count Reform Act of 2022, which established crucial guardrails prevent election manipulation and close legal loopholes resulting from textual ambiguities.⁷⁶ The Electoral Count Act also introduced several key safeguards against abuses of power from state legislatures and attempts to overturn future elections.

3.2.2 The Political Targeting of Nonpartisan Election Administration Roles and Workers

Democratic elections in America require thousands of people, many of whom are nonpartisan election workers (or “officials”) and volunteers, to perform the various tasks, counts, transports, and certifications that make up an election outcome.

Recent efforts in states like Iowa, Georgia, and Florida are targeting these essential civil servants, including a bill in Iowa imposing fines of up to \$10,000 for “technical infractions” of election rules by volunteers and election workers.⁷⁸ A bill signed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis creates a \$25,000 penalty for anyone who mistakenly leaves a ballot box unattended for a single minute.⁷⁹ Coupled with an increase in frivolous lawsuits and information requests, local and state election bodies are reaching a crisis point with thousands of experienced election staff and volunteers resigning ahead of the 2024 election cycle.⁸⁰

Compounding the problem is the concerted effort by former Trump Administration advisor Steve Bannon and others to replace these nonpartisan election workers with explicitly partisan actors operating with the open and stated intention of ensuring their party wins the next election.⁸¹ This tactic may be new in the United States, but it is a tried and true page from the authoritarian handbook. We have seen from studying places like Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela that it is very possible to achieve undemocratic ends through democratic or legal means.⁸²

Nonpartisan election administration relies on nonpartisan election workers operating under clear procedure and without looming threats of retaliation or punishment. We are facing a critical shortage of both people and processes in 2024 and beyond.

3.2.3 The Tangible Threat of Politically-Motivated Violence Between Citizens or by the State

This overheated climate of unfounded⁸³ “Big Lie” election conspiracies—and the resulting anger at the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Election—has metastasized into harassment and threats of physical violence against those who personify the democratic process.⁸⁴ Secretaries of State in Arizona and Michigan have reported crowds of angry conspiracists gathering in the dark outside their homes, even texting them information about their children’s schools or

daycare facilities.⁸⁵ A Vermont man is on record threatening state election workers, shouting: “This might be a good time to put a f— pistol in your f— mouth and pull the trigger. Your days are f— numbered.”⁸⁶ A plot was foiled to kidnap Governor of Michigan Gretchen Whitmer.⁸⁷

Election administrators at the local level have experienced similar violent threats in the wake of the 2020 election. Poll workers have reported death threats, verbal abuse, and online harassment from election deniers and conspiracy theorists.⁸⁸ A shocking 45% of local election officials voiced concern for the safety of their coworkers; as tensions rise leading up to the 2024 election, many have chosen to resign their posts to protect themselves and their families.⁸⁹ A survey from the Brennan Center finds that 11% of all current election officials say they are “very or somewhat likely” to quit before the 2024 presidential election.⁹⁰ A mass resignation of experienced election workers means a loss of institutional knowledge and greater potential for administrative mistakes from newly-hired officials, which in turn can promote further conspiracy theories of election fraud.⁹¹

Writing about the 2020 Election, Daniel Byman and Colin Clarke make the point in stark terms: “Unclear or contested election results could fuel a range of agitators, on both the left and the right, and perpetuate the cycle of reciprocal radicalization where each side sees the other as an existential threat, and [mobilize] accordingly.”⁹² Even the military, historically a secure bastion of nonpartisan resilience in American democracy, may not be immune. Three former U.S. Army generals have raised concerns about the potential danger of violence should there be a “breakdown of the chain of command along partisan lines” *inside* the military following a contested election in 2024.⁹³ Once again, the United States is not unique—political violence meant to influence the process or outcome of an election happened in 54% of national elections around the world in 2020, the highest it’s been in over two decades.⁹⁴

Nearly everything mentioned above stands in direct opposition to the will of the people:

- 62% of Americans fear violence surrounding the next presidential election.⁹⁵
- 85% of voters would support a law to ensure that officials cannot influence election procedures to benefit a particular candidate or political party.⁹⁶
- 83% of voters support federal legislation ensuring that partisan elected officials, including state legislatures, cannot influence election outcomes.⁹⁷

Section Four: Proposed Path Forward

To be clear, though many of the points raised in the previous section are tied to toxic partisanship, the issue at hand is not about Democrat versus Republican. This paper focuses on the existential danger to the democratic process itself, which must transcend partisanship. As Adam Gopnik put it in 2016,

There is a difference between major and minor issues, and between primary and secondary values. Many of us think that it would be terrible if the radical-revisionist reading of the Second Amendment ... was kept in place; many [others] think it would be terrible if ... Roe v. Wade continued. What we all should agree on is that the one thing worse would be to have no constitutional order left to argue about.⁹⁸

There is, however, reason to remain hopeful and resolved. To mitigate the dangers described above—and to strengthen the essential levers of our democracy—we offer a two-pronged short- and long-term path forward. Predicated on the ability of the Jewish community to rise above its differences to align on our shared imperatives, the strategies outlined below have the potential to make an immediate and lasting impact.

In the short-term, we propose a coordinated, trans-partisan Jewish partnership to focus the community’s power, resources, and support on ensuring that the United States remains an electoral democracy in 2026, when we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the nation’s independence. This coordinated effort will confront the immediate threats to the 2024 elections discussed in Section 3.2, including building meaningful pathways for as many of the country’s 10,000 Jewish organizations to participate as possible.

Per Just Security, a national security forum based at the Reiss Center on Law and Security at New York University School of Law, religious leaders and communities “acting in concert to uphold clear election outcomes and reject[ing] calls for violence, can isolate bad actors and limit their ability to recruit supporters.” Should we once again face a contested election outcome with the potential for violence, religious influencers “can use their visibility and influence to model responsible behavior” to their considerable spheres of influence.⁹⁹

Protecting electoral democracy is, of course, a much larger task than the Jewish community can achieve on its own. However, if properly organized and mobilized, the Jewish community can bring our collective financial resources, vast institutional structures, strong communal ties, business networks, and cultural and political power to influence actors throughout the system to uphold American democracy. We can also coordinate and share knowledge with other faith groups, further amplifying our impact while also fighting polarization and stimulating similar efforts in other communities.

In the long term, A More Perfect Union will focus on strengthening American democratic culture so that it fosters a shared sense of civic commitment and mitigates against toxic forms of political polarization. In order to build greater resilience among the public to the dynamics of toxic polarization and to reverse its growth, the United States must strengthen its democratic culture, its commitment to using the tools of democracy—organizing, voting, argumentation, negotiation, and compromise—to resolve vital public policy questions.

Our Common Purpose, a report released by the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, identifies religious leaders and communities as key champions of this work to strengthen American Democracy. In their words, “houses of worship [get] people involved in the lives of their communities ...Often, they are the places where Americans first develop the practical skills... that are fundamental to democratic citizenship.”¹⁰⁰ Beyond synagogues and other gathering places, according to the Democracy Fund, “the moral framework that faith provides can help to build community and promote understanding across partisan lines.”¹⁰¹

A strong democratic culture will be supported by better civic learning and citizen development; greater civic engagement; expanded national service opportunities; strengthened capacity—across all levels of American society—to navigate and tolerate difference; and narratives and practices that build bridges and bolster social cohesion across religious, racial, ethnic, and ideological lines. The Jewish community provides a perfect microcosm to undertake this work.

These short-term and long-term priorities are mutually reinforcing: The stronger U.S. democratic culture is, the greater the chance we have of staving off election subversion, because an engaged citizenry committed to vibrant democracy won’t allow its partisan positions to override its commitment to free and fair elections. Likewise, the near-term fight against election subversion offers a tremendous opportunity for the Jewish community to reinvigorate, strengthen, and deepen its commitment to democratic culture.

Section Five: Conclusion

For the sake of our own community, we cannot afford to view these threats, and the breakdown of democratic norms and processes they bring, as something happening “out there.” The truth is that it is happening here, among us. Perhaps, though, this realization can be the seed of our redemption rather than our destruction.¹⁰² As David Bryfman, CEO of The Jewish Education Project, writes:

For Jewish education to be meaningful and relevant in today’s political climate, we must commit to applying our tradition and wisdom to the greater society in which we live. This involves bringing together voices that will push us to address the big questions we are all asking ourselves these days.¹⁰³

Bryfman’s call extends to all of us. As a Jewish community, we have the opportunity to model the type of transpartisan partnership we want for the nation writ large. Per David Bernstein, former CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, we can “exemplify...a shift back toward the civil middle, strengthen the bonds of Jewish peoplehood, and serve as a model for the rest of society.”¹⁰⁴ And we can begin doing this right now.

How? By transcending partisanship and building a robust Jewish coalition, well-resourced and working together to preserve democracy. By being Jews first (what we share) and liberals or conservatives (where we differ) second. By recognizing that, to borrow verbiage from The Israel Forever Foundation, we are “Stronger Together”¹⁰⁵ and joined by a shared imperative to pass a stable and functioning democracy to our children.

Lastly, to put it frankly, the degradation of democracy affects all of us, and its preservation will take all of us. The Jewish community has thrived in America over the last 360 years alongside other marginalized or minority groups who have found a home here. It is now necessary to join those communities, and others from the business, labor, faith, and government sectors, in ensuring the same is true for the next generation.

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