



ELECTION REFLECTIONS

Democracy in 2025 and the Path Forward

In January 2025, the NewDEAL Forum reached out to five forward-thinking secretaries of state to discuss the lessons learned from the 2024 election, as well as their views on the current state and future of democracy in the United States.

These leaders, on the frontlines of promoting and strengthening American democracy, offered unique insight into their preparations for the monumental election and what threats still loom for future elections. Recognizing that efforts to improve our democracy go beyond election administration, these officials also provided insight into how communities and states can come together to improve our institutions and civic engagement in politically polarizing times.

Over the course of the conversations, five major themes emerged: **Preparation, Vigilance, Concerns, Unity, and Optimism.**

This document is based on conversations with:

- **Jocelyn Benson**, Secretary of State, Michigan
- **Adrian Fontes**, Secretary of State, Arizona
- **Jena Griswold**, Secretary of State, Colorado
- **Tobias Read**, Secretary of State, Oregon
- **Steve Simon**, Secretary of State, Minnesota

This document builds on the work of the NewDEAL Forum’s [Democracy Working Group](#), launched in the wake of the dangerous wave of misinformation that followed the 2020 presidential election, culminating in the violent January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. At the time, the group declared, “It is imperative – and urgent – that we shore up our democratic process to withstand attacks on its legitimacy, especially as we head into the 2024 Presidential Election.”



PREPARATION

Following the threats to, and ultimately violence around, the 2020 election, secretaries of state spent four years getting ready for 2024. Activities included championing legislation to make voting more accessible; working with partners to dispel misinformation; ensuring the safety of election workers; and coming up with plans to address new threats, such as cyberattacks. These preparations paid off, as most everyone largely agrees that the 2024 election was safe and secure for all involved.

“The name of the game is partnerships. Democracy is a team sport. In Michigan, we partnered with business leaders, local officials, college students, mayors, faith leaders, and sports figures to meet people where they are with information about how to participate in the election with confidence. These partnerships helped counter misinformation from social media with actual people sharing accurate, accessible information with their networks.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“When it comes to our preparation, the proof is in the pudding. Voters participated at record-breaking levels. We saw 5.7 million Michigan citizens cast a ballot, which is almost 80 percent turnout. Among them, more than half, 3.4 million people, voted early. We’re in a new era of voting - not just in our state but elsewhere. Options to vote are key. When you give citizens the option to vote at their convenience, whether by mail at an early voting site, many embrace them. And then some still choose to vote on Election Day.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“Colorado is considered the nation’s gold standard for election access and security. We have a great election model that values access. In the past six years, Colorado has placed 70 percent more drop boxes, opened more voting centers, guaranteed access on tribal lands and college campuses, and much more. We’ve also taken a zero-tolerance approach to threats against election workers, and that has worked.”

- Jena Griswold, Colorado

“Any discussion of 2024 must include a discussion of 2020. So we spent four years on multiple fronts, making sure that Minnesota would be prepared, not just from a logistical administrative standpoint, but otherwise as well, including mis- and disinformation, physical security, and protecting election workers from hostility or threats or harassment or intimidation. In 2023, I told my staff that I had two goals for the 2024 election: High turnout and low drama. And we were successful. We did not have widespread harassment, threats, or intimidation aimed at election workers; we didn’t have cybersecurity attacks; we didn’t have the post-election drama we had in 2020. Now is that because we prepared for them and people knew that we were prepared? I guess we’ll never really know, but we planned for the worst. And are glad we

did, I wouldn't do anything differently. Preparation and teamwork really made for a successful election from the standpoint of election administration and protecting democracy.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

“We're really proud of the fact that in Oregon, we were the first state in the whole country to move all our elections to mail. But really, we prefer to call it “vote at home” because the point here is to make it convenient for people. Some people still want to go to an elections office. They're perfectly able to do so. Some people want to go drop their ballot in a drop box. They can do that too. Mail is but one of the options, and the point really is to make it accessible for people. So I think we really believe in the security and accessibility of that, and you can see that time after time in our improved turnout and participation rates.”

- Tobias Read, Oregon



VIGILANCE

Preserving a strong democracy means staying constantly vigilant against threats, as well as taking pragmatic steps to further strengthen democratic institutions. While 2024 was a success from an institutional standpoint, we cannot rest on our laurels. Election officials must remain prepared for increasingly sophisticated cybersecurity attacks, as well as the threat of AI-generated misinformation that can spread rapidly. The next few years will be a time of leadership at the state level. Transparency can help build more confidence in our election system, and there is a continued need to pass pro-voting legislation to make our elections even more accessible while still being secure.

“I always worry about those who will let their guard down after the 2024 election. It would be wrong and dangerous to take as a lesson that concerns were overblown and that we don't need to think about those issues moving forward. The same with cybersecurity. Only eight years ago, in 2016, we had a foreign adversary try to hack us and many states. And it would be a mistake to interpret the lapse of time as an excuse to take this issue off the priority list. As we've learned over recent years, these things can flare up. It's important that we don't rest on our laurels.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

“We are still in an era of misinformation, which can be turbo-charged through artificial intelligence, to confuse and frustrate voters and cause them to disengage from the process. And there is a direct link between election lies and the violence, threats, and harassment directed at election workers and volunteers. We’ve all got to continue fighting the information battle to empower citizens to be informed.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“Every state needs to be ready for the absolute worst. And the best. We were not tested nationwide with massive AI-generated misinformation. Our laws regarding fake elector schemes and threatening or doxxing elections workers were not tested. But that does not mean it's not coming. For example, AI technology is growing very quickly, and we must be concerned not only about misinformation, but also cyber attacks. At the same time, AI can be utilized to help protect elections. This past election was a good year to remind people of a lot of the risks that are evolving in the election space.”

- Jena Griswold, Colorado

“All of us, regardless of party, have to keep working on further strengthening confidence in our election systems. And that can be frustrating because there can be bad actors out there knowingly spreading disinformation about what the system is. And so we are having to contend with people who are outright hostile about the election system. When I am talking about misinformation, I am not talking about disagreement. Disagreement is normal, natural, and healthy. Disinformation is the intentional spread of knowingly false information of what the system is. And when people say the wrong thing, intentionally, about how elections work, that’s a problem.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

“This is the moment for states – who have always been the laboratory of democracy – to step up and lead. We need strong Voting Rights Acts at the state level to protect everyone, no matter who they vote for. This is especially important in an increasingly diverse electorate. To do this, dedicated funding is critical and necessary for strong election administration. Funding from both the state and federal governments allows us to both train election workers, recruit volunteers, and protect everyone during elections.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“The most effective antidotes to misinformation, cynicism, and skepticism are transparency and authenticity. When people are given opportunities to see the validity and accuracy of election administration, that's a key to success. For instance, there is a fairly simple technology that voters in several counties in Oregon, but not all counties, can opt into so that they get a series of messages related to their ballot. The first message is, ‘Your ballot is on the way’ so you know it's in the mail and you can look for it. At this point, if it doesn't show up soon, you know something has gone wrong. The second message comes after you've returned your ballot: ‘Your ballot has been received.’ And then a third message, which is, ‘Your ballot has been accepted’ which is an indication that they've verified the signature and it will be counted. Allowing people to have a greater visibility on where their ballot is in the process really matters. So I can imagine working hard to make sure that this option is available in every county in Oregon, making the investment that would help people have more trust in their system.”

- Tobias Read, Oregon

“We have these things called a public accuracy test. Sounds boring, I realize, but it means that it is mandatory in every jurisdiction, county, city, town, that owns and uses election tabulating equipment of any kind must trot out that equipment in a pre-noticed public meeting. Anyone can go to these. It is mandatory before every election: general elections, primaries, and special elections. Folks basically try to trick the machines. There's a procedure whereby they will mark up the ballot, they will over-vote; they will under-vote; they will put stray marks on the ballot. They will do everything they can to trick the machines into counting or not counting ballots. And only if those machines perform perfectly, are they allowed for use in the upcoming election.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

“We need to stop thinking that “democracy” only pertains to the activity of running elections. Democracy is about a free and unencumbered press. Democracy is about an independent judiciary. Democracy is about law enforcement that follows the rule of law and equally applies without passion or prejudice to pursue justice. Democracy includes a free market system that depends on a government system that doesn't hold favor to one person versus the other. That a real democracy is a space where an individual can operate equally well in society regardless of their political affiliation. Democracy is a space where the fact that you worship, whether or not you worship, and who or how you worship to or with is irrelevant. Democracy also includes the notion that you don't have ideological curricula, that you have libraries that are open and free and public, and that you have an academia that while in total, may reflect a broad space of views, all of those views are actually reflected in a robust enough way within their disciplines to be able to continue to innovate and explore. Secretaries of State need to talk about democracy as an entire ecosystem of rights and obligations that we as citizens have and exist within, and how all of them working together make up a very complex society that grants us the luxury that we feel day in and day out, as compared to other places in the world. And election administration is the golden thread that holds together the fabric of our free society. The task of an authoritarian is to pull that golden thread out so that the rest disintegrate. And that's exactly what authoritarians want.”

- Adrian Fontes, Arizona

“It is incumbent on Democrats and moderate Republicans to declare that standing up for democracy is not partisan. Those of us who have been on the front lines know that it comes with a cost. Four men have been found guilty of threatening my life. And to have folks characterize the protection of democracy as partisan just undermines a lot of the nonpartisan work those on the front lines have been doing.”

- Jena Griswold, Colorado

“The office of Secretary of State will have an expanded role in the national conversation in the coming years. I think that partially has to do with the fact that we are ministers of not just elections, but of the business records that preserve property rights and intellectual rights and corporate formation rights. These are part of the bundle of rights that individuals have that authoritarians will try to pluck away. And they're among the most critical. Because if someone can pluck at your property rights, your intellectual property rights, if they can pluck at your corporate structure and say your company was illegally formed, then you can do a lot of damage.”

- Adrian Fontes, Arizona



CONCERN

In addition to the need for specific policy efforts to respond to election threats, broader forces still seek to weaken our democracy. Some partisans prioritize talking points over good policy, while President Trump and his allies continue to embrace election lies and anti-democratic tendencies. Meanwhile, the onslaught of political news following a hard fought election brings worries about citizens becoming disengaged from political and civic life. Being aware of specific dangers can help elected officials plan for ways to protect communities and our democratic institutions.

“I’m concerned about any administration or leaders approaching election policy not focused on the needs of election officials and voters, but rather focused on partisan-based policies that potentially could deny hundreds of thousands of American citizens the right to vote. For example, the imbalanced focus on making sure non-citizens can’t vote. We all committed to ensuring only citizens can vote. But when the attention on non-citizens voting far outweighs what the data shows, that takes attention away from the actual data-driven work we need to do to make sure elections work for everyone.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“Donald Trump continues to be a very real threat to American democracy. He’s made it plain to anyone and everyone that he only accepts results of elections he wins. To have that mainstreamed among more extreme Republicans is a danger because that’s not how elections work. Lies and misinformation are used to destabilize our elections; to justify voter suppression; and incite threats to election workers. Those are all very real threats.”

- Jena Griswold, Colorado

“Looking ahead for the next few years, one of my biggest concerns is the exhaustion that many people are feeling with the circus and the mis- and disinformation. I worry that people otherwise very engaged, very smart, very capable, will just say, ‘I can’t handle it. I don’t want to listen to the news.’ Disengaging, I think, puts us on a really dangerous path.”

- Tobias Read, Oregon

“One danger I see in the coming years is disconnectedness. I worry that people, either actually or metaphorically, will disconnect not just from elections, not just from voting, but from government or civic life.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

“The call for the criminalization of the Democratic Party is the next step. That's the next step in the playbook. I'm kind of reasoning this out in my own head. But if Sun Tzu tells us anything, he tells us to be apprised of the ways of your enemy. And sadly, I've never read Mein Kampf, so I don't know exactly what's next.”

- **Adrian Fontes, Arizona**



DEMOCRACY BEYOND ELECTION DAY

As statewide elected officials, secretaries of state know that there is more that unites Americans than divides us. Elected officials should meet people where they are, from community centers to Friday night football games, and prioritize meeting with voters of all ideological perspectives. There is a responsibility, especially in polarizing times, to foster a sense of connectedness in our communities and the idea that public services and institutions are working for the benefit of everyone.

“We all have a role to play in our communities. Engaged citizens show they care about the community around them, and bring accountability that if local officials do not do their job, citizens will vote them out. In Michigan, we lead the nation in youth vote turnout, but it is still far below where it needs to be to prepare the next generation to inherit our democracy. We’ve done a lot of work to involve young people in the process, ranging from resources for schools to promoting mock elections in schools. We’ve also implemented legislation to allow 16- and 17-year olds to pre-register to vote.”

- **Jocelyn Benson, Michigan**

“For me, we've got to rebuild the trust that people have in government. It's not something that is given or to which we are entitled. It's something we have to earn, and continue to earn, and I think it is connected with integrity. It means owning up to our mistakes, being accountable to our constituents. While I was [Oregon state] Treasurer, we had eight different secretaries of state, for a variety of different reasons. The fundamental tenet, for me, is just basic competence – showing up and doing the work and doing the unglamorous stuff allows people to say, ‘I don't agree with everything, but they're doing the work and they're delivering.’”

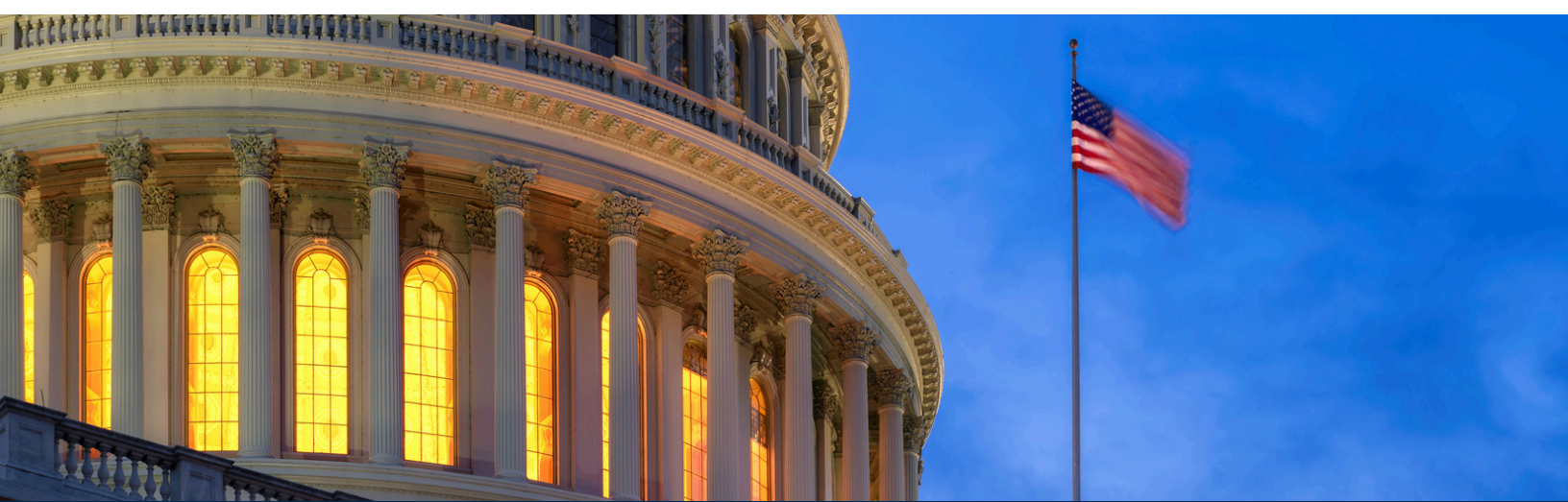
- **Tobias Read, Oregon**

“I keep coming back to this idea of connection, making sure as much as we can that people are connected to the community, and connected to the government in particular. That doesn't mean they have to like everything the government does. They can be a skeptic. I just mean convincing people, whether it's through voting or otherwise, that this stuff matters. And voting is one way to get at that. Another way is to show up places. It's about showing up at schools, and it's about arts and athletics organizations. In all these ways, it's about getting people connected in ways that aren't necessarily focused on an election or a campaign.”

- **Steve Simon, Minnesota**

“We need to reexamine our definition of civic engagement. Is 100,000 people showing up at a football stadium on a Saturday afternoon to root for their alma mater civic engagement? You're damn right it is. These are people who are engaged in a community for a common purpose. Wednesday evening Bible study. Is that not civic engagement? How about Little League? Is that not civic engagement? Coaching a little league team, a Girl Scout troop selling their cookies on a Saturday afternoon outside of the grocery store. Civic engagement happens everywhere. Everybody's already involved in civic engagement. What we need to ask is: ‘How do we reach people where they live and work and play and pray?’ Democratic elected officials are the ones that should be tasking ourselves to be better and broader. We pretend like we want to include everybody. How many times have the Democrats reached out to the evangelical church? How many times do Democrats go to gun clubs or gun fairs? How many Democratic candidates have set up a voter registration booth at a firearms fair at the local fairgrounds? We can't have a better society if we can't win elections, and we can't win elections when we're only reaching out through this narrow slice of the electorate.”

- **Adrian Fontes, Arizona**



OPTIMISM

While taking concerns about our democracy seriously, Americans, and their leaders, should remain optimistic. Throughout the conversations, secretaries of state emphasized their determination to safeguard American democracy for generations to come, and a dogged refusal to allow forces seeking to undermine our nation to succeed. Even after everything these officials have seen and endured, including death threats, their optimism about the foundations of our democracy provides reasons for hope.

“Hold on to hope – a hope informed by our history. Every time citizens have given up on our democracy, it has failed. Every time citizens have leaned in and fought back against attempts to undermine democracy, with truth and laws and justice in our corner, we’ve prevailed. We can’t forget that. We can’t allow exhaustion to deter us from doing this work. If we do that, we can overcome this era and emerge stronger and better than we were going into it.”

- Jocelyn Benson, Michigan

“The number one thing that elected officials can do right now, across party lines, is to have courage. To have the courage to stand up for facts, for the truth. Folks need to have the courage to say the truth.”

- Jena Griswold, Colorado

“Everybody is affected by the government, good or bad. And so I focus on the idea that there's a lot more that unites us and then divides us. It's way too easy to think that someone from Portland is not going to be the same as someone from Port Orford or Pendleton. But ultimately, people want to be safe and have an economic future, and they want their kids to feel that way. And there's room to talk about what government programs and services can contribute to that and how well they do it. As elected officials, we can rebuild trust by being authentic and honest, and by owning our mistakes while trying to fix them moving forward. The point of serving as an elected official is to make people's lives better and allow people to live up to their full potential.”

- Tobias Read, Oregon

“I remain a long-term optimist about democracy in America, despite what we've all gone through in the last few years. I mean, does democracy feel a little bit dinged and a little bit dented after the last few years? Yes, I would say so. And the biggest ding, the biggest dent, was January 6, 2021. Though dinged and dented, I would say not even close to being defeated. Our democracy is quite resilient and I don't want people to lose faith and lose hope. The resiliency that we've seen, especially recently, demonstrates that these institutions were built to last. They were meant to last. They will last, not automatically, but because we will make it so.”

- Steve Simon, Minnesota

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