

## **Here's how we defeat American authoritarian populism**

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January 19, 2022

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There are two urgent reasons for Americans to mobilize to protect and strengthen the ideals, institutions and norms of our constitutional republic. The first is to secure our sacred national purpose to treasure and perfect the life-affirming values of freedom, justice and opportunity for all. The second is to defeat the cultural, economic and political ravishes of America's rising authoritarianism.

Both of these require a new American consciousness that produces evolved political relationships liberated from the constraints of 20th-century ideologies, parties and special-interest groupings. And neither of these goals can be realized without mobilizing and coalescing a diverse, cross-partisan constituency committed to a clearly articulated agenda and strategic objectives designed to strengthen our constitutional republic.

Any attempt to distinguish between authoritarianism and other forms of governing philosophy inevitably confronts the eternal, and frequently contentious, debate about whether our Founders' true intentions were to create a republic or a democracy.

Given the current toxicity of America's politics, this essay adopts James Madison's unequivocal conclusion that America is a "constitutional republic". As Madison wrote in Federalist Papers No. 10, the best, or perhaps the least worst, alternative to the "violence of factions" — whether caused by the despotic instincts of the autocrat, or the uncontrollable passions of the entirety of the citizenry — are the values, ideals and norms of a constitutional republic constructed to control the excesses of factions and to mitigate the threats of majority rule.

The following is an initial attempt to summarize strategic goals and priorities of a new, diverse, cross-partisan coalition to strengthen our constitutional republic. While critical components of this coalition have been growing for a number of years, it has not yet been mobilized and coalesced for optimal policy and political impact.

We expect and hope that in the months and years to come, as new and dynamic cultural and political alliances form, the strategies summarized herein will be refined, the agendas expanded and the strategic objectives more fully developed.

This essay is divided into four parts:

- Defining the core features of 21st-century American authoritarian populism.
- Strategic goals: Mobilizing a coalition to strengthen our constitutional republic.
- A sampling of leadership organizations committed to our republic.
- Strategic priorities: Specific actions necessary to begin mobilizing a coalition to strengthen our constitutional republic in 2022.

## **1. Defining the core features of 21st-century American authoritarian populism**

The meaning of authoritarian populism, and its inexorable acceleration as an American cultural and political phenomenon, was clearly defined in a seminal essay, “The Terrifying Rise of Authoritarian Populism,” written by Tom G. Palmer of the libertarian Cato Institute and published by Reason Magazine in September 2019:

*“Historians and political theorists have argued for decades about what exactly populism is. ... [T]he political theorist Isaiah Berlin ... identified a core populist idea: the notion that an authentic ‘true people’ have been ‘damaged by an elite, whether economic, political, or racial, some kind of secret or open enemy’. The exact nature of the enemy – ‘foreign or native, ethnic or social’ – doesn’t matter, Berlin adds. What fuels populist politics is that concept of the people battling the elite.*

*“The Princeton political scientist Jan-Warner Muller proposes another characteristic: ‘In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always anti-pluralist. ... Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people. In that formulation, the key to understanding populism is that the ‘people’ does not include all people. It excludes ‘the enemies of the people’ who may be specified in various ways: foreigners, the press, minorities, financiers, the ‘1 percent’, or others seen as not being ‘us’. ...*

*“[This] Berlin-Muller brand of populism is ... threatening individual liberty, free markets, the rule of law, constitutionalism, the free press and liberal democracy.”*

Populist threats to our constitutional republic have deepened in the two and a half years since that article was written and conditions have deteriorated into further political divisiveness and the possibility of more violence in 2022, 2024 and beyond.

Truth, trust, reason and civility in our politics, which are foundational values of a healthy republic, cannot and will not survive populist narratives and rantings from either the right (e.g.,

incessant lies about “election fraud,” the “stop the steal” assault on our state electoral systems, the denigration of a free press, the harassment of immigrants, marginalization of minorities, unabated extremist cynicism, nihilism and violence), nor from the left (e.g., “defund the police,” “cancel culture,” “socialism,” “Occupy Wall Street,” and the rigid certainties of “woke-ism”).

History is a testament to the fact that anti-elitism and anti-pluralism from across the political spectrum, their proclivities for the spread of mis- and disinformation and their penchants for the hatred of adversaries and appeals to violence, lead, inexorably, to corrosive authoritarianism and are anathema to the values and ideals of a constitutional republic.

## **2. Strategic goals: Mobilizing a coalition to strengthen our constitutional republic**

The authoritarian threats in America could not be clearer, more present and urgent. Fortunately, the platforms and conditions exist to mobilize diverse, cross-partisan organizations, strategists and donors to coalesce agendas and strategies necessary to advance liberty, justice and opportunity for all and to defeat authoritarian populism.

It is vitally important at the outset to emphasize that this appeal to mobilize a diverse, cross-partisan coalition to strengthen our republic is not a veiled call for creating a third party. American political parties are creatures of statutory and operational dysfunctions and “new” parties are just as likely as the existing ones to splinter, fissure and trend toward narrow ideological capture.

Rather, mobilization of the coalition will underscore the reality that a healthy constitutional republic is dependent on a marketplace of ideas where diversity of thought, opinion and political perspective is celebrated as a strength and where partisan preferences are respected and provide the foundation of informed and reasoned dialogue, debate and problem-solving in our national interests.

Accordingly, the core features of a “diverse, cross-partisan coalition to strengthen our republic” include:

- **Diversity** refers to the commitment to be inclusive of the remarkable range of the American people, looking at race and ethnicity, gender, religion, geography (urban, suburban, rural), levels of educational attainment, economic status, and sexual orientation.
- **Cross-partisan** refers to the commitment to honor and respect, but not necessarily agree with, the full range of open-minded, principled conservatism of the center-right; the open-minded, principled liberalism of the center-left; and the non- and bipartisan approaches of independent promoters and defenders of dialogues, reforms and policies.
- **Constitutional republic** refers to the commitment of those participating in the coalition to be devoted to the core principles — election integrity, protection of minority rights, the rule of law, separate but equal branches of government, etc. — of our constitutional government and its stated ideals of liberty, justice, respect for human dignity and opportunity for all.

- **Coalition** refers to the commitment of coalition members to acknowledge that they possess differing partisan preferences, and yet are willing to respectfully consider a range of cultural and political ideas and to discuss, deliberate and discover their common causes and shared destinies.

### 3. A sampling of leadership organizations committed to strengthening our republic

There are an impressive number of existing, highly respected center-left, center-right, moderate and independent organizations with enlightened leadership committed to elements of an agenda and poised to pursue a strategy for organizing their constituencies into an enduring cross-partisan policy and political coalition.

Any list(s) of such organizations inevitably will be incomplete. However, in an attempt to begin the process of identifying the depth and breadth of existing capacities, the following preliminary organizational names are proffered:

- **Center-left organizations:** Third Way; Progressive Policy Institute; New Democrats; The NewDEAL.
- **Center-right organizations:** Defending Democracy Together/Republicans for the Rule of Law/The Bulwark; Niskanen Center; R Street Institute; Renew America Movement; Stand Up Republic; Mercatus Center’s Pluralism and Civil Exchange Program/The UnPopulist; The Dispatch.
- **Independent, nonpartisan organizations:** Bipartisan Policy Center; Convergence; Citizen Data; the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget’s FixUS Initiative; and more than 100 organizational members of the Bridge Alliance and National Association of Nonpartisan Reformers. BA and NANR members pursue a range of civic dialogue and engagement, campaign and election reform, and governance and policy initiatives. Collectively, they have millions of members, supporters and affiliations.

Many of these organizations are under five years old, remain relatively small compared to the missions they are pursuing, lack both management and staff depth as well as the financial resources necessary to grow and increase their impact. Accordingly, mobilization of a diverse, cross-partisan coalition requires significant new investments *both* to strengthen many of these individual groups, *and* to further develop their respective center-right, center-left and independent, nonprofit communities.

Finally, a word about the potential size and scope of a diverse, cross-partisan coalition to strengthen our constitutional republic. Although it is difficult to quantify political motivations of either voters (about 155 million of whom cast ballots for president in 2020) or of all voting age adults (roughly 250 million), the 2020 study “Hidden Tribes,” conducted by the respected international public opinion research firm More in Common, observed the following:

*“In talking to everyday Americans, we have found a large segment of the population whose voices are rarely heard above the shouts of the partisan tribes. These are people who believe*

*Americans have more in common than that which divides them. They believe that compromise is necessary in politics, as in other parts of life, and want to see the country come together and solve its problems.”*

The Hidden Tribes study concluded that most of America’s existing political dialogue is dominated by the right wing of the Republican Party and the left wing of the Democratic Party, which together constitute roughly 30 percent of the electorate. Thus, approximately 70 percent of voters (about 110 million people in 2020) constitute what More in Common refers to as the “Exhausted Majority” — Americans who are less well-organized, financed or politically coherent, and therefore are at the rhetorical mercy of the most hyperpartisan, vocal factions of American politics.

#### **4. Strategic priorities: Specific actions necessary to begin mobilizing a coalition to strengthen our republic in 2022**

The following is a summary of priority actions necessary to mobilize and coalesce a diverse, cross-partisan coalition to strengthen our republic in order to become a sustainable and effective voice for policy and political change beginning in 2022.

**Priority one: Create a cross-partisan leadership collaborative.** The first step in identifying and mobilizing this coalition is to create a cross-partisan collaborative consisting of highly respected representatives of the center-left, center-right and independent groups. The purpose of the collaborative will be to (1) agree upon a process/method for the productive exchange of their partisan political ideas and identification of their shared interests and common causes, and (2) determine their concrete policy agendas and implement their highest priority political strategies for 2022, 2024 and beyond.

**Priority two: Create a compelling, politically relevant narrative promoting the values and ideals of America’s constitutional republic.** Design and implement a concise, compelling narrative and communications strategy to relentlessly promote the values and ideals of our republic — e.g., freedom, justice, dignity and opportunity for all — that is well-researched and employs state-of-the-art innovations in reaching and influencing selected audiences through multimedia platforms.

**Priority three: Craft a substantive agenda for 2022 and 2024.** Promoting a coherent, substantive pro-republic agenda requires a clear, concise and compelling set of strategies that promote popular policies and support candidates, including, but not limited to, the following:

- A carefully curated agenda to advance specific substantive policies with proven, broadly based, cross-partisan support such as immigration, health care cost reductions, child tax credit, carbon pricing, responsible gun safety, etc.

- A state and federal legislative strategy that assures election integrity and administration of free and fair elections, reduces the adverse effects of gerrymandering, and addresses campaign finance reform.
- Financial and get-out-the-vote support for candidates up and down the ballot in states and voting districts where a pro-republic agenda will resonate.

**Priority four: Focus strategically on a finite number of states in 2022 and 2024.** The electoral focus of the coalition to strengthen our republic should be on perhaps as few as 10-12 states where pro-republic candidates are likely to win, with special attention to federal and state elections with increased priority on down-ballot races — district attorneys, secretaries of state, school boards, county and municipal elections, state legislatures and congressional seats.

**Priority five: Permanent management and significant financial investment.** Continuing refinement and implementation of this agenda and strategy will require ongoing management and oversight. The Leadership Collaborative will need to establish a small, efficient management/staff “hub” to assure the continuing growth and development of the coalition. Moreover, significant multiyear, multicycle investments will be required to continue to build the internal capacities of national groups, to align independent expenditures, (c)(3) and (c)(4) organizations and candidate campaigns within select states, and generally, to accelerate the impact of the coalition.

## **Endnote**

Activists committed to mobilizing the coalition described above feel an acute urgency to confront and defeat American authoritarianism in the short term because if it continues to metastasize and accelerate, for even one more year, America’s ideals, institutions and norms likely will be permanently damaged. This is a legitimate fear and time *is* of the essence.

Accordingly, we must begin immediately, strengthen our collective capacities in 2023 and 2024, and continue to be a force for change for decades to come. Restoring the health and well-being of our constitutional republic — and realizing our hopes, dreams and aspirations for a more perfect union — will require the courage of our convictions, faith in one another and our country, and patience, persistence and relentless resilience.