

Presentation: “Pretensions of American Democracy”

Tom Arendshorst, September 1, 2022

The title of my presentation tonight, my thirteenth, is “Pretensions of American Democracy.” This is a big subject, and I’m no expert. But I believe it’s really important. My hope is to offer some interest, stimulate some of our storied discussions, and hopefully gain some understanding together.

We Americans are proud to be the world’s avatar of democracy. We see ourselves as the world’s experts on democratic governance, and have deemed ourselves the admired leader in advancing democracy around the globe.

But we all know there are chinks in our democratic armor, bedsores born of complacency with our democracy’s faults. Throughout our history our government has been content to offer partial, limited democracy, and has had to put down a variety of internal rebellions driven by the frustrations of Americans ravaged and ruined by American anti-democracy.

I. FIRST PRINCIPLES:

- A. Our 1776 Declaration of Independence was also our Declaration of Democracy, separating America from a monarchical world: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Our 1787 Constitution begins: “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

In the context of their time, our founding fathers did indeed invent a radically democratic approach to national governance. They not only refused monarchy and dictatorship, but jumped past rule-by-elite to include farmers, shopkeepers, and hired laborers in parts of their new government’s decision-making process. Beginning the United States truly was an amazing venture.

- B. But, as we well know, when our founders promised to “all men” the benefits of “justice,” “tranquility,” “welfare,” and “liberty,” their notion of “All” was limited — including far less than half of the people living in and struggling to find these benefits in the new United States of America. The founders committed the American future to tremendous compromises in democratic ideals and structure.

II. HOW IMPORTANT IS DEMOCRACY? A core tenet of my talk tonight is that Democracy is really, really important for the United States — and that any deficiencies in our democracy are genuine

problems. But it's fair to ask how important democracy really is. Is democracy beneficial — or, more accurately, is democracy a beneficial aspiration and goal? Is democracy necessary for good government?

Well, it depends on whom you ask. If you'd asked Adolf Hitler, he'd have convinced you that national greatness requires that power be concentrated in a visionary, strong-willed leader. If you'd ask me, I'd say that democracy is the alternative to dictatorship and subjugation, the only political path toward a sustainably fair, just society. What do you think? Is democracy that important to our future?

III. WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

The whole world understands that democracy involves political elections, and that the power to vote gives power to the voters. Democracy is government controlled by the people, who all possess equal rights and privileges. In the evolved democratic ideal, the entire society of well-informed voters choose their leaders and representatives by popular vote — majority rules — and those same voters have the power to approve or reject elected officials and laws.

Our nation's founders spent a lot of energy working out who should be allowed to vote and what they'd be allowed to vote for. They agreed to exclude the majority of Americans at that time from the new nation's democratic processes. However, though the American people and the American government have continually failed to fulfill democratic ideals, the power of the vote has been effective enough to generate and sustain fairly general confidence in the democratic nature of our country for the majority of Americans.

But it's crucial to understand that "Democracy" is much more than having elections. Indeed, merely having the vote is not enough to create or sustain genuine democracy. Broad participation of the pluralistic society is necessary. The functions of government must depend on democratic decisions. Everyone must have equal rights and privileges. Civil liberties must be defended, and the political culture must respect democracy.

The underlying foundations of democracy are not political — they're social and economic. Political democratic processes can only hold if established on a solid base of social and economic "democracy," of some prevailing trust in economic opportunity for all and respect for all the unknown others. In the United States and the other democracies of our modern world, democratic governments have only succeeded when their political democracy has been erected upon a foundation of shared social contract and distributed economic opportunity. Let's call this condition of shared and distributed economic opportunity and social order "economic democracy."

At least two lines of thought confirm the sense of this idea that political democracy must be founded upon economic and social democracy.

1) First, the dynamics of power predictably devour political democracy if economic opportunity and economic power aren't distributed among the people. Distribution of economic

wealth has long been understood as a justice issue, but it's also a crucial democratic issue. If economic clout is significantly distributed throughout society, the voices and votes of all economic shareholders will carry some weight. But if economic wealth and power are concentrated among too small a subset of the population, those economic elite will act with little regard for the voices of the people, and will change the rules of voting and government to fit their interests. We're seeing that more and more in our own country. Concentrated economic power will always end up concentrating political power and corrupting what were meant to be governing laws and regulations. Political democracy will shrivel and eventually die.

2) Second, these patterns are clearly evident in recent world history. Every stable political democracy exists in concert with generalized economic opportunity and a functioning middle class. When men in suits try to install a top-down "paper" democracy in a new or war-torn country that lacks distributed economic opportunity, that political democracy rapidly wilts and becomes a democracy in name only, offering its citizens the vote but governing only to serve the interests of their economic elite. Examples are rife: Iraq, Afghanistan, Brazil, Uganda, Russia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Kenya, Venezuela — the list is long and ugly. The wealthy elite rig the elections and gain extreme power and control of the national treasure. The elected President may decide to extend his (or her) term and end up President-for-Life. The police and military cement the dictator's power.

The American path toward democracy was very different from that picture. In the centuries before our 1776 revolution Renaissance Europe had gradually developed some "economic democracy," as capitalist trade, markets, guilds, and trade unions replaced the monarchic-oligarchic economy of feudalism. The United States began its democracy on the foundations of classical and enlightenment ideals, capitalism, and the astonishing, almost limitless opportunity wealth of its unclaimed, undeveloped West.

The democratic concept that "All are created equal" involves not only equal votes in political elections, but equitable, fair opportunities to share in the benefits of society. To understand this is crucially important for any discussion of democracy to make useful sense.

We all know that all people are not created equal. Even apart from the inequalities of race and gender, some people are born with greater or lesser intelligence, greater or lesser health, greater or lesser emotional stability. We don't earn such advantages; they're essentially distributed among a population by chance.

But if we try to make everyone equal, we can end up requiring, for instance, that those people who are unusually good at talking have to speak at all times with a mouthful of marbles. Equity, on the other hand, is the condition of *fairness*, of equality of *opportunity* — for example, providing entry ramps into buildings for people who cannot ascent stairs.

American philosopher John Rawls, about whom Jeff Padnos spoke in his 2001 Professional Club presentation, wrote about the many ways in which opportunities are unequally distributed. Rawls called these benefits "unearned advantages" — everything from genetic advantages to

family-dependent social connections to inherited wealth to freedom from health troubles to racial caste.

But in the United States opportunity is not merely unequal. A mountain of laws, court and police processes, and business practices systematically rob many Americans of opportunities while magnifying opportunities for other, more privileged Americans. **If fair access to opportunity is an important part of a democratic society, then America falls far short of legitimate democracy.**

IV. SO, HOW ARE WE DOING?

The **Democracy Index**, compiled and published every year by the *Economist* provides a snapshot of democratic function in 165 countries, covering almost the entire population of the world. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Based on its scores on a range of indicators, the Democracy Index classifies each country as a “full democracy”, “flawed democracy”, “hybrid regime” or “authoritarian regime”.

In 2020 23 nations achieved “Full Democracy” designation, including Iceland, New Zealand and Canada, most of Western Europe, and others including Australia, Taiwan, Uruguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Mauritius, Japan, and South Korea. The U.S. is not among these top democracies.

For the fifth consecutive year the United States failed to rise above a “Flawed Democracy” rating, despite high and increasing political participation by its citizens.

Varieties of Democracy, an international organization that tracks democratization, has dropped the U.S. from #17 to #29 in the world between 2016 and 2021.

These studies list major threats to American Democracy:

- * extremely low levels of trust in institutions and political parties, and cynicism among young voters;
- * deep dysfunction in the operations of government,
- * increasing threats to freedom of expression;
- * a degree of societal polarization that makes consensus almost impossible to achieve on fundamental issues;
- * Donald Trump’s big lie, damaged trust in the election process, and corrosion of the peaceful transfer of power;
- * the politicization of ballot counting by Republican state legislatures; and
- * the attempt to disenfranchise segments of the population.

Supporting these chilling analyses is the **Social Progress Index**, based on research by three Nobel Prize-winning economists. Comparing the U.S. to 145 other countries, the Social Progress Index ranks the United States #25 in well-being of citizens, behind all the other

members of the G7 and other, poorer countries. We are #32 in internet access, #39 in access to clean drinking water, #50 in personal safety, and #61 in high school enrollment.

IV. HOW HAS AMERICAN DEMOCRACY DEVELOPED SUCH PROBLEMS? Isn't the United States the world's poster-nation of democracy? Well, our democracy has some defects, and has been defective from the start.

A. The Americans who declared their independence from the oppressive slavery of British rule, and who then eventually agreed on their Constitution, were wealthy, educated, upper-crust white men, even if they did wear knee socks and hairpieces. Their notion of "all men" extended as far as less-wealthy, less-educated, lower-class males of northwest European descent, but no further.

B. Black enslavement was America's initial determinant of America's anti-democratic future, despite the founders' sense of a classical democratic ideal.

I'm going to spend some time examining the myriad ways in which the American promise of democracy has been a lie for African-Americans, because:

- 1) it so clearly demonstrates the range of means the United States has used to withhold its democracy from many of its people; and because
 - 2) our nation's anti-democratic treatment of Black Americans has been a cancer that has corrupted American democracy in other ways. Our predecessors' commitments to a social order that relied on slavery has been the cornerstone of American anti-democratic decisions and patterns ever since.
1. At the time of America's declaration of independence 20% of Americans were enslaved — and their slavery not only stripped them of their humanity and hope, but was heritable and permanent, condemning them and their children and all succeeding generations to eternal slavery.
 2. Enslaved Americans had no legal standing in courts, and could own nothing.
 3. When the 13 colonies aggregated into a new nation, the economic institution of slavery dominated and the political process. In order to entice the rich southern colonies into the nascent union, pivotal anti-democratic concessions were granted:
 - ✓ The vote of every slaveowner would be forever magnified by the number of slaves he owned, adding the power of 0.6 votes per slave. By this, a man owning 10 slaves would have *seven times* the national voting power of any non-enslaver.
 - ✓ The Electoral College was configured this same way, to grant enslavers this same disproportionate power over the young nation's choice of its Presidents. This goes a long way to explaining why most of America's Presidents and Supreme Court justices before 1861 were from Southern states.
 4. American slave-owners lived in continual fear that their captive forced laborers might rise up against them, as Haitian slaves did successfully in 1791. The Second

Constitutional Amendment, passed later that same year, empowered militias not only to take the place of a non-existent national army, but also to assure militias' capacity to put down slave rebellions and to hunt and recapture escaped slaves.

5. Throughout the United States' first seven decades, a fortress of laws and Superior Court rulings established American Blacks' racial inferiority — and consequent ineligibility for rights, citizenship, and property ownership.
 6. This oppressive dehumanization of Black people united white Americans, poor and rich alike, in their “not-a-Black-slave” identity. This, too, has had broad-reaching effects on American democratization.
- C. After the Civil War the United States adopted its Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, granting citizenship to Black Americans and all people born in the United States; equality and equal protection under the law, and the right for all men to vote, regardless of race or previous servitude. For a brief time these structural changes empowered America's Southern Reconstruction, and **the** American South for the first time resembled a democracy.
1. But America's commitment to expanding democracy dissolved. Jim Crow laws in the South grew more and more oppressive, law by law, layer by layer, violence upon murderous violence, over the ensuing ninety years. In 1896 the Supreme Court declared segregation constitutional [*Plessy v Ferguson*], giving Southern states the green light to pass laws and codes making our post-slavery racial caste system permanent and terrifying in its violence.
 3. The Thirteenth Amendment is credited with ending slavery, but it allowed law enforcement to convict people of crimes and then use them as slaves. Prison slaves became an important part of the Southern economy. [1619, p 279]
The legacy of this approach to criminalization and over-punishment is evident today in Americans' broad acceptance of criminalization for small offenses, over-prosecution and over-conviction of non-white Americans, and excessive prison terms, especially for non-violent crimes. These patterns are wounds in our country's democracy.

- V. **America's anti-democratic commitments to slavery and repression of Black Americans are at the base of the United States' failures to develop a democratic, adequately distributed, economy.** *The lack of wealth that has been a defining feature of Black American life since the end of slavery is a crucial factor making Black lives hard and dangerous in today's America.*

Wealth, not just equal rights or even current income, is the principal means to security in America and a crucial determinant of equitable access to economic opportunity. Net worth is what enables you to buy a home in a safer neighborhood with better-funded schools. Wealth is what enables you to send your children to college without accruing overwhelming debt.

Wealth prevents a family emergency or an unexpected job loss from being a catastrophe and leaving you homeless. Wealth provides security and peace of mind.

But wealth is not often something people create solely by themselves; wealth is accumulated across generations. The development of family assets, exactly like invested money, compounds in value over time.

Durable democracy needs equitable opportunities for all people to develop wealth, some financial assets.. Our American society has failed to accomplish this equity of opportunity. For **Black Americans**, it is **white Americans' centuries-long economic head start that most effectively maintains racial caste today.**

To our current day, the United States and its individual states have used the powers of government, laws, regulations, and policies to inflict systemic, structural economic injustice on African-Americans in an array of ways.

1. In 1865 Union General Sherman awarded 10,000 land grants to former slave families who were totally destitute. After Abraham Lincoln's assassination new President Andrew Johnson, a slaveowner, cancelled those land grants and installed the sharecropper system, which locked 4 million Black people into new legal and economic bondage to their former enslavers. At the same time, the federal government bestowed millions of acres in the West on white Americans under the Homestead Act.
2. For more than a century the U.S. Department of Agriculture has disproportionately denied farm loans and assistance to Black farmers.
3. The Depression-era National Housing Act of 1934 created the Federal Housing Authority, aimed to provide federal insurance for mortgages. But the FHA used Redlining, jacking up Black mortgage rates and forcing Americans of color into poor neighborhoods with poor resources, suppressing their economic development. Other discriminatory housing practices have continued into current times,
4. The Social Security Act of 1935 was intended to provide a safety net for workers,
✓ But the new Social Security system specifically excluded farmworkers and domestic workers — groups who were predominantly Black, Latino, and Asian — from receiving benefits, and drove wages for workers of color as low as \$5 per day.
5. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, yet another New Deal economic reform, established a national minimum wage and maximum work week and prohibited most child labor.
✓ But domestic workers and tip-based workers, a heavy proportion of them Black Americans, were excluded.
6. The G. I. Bill of 1944 jet-fueled the United States' recovery of its middle class and the nation's post-war economy in general. G. I. mortgages became the economic foundation for succeeding generations of white Americans.

- ✓ But Black Americans were denied many of the G. I. Bill's benefits: federally-backed mortgage loans, VA unemployment benefits, and the pivotal educational benefits of the G.I. Bill for high school, vocational school, and college.
7. Equal access to education is both a democratic civil right and a cornerstone of economic development, but has been systematically and structurally withheld from Black youth throughout our nation's history.
- ✓ 58 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many American students of color still lack equal access to educational opportunities. A huge funding gap separates schools that are primarily white from primarily Black schools.
8. The "War on Drugs," whatever its original intentions, has created severely adverse impacts and obvious injustices against African Americans and other communities of color. Comparing similar offenses, Black Americans have been convicted more often and have received much more severe average prison sentences than have white counterparts. *Black Americans are up to 10 times as likely to be stopped, arrested, or sentenced for drug-related offenses than their white counterparts, despite evidence that both communities use and sell drugs at the same rates.*
- ✓ Long after an ex-offender has "paid his/her debt to society," Imprisonment has corrosive effects on families and on ex-offenders' economic opportunities.
 - ✓ The War on Drugs has created a new branch of anti-democratic American governance.
16. Voting Restrictions are directly anti-democratic laws.
- The American Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended legal discrimination on the bases of race, color, religion, sex or national origin — but the states of the old Confederacy, weren't inclined to comply, so a year later Congress passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act to limit voter suppression. But In 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court released U.S. Southern states from the federal preclearance requirements of that Act. About five minutes later Southern states began installing 21st-century versions of Jim Crow, passing new voter suppression laws that disproportionately impact communities of color. As of July, 2021, over 400 voter-suppressing bills had been introduced in 49 states. Every law that makes voting more difficult damages democracy.
- VI. America's persistent, *insistent* refusal to fully include Black Americans in our political and economic life is one great evidence of our false pretensions of democracy. But the United States' systemic robbery of Black people's liberty and rights has also *laid the rails, established the mind-set and policy patterns*, over which have run the systemic exclusion and dehumanization of other peoples — Native Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Hispanic Americans, LGBT Americans — whom Euro-Americans have perceived to be different and less deserving of civil rights and respect.

- C. **Indigenous Americans** — the first Americans — have suffered terribly from the United States’ anti-democratic founding and history. Throughout its history, our government has systematically worked to destroy Native Americans through robberies of lands, forced expulsions, massacres, genocide, starvation, the repeated unilateral abrogation of mutually-agreed treaties, and current-day inequities in such resources as health services.
 - D. **Women** were also shafted by America’s limited commitment to democracy, and, despite more than 70 years of frustrated national and state activism and eventually imprisonment and beatings for their peaceful picketing, women were not allowed to vote in national elections until 1920. Thus, roughly half of all Americans were excluded from America’s limited democracy for its first 140+ years.
 - E. **Other Ethnic Minorities: Hispanic, Chinese, Japanese, Jewish, Middle Eastern Americans and other non-Euro-Americans** have all suffered systemic, anti-democratic governmental, economic, and social exclusion and persecution. In their turns, all immigrant groups have endured anti-democratic policies and practices.
 - F. **Americans with atypical gender identities and Americans with disabilities** have suffered exclusion and discrimination under American law.
 - G. All of these Americans have been denied not only the United States’ original pronounced democratic equality, but also the inclusive protections of our Constitutional Fourteenth Amendment, especially “equal protection of the laws.”
- VII. During the past four decades of our own lives we’ve seen the advance of historically familiar but newly-revived attacks against American democracy.
- A. Especially through the past six years, we’ve suffered new explosions of Racist-Nativist reactions to the expansions of rights for American people of color. States are moving to restrict the voting of racial minorities.
 - B. Male chauvinist and Gender-orthodox reactions have erupted against expansions of economic equity for women and political-social democracy for LGBT people.
 - C. On top of the United States’ racial, ethnic, and gender structures of anti-democracy, our economic laws and policies have bred ever-worsening deterioration of our economic democracy, recalling the extreme maldistribution of wealth during Jim Crow America. Today the richest 10% of Americans, including many of us, own 75% of the country’s wealth; the top 1% own well over one-third. American political systems, legal arrangements, economic structures, and cultural beliefs underlie and uphold this level of inequality.
 - An important force in the evolution of America’s un-democratic economy has been the Supreme Court’s activism in favor of private corporations.
 - ✓ In 1886 the Court used the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantees of equal protection for all to extend those protections to business corporations as well as to people.

- ✓ In 2010 the Supreme Court ruled, in *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission*, that the Constitution protects corporations' political "speech," including spending in support of a political candidate without making a direct contribution to that candidate.
- ✓ These so-called "Independent expenditures" catapulted 600%, severely undermining the transparency of political economics, allowing the power of wealth to gain extreme power in our political process — and subverting our electoral democracy.

VII. American Economic Democracy expanded after World War II.

- A. In reaction, Charles and David Koch and others have promoted efforts to guard the wealth and political power of the super-wealthy in America by dismantling laws and economic policies that had been increasing "economic democracy." The Koch brothers' belief system is focused on an extremely free market unburdened by governing regulations or taxes.

Today a handful of billionaires led by Charles Koch dominate American politics. They've built an elaborate network of political donors and fundraising institutions that generates a shady maze of largely untraceable dark money, which allows the Koch network (called "the Kochtopus") to spend billions to elect loyal politicians and spread their political agenda.

Let's take a look at how such concentrated power can chew away at the innards of democracy.

1. The Kochs have created messages that elected voices project, most of all through Americans for Prosperity, the active political arm of the Koch network.
2. By developing and using nonprofit advocacy groups, think-tanks, and private foundations, the Kochs have kept political donations anonymous and tax-free. This is where the term "dark money" comes from — from the shielded invisibility of millions of tax-deductible dollars — which can then be used to fund university faculty positions, policy and advocacy institutions like the Heritage Foundation and IRA, and political names like Ted Cruz. An array of giant donors including Richard DeVos have poured money into the Koch political machine. By 2013 the Koch network controlled over 100,000 private foundations with combined assets of \$800 billion. That's a lot of invisible money influencing public policy.
3. The Kochs have made educational organizations a vital part of their conservative network, by using big donations to manipulate faculty appointments, promote right-wing views, and churn out future political leaders loyal to the Koch ideology.
4. The Koch network funnelled millions into the Tea-Party right-wing political movement and media personalities like Glenn Beck in order to add the perception of grass-roots strength to their increasing control of political and educational voices.
5. In 2010 the conservative think-tank Citizens United, funded partly by the Koch brothers, convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to allow both non-profit and for-profit

corporations to spend without limit — and without accountability — for or against a political candidate.

6. The Koch network has fueled aggressive gerrymandering. i
7. My own political worldview finds fault with unregulated capitalism and libertarianism, but the importance of this paper’s review of the Koch network’s political crusade is its destructive effects on American democracy. The work of the Kochs has widened our country’s economic divide, damaging our American political and economic democracy. It’s becoming more and more difficult for the non-rich to challenge the authority of the extremely rich. Many of our democratically elected officials are controlled by super-wealthy individuals. Our political system is closer to an oligarchy than a democracy.

- B. In concert with re-inflamed racist and nativist hostilities and the accelerating takeover of American governance by the ultra-conservative economic elite, we’re seeing new, widespread attempts to suppress voting by Black and other disadvantaged Americans in local, state, and national elections.

Because poor people are less likely to own a car, some states are demanding that voters own a photo ID. Some city areas with many people of color have very few polling centers, or may be offered only limited voting times. Many local jurisdictions provide no translations of English voting instructions. Some voters are given “provisional ballots” which may be discounted. And, of course, our decentralized national election system invites partisan election administration, including intimidation of selected voters.

All of these measures are re-creating a twenty-first century version of Jim Crow anti-democracy, by disenfranchising some Black, of-color, and poor Americans in order to preserve power for Euro-Americans and especially the most wealthy Americans.

VIII. WHAT LESSONS DO I SEE IN ALL THIS?

A. Political democracy can only succeed when founded upon social and economic democracy.

B. Democracy in our United States reached its peak in the three decades following World War II, and that rising tide of democratic authenticity pushed forward the inclusion of Black Americans and other minorities inside the arms of American Democracy.

C. During our lifetimes we have seen both this crescendo of growing American democracy and the unfortunately predictable efforts of entrenched economic and social powers to turn around that progress and send it backwards.

D. Anti-democratic concentrations of economic and political power can only retain lasting control through uses of force or the threat of force — insistence on obedience, constriction of economic opportunities, curtailments of rights, criminalization and incarceration, even overt violence.

E. At some point, people oppressed by such authoritarian governance may revolt. Revolution — indeed, even the ferment that precedes revolt — will trigger new, increased oppression by the ruling elite.

F. I believe this is the territory into which our country has been sliding — gradually, with some ups as well as downs, for more than forty years, as our economic democracy and political democracy have eroded.

- ✓ Since 1980 the lower half of the American economy has slipped farther and farther behind. The U.S. government has failed to respond, and has even legislated measures pushing disadvantaged Americans farther and farther down.
 - * *We've seen tax reductions and subsidies for the wealthy and very-wealthy, suppression of the minimum wage, and dismantling of the American welfare safety-net.*
 - * Average hourly American wages, adjusted for inflation, were lower in 2018 (\$22.65) than they had been in 1973 (\$23.68)
 - * America's tolerance of gross disparities between ostentatious mega-wealth, on one hand, and poultry-plant workers who wear diapers because they aren't given adequate bathroom breaks, on the other, refers us back to the eras of feudalism and early industrialization.
- ✓ In virtually every measure of quality-of-life, Americans today lag farther and farther behind the rest of the industrialized world.
- ✓ Many young Americans have lost trust in our economic system. In 2010 more than 2/3 of young Americans aged 18 to 29 had positive views of capitalism. Eleven years later Gallup found that that same age group were more positive about socialism than they were of capitalism.
- ✓ American adults who are not wealthy live in lifelong fear that, when their working lives end, they will not have enough wealth to carry them through their decades of retirement. *Half* of all American families have zero or negative net worth; they owe more than they own. In very significant ways, the American life experience in the land of the free and the home of the brave is defined by constant economic anxiety.
- ✓ For decades, the U.S. Congress has failed to legislate popularly-supported measures, eroding the people's trust in their government and American democracy ([gun control](#), [minimum wage](#), [women's reproductive independence](#), [environmental protections](#), [national health insurance](#), etc.).
- ✓ Mass incarceration, increasingly severe prison sentences, the militarization of police, and growing awareness of police brutality are all parts of the increasing reliance on governing by force at all levels.

- ✓ The Trump election and the January 6 Capitol invasion are a developing revolution. As U.S. democracy has declined, it's not only the crazies who are frustrated and angry at the government's negligence and disinterest in all the people.
- G. Too many people perceive that their government has escaped their democratic voices and is failing to address our most important needs.
- H. *We and our American society are now immersed in a cross-rip between authoritarian and democratizing currents.*

IX. HOW CAN WE MOVE TOWARD MORE AUTHENTIC — and HEALTHY — DEMOCRACY?

A. *THE PEOPLE MUST CARE.*

- Sustainable Democracy requires the people's dedication to the processes and ideals of democracy.
- A democracy that offers full political, economic, and social privileges to only *some* of the people is not a democracy, but a sort of caste system. If a people and their society aspire to Democracy, they must *care* enough to include all the people, by overcoming self-interest, the fear of others, and the fear of change.

B. *THE PEOPLE MUST BE EDUCATED.* Democracy absolutely requires and depends upon an educated, informed public. An ill-informed or poorly-educated public cannot sustain its own democracy.

1. The public must invest resources in their own and their successors' education
2. An educated, informed public is not just about excellent education for some or for the smartest, but for *all*. There's no way around it: we're talking about *Public* education.
2. Our nation now has the "worst-educated workforce in the industrialized world," according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. 30 Countries now out-perform American students in mathematics and problem-solving.
3. Evidence overwhelmingly supports the benefits of investing in early-childhood education for at-risk kids.
4. Successful educating countries have employed some consistent strategies:
 - 1) Their educational systems are coherently integrated. Our U.S. system is fragmented by state and local governance, variations in local affluence, policies related to race, and private and parochial school systems. To improve the education of our youth, we need:
 - a) a major shift toward higher investment in *PUBLIC* education — *this is an absolute requirement* — and

- b) Educational policies that are vertically and horizontally integrated — which requires enlightened *national* educational governance that supercedes state and local operations of education.
- 2) Other nations have instituted best-researched educational reforms that have endured through multiple changes in political leadership. We need to disconnect educational reforms and governance from frequent changes in national, state, and local political leadership.
- 5. We, with the rest of the world, need to figure out how to limit the threats to democracy of the internet -social media platform for misinformation and disinformation.

C. *OUR FUNDAMENTALIST CAPITALISM MUST BECOME A MORE SOCIALLY-CONSTRUCTIVE ECONOMY*

- 1. We need enforceable national policy that will advance the structure of our U.S. capitalism from “free-market” extremism to incorporate greater social responsibility. We need adequate regulation and enforcement of financial laws to constrain irresponsible speculation, corruption, and illegality. We can learn from other nations’ successes — and from their problems, too. We need economic structure — laws, policies, and norms — that serve the lower rungs on our economic ladder much better, in better balance with benefits for our economic elite.

“To rise above immorality, Capitalism requires a leavening of Socialism.”

- 2. Distributive Justice
 - a. We need a major leap in our federal minimum wage, and it must be linked tightly to rises in costs of living. The U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines are for \$27,180 per year for a single worker — \$13.59 for a full-time worker — with additions of about \$9,000 per year for each additional family member.
 - ✓ No workers should be excluded from the minimum wage. Economic research shows that any rise in the minimum wage elevates wages for all higher-earning workers; the entire economy is lifted, except for the very wealthy.
 - b. National Health Insurance. This is cornerstone to achieving American economic democracy and well-being.
 - c. Compared to other advanced economies, U.S. laborers work more hours and receive fewer work supports, have less access to union benefits, and very often retire without any retirement benefits other than Social Security. *U.S. labor laws need to better reward and improve the quality of life of our laborers.*
 - d. U.S. tax laws — taxes on individual income, corporate income, capital gains, and estate taxes — must be shifted to more strongly advantage low-income

producers and to require the highest-income and greatest-wealth taxpayers to contribute more to the economy that has served them so well.

e. Economic Reparations for Black Americans. White Americans today are not to blame for our American legacies of slavery and enduring economic suppression of Black Americans. But today's white society has benefited from those injustices, and Black Americans are still excluded from opportunity equity by their legacy of economic exclusion.. Together, we must be *responsible* for the fairness of replacing the inheritance Black Americans have lost.

D. **The PEOPLE and THEIR GOVERNMENT MUST BE COMMITTED to POLITICAL DEMOCRACY.**

All citizens must be included in every process, without unnecessary constraint or limitation. Efforts to make voting more difficult and efforts to disenfranchise citizens cannot be tolerated. Both the U.S. Congress and especially the U.S. Supreme Court must hold the function and future of our democracy as a primary priority, above competing concerns like the sanctity of property.

E. Leadership matters, and **Democracy cannot endure executive abuses of high office.** Government leaders must be held accountable to high standards of governing conduct.

F. **Government must withdraw, as much as possible, from governing by force,** and must treat all its citizens with respect. In my understanding, the increasing levels of enforcement violence can only be pulled back by reducing the prevailing levels of civilian weapons.

G. **Our Governments, at all levels, must be Non-Sectarian, Independent of policies and orthodoxies of all Religious Organizations.** This might be the one thing all the founders agreed about. *People should be free to worship and also be free from the potential tyrannies of worshippers.*

H. **The United States needs much greater Government Legislative Accountability to the Will and Needs of All the People.** Again, this is about constantly fixing on **THE COMMON GOOD.** The U.S. Congress and state legislatures must be reformed so they seek to address the most difficult and important societal issues instead of concentrating on their own re-election and accumulation of power. Can America undo gerrymandering and the power of primaries?

America's Founding Fathers talked continually about civic virtue, by which they meant concern for the common good over personal or political gain. We need order and productivity, but our hopes for greater democracy much greater attention to the Common Good, too.

In preparing this paper I have drawn from a variety of sources, especially:

1619 Project, created by Nicole Hannah-Jones;

Tightrope, by Joel Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn;

First Principles, by Thomas Ricks;

Racial Wealth Gap simulation created by Bread for the World Institute; and

Dark Money, by Jane Mayer.

X: SOME QUESTIONS

1. Does our society need democracy? How important is democracy? Does American democracy need to be all-inclusive? Could there be a better alternative?
2. Do you agree or disagree with my insistence that sustainable political democracy requires what I'm calling "economic democracy"? Is it clear enough what I mean by "economic democracy"?
3. What do you believe are the most important pathways toward stronger American democracy?
4. Do you agree or disagree with my contention that social media, as it currently operates, endangers democracy?
5. How might a "Critical Race Theory" opponent react to this paper?

Matthew Desmond has written in *The 1619 Project*, "If today's America promotes a particular kind of low-road capitalism — a union-busting capitalism of poverty wages, gig jobs, and normalized insecurity; a winner-take-all capitalism of stunning disparities not only permitting but rewarding financial rule-bending; a racist capitalism that ignores the fact that slavery didn't just deny Black freedom but built the fortunes of white America, originating the Black-white wealth gap that annually grows wider — one reason is that American capitalism was founded on the lowest road there is." (Matthew Desmond, *1619 Project*, p 185)