



Pillars of Support Project

Horizons Project & SNF Agora Institute



Overview

How can a national pro-democracy movement best protect and advance American democracy? Rising political violence, politicization of previously apolitical institutions, and attacks on the rule of law trouble many who love and respect the American democratic experiment. Yet it is often difficult to know how each of us individually, embedded in our own personal and professional concerns, can best advance democracy.

Fortunately, both in the United States and abroad, there is a rich tradition of civil and social action that has protected, defended, and advanced democracy. Ordinary people have shown extraordinary creativity, courage, and commitment in maintaining the freedoms they hold dear. The cases in this table provide a few emblematic stories from that vast and growing tradition. It is organized around two basic principles: pro-democracy action comes from diverse kinds of *people* and it employs diverse *tactics*. The table seeks to capture some of that diversity by providing a series of caselets at the intersections of five social groups (which we refer to as *pillars of support*) with six tactics of action.

Pillars of Support are the groups and institutions that maintain a social or political system. They are the avenues through which power flows up from the people to political leaders. We are all embedded in various pillars of support, from the businesses where we work to the faith communities where we worship. And that embeddedness gives every one of us influence over our larger political system. The caselets here focus on five pillars of support that are important both across many global contexts and in the United States: businesses, unions, professional associations, faith communities, and veteran's groups.

We focus on diverse **tactics** because not all pro-democracy action looks alike. A comprehensive campaign to protect American democracy may involve quiet conversations behind closed doors, late-night meetings in church sanctuaries and union halls, coordinated boycotts, and protest marches on the streets.

How to use this table

Each pillar/tactic cell in this table contains a brief "caselet" of no more than a couple pages, providing an overview of how a group in that pillar of support used that tactic to attempt to protect or advance democracy. Each caselet includes brief takeaway lessons learned, as well as online resources where you can learn more about the democracy struggle that informed the caselet.

	Business	Unions	Professional Associations	Faith Communities	Veterans and Security Forces
Dialogue/ Engagement	Wisconsin Business Leaders Ensure Fair Elections	Unions Join With Unlikely Allies to Defend American Elections	Polish Judges Resist Attacks on the Rule of Law	Latter-Day Saints Speak Out to Protect Democracy	Ukrainian Veterans Save Lives Through Quiet Diplomacy
Institutional Action	Check My Ads Illuminates Authoritarian Advertising	American Unions Mobilize Poll Workers	American Lawyers Use Litigation Against Assaults on Democracy	Southern Baptist Leaders Condemn the January 6th Insurrection US Bishops and the January 6th Capitol Attack on Democracy	US Military Chiefs Affirm Their Commitment to Democracy
Nonviolent Intervention	A Missouri Chamber of Commerce Speaks up For Their Community	Indian Farmers' Unions Block Roads to Bolster Democracy	Lawyers in Pakistan March Against a Military Dictator	Activating Faith: The SCLC Fights for Freedom	A "Wall of Vets" Protects Free Expression in Portland
Non- Cooperation	Venezuelan Businesses Fight a Rising Dictator	Unions Light the Candle of Democracy in South Korea	Brazilian Doctors Strike for Healthcare Reform and Democracy	Polish Bishops Refuse to Support Authoritarians	Venezuelan Military Officers Refuse Honors From a Dictator
Protest	German Businesses Defend Democracy and Fight Extremism	Comparative Caselets: The Civil Service as a Pillar of Support	"Ask your Doctor if Voting is Right for You!" American Doctors Speak Out on Voting	Hungarian Evangelicals Resist Democratic Backsliding	Veterans Defend Protesters at Standing Rock
Material Support	Small Businesses Fuel the Fight for Freedom in Ukraine	Labor Unions Join the Fight for Civil Rights	Going Pro (Bono): Lawyers Provide Support Against the Muslim Ban	Sikh Langars Feed Protests for Farmers' Rights	Veterans Defend Protesters at Standing Rock

BUSINESS

Wisconsin Business Leaders Ensure Fair Elections

*By [Louis Pascarella](#)

Time Period: 2021-Present

Location: United States, Wisconsin

Main Actors: Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy

Tactics

- Civic Engagement
- Media Outreach
- [Petitions](#)
- Questionnaires
- [Signed Letters of Support](#)
- Amicus Brief

In 2020, a bipartisan group of Wisconsin business leaders, concerned over unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud during the 2020 election, formed an association to protect voting rights and democratic institutions: the Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy. This association emerged out of a collection of business leaders who noted the relentless attacks on Wisconsin's electoral system and wanted to take action. These leaders connected to others in their circles, invited them to online meetings, and discussed the best plan forward. Their conversations led them to establish an association. The association initially focused on encouraging civic engagement in the business sector, through avenues such as voter education initiatives, registration drives, and advocacy for companies to provide paid time off for employees to vote and/or work as an election official. They also created a [civic toolkit](#) to aid other business leaders seeking to improve civic engagement.

The Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy also took an active role in bolstering democracy and resisting attacks on voting infrastructure. The association sent [letters of support](#) to Wisconsin election officials, including the embattled Wisconsin Elections Commission Administrator Meagan Wolfe, members of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, and over 1800 municipal clerks. In doing so, Wisconsin Business leaders legitimized the electoral system and dismissed partisan attacks based on false claims of voter fraud.

During the 2022 Wisconsin general election, Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy publicly requested gubernatorial candidates Tim Michels and Tony Evers [sign a pledge](#) to abide by ten basic democratic principles. These principles included a promise to respect the outcome of the 2022 elections, encourage a peaceful election atmosphere, refrain from propagating known falsehoods about the electoral process, veto any attempts to decertify the 2020 presidential election results, and to certify the results of the 2024 presidential election once verified by the Wisconsin Election Commission.

When candidate Tim Michels did not respond to the pledge, Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy took action. Feeling it necessary to inform the public and having given both candidates ample opportunity to respond, they aired an [advertisement](#) noting Michels'

non-response to the pledge. The ad condemned Michel's non-response and supported Evers as the "pro-democracy" candidate.

Following the 2022 general election, Wisconsin held a special election in April 2023 to fill a vacant seat on the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Similar to the 2022 general election, the Supreme Court race was highly polarized and embroiled in falsehoods around electoral integrity. Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy once again sent a [questionnaire](#) to the two major candidates, Janet Protasiewicz and Daniel Kelly. The questionnaire asked for their perspective on matters of democracy, especially pertaining to cases likely to involve the court. Judge Janet Protasiewicz's responses were published in full on Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy's website, but former Justice Daniel Kelly did not respond after repeated inquiries. Daniel Kelly only addressed the questionnaire after a critical [op-ed](#) from the business coalition, but ultimately refused to answer any part of the questionnaire. Individuals from Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy once again [ran advertisements](#), noting Kelly's role in working to undermine the 2020 election results.

Most recently, Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy submitted an [amicus brief](#) to a Dane county court defending Wisconsin Elections Commission administrator Meagan Wolfe and asking the judge to rule against partisan attempts to remove her from office.

By taking on this public role, Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy signaled the business communities' demands for a free and fair election that respected the choices of the people of Wisconsin. With their help, the Wisconsin elections of 2022 and the Supreme Court 2023 election proceeded with little issue. The Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy exemplify the case for business involvement in democracy. Assembling a non-partisan coalition, the Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy were able to ensure fair, non-violent democratic elections in 2022 and 2023.

Where to Learn More

- [Wisconsin Business Leaders For Democracy](#)
 - [Wisconsin Supreme Court candidate Dan Kelly's failure to complete survey on democracy deeply troubling](#)
 - [Wisconsin Business Leaders & Democracy](#)
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Check My Ads Illuminates Authoritarian Advertising

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: 2021-Present

Location: United States, Online Campaign

Main Actors: Check My Ads Institute

Tactics

- [Online Boycotts](#)
- [Social Media Campaigns](#)
- [Newsletter](#)

In 2021, Nandini Jammi and Claire Atkin, two professionals with backgrounds in marketing and advertising, recognized a critical unaddressed problem in the online advertising world: due to the opaque and complicated nature of algorithm-driven advertising technology (adtech), many advertisers were unwittingly funding groups tied to misinformation and hate. Major brands were discovering their ads on websites such as Breitbart, despite explicitly not wanting to advertise in such spaces. Furthermore, a number of ads were on websites [linked to autocratic campaigns worldwide](#), including those associated with the Russian state.

To address this problem, Jammi and Atkin founded the Check My Ads Institute (originally the “Check My Ads Agency”) as a consultancy to help businesses ensure their ads were placed with reputable sites. Yet the Check My Ads Agency quickly discovered a systematic problem in the advertising technology industry. Despite advertisers’ best efforts, there is no straightforward way to ensure that advertisements do not appear on controversial platforms. Intermediaries (in many cases, the marketing agency/ad house hired to run the advertising campaign) can anonymize the names and seller account ids of where ad dollars end up, meaning a company could be funding known hate groups, without any way for them to audit that transaction. Businesses pay ad houses with the expectation that their brand will be protected from such outcomes, and yet, these ad houses cannot guarantee this expectation. Businesses cannot wholly know where their own marketing funds are ending up. There is a severe lack of transparency in the field.

Considering this finding, Check My Ads refocused their efforts toward transforming the adtech industry through a multipronged approach. Through their newsletter [Branded](#), Check My Ads researches and reports on a wide variety of issue areas. Their work is prolific; Branded covers everything from the [strategies](#) bad actors employ to manipulate ad house blacklists, the [role of Google](#) in facilitating the funding of far-right or Russian-backed outlets, to [details about](#) the disinformation economy. Branded educates the public and pressures intermediaries who inadvertently finance some of the most harmful actors on the internet.

Simultaneously, Check My Ads worked on social media, demanding action and bringing awareness to prominent issues in the adtech space. Through their newsletter and influential social media presence, Check My Ads was able to defund and/or deplatform some of the biggest names in conspiracy theories and authoritarianism in the United States including [Tucker Carlson](#), [Dan Bongino](#) and [Steve Bannon](#) for their lies about the integrity of the 2020 presidential election, support for the January 6th insurrectionists, and hateful rhetoric targeted at minority groups. Check My Ads also used social media to publicly call out advertising hosts, such as X (formerly Twitter). Under the leadership of new owner Elon Musk, X [loosened](#)



[standards](#) on advertisements, resulting in opaque processes and [failures in promises to keep advertisers away](#) from hateful content.

Check My Ads Institute is a powerful example of the link between activism and the business community. While helping businesses protect their brands, they work to stop funding hate online. Businesses deserve to know who they are funding and should have the ability to audit and freeze their ad placements. Without this transparency, businesses face significant risk, and cannot make the ethical choices many business leaders would like to make.

Where to Learn More

- [Check My Ads](#)
 - [Check My Ads \(@CheckMyAdsHQ\)](#)
 - [Nandini Jammie \(@nandoodles\)](#)
 - [Claire Atkin \(@cattheKin\)](#)
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A Missouri Chamber of Commerce Speaks up For Their Community

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: 2020

Location: United States, Missouri

Main Actors: Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce

Tactics

- [Establishing new social patterns](#)

In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations, members of the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce (JACC) in Missouri did not want to stay silent. In particular, Black business owners who were members of the Chamber wanted to know they were supported and represented during such an important moment. In a [critical and candid op-ed](#), Chamber head Tobias Teeter condemned systemic racism, indicated support for the BLM movement, and pledged to address inequities in the Chamber of Commerce and its member businesses. Teeter wrote of an intention to change hiring practices and ensure Black owned businesses and business professionals within the chamber and throughout the community were adequately supported.

This action was costly. Following the op-ed, an oppositional movement began calls to boycott the Chamber of Commerce. Teeter himself received multiple threats, and before his scheduled speech in front of city council, an unknown individual(s) threw a large rock through the JACC's glass front door. The rock was then lodged into the drywall for effect. Internally, some within the chamber were upset with taking such a strong stand. The board of directors offered tepid support and over 40 white-owned businesses canceled their JACC membership.

The Chamber refused to back down and the local community, seeing JACC's strong commitment to racial justice, soon rallied behind them. Many supporters showed up to the JACC sponsored Unity Walk, a demonstration in support for racial equality. A local activist joined with the chamber of commerce, recognizing ways for the community to help amidst criticism and backlash. This activist worked alongside a local non-profit, raising money to pay for chamber of commerce membership dues of Black businesses. This effort sharply increased the representation of Black owned businesses within the JACC. Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) [projects were also instituted](#) and are ongoing.

While its critics hoped to dissolve the Chamber, the JACC's actions strengthened their organization and built valuable ties with the local community. Infused with new members and forming new connections with the broader community, the JACC demonstrates how taking a stand for all Americans' rights can benefit both business and local organizers.

Organizers and businesses can learn much from the Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce. Primarily, the Chamber demonstrated how taking a stand and forming connections with the local community can strengthen the position of business and create mutually beneficial relationships. The local community's willingness to help expand the Chamber was predicated on the JACC taking the initiative to speak out in support of racial justice. The initial backlash the Chamber received was mitigated by an outpouring of support from community members. For activists and organizers, a key lesson is in how business can bolster a democratic movement. By engaging



with business, activists make connections that unify communities, reduce backlash, and achieve movement objectives. Due to local organizers' willingness to engage with business, some goals of the racial justice movement were realized.

Where to Learn More

- See especially Dr. Daniel Kinderman's work, [The US chamber and chambers of commerce respond to Black Lives Matter: Cheap talk, progressive neoliberalism, or transformative change?](#)
 - [Joplin Area Chamber of Commerce issues letter addressing racism, equality in the community](#)
 - [Toby Teeter: An open letter to our community](#)
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Venezuelan Businesses Fight a Rising Dictator

**By Claire Trilling*

Time Period: November 2001 - April 2002

Location: Venezuela, Caracas

Main Actors: Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Production/Federación de Cámaras y Asociaciones de Comercio y Producción de Venezuela (Fedecámaras)

Tactics

- [Economic shutdowns](#)
- [General strikes](#)
- [Cacerolazo](#)
- [Marches](#)

Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in December 1998 after running a populist campaign that appealed to Venezuelans' frustration with economic inequality and political stagnation. In 1999, voters approved a new constitution via popular referendum and then re-elected Chávez as president the following year. From 1999-2000, Venezuela experienced a sharp drop in its level of democracy, as Chávez systematically undermined the country's system of checks and balances. He dismantled judiciary independence and legislative power, while politicizing the military and police and increasingly clashing with organized labor, business groups, the Catholic Church, and the media. Chávez came into office with a history of anti-democratic behavior, having led and been imprisoned for a failed coup attempt in 1992. Between his steps to consolidate power and his growing ties to Cuba, many citizens began to fear that he was modeling his government after a Fidel Castro-style Communist dictatorship.

An opposition movement, composed of business, labor, and church groups together with a mix of left- and right-wing political parties, began to emerge in the summer of 2001. Later that year, on November 13, Chávez enacted 49 new laws without approval from Venezuela's legislature, the National Assembly. Many viewed the laws' overhaul of the oil industry and land expropriation processes, among other changes, as a move by Chávez to consolidate power. Entrepreneurs and business groups immediately denounced such drastic changes being undertaken without consultation with or input from affected interest groups. They called on the government to suspend 10 laws that faced the strongest opposition, but Chávez refused to either suspend the laws or meet with the opposition.

In response to Chávez's intransigence, the business community activated the fledgling opposition movement. On December 10, the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Production (Fedecámaras), the country's main business union, called for a day-long national strike in collaboration with the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), the country's largest labor coalition. They demanded that Chávez renegotiate the fast-tracked laws via a dialogue with the business community and other affected interest groups.

The 6am-6pm "paro", or stoppage, drew widespread support from across the private sector. Millions of people participated across a range of industries, from shopping centers and small businesses to factories and newspapers to banks and the stock exchange. Private schools closed, professional baseball refused to play, and even some hospitals offered emergency services only. In a show of support, housewives organized a *cacerolazo*, a form of protest in

which people make noise by banging pots and pans. The strike paralyzed the country, shutting down 90% of its economy for the day.

The action had a mixed outcome. Chávez refused to reform the laws or hold a dialogue with the business community, although he fired a key ally accused of corruption in a reconciliatory move. The main success of the Dec. 10th strike came from the momentum and strength it built for the opposition movement by exposing the widespread opposition to Chávez's policies. The Fedecámaras and CTV organized another successful strike in early January 2002 that once again shut down the country's economy. Between the two, they organized regular marches that drew hundreds of thousands of participants. By the end of the second strike, Chávez's approval ratings had dropped to 30%.

In late March, Chávez attempted to offset the movement's growing power by taking steps to increase his control over the state-owned oil company responsible for much of the country's export revenue. The Fedecámaras and CTV responded by organizing another general strike for April 9th, this time targeting the oil industry. The action involved a near-total shutdown of the state-owned oil company and was extended first for another day. After Chávez refused to respond, the Fedecámaras and CTV voted to extend the strike indefinitely until a coordinating committee focused on reinstating democratic procedures was formed. On April 11, they organized a mass march against Chávez in Caracas. However, the march resulted in violent clashes between pro- and anti-government demonstrators outside the presidential palace. When Chávez ordered the military to repress the protesters, top officials refused and instead arrested Chávez, alongside other members of his administration.

The head of the Fedecámaras, Pedron Carmona, stepped in as interim president. However, he unilaterally abrogated the 1999 constitution and dissolved the National Assembly and Supreme Court, moves that were seen as highly undemocratic, even by some who opposed Chávez. Carmona was ultimately forced to resign on April 13 in the face of a mass counter-mobilization by Chávez's supporters, with the result being Chávez's re-installment and heightened levels of polarization in the country.

In disregarding democratic norms and processes, the coup attempt and following unilateral institutional changes backfired, costing the movement significant legitimacy, and accelerating the backsliding process. As such, this case not only offers insight on the powerful tactics available to the business sector; it also provides a warning about the dangers of using undemocratic tactics to address democratic backsliding.

Where to Learn More

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 - Global Nonviolent Action Database. "[Venezuelans defend against coup attempt, 2002.](#)" Swarthmore College, 2012.
 - Nelson, Brian. 2009. *The Silence and the Scorpion: The Coup against Chavez and the Making of Modern Venezuela.* New York: Nation Books.
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German Businesses Defend Democracy and Fight Extremism

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: 2017-Present

Location: Germany

Main Actors: WVIB, VDMA, Welcome Saxony, Business Leaders

Tactics

- Civic Engagement
- Media Outreach
- [Signed Letters of Support](#)
- [Social Media Campaign](#)

Given their country's history of Nazism, business leaders in Germany are particularly sensitive to the importance of speaking out against anti-democratic forces. For the past decade, the most prominent of these forces has been the Alternative for Deutschland's (AFD) party, which has demonized immigrants, Muslims, and other minority groups as part of its nationalist ideology. Thus, German business leaders have engaged in several campaigns to strengthen democracy and combat AFD and its allies.

Unity, Justice, Liberty

The Business Association of Industrial Enterprises Baden (WVIB) is a business association of medium sized industrial businesses in the German state of Baden-Wurttemberg. Noticing the rise of autocracy in the United States, neighboring European countries, and domestically in Germany, leadership in WVIB made it a priority to support democracy. In 2016, then WVIB President Klaus Endress addressed member companies in their annual meeting, demanding action to support the association's core values of enlightenment, humanism, tolerance, and democracy.

As a result of this call, WVIB embarked on the "Unity, Justice, and Liberty" [campaign](#), an attempt to [dissuade association employees and members of the public from voting for the AFD](#) in the 2017 legislative election.

The Unity, Justice, and Liberty campaign consisted of a grassroots effort from member companies. Each week, a different member advertised in a local newspaper, demonstrating to the public the business community's commitment to democracy. They also created campaign posters, fliers, and social media posts. On the campaign website, over 1,100 people signed a pledge to "build bridges not walls." Further support was driven by civil society actors, such as professors, politicians, and professional sports figures.

#Europe Works:

The Mechanical Engineering Industry Association ([VDMA](#)) is a machine-tool association composed of 3600 German and European companies. VDMA companies employ over one million Germans. Responding to far-right xenophobia in 2017, VDMA launched the "Europeworks" campaign. Coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of the Rome Treaty (the founding treaty of the European Union), the Europeworks campaign was dedicated to highlighting the importance of European integration and the role of immigration in building a strong German economy. Europeworks launched a social media campaign with a dedicated



marketing budget and website. The second phase of Europeworks, “Moving Europe Forward,” replicated some of the same strategies employed by the WVIB’s “Unity, Justice, and Liberty” campaign. VDMA encouraged business leaders and member companies to distribute a pro-democracy message to the public and their employees. [The goal was to discourage voting of the extreme right parties during upcoming elections](#). The campaign was a success on social media, helping to hinder far-right parties criticized as the “[new nationalists](#).”

Welcome Saxony

Recognizing the German state of Saxony as a hotbed for nationalist, anti-democratic politics, the Saxony business community launched [Welcome Saxony](#) as a campaign to oppose the autocratic right. The association provides members with educational employee training on several relevant topics, such as [multiculturalism in the workplace](#), [Neo-Nazism and the new right in Saxony](#), and [fake news, conspiracy theories, and democracy](#). Welcome Saxony is also active in electoral politics, with a section of the website, [Election 2024](#), dedicated to upcoming elections. Here, Welcome Saxony has embedded video statements of support from a variety of actors, such as the Chairman of the Saxony Silicon business association, a manager of public relations in Dresden, and the frontman of a famous Saxony band. These actors demonstrate solidarity across industry and a dedication to upholding democratic principles. The statements of support encourage votes for parties that support democracy, eschewing encouragement of any particular party. Some individuals reflect on Germany’s history, underscoring the imperative of safeguarding democracy and standing up to authoritarians.

Business opposition to AFD

The AFD party won its first mayoral election in December of 2023, a harbinger of its increased popularity. The burgeoning support of AFD sparked nationwide demonstrations and prompted action from businesses as well. Unwilling to stay silent, several leading business figures led pro-democracy initiatives. Top industry figures, such as the chief executive of the association of German Banks, the leadership of the Federation of German industries, and the leadership of the association of German employers [have all spoken out](#) against rising authoritarianism. These leaders repeatedly call for support of democracy, and condemn xenophobia and hate associated with the far-right. One prominent businessman and former politician, Harald Christ, [has stressed](#) the need to organize against the AFD. Christ has stated “something must be done” and that “I don’t intend to sit passively at my desk and leave the field to the populists.” Christ has started an initiative to bring together CEOs and board members to address political extremist factions.

The German business community’s actions provide a few key takeaways for US audiences. Most importantly is the role business can take in combating far-right extremism. Instead of passively allowing autocrats to take power, business figures took an active oppositional approach. Through business associations, business leaders conducted coordinated campaigns of engagement with the public. Associations provide numbers, organization, and reduce the risk of singling out any one business, which allowed WVIB, VDMA, and Welcome Saxony to mount successful public outreach campaigns. In all cases, the business associations’ willingness to work with community figures like musicians, athletes, and artists furnished their movement with legitimacy outside the business community.

Where to Learn More

- See especially Dr. Daniel Kinderman’s work

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- [Einigkeit. Recht. Freiheit](#)
 - [Europe works](#)
 - [Welcome Saxony](#)
 - [German Business Mobilization Against Right-Wing Populism](#)
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Small Businesses Fuel the Fight for Freedom in Ukraine

**By [Claire Trilling](#)*

Time Period: 1999 - 2005

Location: Ukraine

Main Actors: Small- and medium-sized Ukrainian businesses; Anatoliy Kinakh and the League of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs

Tactics

- Material support
- Institutional action
- [Generalized strikes](#)

In 1999, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma won a second term in an election marred by irregularities, kicking off a period of declining democracy characterized by high levels of corruption and violent attacks on dissidents. Two major campaigns against Kuchma took place during this period. The first was the “Ukraine Without Kuchma” movement in 2000, which involved mass protests in the capital, Kyiv, against corruption and illegal activities by President Kuchma and the big business oligarchs who supported him. Although the government effectively repressed the campaign, civil society groups, such as the student-led organization Pora, responded to their failure by undertaking careful planning, training, and network-building over the following years.

Following “Ukraine Without Kuchma”, however, the government and its supporters further eroded Ukrainian democracy. In the 2004 presidential election, the ruling party put forward Viktor Yanukovich as their candidate and began a shadow campaign of manipulation and sabotage of the opposition to ensure his victory. When, despite widespread evidence of fraud, Ukraine’s Central Election Commission announced that Yanukovich had defeated opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko, civil society groups and the opposition political party coalition, Our Ukraine, were prepared to respond. The coalition mobilized their networks to begin the “Orange Revolution,” named after Our Ukraine’s colors. At the heart of the campaign was the nonviolent occupation of Independence Square in Kyiv, which drew millions of participants, many of whom symbolically wore orange. Much of the city mobilized to support the protest camp, while citizens outside Kyiv organized local demonstrations, marches, and strikes.

Ukraine’s business community played a critical role throughout the campaign, helping to lead to its eventual success. Small and medium-sized businesses [provided much of the funding](#) and the [food and clothing](#) that kept protesters in Independence Square fed and warm, sustaining the protest through the freezing temperatures of the Ukrainian winter. This support did not come about spontaneously. It was the result of a long, careful process of pre-campaign relationship-building. As part of their preparations, Pora had [built specific sections](#) for fundraising and financial management into their organizational structure to facilitate the flow of donations from domestic partners. Small- and medium-sized business owners, often called the “[new Ukrainians](#)” due to their political and economic orientation toward the West, were a major source of those donations. These business owners largely supported Yushchenko due to his campaign promises to end high taxes, corruption, and politically motivated investigations into businesses. Their material support allowed Pora activists to begin the Orange Revolution armed with the knowledge they had sufficient resources to sustain a mass occupation of Independence

Square in the winter's freezing temperatures. Outside of Kyiv, small- and medium-sized businesses participated in local strikes.

Larger business organizations also provided critical support for the Orange Revolution. The League of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (ULIE), which represented the country's large businesses, initially helped bring Kuchma to power. Over his presidency, however, Kuchma's inner circle of oligarchs shrank, alienating many of the country's business elites and [spurring their fears of dictatorship](#). While few of the alienated business elites publicly opposed Kuchma during his first two terms, the 2004 presidential elections and Orange Revolution provided an opportunity to publicly defect. Anatoliy Kinakh, the head of ULIE, was a candidate in the first round of the elections and then threw his weight behind Yushchenko in the run-offs following negotiations with the opposition. ULIE openly supported the Orange Revolution, providing funding to support the mass demonstrations, with Kinakh even attending demonstrations.

On December 3rd, in the face of persistent mass mobilization and a series of defections by former regime supporters, Ukraine's Supreme Court acknowledged the government's electoral fraud and ordered new elections for December 26. Parliament revised electoral law to limit the potential for fraud and put forward constitutional reforms that would limit the powers of the president thereafter. Yushchenko won the new elections, and the country's elite-driven backsliding trend quickly reversed.

The example of Ukraine's business community provides several important lessons on the role of business in struggles against democratic backsliding. Larger business groups (like ULIE in Ukraine) can play an important role through the use of their high public profile and voice. Smaller businesses may have a quieter but no less critical role to play. High profile movements on the streets are sustained through the reliable infusion of resources to keep them there. While many American businesses have provided such quiet support for local pro-democracy movements such support is often ad hoc and does not always flow to the most impactful frontline organizations. Businesses and activist groups should work to build relationships ahead of time (like Pora and the "new Ukrainians") such that, when a major mobilization comes, the streams of funding are already in place to support it.

Where to Learn More

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UNIONS

Unions Join Unlikely Allies to Defend American Elections

*By [Louis Pascarella](#)

Time Period: November 2020

Location: United States

Main Actors: AFL-CIO, SEIU, AFT, UNITE HERE, union members

Tactics

- [Signed public statement](#)
- [Declarations by organizations or institutions](#)
- Demonstrations
- [Assemblies of support](#)

On Election Day 2020 The AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the United States, teamed up with the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the National African American Clergy Network to call for the respect of election results and the peaceful transfer of power. Addressing then-President Trump's unfounded criticisms of the electoral system, and Trump's initial repudiation of Biden's victory, the AFL-CIO and its partners [released a statement](#) noting the importance of giving election officials space and time to count the votes, asked that the American public (including political candidates) practice patience, and condemned electoral violence or intimidation.

This public declaration [followed a year of behind-the-scenes effort](#). Mike Podhorzer, senior advisor to the president of the AFL-CIO, was one of the major forces behind this work. Podhorzer began working with many other democracy advocates (including Protect Democracy and the Voter Protection Program) in the fall of 2019. Democracy advocates feared an attack on the US electoral system and recognized the need to prepare for that potential outcome. Accordingly, they began meeting with a variety of actors from business, civil society, and political spheres. These meetings created an infrastructure to protect American democracy, with initiatives to recruit poll workers, encourage social media companies to remove harmful conspiracies and misinformation, and help overcome voting challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. As election day loomed and President Trump continued to spread falsehoods about the election, Podhorzer and others drew upon their contacts to arrange a meeting between AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce, resulting in the aforementioned statement coming from a united front of labor and business.

A key strength of this statement was its collaborative character. Working with business, faith, and leaders in the Black community ensured the statement was less vulnerable to accusations of bias. This coalition also brought together leaders from across [key pillars](#) of society in solidarity.

In addition to organizing the joint statement, unions played a broader role in defending the 2020 election. In the days surrounding Election Day, a labor coalition of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UNITE HERE (a labor union representing around 300,000 US and Canadian workers in a variety of sectors) and

others organized “[Count Every Vote](#)” demonstrations. These demonstrations made clear the readiness of union leaders to organize en masse against election subversion and coincided with demonstrations from other civil society actors.

Simultaneously, union members [showed up to polling places](#) in hotly contested Michigan and Arizona to protect threatened election officials. When far-right extremists tried to intimidate the Michigan State Board of Canvassers from certifying the 2020 election, [labor pressured](#) Republican members to hold to the process and accept the results.

These efforts demonstrate how labor can play an important role in organizing and waging a pro-democracy campaign. A declaration of support with key pillars of society brought in important actors and created a united front against election interference rhetoric. The importance of coalition building cannot be overstated; for example, aligning with the Chamber of Commerce helped to [pressure](#) pro-business Republicans. Refusing to be sidelined, unions marched with democracy activists and protected election officials from anti-democracy extremists. These actions showcased the importance of “putting boots on the ground” and going beyond rhetoric in times of crisis. When autocratic forces arrived in person to intimidate election officials, union members were there to protect the process and ensure the physical well-being of some of the most important actors in the American electoral system.

Where to Learn More

- [Hard Truths and Good Signs for Labor’s Role in Defending Democracy](#)
 - [Here’s What Labor Unions Say They’re Doing to Protect the Vote](#)
 - [The Secret History of the Shadow Campaign That Saved the 2020 Election](#)
 - [AFL-CIO, Chamber of Commerce, National Faith Leaders Call for Votes to Be Counted](#)
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American Unions Mobilize Poll Workers

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: 2020

Location: United States

Main Actors: AFL-CIO, AFSCME, SEIU, AFT, UNITE HERE, union members

Tactics

- Institutional Action

The 2020 election tested the strength of US democracy. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, poll workers were scarce, in person voting was challenging and unfeasible in some jurisdictions, and typical “get out the vote” campaigns were stymied by social distancing practices. Authoritarian figures used these new difficulties to question established and safe voting mechanisms, such as mail-in ballots. Unfounded fears over voter fraud led to the [closure of voting centers](#), [the limiting/removal of drop-off ballot boxes](#), and the [encouraging of voter/poll worker intimidation](#).

Recognizing the threat to election systems, unions stepped up to ameliorate poll worker shortages. As large, organized institutions, unions were well-positioned to recruit poll workers. The AFL-CIO, and some of its federation members, such as UNITE HERE, the United Steelworkers, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) all [enacted plans](#) to train poll workers. For example, AFSCME partnered with Power the Polls to educate and place 1,200 poll workers, all drawn from their membership rolls. Discussing their poll worker contribution, AFSCME President Lee Saunders [remarked](#), “Who better to perform this important public service than people who have made a career out of public service.” Other unions, such as AFL-CIO, similarly [partnered](#) with Power the Polls.

In addition to poll worker training, unions engaged in widespread campaigns to encourage voting despite 2020’s challenging environment. For example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) dedicated [substantial funds](#) towards a get out the vote campaign. This campaign, titled, “[Your Vote is Essential](#)” especially targeted voters of color. Online disinformation campaigns [spread lies](#) prior to the 2020 election to inhibit the vote of communities of color. SEIU sent canvassers door to door, who informed citizens of their rights and encouraged voting. By canvassing in these communities, unions disrupted voter suppression efforts, especially important at a time in which COVID-19 strained usual get out the vote campaign efforts.

The efforts of unions to protect the electoral process through dedicated campaigns reveal important takeaways for pro-democracy advocates. In particular, these efforts highlight unions’ strength as well-established organizations with the numbers and organization necessary to mobilize large, coordinated groups. When COVID-19 strained voting infrastructure, unions were uniquely positioned to step in. Unions were also able to substitute for what are often civil society efforts, such as get out the vote campaigns. Unions also demonstrated ways in which democracy building can be non-partisan. Poll workers are a necessary part of any functioning democracy, and their training and support is one-way that organizations can combat authoritarian pushes without facing accusations of partisanship. In all, the campaigns above

showcase how unions can play a role in uplifting established institutions, especially during a national crisis and dedicated attack by anti-democratic forces.

Where to Learn More

- [AFSCME launches first-ever program to recruit 1,200 poll workers](#)
 - [SEIU Reaches Millions of Infrequent Voters in Final Days of the 2020 Elections](#)
 - [What Unions Are Doing To Protect American Democracy](#)
 - [Labor Unions Plan To Turn Out An Army Of Poll Workers For The Election](#)
 - [Union Impact on Voter Participation—And How to Expand It](#)
-

Indian Farmers' Unions Block Roads to Bolster Democracy

**By Claire Trilling*

Time Period: June 2020 - December 2021

Location: India (Punjab & Delhi)

Main Actors: Farm Unions, organized under the Samyukta Kisan Morcha ("United Farmers' Front")

Tactics

- [Protest camps, nonviolent occupation, sit-ins](#)
- [Marches](#)
- [Hartals](#)
- [Declarations of indictment and intention, slogans, caricatures, and symbols, public speeches, chanting, live streaming, banners, posters, and other displayed communications](#)
- [Haunting or bird dogging officials, fraternization](#)

The Indian Farmers' Protests were sparked by the introduction of three Farm Bills in the Indian Parliament in June 2020 and accelerated by their passage in September 2020. The bills were advanced by the Hindu nationalist government led by President Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). After winning the 2014 elections, the BJP government began to systematically undermine democratic institutions, degrade citizenship rights for religious minorities, and limit civil liberties. The passage of the Farm Bills was yet another anti-democratic move as the government refused to consult farm unions and circumvented usual legislative procedure to sidestep dissent. The bills significantly cut back government involvement in the agricultural section and gave private corporations greater influence over sales and pricing. They also did not include any of the provisions recommended to protect small farms, triggering concerns among farming communities and making them deeply unpopular in a country where over half of the labor force works in agriculture.

Organized resistance to the Farm Bills began in the northwestern state of Punjab. After the bill's introduction, union activists translated the text into Punjabi and distributed it across the state, which generated widespread outrage and spurred local protests. The farm unions in Punjab gradually coordinated the protests in their region and reached out to farm leaders in the nearby states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. In September, 32 farm unions across Punjab came together to organize a nonviolent movement demanding the bills' repeal. Their first major campaign was called the Rail Roko ("Stop the Trains"). Participants occupied railroad tracks and toll plazas on major roads to disrupt daily transit. In one case, farmers dug up a helipad that a state minister was set to land on. Actions also included sit-ins outside the houses of prominent political leaders. In response to the campaign, several state-level BJP officials resigned, and one local political party withdrew from the BJP's parliamentary coalition. However, the campaign failed to win any concessions from the national government.

On November 7th, 2020, roughly 300 farmers' organizations from across India met in the capital, Delhi, to discuss how to escalate their campaign. The meeting resulted in a shared set of demands and the establishment of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella organization of farm unions tasked with coordinating action nationally. The SKM initiated the second major campaign of the movement, called Dili Chalo, Dera Dalo ("Let's go to Delhi and



Sit There”). Soon after, farmers from several provinces began the march on Delhi. Organized by local unions and coordinated nationally under the SKM, the farmers brought tractors to remove police blockades when needed and ultimately merged into four large marches that converged on the city’s four main entry points on November 25th. Although they were met by police barriers, tear gas, and water cannons, an estimated 150,000-300,000 farmers set up protest camps on each of the four highways. On November 26th, the SKM organized a 24-hour nationwide solidarity strike with the farmers that drew millions of participants.

The government began negotiations with the farm unions on December 3rd in response to the building pressure. The talks went through several rounds, with the farmers threatening to drive tractors into the capital at one point in order to force concessions from the government. On January 12, 2021, the Supreme Court suspended the implementation of the Farm Bills. However, the farm unions refused to accept anything less than the full withdrawal of the laws due to concerns that partial measures would a) fail to adequately address the bills’ harms, and b) fragment the movement. Because of this, talks with the government had largely reached a stalemate by late January.

Throughout this period, the protest camps around Delhi remained well-organized. The farm unions and their allies provided meals, medical supplies, clothes, and other basic services to the tens of thousands of participants. They also organized rallies, music performances, and games, among other events. Local unions coordinated with towns and villages to maintain a rotation system that allowed farmers to take turns returning to their homes without diminishing the overall numbers in Delhi. Camp participants also set up multiple YouTube channels, social media accounts, and a newspaper to spread their own narrative of events in the face of government slander. Outside Delhi, the SKM organized regular day-long strikes and local demonstrations to demonstrate that the protest camp still had widespread support.

The movement faced a crisis in late January when a march into the city devolved into clashes with police. The SKM had reached an agreement with police to hold the march on Republic Day (one of India’s main national holidays), but miscommunication about the route and disregard by several break-away farm unions resulted in one segment of the march storming a historic fort. There and in several other parts of the city, police responded with violence, leading to clashes, arrests, and one casualty. To demonstrate their commitment to nonviolence, the SKM convinced protesters to withdraw from the city and denounced the groups that had diverged from the planned march route. However, the government seized on the event to claim that the movement had been hijacked by extremists and attempted to crack down on the protest camps. The farmers were saved by their supporters back in the villages, who mobilized thousands of people to converge on the sites, forcing the government to withdraw the police.

The farmers’ movement maintained the Delhi protest camps, as well as organizing regular rallies and strikes, throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2021. The SKM sent protesters to the national parliament in Delhi daily and supported campaigns against BJP candidates in several regional elections. Keeping the focus on their core set of shared demands, the farm unions demonstrated organization, discipline, and commitment despite the ethnic and religious diversity in the movement. With the SKM facilitating broader movement unity, individual unions effectively kept their own members informed and organized. The decentralized leadership structure also ensured that government attempts to arrest leaders did not disrupt movement activities.

On November 19, 2021, President Modi announced the government's intention to repeal the Farm Bills. While the sudden turnabout was likely triggered by the BJP's concerns about upcoming elections in agriculture-heavy states, the farmers' movement made themselves into a political force that the government couldn't sideline or ignore. The participants had proven that they were willing and able to sustain their campaign and maintain public support in the face of repression, extreme weather, and COVID-19. On December 11, The SKM declared an official end to the protests after the Farm Bills were formally repealed by Parliament. The protest camps in Delhi were dismantled, and the tens of thousands of participating farmers returned to their homes.

The farmers' movement in India provides several lessons for pro-democracy organizers. First is the power of protest tactics that disrupt without violence. The farmer's blockade of Delhi was high-profile and impossible to ignore, with a greater impact than simple protest marches because it directly interfered with the government's capacity to continue business as usual. Yet the government was hesitant to crack down on it because the SKM was careful to maintain and broadcast its commitment to a nonviolent blockade, and condemned extremists who deviated from the campaign's nonviolent character.

Tactics that are nonviolent yet highly disruptive could be similarly effective in the US context to counter potential moves to undermine American democracy. Second is the importance of building an organizational infrastructure that bridges differences. Participants in the farmer's movement came from many different backgrounds, spoke many different languages, and adhered to many different religions. The intentional leadership of the SKM and its commitment to a shared set of core objectives enabled this diverse group to join forces and present a unified front in negotiations with the government, as well as to meet the significant logistical demands of maintaining a year-long major blockade and protest camp.

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Unions Light the Candle of Democracy in South Korea

**By [Lugha Yogaraja](#)*

Time Period: 2016-2017

Location: South Korea, especially Seoul

Main Actors: Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU), People's Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park

Tactics

- [Vigils](#)
- [General Strikes](#)

In the mid-2000s South Korea began experiencing a period of democratic decline under the presidencies of Lee Myung-Bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-Hye (2013-2017). Both presidential administrations came to power in part through drawing on feelings of nostalgia for the period of high economic growth under Korean dictator Park Chung-Hee in the 1960s and 1970s. Once in power both administrations resorted to heavy-handed oppression of political dissent, including violent crackdowns on peaceful protest, outlawing civil society organizations that opposed them, and [blacklisting artists and authors](#) who were seen as insufficiently supportive of the government. Both governments, particularly the Park Geun-Hye administration, also engaged in widespread corruption, closely collaborating with Korea's large *chaebol* company conglomerates.

The South Korean labor movement, which had played a key role in the country's democratic movement in the 1980s, faced much of the brunt of the government's oppression, and thus began organizing to oppose their authoritarian overreach. In particular, the national-level Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) organized several general strikes against growing government repression. These strikes initially gained little support. However, in 2014 the government's corruption was brought into sharp focus through a national tragedy: the [sinking of the Sewol ferry](#), which led to the deaths of over 300 ferry passengers. Later investigations revealed both government incompetence in the rescue effort, and corrupt relationships between the government and ferry companies, which had led to deregulation and lax safety standards. Then in 2016, [a series of investigations revealed](#) that President Park had offered extensive political patronage to major companies in exchange for donations to her personal advisor Choi Soon-Sil. The combination of public rage over both the *Sewol* disaster and the Choi Soon-Sil revelations led to widespread support for a movement to force President Park to resign.

The KCTU and other labor unions played a central role in organizing the protest movement demanding Park's resignation. Using their long-standing networks across the country and their connections to other civil society organizations, the KCTU helped organize a coalition of over 1,500 organizations called the "People's Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park." In addition to continuing labor strikes, the coalition organized a series of candlelight protests that drew millions of participants from across the country, peaking with a day of protest in December 2016 involving roughly 2.2 million protesters. After this day of protest, the Korean legislature voted to impeach President Park, but protests continued until March 2017, when the Constitutional Court of Korea upheld the impeachment and officially removed President Park from office.

The situation in South Korea offers some striking parallels both to past and potential future democratic backsliding in the United States and offers several lessons for pro-democracy organizers. The first of these is the importance of major triggering events. While the KCTU and other unions had long organized against the Park administration, it was not until the broader public was made dramatically aware of the administration's failures through the *Sewol* ferry disaster and the Choi Soon-Sil scandals that their campaigns gained the level of broad support necessary to mobilize an effective pro-democracy movement. Second is the importance of coalitional organizing. The candlelight protests in 2016 and 2017 were able to maintain their unified message and disciplined, peaceful organizing due to careful collaboration facilitated by established organizations like the KCTU.

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Labor Unions Join the Fight for Civil Rights

**By [Lucianne Nelson](#)*

Time Period: Civil Rights Era, 1955-1970s

Location: United States

Main Actors: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); Labor unions

Tactics

- Mass action
- [Boycotts](#)
- [Protests/Marches](#)
- [Protective Presence/Witnessing](#)

Following the success of the Montgomery bus boycotts, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin identified [the need for a central organization](#) to coordinate and support nonviolent direct action across the South. Martin Luther King, Jr., consulting with Rustin, invited other Black leaders and ministers to establish a coalition that would mobilize the community and strengthen the influence of churches against segregation. Together, they established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957.

Unlike other umbrella groups that recruited individual members, the SCLC leveraged faith communities and other local organizations to mobilize individuals into a collective movement equipped to fight segregation, advocate for voting rights, and promote nonviolent action as a strategy. And, given its coalition-based approach, the SCLC developed a strong alliance with labor unions. Several labor unions—including the Teamsters, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), and the United Auto Workers (UAW)—supported SCLC campaigns by organizing union members to participate in direct-action protests, marches, and other acts of civil disobedience. Together, the SCLC and labor unions coordinated mutual solidarity under the banner of [“jobs and freedom.”](#)

In 1962, the SCLC launched [Operation Breadbasket](#) to create economic opportunities in Black communities. Operation Breadbasket was a selective patronage program that leveraged the persuasive power and organizing strength of Black churches. Groups of ministers surveyed the hiring practices of local businesses, then requested that companies with few (or no) Black employees [“negotiate a more equitable employment practice”](#) and hire qualified candidates within a set time frame. At the same time, these ministers urged their congregations to (re)consider the morality of shopping at stores or buying from businesses that took money from the Black community but underemployed African Americans (leading to [several boycotts and “Don’t Buy” picketing initiatives](#)). When the SCLC implemented Operation Breadbasket in Chicago, members of the Teamsters and the UPWA unions helped with on-the-ground movement building.

Ralph Helstein, who led [UPWA](#) for 20 years, closely advised Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC. Helstein was a “pioneer” of the Civil Rights movement, and the meatpackers union focused on expanding equal employment rights for minorities through its Anti-Discrimination Department. [Under Helstein’s leadership](#), the UPWA supported the Montgomery bus boycott by providing training to organizers and by donating money to support the protest. Members of the UPWA offered additional support to the SCLC by participating in civil rights campaigns

throughout the country during the 1950s and 1960s. The union also launched a Fund for Democracy in the South, which raised over [\\$11,000 in local contributions](#) for the SCLC. Additionally, the UPWA supported students who were involved in the Civil Rights movement through scholarships and Helstein contributed his experience as a labor organizer to help the SCLC train student volunteers.

In addition to UPWA, the [United Auto Workers and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations \(AFL-CIO\)](#) also shared the SCLC's vision for "[jobs and freedom](#)." These labor unions joined [the 1963 March on Washington](#) in support of robust civil rights legislation. Union members were among the 200,000 who marched to protest high levels of Black unemployment, work that offered most African Americans only minimal wages and poor job mobility, systematic disenfranchisement of many African Americans, and the persistence of racial segregation in the South. Labor groups were instrumental allies of the SCLC and the Civil Rights movement because unions underscored the social, political, and economic impact of racial equality.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, labor unions offered institutional support for the [Civil Rights Movement](#) and were strong allies of Civil Rights leaders like [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) One key takeaway is that diverse groups strengthen movements. Even though labor unions were founded to protect worker's rights, the unions which supported the Civil Rights movement recognized the value of advocating for (and with) other marginalized groups.

Another essential lesson this case offers is the power of collaboration. The SCLC deployed its network to protest and take other meaningful action, and labor unions offered a systematic, organized framework of support that ensured the SCLC could maintain its pro-democracy efforts. This cross-issue, collective action produced a more robust movement. By engaging in civil rights action, unions fulfilled a critical role in building American multi-racial democracy.

Where to Learn More

- [The National SCLC | SCLC History](#)
 - [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#)
-

Comparative Caselets: The Civil Service as a Pillar of Support

*By [Becca Leviss](#)

Time Period: 1920-2023

Location: USA, Canada, Germany, Guinea-Bissau, Fiji

Main Actors: Current and former Department of Justice employees; American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE); National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU); Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) employees and unions; Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE); Front commun ("the common front," a coalition of Canadian unions representing workers across the public sector, including health care and education); German trade unions; National Union of Workers in Guinea-Bissau (UNTG); The General Confederation of Independent Unions; Public Service Association; Public Employees Union; Fiji Nursing Association

Tactics

- Civil Servant Strike
- [Boycotts of government departments, agencies, and other bodies](#)
- [Marches](#)
- [Group or Mass Petition](#)
- [General and limited strikes](#)
- [Slowdown strike](#)
- [Popular nonobedience](#)
- [Stalling and obstruction](#)

Research [highlights](#) that successful social movements do not just mobilize large numbers, but specifically bring in people from the organizations and institutions that maintained the power of the status quo, often referred to as the *pillars of support*. Effective organizing requires understanding the strengths and weaknesses of these pillars, how to mobilize people in the pillars to withdraw their support from those in power, and what levers people in the pillars can pull to put pressure on existing authority.

One key pillar of support to consider in any movement targeting the government is the civil service: career government employees hired rather than appointed or elected, and often serving in their roles across various political administrations. Who is in the civil service varies across countries – some countries count medical professionals and teachers among their civil service, for example – and the roles and responsibilities of civil servants similarly vary. Yet what is shared across countries is that every government requires workers to carry out the government's functions. And modern governments with an expansive set of complex responsibilities require a particularly complex, educated, specialized workforce.

In the struggle to protect and expand democracy, civil servants have two key characteristics that make them particularly powerful. First, and most obviously, they are the actual implementers of government policy. Any authoritarian policies or practices will require the cooperation of a critical mass of the civil service. Second, civil servants in the United States take a sworn oath to protect and defend the constitution, committing the heart of their work to protecting our democratic political system over and above the agendas of any particular political leader. The civil service is both critically important to the day-to-day functioning of our political system and uniquely committed to its integrity.

The Civil Service in a United States Context

The current US civil service system was established in the late 1800s to replace and rectify a structure in which personal and political loyalty determined professional placement in the federal government. Since then, the US civil service has functioned as a bulwark of effective, democratic government. At the [core](#) of this is the principle that “a strong merit-based civil service is critical to a functioning democracy. It ensures that our government...continues to serve the American public without interruption, even though our leaders change.” The civil service counterbalances the political whims of the moment, ensuring that the basic functions of government continue no matter who happens to have won the most recent election.

Yet this meritocratic, nonpartisan structure has recently come under fire. In 2020, frustrated at resistance to their policy agenda by civil servants, the Trump administration created a new designation in the federal civil service: “Schedule F,” which would convert tens of thousands of executive branch employees from career civil servants whose responsibilities were to perform the technical aspects of their jobs to [political appointees](#) subject to firing at the whim of the president.

The Biden administration almost immediately repealed the creation of Schedule F and has put in place [regulations](#) that would help civil servants keep their job protections even were Schedule F to be reinstated. Yet until codified into law such protections remain vulnerable to repeal by future administrations, an action that former President Trump has repeatedly [expressed his intention](#) of taking if elected. Attempts to pass laws providing stronger protections such as the [Saving the Civil Service Act](#) have yet to gain significant political momentum.

In this moment of political attacks on the civil service, it is crucial to evaluate ways that civil servants in the US and around the globe have wielded their influence to protect democracy and avoided falling prey to the political whims of would-be authoritarians.

Forms of Resistance and Barriers to Effectiveness

In addition to their distinct position of influence, civil servants face unique barriers to mobilization and some of the more influential forms of nonviolent resistance. For most similar professional workers, the labor strike is a potent political tool. Yet since the passage of the Taft-Hartley act in 1947, US civil servants have been [legally prohibited](#) from striking. Similar laws exist in other liberal democracies. Recently, the European Court of Human Rights [upheld a German law](#) that prohibits civil servants from striking, when it was challenged by several German teachers. In 2024, the International Labour Organization will seek an advisory opinion from the United Nations’ high court on the right to strike, which will have widespread effects on the utility of civil servant actions as a means of opposition.

Civil service unions, then, are understandably cautious to call for strikes and instead rely on a variety of other tactics, such as judicial and legislative interventions to ensure their protection and resolution against unfair treatment that would likely otherwise lead to a strike. For example, in [2013](#), US workers successfully sued the federal government for breaking minimum-wage and overtime laws by withholding wages for essential workers, with the court ultimately [ruling in plaintiffs’ favor](#). A similar case was also filed on behalf of two federal workers’ unions in [2019](#).

During attacks on democracy during the Trump Administration, US civil servants took a wide range of other kinds of actions short of legally-prohibited labor strikes, as outlined in [this piece](#):

joining public statements, whistleblowing, deliberate inefficiency and “slow-balling” job functions, and ultimately, resigning in protest. Civil servants spoke out against [attempts to cripple the Mueller investigation](#), [politicize the Department of Justice](#), and [delays in election certification](#).

One sector of the civil service that has found significant success as a lever of power to uphold democracy has been federal transportation workers, in particular the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA). During the federal government shutdown from late 2018 into early 2019, TSA workers [called in sick](#) as a form of protest and multiple TSA unions filed lawsuits, leading to unprecedented staffing shortages and air travel delays. These combined efforts showed political leaders the costs of keeping the government closed and ultimately generated [significant pressure](#) to put an end to the [longest government shutdown](#) in US history.

In the fall of 2023, when faced with the threat of another shutdown, TSA workers again [rallied](#) at major airports and elevated to [national attention](#) the threats to air travel posed by a shutdown, especially coming up against the holiday season. And while it is difficult to show a clear causal relationship when so many factors are at play, it appears likely that the impending risks to federal employees and everyday Americans alike were a factor in the last-minute [spending bill](#) that ultimately averted a government shutdown.

International Examples

The Taft-Hartley Act has limited the range of action available to civil servants in the United States. Thus, to gain insights into the potential power of more direct civil servant action we have to turn to the rest of the world. In November 2023, [several hundred thousand civil servants](#) in Quebec—teachers, health professionals, and other social service workers—went on strike to demand better pay and working conditions. After several rounds of negotiations between the Quebec government and a coalition of major unions, multiple limited strikes and the [threat of a general unlimited strike](#) (which would have public sector workers striking indefinitely), both sides were able to [reach tentative agreements](#), avoiding prolonged strikes and limits to healthcare, education, and other social services. This example illustrates the effectiveness of such coordinated strikes when they are conducted across wide swaths of the civil service.

And famously, the [Kapp Putsch](#), a coup d'état in 1920 Germany that attempted to overthrow the Weimar Republic, failed primarily because of civil servants' refusal to carry out the orders of Wolfgang Kapp and Walther von Lüttwitz, the illegitimate leaders of the coup government. Senior government officers refused to report for duty, government press offices were unable to publish Kapp's manifesto because they had “misplaced” essential technology like typists and typewriters, and all the Berlin printers walked out in protest when two pro-government newspapers were occupied by the occupying military. These efforts of the government bureaucracy to refuse to cooperate with the coup government inspired other forms of civil resistance, including a more widespread general strike, bringing the country's economy to a standstill. Within days, Kapp announced his resignation.

[In February 2003](#), 95% of civil servants in Guinea-Bissau participated in [a series of general strikes](#) to protest the withholding of overdue wages by the government, the anti-democratic President Kumba Iala, and the release of several opposition leaders that had been illegally arrested for their criticism of the Bissau-Guinean government. The strike happened in coordination with a protest march of human rights activists and labor leaders through downtown Bissau, as well as a week of widespread sporadic protests throughout the country and a rally

held by the Union for Change, the Guinea-Bissau Resistance Party, and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. In the end, the government and the striking parties reached a satisfactory resolution, but the government's slow pace to meet their ends of the demands prompted another strike a few weeks later. This time, once again, more than 90% of public servants participated in the general strike to demand the government fulfill their promises.

Ultimately, the final round of strikes were moderately successful: while the campaign did not force the resignation of President Iala nor completely halt unlawful detentions of dissidents, the government did release several detainees and agreed to pay overdue wages and provide necessary additional food and medical assistance to civil servants. More importantly, however, the breadth and coordination of the striking coalition—ranging from human rights groups and media organizations to the Bissau-Guinean Bar Association to government bureaucrats *and* the officials they served—sent a message of the strength and power behind their efforts to both the government and the larger international community.

In 2007, several public sector unions [went on strike](#) in Fiji in protest against budget rebalancing measures—such as pay cuts and changes to the retirement age—made by the military government that had staged a coup and come to power in 2006. Participating unions included over 1,400 nurses, 1,000 teachers, and hundreds of public works employees in coordinated efforts for the interim government to restore wages and call attention to the illegitimacy of the coup's mandate to govern. And while ultimately, the Fijian military government [modestly acquiesced](#) to some of the unions' demands, in subsequent years after the strike, in 2009, it passed [several measures](#) that dramatically restricted the rights of federal workers to organize, bargain collectively, and conduct a strike. Additionally, in 2011, Amnesty International [reported](#) the arrests and harassment of several prominent union leaders and staffers by Fijian authorities, in direct violation of the ILO (International Labour Organization) Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

The above examples span history, geography, and motivations. Public sector unions striking for fair wages and benefits, for example, can seem distinct from civil servants intentionally creating bureaucratic snarls through direct action (or often inaction). And yet all these examples—however disparate they might appear—give us clarity around the breadth of power that civil servants wield when they are organized around a common objective, be it improving their working conditions or protecting democracy. In a constitutional crisis, where more dramatic action might be called for, these kinds of direct tactics would be a powerful, essential part of any pro-democracy movement.

Conclusion

Civil servants, while often forgotten players in the functions (or *dysfunctions*) of government, nonetheless hold tremendous power. Civil service resistance has been most successful in achieving its objectives when civil servants take seriously the obligations of their oaths of office to uphold governmental institutions—not the whims of an administration or executive—and work from the essential fact that, ultimately, the power of the political leaders they serve is directly derived from their active consent and cooperation.

By virtue of the work they do on a daily basis—regulating roads and transportation systems, processing identification information and licenses, performing essential clerical and



administrative work, implementation of a plethora of policies from the mundane to the complex—they can utilize their skills and access to be decisive linchpins in the success or failure of democracy.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Polish Judges Resist Attacks on the Rule of Law

**By [Adam Fefer](#)*

Time Period: 2016-2021

Location: Poland, especially Warsaw; Brussels, Belgium

Main Actors: Polish Judges Association Iustitia, Association of Judges Themis, Wolne Sądy lawyers group, Polish Constitutional Tribunal, Polish Supreme Court

Tactics

- [Civil disobedience of illegitimate laws](#)
- [Short form digital videos](#)
- [Assemblies of protest or support](#)
- [Teach-ins](#)
- [Judicial noncooperation](#)

Poland became less free and democratic after the Law and Justice party (PiS) won its 2015 presidential and legislative elections. PiS's anti-system, populist platform --for example, emphasizing threats posed by Muslim immigrants to the Polish nation-- appealed to older, rural, and religious voters, many of whom lost out from Poland's economic reforms following the collapse of communism. During its post-2015 tenure, PiS --led by Jarosław Kaczyński-- tightened its grip on the executive branch, media, opposition leaders, and academics, among others. New anti-terror laws [empowered the PiS government](#) to monitor and detain foreigners without judicial approval, while hate crimes against Muslims soared.

A key domain of Poland's backsliding was the judiciary. For example, PiS passed laws forcing judges into early retirement and created new judicial institutions (staffed by loyalists) that [circumvented the Polish Supreme Court](#). PiS justified these efforts on populist grounds, arguing that judicial institutions are less accountable to and representative of "the people."

In response to these actions, Polish judges have taken extensive steps to try and protect the independence of the courts and reverse Poland's democratic erosion. The judges' public activism is surprising in light of legal-cultural norms against their political involvement as well as judges' lack of experience with collective action.

Much of Polish judges' [activism has been coordinated via the two major judges associations](#): Iustitia and Themis. Both associations have helped judges draft legal opinions and meet with European Commission representatives in Brussels. Iustitia and Themis also co-founded a network of 12 human-rights-focused NGOs for which they provide legal expertise. Similarly, Wolne Sądy, a group of four activist lawyers, has worked to defend judges targeted by the government. It also used its popular Facebook page (with over 75,000 followers) to upload educational videos about the anti-democratic impacts of PiS's judicial reforms.

The judges have focused many of their efforts at the European Union (EU) level. For example, in 2018, Polish Supreme Court justices began requesting that the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) review the legality of PiS's judicial reforms. CJEU sided with the

justices on several occasions, ruling that the reforms were incompatible with EU law. In response, the PiS government regularly denounced CJEU as illegitimate and refused to implement its rulings. However, CJEU has fined Poland for non-compliance.

In addition to their EU activism, Polish judges have worked to mobilize domestic support for democracy. In July 2017, Iustitia and other civil society organizations called for mass protests in Warsaw against new laws seeking to curb the Polish Supreme Court's autonomy. The so-called "Chain of Lights" protest [drew thousands of attendees](#) and ostensibly led Poland's president to veto the Supreme Court bill. However, an amended version was passed several months later.

A group of judges also called for mass protests in January 2020, this time in response to a December 2019 law that threatened to discipline judges who questioned PiS's judicial reforms. [Over 30,000 people attended](#) the so-called "March of 1000 Robes" protest. The law was passed in spite of the protests as well as criticism from the EU.

In addition to their protests, Polish judges have engaged in civil disobedience. For example, judges who faced forced early retirement under PiS legislation continued to go to work. They also gave interviews to domestic media denouncing infringements on judicial autonomy. Finally, Polish [judges have provided education](#) about the value of judicial independence in spaces ranging from schools to nurseries, cafes, and even rock festivals.

The judges' activism eventually bore fruit in 2023, when PiS was defeated in Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections, an outcome that [some attribute directly](#) to Polish voters' dissatisfaction with PiS's assault on judicial autonomy.

US democracy organizers can learn much from the model set by Polish judges. For one, Polish judges have asserted themselves as non-partisan defenders of democracy by focusing their campaign on upholding norms of professionalism. In the US, judicial norms also proscribe overt partisan activity. The Polish case shows that complex legal activism (for example, in the EU) can be paired with public mobilization, all coordinated through associational bodies.

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American Lawyers Use Litigation Against Assaults on Democracy

**By [Lucianne Nelson](#)*

Time Period: 2016-present

Location: United States

Main Actors: Lawyers

Tactics

- Civic Engagement
- Media Outreach
- Legal Aid
- [Petitions](#)
- [Signed Letters of Support](#)

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, attorneys threatened American democracy by weaponizing the American legal system to advance conspiracies and fringe legal arguments through litigation. Dozens of lawsuits were filed across the United States to challenge the election results and the “Big Lie” lawyers also amplified false claims about election fraud outside of the courtroom through public statements in the media, tweets, and elsewhere. Several members of Congress—who are also attorneys—complicitly supported or participated in efforts to undermine and overturn the election. Following the January 6th insurrection, 138 members of the US House of Representatives and twelve Senators voted to overturn the election; twenty-eight of those Congresspeople were attorneys. But even as some lawyers used their legal expertise to destabilize and undermine elections, others within the legal profession have stood up against election denialism and fought to strengthen American democracy.

Individual lawyers, law firms, professional associations (including the American Bar Association), ethics committees, state judiciaries, and other institutions have adopted a special role in advancing democratic values by making it tougher for lawyers to use the legal system to overturn elections. Some have formed coalitions to combat “[fraudulent and malicious lawsuits](#)” against fair election results. Launched in March 2022, the [65 Project](#) initially focused its sights on 111 lawyers who engaged in efforts to challenge or reverse the 2020 election results across 26 different states. The group filed ethics complaints to expose and disbar attorneys who used the legal system to undermine American democracy. Some of the targeted lawyers included President Trump’s legal advisors (like Sidney Powell and Jenna Ellis), lawyers who served as “alternate electors,” and attorneys who were present or otherwise supported the January 6 attack on the US Capitol.

The 65 Project has expanded its scope of work and is now campaigning to change the Bar rules of professional conduct across all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Other groups like [States United Democracy Center](#) and [Lawyers Defending American Democracy](#) (LDAD) to “connect state and local officials, law enforcement leaders, and pro-democracy partners... with the [\[legal\]](#) tools and expertise they need to safeguard democracy.” In addition to filing ethics complaints, these organizations rally individual lawyers at the state level to exert disciplinary action. LDAD has also authored open letters and issued statements calling for lawyers, leaders of bar associations, and the legal academy to join in speaking out against threats to democracy.

Others in the legal community have taken on pro bono work to combat anti-democratic policies. The [Free and Fair Litigation Group](#) was started in 2023 to “bring carefully selected, high-impact cases that protect democracy and individual rights.” This firm focuses on ten cases at a time, taking a more bespoke approach. While Free and Fair is not currently tackling cases directly related to the 2020 election or the Big Lie, their mission is to challenge authoritarianism by taking on issues like gun control and school censorship. Free and Fair believes that—by engaging these policy areas—this fight to restore long-held, constitutional freedoms ultimately combats other, more direct assaults against fair elections and strengthens democratic values.

The 2020 election and the months that followed posed an existential threat to American democracy. As the January 6th Commission hearings confirmed, a team of “Big Lie” lawyers committed brazen violations of their oaths of office and the Constitution in their attempts to overturn the election. Their anti-democratic conduct motivated others in the legal profession to reimagine their responsibility to American democracy. Groups like the 65 Project, States United Democracy Center, and LDAD are protecting American democracy by revitalizing accountability processes that discourage lawyers (and public officials) from using, misusing, and abusing the legal system to overthrow free, fair, and legitimate election results.

These cases show the power of working through and protecting existing institutional channels in order to uphold democracy. A vibrant pro-democracy movement can employ protests and other tactics outside of institutions, but such public actions will be more powerful if there is systematic, organized work to ensure that the institutions that constitute and maintain democracy continue to fulfill their crucial functions. Professional groups like lawyers who make up these institutions can be a critical organizer for this work inside existing channels.

Where to Learn More

- [Trump Lawyer Targeting Push Opens New Front With Bar Rules](#)
 - [The Attorney’s Duty to Democracy: Legal Ethics, Attorney Discipline, and the 2020 Election](#)
 - [Scoop: High-powered group targets Trump lawyers' livelihoods](#)
 - [Free + Fair Litigation Group](#)
 - [Our Work – Lawyers Defending American Democracy](#)
 - [Surveying Americans on Accountability, Election Denial, and Democracy](#)
-

Lawyers in Pakistan March Against a Military Dictator

**By Adam Fefer*

Time Period: 2007-09

Location: Pakistan

Main Actors: National Action Committee of Lawyers, Pakistan Bar Association, Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan, Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) party, Ifitkhar Muhammad Chaudhry

Tactics

- [Assemblies of protest or support](#)
- [Refusal of pledges or oaths](#)
- [Walks and Treks](#)

Pakistan suffered a major democratic decline in 1999 when General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a military coup. Musharraf's government jailed and exiled opposition leaders, harassed and censored journalists and media companies, and declared several states of emergency that significantly restricted civil rights.

One key area of this assault on democracy under Musharraf was the [judiciary](#). For example, an executive order in 2000 required judges to swear allegiance to military rule. Most importantly, in March 2007 Musharraf demanded, with no legal authority, that Chief Justice Ifitkhar Muhammad Chaudhry resign, to which Chaudhry refused. Musharraf then suspended Chaudhry from his post. This suspension sparked the emergence of a Lawyers Movement to counter Musharraf's attacks on the independence of the legal system.

The Lawyers' Movement used many creative tactics, including [international appeals](#), [SMS instructions](#) to local leaders, and [pro-democracy poetry](#). Much of the lawyers' activism was coordinated through domestic and transnational lawyers associations and bar councils. In March 2007, Chaudhry was beaten by police while walking to court to challenge his suspension. In response, Pakistan's Supreme Court Bar Association called on Pakistanis to protest while [carrying black flags and banners](#). Simultaneously, lawyers groups organized weekly strikes at courts staffed by loyalist judges. And between May and July 2007, Chaudhry [toured bar councils across Pakistan](#) and lectured on the rule of law. The protests and tours did much to galvanize ordinary Pakistanis into publicly opposing Musharraf's assault on judicial autonomy.

Chaudhry's case proceedings began in July 2007, during which time he was represented by some of Pakistan's most prominent lawyers. The court ruled to reinstate him, which Musharraf accepted. However, Musharraf then suspended the constitution in October 2007, which he justified by citing the "chaos" resulting from the Lawyers' Movement. Chaudhry and 60 other judges were removed from their posts. In response, the lawyers announced the [Save Judiciary Movement](#) in November 2007. Although Musharraf's emergency rule temporarily inhibited protest activities (e.g., by arresting leaders and supporters), the movement swelled and its goals broadened to include Musharraf's outright removal.

Under domestic and international pressure, Musharraf permitted the return from exile and campaigning of Pakistan's two largest opposition leaders, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

During Pakistan's 2008 election campaign, Sharif [swore that he would restore the sacked judges](#), thus lending key political support to the lawyers' cause. This was noteworthy in light of Nawaz's history of complicity with Pakistan's military dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. In July 2008, the protests against Musharraf grew to at least [40,000 people](#). Musharraf resigned a month later.

The Lawyers' Movement did not stop at Musharraf's resignation. After Benazir Bhutto's assassination, her husband Asif Ali Zardari won the presidency. However, Zardari continued many of Musharraf's authoritarian policies, including with respect to the judiciary. In response, the Lawyers' Movement organized protests that grew to nearly [100,000 people](#) by March 2009. In June 2009, Zardari was compelled to restore all of the sacked judges.

US democracy organizers may wonder whether lessons can be drawn from the Lawyers' Movement. Pakistan was a somewhat open autocracy that became more autocratic after a military coup; its autocratization centered on judicial autonomy and states of emergency. By contrast, the US is a democracy that became more autocratic after free and fair elections, particularly in 2016; its autocratization centered on the integrity of elections and suppression of peaceful protest, among other changes.

In spite of these differences, Pakistan's Lawyers' Movement offers a model of unity in response to democratic decline. The US pro-democracy ecosystem is very diverse in its economic, racial, and religious composition. Such diversity arguably impeded pro-democracy leaders from responding in a united way to authoritarian threats during Trump's presidency. By contrast, the Lawyers' Movement united around a grievance (autocracy and its threat to judicial autonomy) and strategy (peaceful protests), although its leaders and members disagreed on economic, religious, and foreign policies. US democracy organizers may benefit from thinking in similarly simple and direct terms.

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Brazilian Doctors Strike for Healthcare Reform and Democracy

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: 1977-1981

Location: Brazil

Main Actors: Brazilian Doctor's Union

Tactics

- [Professional Strike](#)
- [Slowdown Strike](#)
- [Marches](#)
- [Establishing new social patterns](#)

In 1964, a military coup overthrew Brazil's democratically elected president João Goulart and initiated a period of military dictatorship. Following this coup, military repression targeted any member of civil society found favorable to democracy. One target of this repression was the country's doctors. The military began a purging process, identifying any "progressive" elements in the medical community and removing them from positions in hospitals, schools, and research centers. These medical professionals were then labeled as subversives, and were often detained, tortured, or even murdered by the regime.

About a decade later, doctors began organizing large-scale resistance to the military regime, beginning with junior residents in São Paulo hospitals. Low wages, poor working conditions, and mismanagement of the health sector by the military dictatorship were the primary driving factors. The young doctors also saw an opportunity, as an economic downturn and pressure from civil society had led the regime to express intentions to liberalize. Because of this combination of factors, doctors' protests quickly spread across Brazil. Residents engaged in work stoppages and slowdowns, eventually recruiting permanent non-resident doctors and hospital staff. Despite threats of dismissal from various state governors, officials were forced to relent in the face of hospital collapse.

With initial protests a success, reform minded doctors began a campaign to fully transform the Brazilian health sector. Running under "Medical Renewal" and "Movement for Medical Renewal," progressive doctors won elections to leadership roles in doctor's unions across the country. These key positions in leadership helped reformist doctors spark a stronger and more prolonged protest movement. Legal fights and additional protest support (including strike assistance) were some of the main strategies pursued by union leadership. Perhaps most importantly, doctors connected their struggles to other unions across Brazil. The powerful auto workers' union (led by future president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva), teachers unions, public sector workers and others found a strong ally in doctors, coordinating joint May Day rallies and strikes across Brazil. This participation demonstrated the solidarity of workers, regardless of profession, in protecting rights and demanding democratic reforms. Leadership in other unions met with Brazilian doctors, supported and encouraged their efforts as the Brazilian government attempted to "buy out," and later repress the disgruntled medical community.

Some within the Brazilian medical community attempted to undermine the resistance efforts. These "old guard" elements profited from the corrupt system and felt doctors should be treated differently (or better) as members of the professional rather than working class. The

relationships formed between doctors and other professions (teachers, trade workers, etc.) helped to minimize this influence and isolate voices who were only interested in personal aggrandizement.

The military dictatorship's attempts to disrupt doctors' organizing failed. Hostile takeover of unions and detention of leaders only further galvanized doctors, who were able to fall back on their labor allies in midst of targeting. By July 1981, the doctors won a series of major reforms, including significant pay increases and better working conditions.

While the movement of doctors ostensibly concluded in 1981, the profound struggle laid the groundwork for the eventual collapse of Brazil's military dictatorship. The military regime depended on creating divisions across professions and class. With the medical community organized and connected to the broader struggle for democracy, the military regime's hold on power dwindled. Using work slowdowns and outright stoppages, associations of Brazilian doctors won victory after victory. By 1984, doctors joined millions of other rallying Brazilians, resulting in the end of military rule in 1985 and the advent of Brazilian democracy in 1988. Brazil's doctors illustrated the power and value of professional associations in a democratic movement.

US activists can learn much from Brazil's doctor strikes. The importance of coalition building is of note. Doctors occupy a different position among the working population, generally regarded as professionals, rather than traditional labor. Autocratic governments tend to use this distinction to fragment workers, even currying favor with the professional class to keep them sidelined from political struggles. By "bringing in" professional groups like doctors, more traditional labor elements diversify and broaden their ability to put pressure on the government. In Brazil, this meant that the trade unions could rely on the threat of hospital strikes to heighten democratization attempts. Conversely, these professional workers benefit immensely from the large numbers present in labor groups. Professionals make up a smaller share of the working population than skilled labor, which means they lack some of the benefits larger unions can provide. This weakness can be ameliorated through partnerships with mass organizations. Additionally, this partnership helps to insulate the professional movement from internal strife by providing allies and support from outside the movement. Finally, Brazil's doctors emphasized the power of strikes and work slowdowns in pressuring governments and initiating change.

Where to Learn More

- [White Coats with Blue Collars: Doctors' Labor Protests and the Struggle for Democracy in Brazil, 1978–1982](#)
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“Ask your Doctor if Voting is Right for You!” American Doctors Speak Out on Voting

*By [Lucianne Nelson](#)

Time Period: Present

Location: United States

Main Actors: The American Medical Association (AMA)

Tactics

- [Declarations by Organizations and Institutions](#)

In its June 2022 annual meeting, the American Medical Association (AMA) identified voting as a social determinant of health. As a result, doctors are making voter engagement a part of whole-person health care. Over 700 clinics, hospitals, and medical offices [are helping their patients register to vote](#). The AMA is encouraging medical professionals to add a nonpartisan civic health screening, with the hope that helping people vote can address long-standing health disparities. According to the AMA, making ballots more available can help people better advocate for health-related issues such as clean air, better access to health care, and women’s or children’s health. The AMA is also helping patients to understand that social determinants of health—like affordable housing, food security, environmental rights, and disability accommodation—are equally important issues on many ballots. Per [the AMA](#): “More voting is associated with better health outcomes. And as a rigorously nonpartisan organization, we work with our advisers across the political spectrum to ensure that resources are not partisan and that they speak to the daily experiences of Americans in their health.”

The broad reach of healthcare systems, combined with the trust that doctors, nurses, and social workers often have in their communities, offers an innovative avenue to engage voters, and the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 allows many hospitals and clinics to provide voter registration as a patient service. The AMA is encouraging individual doctors and healthcare providers to bring nonpartisan conversations into the clinical practice, connecting health professionals with nonprofits like [AltaMed](#) and [Vot-ER](#) to integrate civic engagement into health care. Organizations like these help people to register, without endorsing a political party, policy, or candidate. [Vot-ER](#) develops tools, training, resources, and programs for doctors, medical schools, clinics, and hospitals “build healthy communities powered by inclusive democracy.” [Vot-ER](#) reported that the healthcare industry helped nearly 50,000 Americans initiate their voter registration or request a ballot in [2020](#). The majority of those patients registered successfully and approximately 85% cast a ballot in the general election.

In August 2020, the American medical profession launched a civic health initiative and has celebrated [Civic Health Month](#) each subsequent year. [This coalition](#) now includes over 300 partners and over 80 medical schools participate in the Health Democracy Campaign. For the AMA, the goal of these kinds of initiatives is to empower each voter to choose who best represents them and use their own voice to advocate for their health.

However, the AMA is facing some skepticism from the congressional Doctors Caucus. Some members are concerned that the AMA is overstepping its professional expertise, and its position on voting exacerbates friction with those congressional conservatives around [social advocacy](#).

Even with this resistance, the AMA is continuing to build partnerships with civic engagement groups and other medical trade groups (like the American Psychiatric Association) to serve patients by protecting democracy.

The AMA offers an innovative model for pro-democracy movement building by helping health centers identify their role in civic responsibility. The AMA recognizes that its members—doctors, nurses, etc.—are trusted pillars in many communities and can act as powerful vehicles for bringing underrepresented Americans into the electoral process. A key lesson here is how trade organizations can leverage their issue expertise and networks of support to bolster democracy. Civil society actors and the AMA have much to gain from these collaborations. Together, they are serving their patients and addressing the health of the nation.

Where to Learn More

- [Why it's OK for doctors to ask their patients about voting](#)
 - [Evaluating AltaMed Voter Mobilization in Southern California, November 2018](#)
 - [Civic Health Month](#)
-

Going Pro (Bono): Lawyers Provide Support Against the Muslim Ban

**By [Lucianne Nelson](#)*

Time Period: 2017-2018

Location: United States

Main Actors: Immigration & constitutional law attorneys; civil rights activists; members of state and national government; business & labor leaders

Tactics

- Civic Engagement
- Media Outreach
- [Petitions](#)
- [Signed Letters of Support](#)
- Legal Aid
- Amicus Brief

Beginning in early 2017, the Trump administration issued a series of Presidential Proclamations that indefinitely banned travel to the United States from [several predominantly Muslim countries](#). In late 2017, the administration [suspended programs for refugee processing](#) and [family reunification](#) that largely served Muslims applicants. The impact of these orders—collectively known as the “Muslim ban”—created chaos at airports across America. Individuals traveling from these countries were [detained, questioned, or abruptly deported](#). Even some lawful permanent residents of the US were held for prolonged periods before being allowed back into the country. [Others were stranded at airports](#), prevented from boarding flights to the United States.

The impact of the Muslim ban triggered [wide-scale protests](#) as [translators, organizers, and immigration advocates](#) flooded airports to support travelers and family members of loved ones detained under the executive order. Business leaders such as [Sergey Brin](#) (Google) and [Sam Altman](#) (OpenAI) protested in support of detainees at their local airports while [others spoke out against the executive orders and recalled their employees](#) to the US. The ban also triggered wide condemnation from universities, academics, and other public intellectuals. Editorial boards also denounced the ban. [Members of Congress](#), including Senators Elizabeth Warren and John Lewis, joined protests in their home states as well. Over nine hundred career diplomats in the US State Department [issued a memo of dissent](#), outlining their disapproval of the Muslim ban.

As concerned Americans assembled at airports to protest the travel ban, so did lawyers. Hundreds of attorneys crowded at international terminals, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, and crouching on the floor with laptops, conducting legal research and writing motions to file at court. And, as the Trump administration continued to refine and implement the Muslim ban, [the American Civil Liberties Union \(ACLU\) and partner organizations](#) filed a series of lawsuits to challenge these immigration sanctions. Once the cases advanced through the legal system, other lawyers filed amicus briefs in opposition to the Muslim ban. [These briefs provided critical perspective and expertise to the Supreme Court](#) as it considered the constitutionality of the executive orders. Removal or deportation defense work is complicated, challenging, and time-consuming, but many of the attorneys who rallied against the Muslim ban volunteered independently and immediately. In taking on the pro bono work of defending travelers impacted by the Muslim ban, attorneys practiced civic vigilance and upheld core principles of democracy.



The Muslim ban represents only one of many attacks against Americans' civil rights. By publicly protesting the ban, lawyers (and activists, business leaders, Congress members, and other government actors) fulfilled a critical role in shoring up American democracy. One key lesson of the response to the Muslim ban is the power of a rapid, organic response by those with expertise in a moment of crisis, followed by a more sustained response by formal organizations. Lawyers did not wait for the bar association or the ACLU to take action but responded immediately to the impending crisis. This helped check the direct negative effects of the Muslim ban. Then, over the long-term structured organizations took the lead. Successful defense of American democracy will require both a quick immediate response to direct violations of rights, and the construction and maintenance of well-resourced advocacy organizations that can keep this response going.

Where to Learn More

- [The Evolution of the Muslim Ban - an explainer](#)
 - [Impacts of the Muslim Ban 2019](#)
 - [Legal Heroes in the Trump Era: Be Inspired. Expand Your Impact. Change the World.](#)
-

FAITH COMMUNITIES

Latter-Day Saints Speak Out to Protect Democracy

**By [Lucianne Nelson](#)*

Time Period: 2020-present

Location: United States

Main Actors: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Tactics

- Public Statements

In the immediate lead-up to the inauguration of President Biden, the governing body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [urged church members](#) “to honor democratic institutions and processes, and to obey, honor, and sustain the law.” And, as early as October of 2020, high-profile members of the Church warned that they would oppose any post-election unrest. Dallin Oaks, First Counselor to the First Presidency, [clarified in his sermon](#) at the Church’s General Conference that “We [members of the Church] peacefully accept the results of elections. We will not participate in the violence threatened by those disappointed with the outcome.”

Despite these preemptive statements from church leadership, some Latter-day Saints did participate in the insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6th. Several of these individuals even incorporated sacred texts and imagery into [banners](#) and [clothing](#) during the attack. These conflicting views of democracy within the Church gesture at the layered challenges that members of the modern church are wrestling with, and this caselet provides an overview of how the Church is dealing with the aftermath of January 6th. It also addresses the Church’s efforts to establish a more fortified front against subsequent attacks on American democracy.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experienced periods of intense religious discrimination throughout US history, and episodes of violent persecution led the Latter-day Saints to develop a wariness towards the American government. Joseph Smith—the first prophet and founder of the Latter-day Saints faith—[initially encouraged](#) his followers to respect the United States Constitution as “a glorious standard” that “is founded in the wisdom of God.”

The Church encountered mob violence as it grew, and the US government neglected to intervene or protect Latter-day Saints from attack. The Church migrated through different states in order to avoid conflict but continued to face extermination orders and violence that effectively amounted to religiously motivated genocide. Joseph Smith was eventually killed by a mob while in American custody. This event created a disenchantment with mainstream America, and the church fled to Utah territory (which was outside of US jurisdiction at that time).

Even after they fled west, the Latter-day Saints continued to clash with the United States government. Nevertheless, they maintained a reverence for the Constitution and conceptualized themselves as true defenders of America’s founding principles. The Church [adopted a](#)



[bifurcated](#) position in which they supported the US Constitution but defied American policy. Church leaders like Smith and Brigham Young (the second prophet who took over after Smith's death) prophesied that the US would ultimately fail, and that Latter-day Saints would step into the ensuing chaos to preserve a collapsing system. As the Church's theology and culture was refined over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latter-day Saints continued to maintain a level of distrust toward centralized government.

Church leadership eventually chose to integrate the Church into mainstream American society and the current Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints aims to be a politically neutral body. But, given its complicated history with government in the United States, the Church retains traces of conservative libertarianism. [Modern Church leaders](#) often still articulate a religious vision where "America is a chosen land meant to be ruled by godly figures, divine truths, and libertarian values." According to [data](#) from the Public Religion Research Institute, nearly forty-six percent of self-identifying Latter-day Saints believe the "Big Lie" that the 2020 election was rampant with voter fraud and the outcome was stolen. [PRRI also found](#) that the members of the Church are likelier than others to believe in disinformation that undermines American democracy. Even as official Church leadership encouraged the Church to support the 2020 electoral outcomes, they struggled to effectively overcome these modern iterations of a historical distrust.

Utah Senators Mike Lee and Mitt Romney—and their vastly different responses to January 6th—offer a study of contrasts that illustrates the tensions within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While Senator Lee enthusiastically supported, justified, and encouraged President Trump's attempt to subvert the 2020 election, Senator Romney steadfastly opposed attempts to undermine American democracy. Romney was the first (and arguably most high-profile) Republican in the US Senate to vote to convict President Trump in the 2020 impeachment trial. Romney, a more establishment Republican, aligned with Church leadership in supporting democracy. Like the official Church, Senator Romney is conservative, but he embraces Church member integration into mainstream American politics. He voted to convict former President Trump in 2021 for inciting the January 6th insurrection. Senator Lee, however, actively participated in efforts to block President Biden from taking office during the transition between administrations. He also endorsed the "fake electors" [scheme](#) prior to the attack on the Capitol. Senator Lee is a more populist politician, and his political behavior carries forward an anti-government distrust that lingers in Latter-day Saints culture.

Other Latter-day Saints also took courageous action in response to the crisis of January 6th. Rusty Bowers, former Speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives, gained national recognition for his efforts to resist attempts to overturn the 2020 election results. A former statewide leader, Bowers is a staunch conservative, but he [refused to cooperate](#) with unconstitutional attempts to invalidate Arizona's election results. Bowers publicly asserted that there was no evidence of election fraud, and also denied a bill in the Arizona House of Representatives that would have allowed the state legislature to reject the outcomes of the 2020 election. Bowers consistently emphasized his commitment to democracy, [despite](#) being threatened, doxed, and harassed for his position. In 2022, Bowers testified before the US House January 6th Committee and detailed how his life became completely upended by anti-democratic actors. Bowers [stated that his faith motivated him](#) to uphold his oath of office and protect democracy.

The organization Mormon Women for Ethical Government—MWEG—also identifies their faith as foundational to their work of protecting a peaceful and democratic society. While [MWEG](#) is not endorsed by or officially affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the group is nonetheless guided by faith and “honors and sustains the Church’s doctrines and leaders.” Much of their work utilizes bridgebuilding tactics to engage its members and other citizens in the political process, support civic leaders in facing tough challenges, and promote peaceful discourse. During the period between Election Day 2020 and the January 6th insurrection, MWEG issued a series of action calls that urged their members to request that members of Congress [acknowledge](#) and [certify](#) the 2020 election results. MWEG expressed concern about the attacks on American democracy and offered concrete actions that its members could take to demonstrate support for democratic norms. And, after the attack on the US Capitol, MWEG denounced the events of that day as violent and anti-democratic. MWEG published [additional calls to action](#) that encouraged its members (and all Americans) to [offer robust support](#) to leaders who take courageous action in defense of democracy.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is uniquely positioned to exercise spiritual authority to influence and mobilize the political behavior of its members. The Church features a centralized organizational structure and Church doctrine requires members to remain in faithful obedience to its leadership. In fact, individual members who wish to participate in Church life are required to affirm that they believe that (1) the president of the Church is the sole person authorized to speak for God and (2) that this Prophet is their primary authority over day-to-day life. Many activities that are central to Latter-day Saints’ religious life—such as teaching Sunday School, conducting home ministering visits, and religious outreach—channel community consciousness through the Church. Latter-day Saints’ congregations view civic engagement as an expression of faith and are thus primed to be part of efforts to fortify American democracy.

Where to Learn More

- [October 2020 General Conference](#)
 - [Get Involved - MWEG](#)
 - [Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol](#)
 - [The “Big Lie”: Most Republicans Believe the 2020 Election was Stolen](#)
-

Southern Baptist Leaders Condemn the January 6th Insurrection

**By [Lucianne Nelson](#)*

Time Period: 2020-present

Location: United States

Main Actors: The Southern Baptist Convention; Russell Moore

Tactics

- Personal Statements
- [Blogging or Online Article Writing](#)
- [Newspapers and Journals](#)

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is [the largest Protestant denomination in the United States](#). This denomination is also among the [more conservative evangelical faith communities](#). Since the early 2000s, the SBC has appointed increasingly right-leaning leaders who are determined to stop what they see as a concerning submission to progressive social positions around immigration, racial reconciliation, gender and sexuality, and women and families. As the SBC began to merge its American and Christian identities, linking traditional faith with America's constitutional democracy, the internal denominational culture conditioned the rise of [Christian nationalism](#) (an ideology which seeks to merge Christian and American identities) among its members. That ideology was on prominent display during the January 6th attack on the US Capitol. This caselet provides an overview of how the Southern Baptist Convention responded to the insurrection. It also addresses the SBC's struggle to develop a unified front against subsequent attacks on American democracy.

Unlike other religious traditions, the SBC [is not governed by a top-down hierarchy](#); instead, it is made up of individual churches that voluntarily opt into participation by agreeing to a shared faith and practice. Churches are not required to seek or receive approval from a central authority prior to affiliation, and every church that joins the Convention has equal standing. All churches are completely independent of each other and, as such, fully autonomous. The SBC has an executive committee that manages the day-to-day operations of the denomination. The independent churches select members to that committee at regular intervals through a popular vote. This executive committee has the authority to represent the SBC's public stance on various social issues, discipline churches who stray from the official theological pillars of the faith, and pursue any other actions delegated to them by the denomination as a whole. The SBC has also created other committees to support the Executive Committee in this work, including the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (which acts as the public policy arm of the SBC).

In the early 2010s, divisions over 'social' issues related to race, politics, and gender began to take hold of the Southern Baptist Convention. Many self-identifying Baptists encouraged their churches and delegates to the SBC to push the Convention to adopt a more progressive stance on these issues while others insisted that the SBC maintain its conservative position. Russell Moore, who was president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) from 2013 through early 2020, garnered national attention as a more measured voice within the Convention. He warned about the growth of Christian Nationalism and encouraged the SBC to distance itself from Donald Trump in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential election. Though Moore remained staunchly conservative on issues like abortion and LGBTQ-related policies, he

nonetheless [warned](#) that sacrificing the church's moral values in the short term would result in a long-term acceptance of what he deemed immoral behavior.

After the January 6th storming of the United States Capitol, Moore used his personal blog to [condemn](#) it as “an insurrection of domestic terrorists, incited and fomented by the President of the United States.” Moore [told his readers](#) that, if he were a sitting member of the US Congress, he would have voted to remove Trump from office even if it cost him his seat. Moore immediately urged Christians to be truthful that [democracy is under assault](#) and called upon the church to be “people who are for integrity” under all circumstances by acknowledging that Joe Biden was elected president. The SBC Executive Committee assembled a task force to investigate Moore, ultimately issuing a report that reprimanded him for making these public comments in contradiction to official SBC positions. Moore resigned from leadership within the SBC and [listed](#) the “threats from white nationalists and white supremacists, including within [the] Convention” he received after condemning the insurrection among the reasons he was stepping down.

While many other evangelical leaders—within the SBC, as well as from other denominations—also issued statements condemning the violence of January 6th, Moore directly connected that assault on democracy to a pattern of permissive silence within the American church more broadly. Since stepping down from the SBC, Moore has continued to speak out against the anti-democracy trend he sees gathering momentum within evangelicalism. Moore also continues to write to an evangelical audience about why democracy matters. He also regularly interviews with mainstream journalists and often makes guest appearances on podcasts to encourage evangelicals to bolster democracy.

Moore is the most public and high-profile figure within the Baptist denomination to engage in this work but his resignation from the SBC functioned as a catalyst amongst affiliated churches as individual members and more local leaders also push back against the anti-democracy trend Moore identified. These efforts are relatively informal. While many members of the SBC are still figuring out what tactics will be the most impactful in the long-term, some recurring activities have included:

- [Publicly posting](#) on social media platforms to condemn the insurrection like [Beth Moore](#) (Founder of Living Proof ministries, not related to Russell Moore), [Greg Laurie](#) and Rick Warren (pastors at two of the largest nondenominational megachurches in the US).
- Elevating a pro-democracy vision for “faithful citizenship” via externally-facing outlets such as op-eds (see [here](#) and [here](#)), [news programming](#), and podcasts.
- Using trade-specific publications to [inform](#), [encourage](#), [resource](#), and connect ministry leaders in pushing back against Christian nationalism and anti-democratic trends within conservative faith communities.
- Joining with affiliated Baptist and Evangelical institutions to denounce the insurrection on January 6th, condemn Christian Nationalism, and create resources to combat anti-democratic beliefs amongst the Christian Right.

The key takeaway, though, is that there is growing momentum within the SBC and other conservative Christian denominations to take on a campaign for protecting democracy here in the United States. Russell Moore, along with other prominent conservatives, launched a project called [The After Party](#) which is intended to help Christians work against any anti-democratic movement within the American Religious Right. Moore recently emphasized that the future of democracy requires him—and other evangelicals—to come alongside other pro-democracy

groups in a trans-religious, multicultural coalition (or, [to use Moore's framing](#), “a cross-cutting friendship”). Other conservative evangelicals have also formed coalitions to combat the rise of Christian Nationalism and anti-democratic trends within the American church. These include [Vote Common Good](#) (which aims to inspire, energize, and mobilize people of faith to make the common good their voting criteria) and Christians Against Christian Nationalism (who fight the ideology's violence from within the faith). Moore firmly believes that these kinds of pro-democracy projects “must be done for the sake of our country and our common humanity.”

Where to Learn More

- [Southern Baptist Leaders Condemn Storming of US Capitol](#)
 - [Christian nationalism & the January 6 attack on the Capitol](#)
 - [What is Christian Nationalism?](#)
 - [Southern Baptist Convention president, 'White Evangelical Racism' author, and Respecting Religion co-host discuss Christian nationalism](#)
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Activating Faith: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference Fights for Freedom

*By [Lucianne Nelson](#)

Time Period: Civil Rights Era, 1955-1970s

Location: United States

Main Actors: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); affiliate churches; Civil Rights organizers

Tactics

- [Protest](#)—teach-ins to educate and encourage participation
- [Mass action](#)—sharing information and raising awareness
- [Boycotts](#)—refusal to purchase certain goods or utilize services

Following the success of the [Montgomery bus boycotts](#), civil rights leader Bayard Rustin identified [a need for a central organization](#) to coordinate and support nonviolent direct action across the South. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., consulting with Rustin, invited other Black leaders and ministers to establish a coalition to leverage Black churches' influential networks, independence, and influence as a force against segregation. Together, they established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. The SCLC framed the (mis)treatment of "Negroes [as] a basic spiritual problem," and the organization [called on churches](#) to "delve deeper into the struggle [for desegregation] and to do so with greater reliance on nonviolence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding." Unlike other umbrella groups that recruited individual members, the SCLC leveraged the collective impact of faith communities to fight segregation and advocate for voting rights. The [SCLC's work](#) was critical to the Civil Rights movement.

The SCLC began its first major campaign, the Crusade for Citizenship, in late 1957. The crusade was developed in August 1957 in response to pending civil rights legislation in Congress. The main objective was to register thousands of Black voters - historically targeted with violence and disenfranchised - in time for the 1958 and 1960 elections. The [Crusade](#) raised awareness among Black Americans that "their chances for improvement rest on their ability to vote." Funded by donations from local churches and other private donors, the SCLC established voter education clinics throughout the South. While the SCLC did not achieve its ambition of doubling the number of Black voters in the 1958 and 1960 elections, the Crusade did accomplish the SCLC's [overarching goal](#) of consolidating churches and regional organizations into a movement.

SCLC campaigns that focused on the desegregation of individual cities were more successful. The SCLC joined local movements in Albany, GA, Birmingham, AL, and St. Augustine, FL to coordinate mass protests and nonviolent civil disobedience. In 1963, the SCLC's Alabama affiliate wrote that the [Birmingham campaign](#) was "a moral witness to give our community a chance to survive." SCLC members educated Black citizens about the philosophy and strategies of nonviolence and nonviolent action and appealed for volunteers. The SCLC relied on tactics such as mass meetings, direct actions, lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall, and boycotts of local merchants. The desegregation campaigns expanded to include additional



tactics like kneel-ins at churches, sit-ins at libraries, and marches to register voters. Because of these campaigns, the organization quickly moved to the forefront of the civil rights movement.

The SCLC reflected Dr. King's belief that the Christian faith entailed a responsibility to reform unjust laws and policies. However, the SCLC's position that churches had a spiritual imperative to be politically engaged—especially in pursuit of racial equality—was controversial. Even some Black religious leaders opposed SCLC's overt call to activism because they considered segregation a "social" issue that fell outside the scope of the church's mission. The SCLC largely failed to attract moderate white churches for similar reasons. While some Christian progressives challenged white supremacy, this support was often clustered at white seminaries, in denominational headquarters, and on the foreign mission field. Billy Graham, a highly visible white Christian evangelist, [supported some measures of desegregation but kept his support for the SCLC private](#). [Oral histories and contemporary documentation](#) indicate that, even when white pastors did attempt to affiliate with the SCLC, their congregations rejected and undermined those efforts. As a result, very few white churches officially joined the SCLC.

Though the SCLC did not convince many white churches to join its coalition, it was nevertheless successful in recruiting white Christians (and Jews) on an individual level. Reverend Hosea Williams, who had been joined by white college students for various short-term civil rights projects facilitated by local SCLC affiliates, developed an idea to connect teams of young, white volunteers with Black churches. This grew into the SCLC's Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Project, a voter registration and civil rights initiative. The SCOPE project began in 1965 and deployed 500 white college volunteers (from nearly 100 universities) across six Southern states to areas where local Black leaders had requested aid from the SCLC. The Black church provided a network of homes for SCOPE volunteers to stay at while they registered voters and provided civic literacy classes.

These white college students provided critical support that helped the SCLC and Black churches accomplish grassroots change. SCOPE volunteers reported violations of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Based on this information, the Department of Justice conducted targeted investigations and sent additional support to counties that had denied Black peoples' rights to vote. SCOPE alumni include activist Catholic priests, Jewish rabbis, and evangelical pastors. By inviting young, white people to act on their faith directly, the SCLC found a creative alternative to white churches' resistance. In this way, the SCLC maximized the collective impact and influence of religion. The SCOPE Project offers an interesting model for re-routing individual "defectors" or dissidents toward changemaking initiatives and for supporting them in taking actions of courage beyond their religious communities.

A vibrant pro-democracy movement can engage and deploy individuals to protest, boycott, and participate in mass action but these tactics are most powerful when there is well-resourced scaffolding backing up public action. The SCLC recognized that churches can provide crucial infrastructure and networks of support for coalition building. The work of preserving and revitalizing American democracy relies on both the responsiveness of individual activists and advocates and a more sustained response by formal organizations. This case demonstrates how faith communities can strengthen and reinforce pro-democracy movements.



Where to Learn More

- [SCLC History](#)
 - [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#)
 - Carolyn Dupont, [Mississippi Praying](#) (2015)
-

Polish Bishops Refuse to Support Authoritarianism

**By Adam Fefer*

Time Period: 2016-2023

Location: Poland, especially Warsaw.

Main Actors: Polish Episcopal Conference

Tactics

- [Declarations by organizations and institutions](#)
- [Public speeches](#)
- [Boycotts of social affairs](#)

Poland became less free and democratic after the Law and Justice party (PiS) won its 2015 presidential and legislative elections. PiS's anti-system, populist platform --for example, emphasizing threats posed by Muslim immigrants to the Polish nation-- appealed to older, rural, and religious voters, many of whom lost out from Poland's economic reforms following the collapse of communism. During its post-2015 tenure, PiS --led by Jarosław Kaczyński-- tightened its grip on the executive branch, media, opposition leaders, and academics, among others. New anti-terror laws [empowered the PiS government](#) to monitor and detain foreigners without judicial approval, while hate crimes against Muslims soared.

Christianity played a key role in PiS's rise. For one, its alliance with the Polish Catholic Church --and especially 'nationalist' bishops-- helped PiS win the 2015 elections. As Poland is a Catholic-majority country, PiS and many of its supporters converge on moral issues like opposition to abortion and gay marriage. Meanwhile, [PiS has used Christian rhetoric and symbolism](#) to legitimize its policy agenda, for example opposing Muslim immigration that "pollutes" Poland's pure, Christian nation. PiS supporters have used the symbol of a Rosary with an added clenched fist at their rallies.

Liberal and conservative Polish bishops have both made statements and taken actions to try and halt PiS' anti-democratic agenda, [an agenda that nationalist bishops have furthered](#). Many bishops have denounced PiS' anti-refugee policies, which PiS justifies on populist, xenophobic grounds. For example, in May 2016, Polish Archbishop Stanislaw Gadecki proclaimed that such policies "[lack the spirit of Christ](#)." And in April 2017, the Episcopal Conference released a document denouncing PiS' Christian nationalism as incompatible with "loving thy [refugee] neighbors." In both of these examples, bishops employed biblical language to challenge the convictions of PiS and its Catholic constituents. In January 2018, the Episcopal Conference publicly celebrated both Migrants Day and the Day of Judaism, presenting a document offering church support to migrants.

Bishops have also been vocal in opposing PiS' more overtly anti-democratic efforts. For example, in June 2017, Archbishop Gadecki and others [publicly warned PiS not to undermine Polish judges' autonomy](#). These warnings ostensibly led President Andrzej Duda to veto two bills that would have done just that. In May 2018, during a mass celebrating Poland's Saint Stanislaw, the bishops denounced President Duda's proposal to change the constitution --in [unclear and vague ways](#)-- as "[an offense to God](#)." There they affirmed the democratic, pluralistic nature of their ideal Polish state. In July 2018, arguably because of pressure from Polish

bishops, President Duda vetoed a law that would raise the threshold for parties competing in European Parliament elections.

Finally, Polish bishops have resisted PiS' attempts to utilize Christian imagery and holy days for anti-democratic ends. For example, in November 2017, the Episcopal Conference [refused to celebrate Mass](#) during Poland's Independence Day rallies. In their justification, Episcopate leaders drew attention to PiS' Islamophobia and "unChristian nationalism." And in November 2018, the bishops refused to grant PiS protesters permission to hold Mass in front of the Parliament building.

The bishops' activism eventually bore fruit in 2023, when [PiS was defeated](#) in Poland's 2023 parliamentary elections. It is unclear precisely what role religious mobilization played in this process. But in a Catholic-majority country like Poland, it is safe to assume that the actions of Archbishops and other prelates did not go unnoticed.

US democracy organizers can learn much from the model set by Polish bishops. For one, religious actors may be most effective when utilizing religious rhetoric. These efforts may be especially effective when incumbents themselves use religious rhetoric to legitimate their rule. Polish bishops used Catholic arguments to challenge both PiS' anti-democratic measures as well as PiS' attempts to define itself as a Catholic party. As some [Republican elites work to construct](#) their own version of Christian, anti-democratic nationalism, US religious leaders can endorse democratic norms by drawing on the moral-theological ideas they know best.

A second lesson from the Polish case is that pro-democracy leaders, even if they are an ecclesial minority, can still succeed in countering dominant narratives. Although Polish nationalist bishops gained unprecedented access to power through their alliance with PiS, liberal and conservative bishops succeeded in drawing attention to PiS' anti-democratic measures. In the US, liberal Catholic bishops are also a minority, owing to the [limited number of appointments made by Pope Francis](#). However, they can still be effective in countering those bishops whose focus on the politics of abortion renders them more accepting of anti-democratic measures. Importantly, joint statements and actions by pro-democratic liberal and conservative Catholic faith leaders and parishioners would go a long way towards countering rising far-right authoritarianism in the US.

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Hungarian Evangelicals Resist Democratic Backsliding

**By Adam Fefer*

Time Period: 2010-2019

Location: Budapest, Hungary

Main Actors: Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (HEF), Pastor Gábor Iványi.

Tactics

- [Declarations by organizations and institutions](#)
- [Selective social boycott](#)
- [Protective presence](#)
- [Signed public statements](#)

Hungary has become markedly less free and democratic since Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party won the 2010 elections. Using its parliamentary super-majorities, [Fidesz has gerrymandered new districts in its favor, created fake parties to overwhelm its opponents, and used its media control to cover only itself while slandering the opposition](#). Fidesz's ideological vision is one of illiberal, Christian, Hungarian nationalism; it opposes so-called "Western" notions of unqualified human rights, multiculturalism, and respect for religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities. With Hungarian opposition parties marginalized, several civil society actors have stepped up and attempted to combat Hungary's democratic erosion.

One such civil society actor is the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (HEF) church, specifically Pastor Gábor Iványi. Iványi is no stranger to anti-authoritarian organizing, having worked --at times with Orbán-- against the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party dictatorship in the 1970s and 80s. Iványi officiated Orbán's wedding and baptized his two eldest children.

Since 2010, Iványi has criticized Orbán's autocracy, illiberalism, and Christian nationalism. Iványi has expressed these criticisms in interviews with domestic and international media outlets. After Fidesz's 2010 election victory, Iványi refused to attend Orbán's inauguration. Iványi's actions arguably played a role in provoking Orbán to undermine religious institutions: in late 2011, Fidesz passed its 'Act C' law that stripped nearly 300 churches and religious groups --including HEF-- of official state recognition. Act C [deprived these churches](#) of access to state-funded programs and subsidies.

The Act C law provoked both international and domestic judicial action. In 2017, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Act C violated the European Convention on Human Rights; it ordered the Hungarian government to compensate the Evangelical Fellowship and other churches that lost access to state subsidies. In addition, Hungary's Constitutional Court twice ruled that Orbán's government violated the constitution in its dealings with HEF, e.g., by depriving the church of public education subsidies. Iványi's activism likely played a role in raising awareness about the dire financial situation of HEF and other Hungarian religious institutions. However, Iványi alleges that the full amount owed to his church by Orbán's government has not yet been paid. Additionally, his rhetoric arguably provoked government backlash; for example, in March 2022, Orbán's government sent tax officials to raid Iványi's office, claiming the church owes about \$7.2 million in payroll taxes.

HEF runs multiple Budapest shelters for homeless, refugee, and Roma communities. All three groups have been marginalized during Orbán's tenure. During Hungary's 2015 migrant crisis, HEF cooked 600-800 meals per day and provided shelter for nearly 200 refugees. This was in marked contrast to the Catholic Church of Hungary, which denounced refugee-sheltering as human trafficking. Despite these efforts, HEF's actions did little to counter Orbán's anti-refugee rhetoric and policies. Refugees in Hungary continue to face discrimination and are often prevented from entering the country by Hungarian border police and militias.

Finally, in 2019, Pastor Iványi and other religious leaders authored an "Advent Statement," which responded to Orbán's claim that Hungary was being governed in accordance with "Christian Liberty." The authors denounced this concept as "a slogan for exclusionary, hate-filled and corrosive policy...that systematically threatens democracy and the rule of law." The statement had nearly 300 signatories but did not provoke an explicit response from the government.

The campaign by Pastor Iványi and the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship has done much to raise awareness of Hungary's democratic backsliding. However, civil society actors have struggled to stand as a pillar of Hungarian democracy. In both speed and depth, Hungary's democratic erosion is unique: Orbán's Fidesz party managed to capture the legislature, executive, judiciary, and media within a couple of years of its 2010 election victory. Hungarian civil society has accordingly struggled to act, even while refraining from using confrontational tactics that tend to provoke authoritarian repression. Without consistent international pressure on Fidesz, civil society is at a further disadvantage. Still, democracy activists would do well to emulate Pastor Iványi and HEF's consistent and multi-pronged organizing and activism.

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Sikh Langars Feed Protests for Farmers' Rights

**By [Claire Trilling](#)*

Time Period: November 2020 - December 2021

Location: Delhi, India

Main Actors: Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee & other Sikh organizations

Tactics

- [Protest camps, nonviolent occupation](#)
- [Declarations by organizations and institutions](#)
- Material support

In September 2020, the Indian parliament, led by Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) passed three Farm Bills significantly cutting back government involvement in agriculture and removing protections for farmers. In response, farmers across India launched a protest movement to demand the bills' repeal. For more detail on this movement as a whole, see our caselet on this movement [here](#).

The peak of this movement involved a mass nonviolent blockade of the four main highways going into New Delhi, India's capital, by hundreds of thousands of farmers. The farmers ultimately remained in the protest camps for over a year, until the government finally caved to the movement's demands and repealed the Farm Bills in December 2021. Throughout this period, the protest camps consistently held tens of thousands of protesters who organized rallies and music performances, set up educational centers, and created their own media outlets.

The endurance of the Delhi protest camps hinged on the consistent provision of meals, medical supplies, clothes, and other basic services to its inhabitants. While the farmers' movement was characterized by high levels of religious and ethnic diversity, much of the material support for the camps came from the Sikh community. Most of the farmers came from the region of Punjab, known as India's breadbasket. Punjab is also the homeland of the Sikh religion, with about 58% of its residents identifying as Sikh. In Sikhism, all places of worship, called gurdwaras, have a *langar* hall, a community kitchen that serves free food to all people, regardless of religion, caste, gender, or ethnicity. Gurdwaras also frequently provide medical and educational services. From the beginning of the protest movement, Sikh organizations, leaders, and participants established langars and provided various resources and services to the farmers.

Before the arrival of the farmers, the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC), which oversees all gurdwaras in the capital, [announced](#) that they would provide whatever material support was needed for the farmers' campaign. Upon the establishment of the camps, the DSGMC set up langars that provided food several times a day to the farmers, as well as to underprivileged residents of Delhi. In January 2021, they [repurposed 30 buses](#) from their school system to serve as night shelters and [donated 1200 elevated beds](#) to ensure that the protesters could endure the severe cold and heavy rainfalls of the season. The DSGMC also repeatedly made statements in support of the movement and denounced its critics. Other organized Sikh groups, including international organizations like Khalsa Aid and United Sikhs, assisted in establishing medical centers and providing hygienic goods.

In addition to the critical contributions by Sikh organizations, individual Sikh farmers also drew on their religious practices in the campaign. Sikh farmers began the march to Delhi prepared to set up langars on the way, and they were continuously resupplied by their home villages and towns. The tradition of running langars meant that Sikh farming communities were practiced in pooling resources and preparing mass meals, skills that they used to make the Delhi campaign sustainable for such a long period of time. In one case, a group of friends [set up a pizza langar](#) to support the farmers, while in another, an almond langar was organized with the support of one of the largest American almond producers. In Punjab, [Muslim farmers also set up a langar](#) to support the early protests in September 2020, a gesture of solidarity in response to prior Sikh support for Muslims who had protested Modi's citizenship law in 2019.

The establishment of Sikh langars throughout the 2020-2021 Farmers' Movement offers a model for how faith actors can support pro-democracy organizing. The langars exemplify how religious traditions and practices can be repurposed to support campaign needs. The government's capitulation is, in part, contributable to the fact that participants were willing and able to maintain their presence in the capital in the face of repression, extreme weather, and COVID-19. The material resources provided by the Sikh langars were the foundation on which that durability rested. Furthermore, the mobilization of entire villages and towns on behalf of the protest camps was facilitated by their prior experience serving the langars in their own gurdwaras. Organizers in the US can think of what tactics might be tied to the pre-existing skills and practices in the religious communities they seek to mobilize. Finally, the Sikh langars demonstrate how religious actors can contribute to a diverse movement in a way that promotes religious tolerance and fosters pluralism.

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US Bishops and the January 6th Capitol Attack on Democracy

**By Adam Fefer*

Time Period: 2021-2024

Location: USA

Main Actors: US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)

Tactics

- [Declarations by organizations and institutions](#)
- [Letters of opposition or support](#)
- [Signed public statements](#)
- [Newspapers and Journals](#)
- [Digital video and audio art](#)

This caselet is about US Catholic bishops' responses to the January 6th Capitol attack. Why did some bishops denounce the attack as anti-democratic while others merely called for peace or stayed quiet? On the one hand, Catholic teaching on the sanctity and protection of life places bishops on the traditionalist side of issues like abortion and physician-assisted suicide. On the other hand, Catholic social and economic teaching places bishops on the progressive side of issues like universal healthcare, the living wage, debt reduction for developing nations, and immigration (Fichter et al. 2019). Bishops focused on so-called "life issues" (especially abortion) seem to have been less likely to view the attack as anti-democratic. By contrast, bishops who take a broader "seamless garment" approach to Catholic social and economic teaching seem to have been more likely to take a strong stand against the attack.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) occupies a unique role in American religion: no other denomination has an authoritative, ecclesiastical body like it. The temporal focus of this caselet is mostly January 2021, the month where many bishops issued condemnations of the attacks and of Donald Trump's incendiary behavior. The geographical focus is largely on archdioceses of the most populous US cities. The conclusion offers other examples of Catholic political activity that are relevant to pro-democracy organizing.

I. Catholics' Right Turn and Persistent Divisions

The January 6th attack exemplified the US' increasing democratic backsliding, especially since 2016 (Williamson 2023). US backsliding is largely a Republican Party-led phenomenon. This is true nationally, where leaders like Donald Trump have undermined the integrity of elections and checks on executive power. It is also true sub-nationally, where Republican-led state legislatures have furthered voter suppression and racial gerrymandering (Grumbach 2022).

The US Catholic clergy and laity are divided on partisan lines (Audi & Rocca 2015). Roughly 48% of Catholic voters self-describe as Republican while 47% self-describe as Democrats (Smith 2020). These divisions are relatively new, tracing to the late 20th century. In the early 20th century, by contrast, Catholics supported the Democratic Party. For example, between 70-80% of Catholics voted for FDR in 1936 (Rozell 2022, Catholic University of America 2023). As a predominantly immigrant, working class bloc, Catholics were key beneficiaries of FDR's New Deal (McAndrews 2021). Official Catholic doctrine is also progressive on many issues: support for a strong welfare state and immigration as well as opposition to the death penalty and

nuclear deterrence (Feldman 2006).¹ During the early 20th century, the Catholic clergy was relatively apolitical; parish-specific issues like education and spiritual guidance dominated the Catholic agenda (Sammon 2008).

By the mid-twentieth century, Catholics had more fully integrated into American society and the middle class (Massa 2021). These trends were exemplified by JFK's 1960 presidential campaign² and the decline of overt anti-Catholicism³. During this time, Catholic clergy and their upwardly mobile laity became more politically engaged (McAndrews 2021). For example, liberal Catholics spoke out against the Vietnam War and in favor of civil rights. Meanwhile, an increasingly vocal conservative clergy focused on issues of perceived moral decline, like abortion and contraception.

The 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision was a landmark in US Catholic history (Sammon 2008). Catholic clergy and laity mobilized vigorously against the decision. In doing so, Catholics found common ground with Evangelical Christians in their mutual hostility toward abortion, school desegregation, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism. Since then, conservative Catholic activists have worked to make abortion a "non-negotiable" part of Catholic political identification. This is especially the case among white, church-going Catholics (Feldman 2006). These changes upended previous patterns of Catholic support. For example, Reagan obtained between 54-61% of the Catholic vote in his 1984 reelection campaign (Prendergast 1999). Abortion has become a central part of Catholic politics.

Despite being split on partisan lines, Catholic majorities have consistently supported winning presidential candidates. This includes both Reagan campaigns, both Bill Clinton campaigns, and both Obama campaigns. However, these patterns break down when examining ethnicity, religiosity, and income (Gray & Bendyna 2008). For example, despite Donald Trump winning the Catholic vote, Hispanic Catholics supported Hilary Clinton by a margin of 67-26 (Martinez & Smith 2016). The Trump presidency energized many liberal Catholics, who detested his "Muslim travel ban" and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric (Barb 2022). However, progressive Catholic interests are relatively marginalized in institutions like USCCB.

II. The January 6th Campaign and Catholic Bishops' Tactics

The 2020 election campaign witnessed "unprecedented levels" of polarization among Catholic bishops and the US population writ large (Gayte 2022, 113).⁴ This culminated in the January 6th attack, which exemplified many Republican elites' disdain for a key tenet of democracy, namely that parties accept election results (Williamson 2023).

It should first be noted that Catholic leaders and institutions outside of USCCB also spoke out against the January 6th attack. For example, Father James Martin wrote an op-ed denouncing the attack, while Catholic laity held commemorative vigils for January 6th a year later (Martin 2021, Jenkins 2022). The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (2021) released a

¹ These concerns have been conceptualized as a "consistent ethic of life."

² However, JFK met fierce opposition from (particularly Evangelical) protestants who feared that he would act as a puppet for the Vatican.

³ This was aided by Catholics' strong support for the Cold War crusade against so-called "godless" communists.

⁴ Such polarization continues as the USCCB has failed to issue an updated "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" document, which informs Catholics' political obligations (Reese 2022).

newsletter denouncing the attacks. And the Catholic lobby NETWORK also issued a response (2021) to the “violent effort by extremists to overthrow the United States government.” Finally, Catholic media including *America Magazine* (2021) and *National Catholic Reporter* (2021) also denounced the attacks.

We can begin our analysis of bishops with Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez, also USCCB’s president. Gomez expressed that “peaceful transition of power is one of the hallmarks of this great nation. In this troubling moment, we must recommit ourselves to the values and principles of our democracy” (USCCB 2021a). Gomez’s response was noteworthy given his statements both before and after January 6, 2021. For example, on January 20, Gomez authored a letter stating “that our new President [Biden] has pledged to pursue certain policies [related to abortion] that would advance moral evils and threaten human life and dignity” (USCCB 2021b). Gomez’s letter furthered divisions among US bishops. For example, Chicago’s Cardinal Blase J. Cupich authored his own letter in response, which called Gomez’s statement “ill-considered” and issued without other bishops’ prior consultation (White 2021). This exchange highlights the centrality of abortion politics in USCCB.

In Chicago, Cardinal Cupich lamented “the deliberate erosion of the norms of our system of government [and] violence in the service of a falsehood,” prayed for “the peaceful and orderly transition of power” and implored elected officials to “recognize threats to democracy, no matter their source” (Archdiocese of Chicago 2021). Philadelphia’s Archbishop Nelson J. Perez affirmed that “Regardless of political affiliation, we are united by democracy,” expressing his gratitude to those who “worked through a dark day in our history to ensure the peaceful transition of power” (Archdiocese of Philadelphia 2021). And in one of the most forceful statements, San Diego’s Bishop (now Cardinal) Robert McElroy said “We must be clear in identifying this moment as the logical trajectory of the last four years of President Trump’s leadership of our country...we have stood by without giving greater witness to the terrible danger that leadership rooted in division brings to a democratic society” (White 2021).

Other archbishops’ responses are noteworthy for their omissions. For example, New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan condemned “the man [Trump] who should be leading us...[for] stoking these flames” (Lavenburg 2021). Although Dolan omitted mention of the attack on democracy, his direct criticism of Trump was surprising in light of his behavior during the 2020 campaign. Indeed, Dolan had called Trump a great friend, “salute[d] Trump’s leadership” on Fox News, and gave a prayer at the 2020 Republican National convention (White 2020, Warren Davis 2020).

In addition to Dolan, San Antonio’s Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, Dallas’ Bishop Edward J. Burns, and the Diocese of Austin all tweeted for “peace” without explicitly mentioning the attack on democracy (Gledhill 2021, Guidos 2021). Meanwhile, Houston’s Cardinal Daniel DiNardo and Phoenix’s Bishop Thomas Olmsted were noteworthy for their silence, unsurprising in light of their conservative views on social issues.⁵ These omissions cohere with Reese’s (2020) finding

⁵ For example, DiNardo claimed in 2019 that climate change is “important” but not “urgent” (Schlumpf 2019). Olmsted endorsed the view that Biden should not receive communion (Catholic News Agency 2021).

that across 160 USCCB press releases between 2019-20, bishops were unlikely to criticize Trump by name and instead make references to his “administration.”

What patterns can we glean from these varied responses? Consider first the bishops who diagnosed January 6th as an attack on democracy. One thing that stands out is their broad political agendas that encompass more than just abortion. For example, both Bishop McElroy and Cardinal Cupich have been strong advocates for immigration, anti-poverty, and the environment, lamenting the church’s narrow focus on abortion (O’Loughlin 2015). Archbishops Perez and Gomez also have strong records on immigration and poverty, although they seem content with the USCCB’s prioritization of abortion (Gayte 2022). Looking at the neutral or silent responses, one finds bishops who are more singularly focused on abortion, including Cardinal DiNardo (Reese 2019).

III. Beyond USCCB and January 6th

Looking beyond USCCB and January 6, there are several domains of Catholic political activity that may be relevant to pro-democracy organizing. To begin, bishops and parishioners have criticized prominent Catholic politicians with anti-democratic sympathies. Ron DeSantis in Florida and Greg Abbot in Texas have faced Catholic backlash, albeit more for their stances on immigration and capital punishment (Scanlon 2023, Guidos 2022, Nowlin 2020). It is crucial that Catholic organizers recognize the threats DeSantis and Abbot pose to democratic practices such as voting rights and lawful protests (ACLU 2023, 2024).

A second domain is higher education, where Catholic leaders at universities like Notre Dame, Fordham, and Villanova have denounced Donald Trump’s immigration ban and racist rhetoric (Jenkins 2020). As with Catholic governors, university leaders could go further by identifying Trump’s threat to democracy. Santa Clara University’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2021) was exemplary in this respect, providing a host of analyses that linked the January 6th attack to narrow self-interest, charismatic demagoguery, and disinformation.

Finally, Catholic podcasts have become important forums for articulating pro-democracy agendas and shaping parishioners’ beliefs. For example, *The Commonwealth Podcast* and *Just Politics* have broadcast episodes entitled “Should Catholics Promote Democracy?” and “Actual Strategies for Saving Democracy,” respectively. NETWORK, a Catholic lobby for social justice, has sponsored a three-part “[White Supremacy and American Christianity](#)” series. Organizing via podcasts and universities may help reach youth voters, a key demographic, yet one that is more religiously disengaged.

IV. The Future of Pro-Democracy Catholic Politics

The USCCB’s right-wing orientation that prioritizes abortion may generate pessimism that Catholics can be a pillar of democracy. However, there are several sources of optimism. First, Catholics are more liberal than Evangelicals --and many mainline Protestants-- on issues like immigration, affirmative action, and social welfare (Sammon 2008). Relatedly, the Catholic church is among the US’ most racially integrated and diverse Christian denominations (Lipka 2015). This cluster of issues may serve to push Catholics toward politicians who emphasize inclusive, multiracial democracy.

A second reason for optimism is that Catholics are a key swing constituency. Because official church doctrine pushes them in opposite political directions, strategic political parties cannot

expect unwavering Catholic support. In addition, Catholic voters are concentrated in midwestern swing states. That Donald Trump courted fringe Catholic elites --like the conspiracist Carlo Maria Viganò-- during his 2020 campaign may serve to further push Catholics away from leaders who propagate conspiracies about elections (Anti-Defamation League 2023).

Finally, and concerning bishops specifically, Pope Francis appointed many bishops who wish to broaden USCCB's agenda and prioritize social and economic issues (Allen 2016). Although these bishops currently constitute less than a quarter of the USCCB, they have been outspoken in attempting to change the conference's priorities. Especially in the post-Roe environment, many USCCB bishops have taken a conservative hard line on issues like trans rights and the religious liberty to discriminate. So long as such issues continue to direct the conference's agenda, many bishops and parishioners may continue to support anti-democratic politicians.

Discussion Questions

1. Catholicism is a very hierarchical denomination. How might bishops best use these hierarchies to engage priests and deacons in pro-democracy activity?
2. In addition to abortion, some Catholic parishioners prioritize "culture war" issues (e.g., related gender and racial identities) over issues relating to US democracy. How might these priorities be reversed?
3. How might Catholic organizations educate more Catholics to consider issues beyond abortion when deciding who to vote for at the local, state, and national level?

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VETERANS AND SECURITY FORCES

Ukrainian Veterans Save Lives Through Quiet Diplomacy

**By [Claire Trilling](#)*

Time Period: December 2002 - December 2004

Location: Ukraine

Main Actors: General Volodymyr Antonets, veterans & officers in the Ukrainian security forces

Tactics

- Dialogue/engagement
- [Fraternization](#)
- [Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance](#)
- [Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents](#)

In 1999, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma won a second term in an election marred by irregularities, kicking off a period of democratic decline that lasted until 2005 and was characterized by high levels of corruption and the repression of dissidents. Two major nonviolent resistance campaigns occurred during this period. The first was the “Ukraine Without Kuchma” movement in 2000, which involved mass protests in the capital, Kyiv, against the corruption and illegal activities of President Leonid Kuchma and other oligarchs. Although the government effectively repressed the campaign, leading civil society groups engaged in careful training and network-building over the subsequent years.

At the same time, however, the government and its supporters undertook further actions to erode Ukrainian democracy. In 2004, as Ukraine faced a presidential election, the ruling party put forward Viktor Yanukovich as their presidential candidate and began a shadow campaign of manipulation and sabotage to ensure his victory. When, despite widespread evidence of fraud, the Central Election Commission announced Yanukovich had defeated opposition candidate Viktor Yuschenko, civil society groups activated their networks and, in partnership with the opposition coalition of political parties, Our Ukraine, kicked off the “Orange Revolution,” named after the color of the opposition coalition.

At the heart of the mass resistance campaign was the nonviolent occupation of Independence Square in Kyiv, which drew millions of participants, many of whom symbolically wore orange. Much of the city mobilized to support the protest camp, while citizens outside Kyiv organized local demonstrations, marches, and strikes. During the campaign, a network of veterans organized by former General Volodymyr Antonets played a crucial role in preventing a violent crackdown against the protesters by state security forces.

General Antonets joined the opposition after being pushed out of his position as Chief of the Ukrainian Air Force by President Kuchma in 1999. Beginning in December 2002, Antonets recruited volunteers from among his retired colleagues with the goal of building bridges to the state security forces. Together, they conducted outreach to mid-ranking officers, military families, and other veterans, gradually organizing regional teams that could pass information from their contacts to Antonets and his partners in the Our Ukraine coalition. The veterans’ network helped

the opposition party stay up-to-date on opinions and attitudes among the security forces toward the government.

When the Orange Revolution broke out, the veterans mobilized their regional networks. Strategically working from the grassroots up, they recruited a critical mass of lower-ranking soldiers who were prepared to refuse any orders to use arms against civilians. Building from that base, Antonets and his team then negotiated informal agreements with middle- and upper-ranking military officers that they would also refuse to use force against protesters and that they would intervene if the government attempted to use the police or special forces to do so.

Demonstrators themselves added indirect pressure on top of the veterans' bridgebuilding work, often chanting "the military is with the people" at protests. On November 28th, the efforts to induce a loyalty shift among the security forces (away from the autocratic ruler and in support of democratic constitutionalism) paid off. When the Interior Minister attempted to mobilize special forces outside Kyiv to crack down on the protests in the city, Our Ukraine leaders received warning through the veterans' network and reached out to the Army Chief of Staff, who threatened to place soldiers between the special forces and the protesters. The Interior Minister backed down, and the demonstrations continued without the threat of violent repression.

Mass mobilization continued unimpeded for five more days, until the Supreme Court acknowledged the use of fraud and ordered new elections for late December 2004. Parliament revised the country's electoral law to limit the potential for fraud and put forward constitutional reforms that would limit the powers of the president thereafter. Yuschenko won the new elections, and the backsliding trend quickly reversed.

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US Military Leaders Affirm Their Commitment to Democracy

**By [Sivahn Sapirstein](#)*

Time Period: January 2021

Location: Washington, DC

Main Actors: Joint Chiefs of Staff

Tactics

- [Letters of Opposition or Support](#)

On January 6, 2021, the United States faced a direct threat to its democracy. Encouraged by former President Donald Trump and defended by a significant number of politicians, the January 6th attack on the US capitol was a last-ditch attempt to undermine the 2020 presidential election by preventing an official count of the Electoral College votes. While the violent mob was unable to stop the proceedings, and Joe Biden became president shortly after, the scope and length of the attack were particularly concerning to pro-democracy Americans.

In response, the Joint Chiefs of Staff published an [unprecedented letter](#) to the joint forces. [The Joint Chiefs](#) is a politically appointed body comprised of the top eight military officials in the country and headed by the Chairman who serves as the principal military advisor to the White House. Given their rank, their commentary has serious implications. [The letter](#) stated plainly that the events of January 6th were an assault on American democracy and against the rule of law. It also emphasized how the US military will continue its 250-year legacy of defending the Constitution and reiterated that President-elect Biden will be the next Commander in Chief, in line with the rule of law.

While the ideals listed in the letter - a commitment to the Constitution and upholding the rule of law - are not themselves political, any commentary by military officers on ongoing political matters is nearly unprecedented in American history. The only similar act in recent history is the [“revolt”](#) by retired generals against former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s management of the Iraq War in 2006. However, as with most instances of political involvement from the armed forces, these were all former officers. The US military has an important standard of maintaining an [apolitical](#) approach to domestic politics, which is critical to ensure civilian control over the armed forces. However, in the months leading up to January 6th this reputation was being challenged. While [broader trends of politicizing political appointees](#) are not directly linked to the Trump presidency, during Mr. Trump’s time in office, his remarks of “my military” and the planned surprise [photo-op with General Mark Milley](#) (the chairman of the Joint Chiefs) after using the National Guard to clear peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters, an incident General Milley apologized for soon after, particularly threatened to damage the reputation of nonpartisanship.

Therefore, in publishing this letter reminding the public of the military’s primary commitment to the Constitution, the Joint Chiefs not only rejected the prospect that they would be a pawn in any plans to overthrow American democracy, they were also working to reestablish a key pillar of American democracy: their own nonpartisan status.

Where to Learn More

- [Military Chiefs Remind Troops of Their Oath After Fallout From Assault on Capitol](#)



A “Wall of Vets” Protects Free Expression in Portland

**By [Sivahn Sapirstein](#)*

Time Period: Summer 2020

Location: Portland, Oregon (and then spread across USA)

Main Actors: U.S. Veterans

Tactics

- [Protective Presence](#)
- [Nonviolent Interjection](#)

Following the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, [demonstrators organized](#) across the United States to protest police violence, systemic racism, and systemic inequality. In Portland, Oregon these protests took place nightly for several months. The protests were primarily peaceful, though punctuated by occasional violent escalation. After over a month of protesting, then-President Trump sent federal troops to Portland, [without the approval of the Governor or Mayor](#), claiming that the city and state politicians had lost control. While the purported purpose was to subdue the protests, in many cases [the federal agents escalated conflict](#) by employing excessive (and illegal) tactics, including abducting [protesters](#) off the street.

Observing these dynamics unfold, Christopher David, a Navy veteran, decided to attend a protest to speak with officers about what he saw as a violation of their shared oath to support, uphold, and defend the Constitution. After speaking to several officers, David was [beaten](#) by federal agents and pepper sprayed, resulting in a broken hand. A video of the encounter went viral, inspiring veterans from a variety of branches and backgrounds who resonated with the call to remove federal troops. Together, through Facebook and other community groups, they organized the “[Wall of Vets](#)” to protect protesters’ first amendment rights.

The strategy built on the legacy of human protective walls and the wider practice of protective presence and nonviolent intervention, where third party groups strategically place themselves to deter violence directed against others. For the “Wall of Vets,” protesters gathered to stand between federal agents and protesters, anticipating the violence of previous nights but intending for their presence to function as a “[shield](#)” for protesters. The veterans involved were also aware that their presence and legitimacy [would bring increased media coverage](#) which would raise the profile of the protests nationally and perhaps shift the narrative. As the group represented a wide spectrum of political orientations, their unifying purpose was defending the protesters’ constitutional rights to protest and freedom of speech. Specifically, they saw their presence at the protests as a continuation of the oaths they took in the US armed forces.

In addition to showing up for protective presence as a group and communicating with other organizers already on the ground, David made a point of [refocusing](#) media coverage of his experience being attacked back to the protests, the issue of systemic racism in America, and his duty towards the Constitution and the American people. Considering the shared history and understanding between veterans and the current federal agents, David and other attendees hoped that their engagement would have a unique capacity to lower conflict and excessive tactics by federal troops, with the ultimate goal of removing federal troops entirely from the protests. Around two weeks later that goal was achieved, ushering in an [ease in tensions](#) at the nightly protests.

Where to Learn More

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Venezuelan Military Officers Refuse Honors from a Dictator

**By Adam Fefer*

Time Period: June 2000

Location: Venezuela

Main Actors: Venezuelan Military Officers

Tactics

- [Selective social boycott](#)

Venezuela began a long, sad road towards authoritarianism and economic crisis during Hugo Chávez's presidency (1999-2013). The 1998 election ended four decades of competitive two-party politics in Venezuela. Chávez, a military officer who had been imprisoned in 1992 for plotting a coup d'état, won the 1998 election without a mainstream nomination. During his campaign, Chávez [deployed populist rhetoric](#) against a corrupt and unequal system that could no longer meet voters' needs, for example calling to "fry" his opponents.

After his 1998 victory, Chávez moved to rewrite the constitution, slowly [eroding Venezuela's system of checks and balances](#). He then proceeded to dismiss the Supreme Court and legislature. Chávez's military allies and former coup-plotters were tapped as ministers of defense, transport, and taxation, as well as state governors and directors of Venezuela's secret police. Regional army commands were empowered to oversee elected officials. Many such appointments were made without legislative approvals. Meanwhile, military courts largely shielded human rights abusers from civil prosecution.

During Venezuela's 2000 election, opposition parties had a strong showing. This competitive atmosphere helped opponents raise awareness of [Chávez's undemocratic attempts to consolidate power](#). Although he won the election, some of Chávez's key military advisors deserted him during the campaign. In June, a ceremony was held for 93 retiring officers who were to receive the military's highest honors. In opposition to Chávez's power-grabbing and military interference, 42 of the 93 officers did not attend the ceremony.

The retiring officers' boycott did not ostensibly hamper Chávez's efforts to consolidate power alongside his military allies. It was relatively small-scale and was not followed up by any observable additional resistance tactics. However, the boycott sent a strong signal that Chávez's actions violated norms of Venezuelan democracy. Democracy organizers in the US could benefit from further studying acts of resistance among Venezuela's armed forces, especially in light of Donald [Trump's attempts to politicize the US military](#).

Where to Learn More

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 - Schaffer, M. (2023). "[Trump Politicized the Military. Was That the Real Problem With the Jan. 6 Response?](#)" *Politico*.
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Veterans Defend Standing Rock Protesters

**By [Louis Pascarella](#)*

Time Period: December 2016

Location: United States, North Dakota (Standing Rock Reservation)

Main Actors: Veterans, Veterans Stand for Standing Rock

Tactics

- Protest
- [Non-violent occupation](#)
- [Assemblies of protest](#)

The Standing Rock protests began in April of 2016 in response to the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline near the Standing Rock Reservation. Citing concerns over environmental destruction, water contamination, and the desecration of sacred sites, nearby Indigenous groups attempted to stop the pipeline's construction. Protesters [sued for an injunction in court](#), while setting up camps and active protests outside the construction area. Peaceful protests were met with [violence](#); a mix of police, National Guard, and private security forces used water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, pepper spray, batons, and dogs to repress protesters.

Witnessing the violence against peaceful protesters, and wanting to use their experience and social capital, veterans organized a campaign to protect protesters from violence. [Describing her reasons](#) for participating, veteran Danielle Bradley stated, "I couldn't take the mistreatment of the protesters and sit at home and do nothing about it... we came out to show that we will defend the people of this country, even when our obligation on paper has ended." Coast Guard veteran Asleigh Jennifer Parker [stated their intentions to help](#) protesters: "We want to offer them a moment of peace and, if we can, take a little bit of pressure off."

The group "Veterans Stand for Standing Rock" crowdfunded a campaign which [raised over \\$500,000](#) to purchase supplies and other aid resources. Veterans Stand for Standing Rock, alongside other unaffiliated veterans, showed up at Standing Rock around December 1st, 2016. [Over 2,000](#) veterans arrived, with another 1,000 in waiting (the camp could not accommodate everyone). From the onset, veterans ceded leadership to tribal leaders, recognizing that as new members to the movement, they were best suited to a support role. When asked to ensure their presence was peaceful, veterans [shed their "battle gear"](#), deciding they did not want to appear as aggressors dressed similarly to the militarized security forces.

On the day of protest, veterans arrived at the front lines and helped with setup. Veterans built shelters, maintained fires for warmth, and protected the perimeter of the camp. They placed themselves physically between security forces and the other protesters. The presence of veterans was a success. As [described](#) by former Marine Tom Petersen, "The police started backing down. In the face of such an impressive veteran presence, law enforcement vehicles began leaving. Then, a little after 4 p.m., an announcement came over the speakers. The Department of the Army halted the project." While the Department of the Army's hold would not remain indefinitely, the pause allowed protesters space to rest and reorganize.

Activists can learn much from the efforts of veterans at Standing Rock. Most importantly is that diverse groups strengthen movements. Inclusion of veterans in the resistance space afforded

Standing Rock protesters with unique skills and greater public exposure. Due to their combat experiences, veterans were willing to stand up to militarized security forces, especially in defense of other protesters. Additionally, veterans wield high levels of respect from the public. This fact deterred security forces from their “usual” repression, as they knew engagement would incur higher costs.

Veterans at Standing Rock also catalyzed success through their desire to work with Indigenous leaders. The willingness to accept tribal leadership directive and commit wholly to peace was a major factor in their success: veterans deterred security forces and aided Indigenous protesters in a supportive and deferential manner. Following direction eased concerns regarding a large influx of newcomers. This is important as coalition building can lead to tensions between different factions. Clear communication of goals and observation of already established leadership ameliorated tension. Additionally, the dedication to nonviolence meant veterans did not (purposely or not) encourage violence and place others in danger. As a movement, the Indigenous protesters felt it important to convey a message of nonviolent resistance, and veterans obliged this wholeheartedly.

Where to Learn More

- [Standing Down, Standing Together: Coalition-Building at Standing Rock](#)
 - [Why I Joined My Fellow Vets at Standing Rock This Weekend](#)
 - [2,000 veterans to give protesters a break at Standing Rock](#)
 - [Thousands of Veterans Descend on Standing Rock to Protect and Serve](#)
 - [Veterans Stand for Standing Rock: “We Will Never Stop Protecting”](#)
 - [Veterans to Serve as ‘Human Shields’ for Dakota Pipeline Protesters](#)
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