Rechanneling Beliefs:
How Information Flows Hinder or Help American Democracy

To solve the current crisis of democratic fragility, we don't need a return to some previous status quo. Instead, we need to work towards a dynamic stability that incorporates new forces into American democracy rather than denying them, and enables people with different beliefs and ideas to coexist. Here's how.

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> This year, we need to start fixing American democracy. On the technical level, 2020 saw exceptionally successful elections under exceptionally difficult circumstances. People voted in unprecedented numbers despite the coronavirus pandemic. Their votes were counted with no major difficulties. In states such as Georgia, paper records and auditing procedures made it possible to verify the count's accuracy.

Despite these facts, our institutions and procedures have not created the kinds of shared public consensus over the results that they were supposed to. The famous theorist of democracy, Adam Przeworski, defines democracy as a "system in which parties lose elections." More broadly, this means a functioning democracy is one where the losers admit they have lost, and then adapt to improve their chances of winning in the future. Many people believed (and continue to believe) that the 2020 election was fixed. They were encouraged in these beliefs by the sitting president's repeated accusations of fraud and conspiracy, and elected Republican officials who actively supported the president's claims. What should have been a moment of democratic celebration instead starkly illustrates the fragility of American democracy.

It's much easier for democratic stability to break down than most people realize, but this doesn't mean we must despair over the future. It's possible, though very difficult, to back away from our current situation towards one of greater democratic stability. This wouldn't entail a restoration of a previous status quo. Instead, it would recognize that the status quo was less stable than it seemed, and a major source of the tensions that have started to unravel it. What we need is a dynamic stability, one that incorporates new forces into American democracy rather than trying to deny or quash them.

This paper is our attempt to explain what this might mean in practice. We start by analyzing the problem and explaining more precisely why a breakdown in public consensus harms democracy. We then look at how these beliefs are being undermined by three feedback loops, in which anti-democratic actions and anti-democratic beliefs feed on each other. Finally, we explain how these feedback loops might be redirected so as to sustain democracy rather than undermining it. Throughout the paper, we focus on the problems among conservatives, because these are the problems that are most urgent to American democracy. Our prescriptions are not intended to weaken the Republican Party, but instead to redirect its energies so that its extremists don't undermine a basic shared understanding of democracy.

To be clear: redirecting these and other energies in more constructive ways presents enormous challenges, and any plausible success will at best be untidy and provisional. But, almost by definition, that's true of any successful democratic reforms where people of different beliefs and values need to figure out how to coexist. Even when it's working well, democracy is messy. Solutions to democratic breakdowns are going to be messy as well.

The Crucial Role of Democratic Beliefs

What role do people's beliefs play in supporting democracy? Or, put more straightforwardly, why is it a problem that very many Americans believe obviously false claims about widespread election fraud? The answer may seem obvious, but actually it's not. We don't have a good understanding of the relationship between democracy and citizens' beliefs.

Przeworski and others use basic game theory to model democracy as a system of mutually interacting beliefs and strategies. They start from the brutal assumption that politicians and citizens don't really care about democracy as such. Politicians in a democracy disagree with each other, and will only buy into democracy if it gives them a real chance at ruling. Otherwise, they may turn to violence, throwing real stones rather than the "paper stones" of ballots. The boundary between settling political disagreements through votes and settling them through armed violence is far thinner than most people realize.

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This stripped-down and pessimistic account of democracy captures key aspects of the situation we're in. Different factions support democracy so long as they believe they will do better in the long term under democracy than under non-democracy. This means that competitive elections are a crucial source of stability: when a party loses one election it has reason to believe that it might win in the future. Fears about the costs of democratic breakdown can also stabilize democracy, although some parties (those that would do worse under an autocracy) will be more worried than others.

The good news is that when everyone has the right beliefs, democracy will be self-enforcing. That is, it will be stable without any need for outside intervention. The bad news is that if key factions stop believing in democracy, it may break down. Like Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*: if we stop believing in democracy, it will die.

When Democratic Beliefs Break Down

A faction will stop accepting democracy when it thinks it would be better off in an autocracy. But it also might do so for defensive reasons. First and most obviously, if a major faction stops believing that it has a chance of winning in the future, it may reject democracy and try to subvert election rules and results. Second, if it believes that voting rules and the institutions of voting are rigged against it, it may stop participating in elections, start cheating, or both. Finally, if a major party or faction starts believing that its opponents are crazy and irrational, it may no longer want to participate in democracy. All of these processes can be self-reinforcing, creating a kind of feedback loop of ever worse democratic breakdown (something that game theory is bad at modeling, but can be really important in real world politics). We can see signs of all three kinds of breakdown in the U.S. at the moment.

To the first. Some Republicans believe that they can't win a fair election. Trump refused to accept his loss, instead pressing electoral officials to "find" enough votes for him to win, and threatening dire consequences if they didn't. Even before the Capitol invasion, this significantly damaged the stability of democracy. It was damaged further when a significant number of Republican senators, and a majority of Republican members of the House of Representatives, signed onto some version of Trump's complaints. It was damaged yet again when a large majority of Republican senators declined to convict him in his impeachment trial for fomenting the insurrection.

The worry is that this creates a self-reinforcing feedback loop, in which losers will be unwilling to accept election results in the future. Most obviously, elected Republicans will now find it much easier to refuse to accept future election results that go against them. Indeed, they may fear for their careers, or their families' safety, if they refuse to support Trump's continued defection from democratic expectations. If the balance of power had depended on just one state under the control of Republican elected officials, Trump's challenge might have worked. And perhaps it will next time.

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This may fuel another feedback loop. Democrats might also be less likely to accept election results in the future. They may reason that the Republican party's unwillingness to accept elections that go against them may mean that Republicans will use the power of elected office to make sure that there aren't going to *be* any elections that go against them. Therefore the Democrats can't win if they keep on playing fair, justifying their using every means possible to win. And of course, such actions may in turn make Republicans believe that their own fears about Democrats' intentions have been validated, resulting in a vicious spiral.

In such a world, everyone's commitment to accept election results starts to break down. No one wants to be the last sucker to play by the rules when everyone else is willing to break them. When Senator Mitch McConnell warned that "[i]f this election was overturned by allegations from the losing side, our democracy would enter a death spiral," he was not being idealistic. He was describing how unraveling beliefs might lead to a situation where every presidential election would be, in McConnell's words again, "a scramble for power at any cost."

Democracy can also be weakened more subtly, through slow strangulation. The Republican party has become convinced that it can only win when voter turnout is low, leading it to advocate new rules that would make it harder to vote. It has also engaged in widescale gerrymandering, and is expected to do so again in the states where it controls the governorship and the state legislatures. Politicians have always tried to game the system, but when the gaming becomes systemic, it generates incentives for opponents to game in their turn where they can, with the result that the formal machinery of democracy becomes ever more unrepresentative of what voters want.

This downward spiral is reinforced by a second spiral of decaying trust in the institutions of vote counting and certification that elections depend upon. In one important sense, these institutions held in 2020 and early 2021. Most of the relevant officials refused to accede to the president's requests to ignore the vote count. Courts that were asked to overturn the election results declined to intervene. Congress and the vice-president certified the votes despite the president's attempt to use mob pressure to compel them to do otherwise.

Yet while the institutions held, people's belief in them did not. Even though there's no evidence of widespread election fraud, a majority of Republicans believe that it happened. And while we know how to make elections even more secure, we don't know how to convince the public that these measures work. The state of Georgia's vote counting procedures conform to many of the recommendations of experts. It has auditable paper ballots. The full recount of the votes in the 2020 presidential election did not lead to any significant change in the result. Even so, many Republicans still believe that the election was fixed.

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It is possible that some of these beliefs are weakly held expressions of partisan resentment, rather than deep convictions about what actually happened. But such weakly held beliefs on the part of many can combine with more deeply rooted beliefs in a smaller minority, and create an apparent general consensus. That, in turn, can create symbolic loyalty tests for politicians: having to agree to a false version of events in order to demonstrate their partisan credentials to voters.

This can also lead to a spiral of actions and counteractions. If you believe (or profess to believe) that the other side gimmicked the institutions to win an election, then you may be happy to see your side cheat to redress the imbalance. This may provoke retaliation from your opponents, spurring counter-retaliation in turn.

Even if this doesn't happen, allegations of cheating may provide rhetorical support for changes that purportedly stop electoral fraud, but in fact aim to make voting harder. There is a consensus among expert political scientists that voting fraud is rare in modern U.S. politics, and effectively inconsequential; but measures taken to "stop" voting fraud can be very consequential in reducing turnout among key communities. Adapting the words of the writer John Crowley, conspiracies have rarely held power in history, but the belief that conspiracies have held power has been very powerful indeed.

Finally, the third spiral. If democracy is to really work, we need to believe that our opponents as well as our fellow partisans are reasonable. That is, even if we think that their beliefs are wrong, we need to think that they are responsive to evidence. This belief is under severe challenge. There are conspiratorial beliefs

on both the left and the right in the U.S., and these conspiratorial beliefs are more visible thanks to social media. However, these beliefs underpin politics on the right more than on the left, because, as Yochai Benkler and his colleagues have documented, right wing media acts as a conveyor belt transporting crazy ideas from the fringes to the center of Republican politics. One result is that 41 percent of the Republicans who have heard of QAnon think that it's a good thing for the country.

These three feedback loops all demonstrate that beliefs are crucial to democracy. Democracy works well when parties believe (1) that their opponents will give up power if they lose elections, (2) that electoral institutions are trustworthy, and (3) that their opponents aren't irrational, crazy, or wicked. If these beliefs start to break down, the process of breakdown may feed upon itself. That is plausibly where we are today in the United States.

Reinforcing Democratic Beliefs

It's tempting to think that the best way to solve our democratic problems is to try to turn American politics back to the way it was before Donald Trump, but we should resist. The obvious reason is that Trump's election didn't happen by magic. It reflected and amplified longstanding problems in American democracy. The less obvious reason is that democracy is a dynamic rather than a static system. If it can achieve stability, it is through redirecting dynamic forces so that they reinforce American democracy rather than undermining it.

Under different circumstances, the three feedback loops that are undermining American democracy might reinforce it. Politicians and parties are ambitious, and that selfish ambition can be a wonderful thing when directed appropriately. As the political theorist Nancy Rosenblum argues, the desire to win competitive elections makes politicians attentive to what their voters want. These ambitions can turn partisan politics into a self-reinforcing cycle of competition among politicians to solve the problems of the democratic public, which will tend to strengthen democracy over time.

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Equally, there is nothing in principle wrong with citizens questioning electoral institutions. Sometimes these institutions are unjust. They've been designed to help preserve the monopoly of a political party or—as in most of the U.S.—a duopoly. Ballot design, polling sites, identification requirements: all of these affect who wins and who loses. Gerrymandering has become a fine art thanks to better data and the development of sophisticated statistical models. And while today's U.S. electoral officials are remarkably honest and responsible, historically that hasn't always been the case. Citizen skepticism and oversight is an important safeguard for ensuring that democracy works. It can generate feedback loops that reinforce democracy, by ensuring that rules and officials are responsive to democratic needs.

Finally, while consensus among citizens provides democratic stability, that consensus often stands in dire need of being challenged. The U.S. has a terrible history of systematically excluding key perspectives from the purported mainstream. The apparent conformity and unanimity of the 1950s papered over major disagreements, and excluded African American perspectives from the national conversation.

The dynamic advantage of democracy is that it aspires to be what Barry Weingast and his colleagues call an "open political order." When it is working appropriately, it allows all groups to organize themselves and to press their concerns. New media have made some kinds of gatekeeping harder, opening up opportunities for different groups. The same social media structures that helped QAnon also helped make Black Lives Matter into a cause that couldn't be ignored any longer.

This means that we need to ignore the persistent temptation to water down democracy in favor of elites and expertise, closing down debate and shoring up static institutional solutions to fend off apparent chaos. We still need experts, and we probably can't do without some system of elites, but strengthening their authority at the expense of democracy is a terrible idea. It will reinforce the belief that some groups will never be allowed to win, reinforce distrust of institutions and expertise that seem ever further from the interests of ordinary people, and create ever greater contradictions between official mythologies and people's lived experiences.

How Can We Do Better?

Real change is going to be hard to push through, because the problems that plague U.S. democracy also impede those who want to fix it. But allowing those problems to fester and worsen will make change even more difficult.

The first and most important fix is to change the incentives of politicians. Specifically, the ambitions of Republican politicians need to be redirected to reinforce democratic institutions rather than undermining them.

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A good first step would be to pass the "For the People Act," which makes voting easier, criminalizes inter-ference with voters, and prevents gerrymandering by introducing electoral commissions to set constituency boundaries. This bill is commonly thought of as a partisan bill that favors Democrats, but its long-term consequences will not benefit either party. The 2020 elections provide evidence that the Republican party could succeed in a higher turnout election, by attracting voters from groups who have distrusted them in the past. As Jamelle Bouie argues, the 2020 election suggested that Republicans have swapped white suburban voters with college education, who are more likely to vote, for poorer and less educated voters, who are less likely to vote when there are obstacles in their way. If the 2022 Congressional elections again suggest that Republicans benefit from high turnout, then they may move away from election fraud rhetoric towards making voting easier (while still trying to depress it among Black voters and others on the margins).

By making voting easier and rule manipulation harder, the law would encourage both parties' politicians to compete by attracting voters rather than trying to rig the system in their favor. This would help reverse the slow strangulation of American democracy.

This doesn't directly address the more pressing problem: that President Trump refused to accept defeat and encouraged violent rioters, and that a large majority of elected Republicans either acquiesced or openly embraced his tactics. To fix that problem, we have only second-best remedies. But what we have, we need to use.

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We must make life as painful as possible for politicians who showed themselves willing to trash the basic organizing principles of democracy. Under ordinary circumstances, the instinct to compromise can help stabilize democracy. But there is no room for compromise with actors who have supported, or come to support, violent actions aimed at overthrowing a legitimate election. This is why it is urgently important to punish Trump and his enablers: not because it will hurt the Republican party, but because it will help democracy. Politicians who can be shown to have actively helped undermine the election, or to have provided help to the Capitol rioters, should be prosecuted. Where legal punishments aren't available or appropriate, informal punishments such as boycotts should be applied to the many Republican members of the House of Representatives who voted to deny legitimate election results, cutting them out of the opportunity to shape legislation.

Such punishments should be as harsh as possible within the constraints of law, to create disincentives for flirting with authoritarianism. However, they should also be narrowly and specifically targeted only against those who explicitly supported the effort to reverse the election results, and not at the Republican party as a whole. And where Republicans are willing to embrace democracy, Democrats and others should welcome them as part of a pro-democratic coalition, just as after the attempted 1981 coup in Spain, conservatives and Socialists "came together to defend democracy" against the hard right.

Other measures to realign politicians' long-term incentives more systematically are more difficult to implement. As Lee Drutman has argued, pushing states to move to some version of ranked-choice voting (a system in which voters do not just opt for one candidate, but instead say who their most preferred candidate is, then their second-most preferred candidate, and so on) might be the single most effective way to stabilize democracy. In the short run, it reduces the likelihood that an election official would be successfully "primaried" by a more extreme candidate from their own party. This would make senators and members of the House more likely to represent their constituents as a whole rather than their party activists (as witnessed by the actions of Senator Lisa Murkowski).

In the long run, ranked-choice voting might break the duopoly of modern American politics, by allowing voters to express their preferences for parties and candidates who could never win under the current system, making it possible for a more moderate right-wing party to emerge. However, ranked voting will be opposed by many incumbents, who don't want to have to fight elections under new and unpredictable conditions, and by some voters who prefer a voting system that they are familiar with. While it has been implemented in Maine and Alaska, it is still rare. More far-reaching measures, such as a broadly defined constitutional right to vote, would have greater benefits still. But these are at best long-term aspirations under current political conditions.

Building broader trust in election results is also critical. This is all about information and the ways that citizens receive and make sense of it.

Many conservative citizens will continue to believe in widespread voter fraud, even if their politicians no longer feed their mistrust. It provides an easy heuristic for explaining away losses, especially when combined with racist myths about systemic fraud in Black-dominated cities. The challenge is not to convince that minority, but instead to prevent their false beliefs from overwhelming democracy, and to harness a more reasonable skepticism to reinforce democracy rather than weakening it. This involves small-, medium-, and large-scale changes.

The small-scale change might be to provide a different way for democratic publics to stay informed about democracy. As things stand, citizens' beliefs and institutional expertise can work against each other. Because many citizens don't believe in experts or public institutions, efforts by these experts or institutions to reassure them can be counterproductive. But there are ways to involve citizens more directly. Other countries have experimented with "policy juries" or "citizen assemblies" as ways to involve citizens directly in policy making. So why not involve them directly in supervising the workings of democracy?

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The idea would be to select a group of citizens at random (rather than self-selecting volunteers) at the local level to serve in a small supervisory body. They would then be provided with all the information they needed to understand how the system worked and what the safeguards were, as well as being able to directly monitor the counting procedures and verification procedures. They could deliberate and issue a report on the procedures, how well they had worked, and whether there was need for change—and then disband. This would provide both a check against problems and abuses in the system, and a nonprofessional means of verifying the process for the benefit of other citizens. This could go wrong in the ways that juries can occasionally go wrong, but juries do reasonably well at ascertaining facts and creating a shared understanding that the law isn't just a matter of judges and professional advocates.

The medium-scale change is partly underway already: limiting the spread of widescale myths about election fraud. Towards the end of 2020, social media companies, which had previously been reluctant to intervene in politics, banned Trump and others who repeated bogus claims that the election had been stolen. This likely helped at the margins. However, there are continuing questions about whether private companies ought to be allowed to administer the public responsibility of including or excluding actors from large swathes of public discussion. Furthermore, it is hard to moderate complex political questions at scale.

This is just one piece of a vast and complex debate (we return to it below). The large-scale changes involve how best to rebuild our information structure. Should these platforms be broken up via antitrust? Should they adopt better means of public accountability? We don't have good answers, just the unsatisfying assertion that we need to develop further our nascent understanding of how different kinds of power (platform power, economic power, political power) are entangled, to develop better remedies. Furthermore, online platforms are just one part of the infrastructure. As we discuss below, there is reason to believe that Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting affiliates, and smaller competitors on the right play a more substantial role in spreading false beliefs in the U.S. than social media.

Ranked-choice voting would help here as well. One of the less widely appreciated problems of the current party system is that it binds together anti-democratic extremists on the right with those whose beliefs are more moderate. An electoral system that allowed for more than one party on the right would weaken the power of extreme ideas, by making it easier for those who didn't share them to break out and form their own parties.

Finally, and perhaps the most difficult problem, is how to preserve the openness of democracy to new perspectives and groups while also preventing a general epistemic breakdown where no one agrees on the truth. Here, the difficult questions involve gatekeepers. We have seen periods in American history with a much higher apparent degree of consensus. In the 1950s, bandwidth was scarce and regulations were strong. This allowed television networks, radio stations and, to a lesser extent, newspapers, to act as gatekeepers, enforcing a centrist consensus. They excluded voices that didn't fit, whether they were conservatives (who bitterly complained that the system was rigged against them) or African Americans (who were forced to build their own separate ecology of news).

We live in a world of infinite bandwidth, allowing anyone to speak (though not necessarily to be heard), but where gatekeepers are again powerful. The reemergence of single-channel companies (such as Netflix and Disney Plus); the dominance of a small handful of national newspapers, while local and regional newspapers wither and disappear; conglomerates' buying up of radio stations and local TV affiliates; the convergence of Internet communication on a small number of platforms: all of these create new opportunities for gatekeeping.

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Sometimes these gatekeepers actively spread disinformation as part of their business model; sometimes they dabble at limiting disinformation, but only when it doesn't harm their business model.

The fundamental trade-off here is the following: On one hand, we want to preserve the opportunity for people to articulate their shared interests and political aspirations, even when these understandings and aspirations are at odds with the existing majority understanding. On the other hand, we want to preserve the minimal standards for truth that allow democracy to successfully adjudicate claims. These desires are frequently in tension with each other; new groups' understanding of their situation often directly challenges the accepted verities of those around them. And there can be no universal umpire to arbitrate clashing understandings of the truth in a satisfactory fashion, since there isn't any universal standard for what is true and what is not.

Striking this trade-off is essential. Democracy has to allow new groups with new needs and understandings of politics to coalesce and make demands. Otherwise, it will stagnate and die. Yet democracy too needs to protect itself against fragmentation and incoherence. A healthy democracy is one where the feedback loops strengthen democratic institutions: as new groups organize and articulate their demands through democratic means, this obliges others to recognize the legitimacy of their demands.

Figuring out these trade-offs in practice will often require specific understanding of the relevant technologies and economic structures through which information is disseminated. So while we can identify general problems, we don't have any generally applicable solutions. Any answers depend on the particulars of the situation. What we can offer are three broad design principles, based upon our understanding of these trade-offs.

The first principle: democracies should be hesitant to regulate decentralized forms of communication where individuals from a wide variety of communities or viewpoints speak to other individuals or small groups. Yes, these forms of decentralized communication can allow rumors to propagate. But long before WhatsApp, there were chain emails, and before them, oral culture and gossip networks. These decentralized systems also provide the basic means through which publics can start to come together, and begin to figure out their shared situation and common goals. The possible harms of misinformation spreading along these networks are real, but limited. The possible democratic benefits are equally real, but much wider reaching. The balance suggests that in general the assumption should be not to limit or shut down these networks, except where they are designed or primarily used for propaganda and/or organizing violence.

The second principle is that democracies should be cautious about expanding the power of gatekeepers. While this may be warranted in specific situations, it should only be done to the extent necessary to mitigate urgent democratic problems. We have already mentioned social media companies' efforts to dampen the spread of messages intended to undermine faith in fair elections. These efforts have not been fully successful, but they have been more successful, and less costly to free expression, than many feared. Still, there are obvious long-term difficulties. We don't yet know the ability of platforms to respond at scale to more subtle forms of manipulation. Equally, as platforms develop more sophisticated means of filtering, they will have incentives to use these means either for their own self-interest, or because less-democratic governments demand that they do so.

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Other gatekeepers—such as newspapers, cable news providers, and networks of local TV stations—also have power, and are often more willing to use it to tilt the table in favor of their preferred political goals. A more fragmented marketplace means that these gatekeepers don't have the same incentives towards centrism that their counterparts did in the 1950s and 1960s. This is a good thing, since it makes it easier for new groups and interests to find a niche, but equally, some gatekeepers have little incentive to stick even to minimal standards of the truth. They don't face punishment from regulators, from courts, or from their viewers for lying, except on rare occasions.

One such occasion was the recent decision by Fox News, Newsmax, and other broadcasters to stop claiming that voting machine manufacturers deliberately rigged their machines in Biden's favor, because these claims were so preposterous that they might meet the high legal standard for proving "actual malice," statements made "with knowledge that [they were] false or with reckless disregard of whether [they were] false or not," potentially making these news organizations liable for defamation. This raises one possibility for targeted reform, depending on the legal specifics (we are not communications lawyers): a regulatory requirement that news organizations only receive broadcasting licenses if they have substantial internal organizational structures that check and maintain records on the truth or falsehood of claims that are broadcasted. This would strengthen internal critics against systematic mendacity and expose these broadcasters to greater potential liability if they broadcasted false or reckless claims, while avoiding moving to a UK-type system in which libel and slander laws can be readily misused by the powerful.

The third principle: democracies should maintain democratic oversight of gatekeepers rather than deferring to purely private arrangements such as Facebook's Oversight Board. The risks of failing to do so are obvious. Private arrangements have no actual authority, and are subject to the whim of the gatekeepers who establish them. Their mandate can be defined so as to make it hard for them to intervene in the most crucial problems: those where problematic gatekeeping and the gatekeeper's profit model reinforce each other. And when they do make recommendations that go against the gatekeeper's business model, they can be ignored, or fobbed off with superficial solutions. Real accountability and real power are unlikely in such situations. Gatekeepers are usually in the money-making business, and real responsibility makes it harder to do anything to reduce the monopoly profits that their shareholders have become used to.

This is not to say that democratic oversight will be perfect. If, as Mark Twain said, God made an idiot for practice before creating the school board, then Senate hearings on technical topics mark a still higher stage of divine achievement. Yet even as they are, such hearings have a better chance of having consequences than the various flavors of self-regulation that gatekeeping companies prefer. And as technology becomes more political, and more relevant to voters, oversight is likely to become better.

Conclusions

> Democracy is always at risk of decaying into quasi- or full-on authoritarianism, because the shared beliefs that anchor it can shift quickly from stabilizing it to destabilizing it.

The problems faced by democratic systems, especially those of the U.S., are grave. It seems as though we have suddenly slipped from a world of democratic stability into a world of political chaos, a democratic dystopia that is tearing apart the fundamental shared beliefs that democracy relies on. It is no wonder that people are scared, and even panicky.

The truth is that American democracy has never been all that stable in the first place. Perhaps it has seemed so, especially to those who did well from it over the previous few decades. But many people remember when large parts of the U.S. South were not democratic, and instead were what political scientist Rob Mickey has described as "authoritarian enclaves." The recent record of U.S. democracy is at best extremely patchy, and in some ways we have been much worse off in the past.

Democracy is always at risk of decaying into quasi- or full-on authoritarianism, because the shared beliefs that anchor it can shift quickly from stabilizing it to destabilizing it. Politicians' ambitions may lead them to trash their commitment to give up power when they lose elections. Healthy distrust of rules and institutions may warp into open-ended suspicion of everything. And the openness of democracy, which allows new groups to find voice and contend for their interests, can also allow new coalitions of the paranoid to arise and reshape politics.

That's the bad news, and yet it's also the good news. Politicians' ambitions can be harnessed to power the engine of democracy as they contend to attract voters. Distrust can be channeled into monitoring, and institutional trade-offs can potentially allow a high degree of openness while mitigating the problems of disinformation.

All of this is messy. Reforms aimed at redirecting the energies of political contention in more stabilizing ways are hard to accomplish, especially in a political system that is purposefully designed to stymie major changes. But it *is* possible. For the same reasons that the healthy energies of democracy can be channeled

into unhealthy feedback loops that lead to democratic breakdown, those energies can be redirected in ways that reinforce democracy rather than undermining it. We have proposed a series of policy steps that could help get this started. Some are much harder than others, but none is impossible. And there are surely other possible reforms that we haven't discussed, or that would improve substantially on the reforms that we list. The forces that are leading to democratic breakdown can be redirected in healthier ways, ways that might even help restabilize democracy. Understanding how political beliefs can unravel is the first step towards understanding both democratic fragility, and how it can be shored up.

The broader point is that if we understand the dynamic nature of democracy, we acknowledge—as the previous complacent consensus did not—that American democracy is always vulnerable to curdling into faction or autocracy. Equally, we can see that breakdown is not inevitable. Both the old naïve optimism about democracy and the current near despair are unwarranted. We don't have to give up on American democracy and shouldn't. Now, we are moving from the good to the bad, but by redirecting energies, we might begin to move back from the bad to the good. That is a huge challenge, but not one that is impossible.

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