



CHAPTER 2

The American University and the Struggle for Democracy

Richard Van Heertum

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is in great peril across the globe, a small cabal of global elites, right-wing organizations and populist authoritarians chipping away at foundational principles at the heart of popular sovereignty. The signs are everywhere. In Hungary, India and the Philippines, the public has been largely complicit in accepting democratic backsliding, while in countries like Venezuela and Turkey, people have experienced the full realization of the process (Taub, 2021). In China and Russia, power is consolidating in ways that undermine any notion of freedom, while threatening democratic neighbors in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Ukraine (Satariano & Mozur, 2021). In Egypt, Tunisia and Myanmar, popular rule is dying before our eyes as Africa suffers through its worst democratic backsliding in 40 years, with military coups in Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan and Burkina Faso. And across the globe, multinational corporations and a small coterie of global

R. Van Heertum (✉)
New York Film Academy, Los Angeles, CA, USA
e-mail: Richard.VanHeertum@nyfa.edu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature
Switzerland AG 2023
K. R. Roth et al. (eds.), *Emancipatory Change in US Higher
Education*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11124-2_2

elites continue to hold outsized sway over decision-making at all layers of governance.

In fact, recent studies have shown global democracy has been on a steady decline since 2006 (Diamond, 2021; Repucci, 2020) and popular support for democracy has fallen substantially (Wike et al., 2019; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018). This is particularly true of the United States of America (US), with *The Economist* downgrading it from a full to a “flawed” democracy in 2017 and even further to 25th on the list in 2021, based on deficits in five criteria including electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture. The report’s authors argue, “The US’s overall performance is held back by a number of weaknesses, including extremely low levels of trust in institutions and political parties; deep dysfunction in the functioning of government; increasing threats to freedom of expression; and a degree of societal polarization that make consensus on any issue almost impossible to achieve.”

Yet the problem today is more dire as an increasing cacophony of voices warns us America appears to be on the road to the potential collapse of our nearly 250-year experiment in popular rule (Gellman, 2021). The neo-populist, anti-democratic movements at the heart of the shift are centered on a virulent nationalism that sees difference as a threat to identity and economic livelihood—misplacing blame for the growing inequality and general decline in quality of life on immigrants, feminists, and minorities (Payne, 2017). These ultra-nationalist, xenophobic movements have been growing in stature in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, England, Hungary and, really, most of Europe to varying degrees for some time now (Rooduijn, 2015; Schaart, 2019). But the more recent movement in the United States, which arguably has its roots in the wake of 9/11 (Ackerman, 2021), has left it arguably the most vulnerable democracy in the Western world today.

At its core, the post-truth, authoritarian-tilting America of today is the full realization of a conservative project decades in the making (Perlstein, 2020). It is not a unique path, though, following well-tested strategies employed by authoritarian regimes throughout modern history. The process generally starts with attacking the media and experts as members of an elite class that looks down on the public and seeks to undermine popular will, alongside some essentialized feature of that country generally tied to national identity that must be rescued from an “invader.” This redefining of the elites as the intellectual and professional classes allows an “outsider”

to come in to save the country from this invasion and purportedly corrupted institutions that have infected political, social and economic life. They simultaneously sow doubts about the electoral process, as part of a broader inculcation of cynicism regarding politicians and the entire political class except for them, as the sole savior, while delegitimizing the mainstream media and other channels of empirical investigation, allowing them to spread partisan right-wing propaganda directly to their constituents through carefully cultivated conservative media outlets and, more recently, social media networks. Speaking to their followers, an increasingly insular tribe full of grievance and resentment, without the inconvenient interruption of facts or truth, allows them to mobilize the mob in service to their cause: with threats, intimidation and violence as essential features of the new collective consciousness (Taub, 2021).

In fact, as pointed out by Gessen (2016), Snyder (2017, 2018) and Chenoweth (2021) among others, the roots of the decline of democracy often lay more in the tacit acceptance of a disengaged or disillusioned public than a forceful takeover. Snyder reminds us of democracies since Ancient Greece have almost invariably fallen prey to tyranny eventually, often with the tacit support of a subset of the population. This process often can be surprisingly rapid. What happened after Trump won in 2016? The liberal establishment immediately demanded we accept the new President and give him a chance. His erratic behavior undermining the norms of democracy was then essentially normalized by the mainstream media rather quickly. Even those who had rejected him on the right soon began to accept his leadership and the troubling move toward authoritarian tendencies as more time passed, until the moment when enemies became committed friends and almost assisted him in “killing” American democracy. Since then, rather than turning their back on a man who lost the House, Senate and Presidency, while ceding states like Arizona and Georgia that had been firmly Republican for many years, the party has further cemented its commitment to Trumpism (if not always Trump himself) and its virulent counter majoritarianism (Parker et al., 2022).

In this chapter, I explore the relationship between the increasing threats to democracy and the university. I argue higher education has unwittingly become a key battleground in attempts to save democracy from forces seeking to strike it down, as one of the last bastions of progressive thought not fully encumbered by corporate and conservative takeover, though both have made great inroads in attempts to disempower higher education’s potential, as they have already done with varying degrees of success

in K-12 education, the media, the Internet, the courts and political discourse itself. The battle over our collective future will be fought in the world of epistemology and the university can be a powerful voice on the side of science, truth and the struggle toward the common good.

Democracy in America

A series of essays in late 2021 warned our democracy could be on the precipice of collapse, either through neglect or through violent revolt. The *Washington Post*, for example, published “18 Steps to a Democratic Breakdown,” which suggested:

Democracy is most likely to break down through a series of incremental actions that cumulatively undermine the electoral process, resulting in a presidential election that produces an outcome clearly at odds with the voters’ will. It is this comparatively quiet but steady subversion, rather than a violent coup or insurrection against a sitting president, that Americans today have to fear most. (Brooks & De Bruin, 2021)

The endangered state of American politics was also the dominant theme of eight articles published by the National Academy of Sciences, looking at hyper-partisanship and the inability or unwillingness of opposing sides to even listen to one another, much less move toward compromise—the essence of democracy from its onset. Zack Beauchamp, a senior correspondent at Vox, raised similar concerns, focusing on the source of the problem: “We are experiencing failures on both the elite and mass public level ... Republican elites have chosen to normalize the violence committed by their extreme right flank on Jan. 6” (2021).

The Atlantic was also tolling the bells of warning in December with “Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun” (2021), arguing “January 6 was practice. Donald Trump’s GOP is much better positioned to subvert the next election.” In the same issue, Packer, in “Are We Doomed?” (2021), envisions an even darker future of deep divisions, factional violence and a government supported by less than half the country imposing near martial rule. Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon agreed, predicting, “By 2025, American democracy could collapse, causing extreme domestic political instability, including widespread civil violence. By 2030, if not sooner, the country could be governed by a rightwing dictatorship” (Luscombe, 2022). While three generals worried

the military itself might get involved in future coup attempt, reminding us the 124 retired generals and admirals openly supported Trump's false claims in 2020 (Kelly et al., 2021).

The general sentiment is perhaps best summed up by a piece in the *New York Times* asking whether we had passed the point of no return, arguing "Democracy—meaning equal representation of all citizens and, crucially, majority rule—has, in fact, become the enemy of the contemporary Republican Party" (Edsall, 2021). What is increasingly clear is one of the two major parties in the country is intent on establishing permanent minority rule in service of corporate America and the power elites, uninterested in enacting policies popular with the public or even most of their supporters (Cox, 2022). This long-term trend goes back to at least the conservative revolution of the Reagan 1980s (Perlstein, 2020), but which began to accelerate in the 1990s with the birth of Fox News, the Contract with America, and the ascendancy of Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich and Glenn Beck. The Bush Administration, though often at odds with the far right on economic policy, tried to lay claim to almost limitless presidential power while serving the few and establishing the strategy of lying with reckless abandon. In 2010, it picked up further steam when Republicans took over the Senate on the back of a Koch-sponsored Tea Party revolt (Leonard, 2019) and decided obstruction was their *raison d'être* until 2016, when they helped elect the most corrupt President in history. His defeat four years later and the "big lie" that quickly followed has left us in our current crisis, with Republican operatives across the country working to undermine free and fair elections, subvert the will of the people, spread false information in service to their agenda and set the stage for a successful coup d'état in 2024.

The threat to democracy today is thus as great, or greater, than at any time since the Civil War. Not only have large swaths of the public lost faith in our representatives and political institutions (Public Trust in Government: 1958–2021, 2021), not only has polarization reached heretofore unrealized heights (Macy et al., 2021), not only are Facebook and other social media sites seemingly intent on abetting the withering of democracy while fomenting violence, insurrection and suppression of free speech (Halpern, 2017; Silverman et al., 2021), but a growing plurality are willing to use violence to "save" the country from perceived threats constructed by the power elite (Balz et al., 2022). In a speech in early 2022, Trump went as far as openly calling for his followers to use violence

to save him from impending critical charges in several states. But how did we get here?

A number of interrelated strategies have been employed to this end. The first, which many seem unwilling to acknowledge though it has existed for some time, is to delegitimize the electoral process itself. The approach has been deployed since the 2000 election as a false narrative about fraud used to suppress the vote, by pushing voter ID laws, poll taxes and other once outlawed methods generally targeted at minority voters (Bateman, 2016). Even as the narrative has been debunked again and again (Feldman, 2020), it continues to animate a frontal assault on our democracy. On March 26, 2020, during a morning appearance on Fox News, Trump summed up the Republican position quite well, talking about the original coronavirus relief bill, “The things they had in there were crazy. They had levels of voting that, if you ever agreed to it, you’d never have a Republican elected in the country again.” That bill had \$400 million for voter protection, down from the \$2 billion experts said was needed. As we now know, it was enough, together with local and state funding, to ensure the most secure election in history, which endless recounts, court cases and even right-wing audits have shown, was without widespread fraud. And yet, Trump and his acolytes somehow convinced 58 percent of Republicans he won (at one point the percentage was closer to 75 percent) and 62 percent believed massive fraud was involved (Parker et al., 2022).

That lie, which has become popularly known as the “big lie,” has led to the introduction of at least 440 bills in 49 states in 2021 alone, intent on suppressing the vote of minorities and the poor. Legislators in 19 states have passed 34 of these bills, directly restricting voter access by limiting early voting and mail in voting, imposing stricter voter ID laws, increasing the chance of faulty voter purging or explicitly creating laws that allow the state legislature to override the voters and select alternative electors (*Voting Laws Roundup: December 2021*, 2021). This is coupled with a second strategy, radical gerrymandering, which has allowed the GOP to be over-represented across state and federal offices for much of the past 20 years (Daley, 2019). As an example, in 2016, the Democrats won more votes in the House, Senate and for President, but lost all three. Rather than adjust this imbalance, recent decisions by the Supreme Court have essentially codified racially biased gerrymandering, by claiming state power supercedes their own in this case, even as they consistently go against federalism’s central premises when it serves their ideological leanings (Cobb,

2019). A third, and potentially more troubling tactic, since voter suppression and gerrymandering have long been central, is Trump's operatives taking over local and state election offices, allowing them to undertake the step that many Republicans across the country were unwilling to in undermining the fair results of an election (Gardner et al., 2021). On top of this, 163 Republicans who have openly embraced Trump's lies are running for statewide positions that would give them authority over the administration of future elections, including 69 for governor, 55 for the Senate, 13 for state attorney general and 18 for secretary of state (Parker et al., 2022).

The failed coup of 2020 also has fortified a fourth strategy, using the courts to undermine not only the will of the people but local, state and federal legislatures and executives. It is not just the shadow docket of a Supreme Court, using a relatively secretive and unaccountable process for decision-making with huge implications (Donegan, 2021), or the fact Republicans have had an unfounded and outsized influence on judicial appointments up to the Supreme Court while Democrats have held the executive office for 17 of the past 29 years, but the way the courts seem to be increasingly intent on overturning legislative decisions and thus making laws themselves. This was never the intent of the constitution and goes against the traditional ideas of constitutionalists. Among the worst of these decisions are two that stand out for dramatically circumventing democratic norms. The first is the 2010 Citizens United decision that, together with the explosion of the lobbying industry in the 1980s, has corrupted the political process with money at levels that overwhelm the voice of the people (Hasen, 2019). To wit, in the last election cycle, an astounding 54 percent of the outside money came from only ten Super PACS (Lessig, 2021). The second is a series of recent decisions effectively neutering one of the signature acts of American politics over the past 60 years: the 1965 Voting Rights Act (Charles & Fuentes-Rohwer, 2021).

Many localities and states have attempted a fifth strategy, which is to outlaw protest itself, in line with effectively convincing tens of millions of Americans that protest and looting are synonymous when civil rights are the topic (Halliday & Hanna, 2021). The exoneration of Kyle Rittenhouse and his subsequent elevation to conservative darling are an open invitation to increased violence at protests, further shuttering an avenue for dissent. In a truly chilling new survey, one in three Americans believe violence against the government is sometimes acceptable (Pengelly, 2022). And, all of this is occurring as a democratic bill, For the People, languishes because of two heavily corporate-sponsored Democratic Senators and a campaign

by right-wing operatives to subvert legislation with popular support across party lines (Kaufman, 2021; Mayer, 2021).

These are but the most direct ways in which democracy is being threatened today. Popular rule has been under attack through conservative rhetoric and degradation of the channels of knowledge production for several decades now. The long-term strategy of maligning the mainstream media as having a liberal bias has borne huge dividends, with many Americans turning away from it toward more conservative, implicitly biased sources like Fox News, Newsmax, OAN and Breitbart, the unchecked information provided by social media, or simply choosing to ignore the news completely (Roberts, 2017). Local news outlets have been stripped bare to the detriment of community building, with the nationalizing of the agenda in recent years very effectively harnessing clear lines of ideological distinction (Sullivan, 2021). They have attacked K-12 schooling through neoliberal and, more recently, neopopulist reform efforts, instrumentalizing knowledge, largely eliminating civics education, undermining multicultural efforts to increase tolerance and embrace of difference, and exacerbating the achievement gap and overall inequality of the system. They have bred a deep cynicism through their political rhetoric going all the way back to Nixon and then Reagan. And they have infected popular culture with conservative messaging that maligns progressive goals, drums the beat of nationalism and justified violence, reaffirms the centrality of capitalist and consumer culture ideals, and breeds a lack of faith in the ability of government, the courts or the community to enact positive social change.

Democracy is thus threatened from all sides. Violent attacks by far-right groups stand beside death by a thousand cuts of local, state and national movements to suppress the vote, a mainstream media seemingly intent on undermining popular rule in service to corporate or right-wing interests, a K-12 system under constant attack for promoting critical thought and dialogue, a court system increasingly hostile to the public at large, social media and tech empires antithetical to the rules of traditional media, truth or anything but their bottom line and a public sphere so infected with hate speech and consumer culture interests there seems little room for reasoned debate. The result has been the retribalizing of America into two camps that seem less and less willing to even talk to one another. This hyper-partisanship has fomented a rampant cynicism and political insularity which now dominates American politics. The clearest signs of the success of the various strategies laid out above are the absurdist reactions to Covid-19 and the vaccine that can protect you, with near certainty, from

death (Scheper-Hughes, 1995), convincing millions to believe clearly skewed right-wing media and social media posts over the lead scientists and experts in the country. This has become a common trait of the new tribalism: whether convincing 75 percent of Republicans an election was stolen with no evidence (Montanaro, 2021), global warming is a scam perpetuated by dark, though never named sources, and liberals around the world are part of a “deep state” that traffics and even “eats children,” and a party that has shown no interest in the concerns of its constituents is still better than one offering policies with popular support across the ideological spectrum.

Democracy and Higher Education

The victories in attacking, delegitimizing and replacing the other institutions of knowledge production and dissemination—including the media, the Internet, K-12 schools and political rhetoric itself—have been coupled with a growing assault on one of the last bastions of independent thought, the university. Yet I think it is important to start the discussion of higher education and democracy by arguing there is no explicit relationship between the two. Higher education has existed in democratic, autocratic and totalitarian states alike. It has persisted in military juntas, in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia and even in fascist states and is often complicit in reproducing the prevailing power dynamics and ideologies of a given society. On the other hand, postsecondary education has often been at the forefront of movements for democratic social change. Obvious examples like the Arab Spring, May 68 in France and the 1960s countercultural movement stand beside inspiration and support for second-, third- and fourth-wave feminism, the various LGBTQA+ movements and global social movements like the world social forum.

The very first university in Europe, in Bologna, established the idea of academic freedom, and it has been a central theme in higher education ever since, seeking to insulate research and teaching from surrounding cultural, political and economic forces and influence. Yet that goal has varied dramatically among the three broad paths higher education has pursued since its formation. The first, informed by Christian values and then separated into religious and secular varieties, with the liberal arts tradition as its most obvious incarnation, saw a well-rounded education as key to cultivating individual development and freedom, while serving the larger society. The second, resulting from the scientific revolution, is the

research university established in the sixteenth century in Cambridge and Berlin, with the common aim of pursuit and dissemination of objective knowledge useful to policymakers across the social, economic and political worlds. The third, the technical college, established in Scotland during the industrial revolution, was focused on work-based skill formation and further credentialing graduates (Kromydas, 2017). As Kromydas argues, the three archetypes have, in recent years, created two major ideas of the university—one based on instrumentalized versions of higher education as serving predominantly economic interests and the other on the more intrinsic value to the individual and society associated with values central to social justice, freedom and democracy.

Looking specifically at the United States, the original private colleges tended to support the interest of the power elite both in whom they trained and how, but from the onset of the republic, there was a notion the university was essential to the proper functioning of democracy. George Washington was so committed to this idea he left a sizable portion of his wealth to the forming of a university to teach young people the “principles of politics and good governance.” While the earliest universities in America were generally training grounds for the elite, the public university system was tied to democracy from its very inception in the early nineteenth century. Private colleges seemed incapable or uninterested in serving the broader needs of American society so institutions like the University of Virginia, and new state universities in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota, offered an alternative vision, where the potent role of higher education in shaping the American experiment was intimately linked with revolutionary ideas on human abilities and the requirements for creating a functioning, participatory democracy. By the mid-1800, state governments, with federal government prompting, launched a dramatic number of new public universities distinct in their governance, in their commitment to broad access, in the scope of their academic programs and in their commitment to public service (Douglass, 2018).

The President of John Hopkins University laid out the four major roles the modern university can play in democracy in a 2020 speech, including (1) training and educating of citizens, (2) fostering a pluralistic society founded on interaction and debate across various lines of diversity, (3) providing opportunities for social mobility, and (4) discovery, interpretation and dissemination of “facts.” I will consider each in turn. The first, civics education, should arguably begin early in primary school and continue throughout the formal schooling period of American children, even

before they move onto college. Among other reasons, this is because only 60 percent of white youth and 50 percent of black youth even start post-secondary schooling. But more than that, civics education sets the foundation for the fundamental idea we must balance our individual wants and interests against those of the community, state, nation and globe (as Dewey argued in *Democracy and Education* [1916]). But to address the ongoing lack of civics education in American schools, it is imperative colleges and universities across the country take on this role to ensure their students are well-versed in their civic responsibility, the proper functioning of democracy, the various roles they can play (beyond voting) and to fight a trenchant cynicism among the young that is a serious challenge to the future of our democracy (Van Heertum, 2009, 2021).

A relative consensus developed in the 1960s and 1970s around the second point, arguing teaching tolerance was a worthy goal and should be pursued across the entire educational system. The conservative attacks on that idea have been around since the 1950s, if not earlier, but they were refortified in the 1980s and the ongoing battle over affirmative action and, more recently, critical race theory are at the heart of the contemporary conservative movement (Gambino, 2022). The ability of higher education to engage in these debates in meaningful ways opens the door to increased dialogue and understanding across all lines of demarcation, real and virtual, and is essential to fighting the pervasive tribalism and political insularity currently ruling American life. Yet this should also include a renewed commitment among progressives to truly open debate, meaning accepting those with different, or even vile, perspectives have the right to have their thoughts heard and debated on college campuses. Freedom of speech is not about protecting speech we like, as an old professor friend of mine used to argue, but about protecting speech we may well despise. Universities across the country, particularly the elite ones, must open their doors to a wider diversity of opinions, to demonstrate to students that dialogue and engaging with ideas that contradict one's own is the essential first step in thinking.

In a world that has become increasingly unequal, the third goal of social mobility is key to confronting a fundamental fear associated with the passing down of wealth and power from one generation to the next. The argument, as again enumerated by Dewey, is the keeping of wealthy in power over time leads to the degradation of ideas and a lack of sufficient diversity of solutions to address changing social conditions and problems. One could go further to argue it foments a myopia to the lived conditions of

those outside elite circles and a neglect of those who suffer the most in contemporary society. In America today, three people have the combined wealth of the bottom 50 percent of Americans and the squeeze on the middle class, working class and poor to support the super wealthy continues to accelerate (Horowitz et al., 2020). As many, including Teddy Roosevelt, argued, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few and democracy are innately incompatible, and dramatic and growing inequality along with the problem of pluralism and global warming are the three key issues facing the globe today.

Turning to the fourth point, Kleinman and Vallas (2001) argued while university scientific research has always been tied to commercial and government needs and interest (most clearly during the Cold War years), more recent changes have amplified the relationship to commerce, challenging the role science can play in democratization and contributing to the common good. The problem has only deepened in the intervening years with universities themselves sometimes playing an active role in the post-truth world (Van Heertum, 2021). It is not the overarching political system so much as the political, economic and cultural realities of a given epoch that have heavily influenced higher education. Whether it was Jewish intellectuals kicked out of universities across Europe in the period surrounding World War II, the firing of left-leaning professors in the McCarthy era or the shuttering of universities in periods of tyranny, powerful forces often seek to undermine the independent nature of higher education research and teaching.

Yet it is important to note three related points: (1) the university has often been involved directly or indirectly in movements for social change throughout its history; (2) the university has consistently been a contested space where the contours of knowledge and meaning are debated and fought over and (3) higher education continues to be one of the key sites where social reproduction of the power dynamics of society are combated, as both a site of opportunity for marginalized and oppressed groups and one where powerful groups solidify and reproduce their status and ideologies. Taking these three arguments together, one could argue the university has become the latest and most vociferously contested space for one of the key battles of democracy, which is over access. Access not only to educational opportunity but to information, to relevant knowledge and to power. And ultimately, it might well become the final battleground in access to democratic participation and democracy itself.

What Can Be Done?

Today, higher education is far too often abrogating its responsibility to serve democracy and the common good, contributing to the threats outlined above largely through its inaction and separation from the larger public sphere. This is arguably the result of the long march of neoliberal reforms that have increasingly instrumentalized education to predominantly serve economic interests; the corporatization of institutions undermining independence and academic freedom; more recent neopopulist reforms attacking the intrinsic values of higher education and a general move toward a consumer-centric model that devalues rigor and the broader goals of higher education to open the mind and cultivate diverse identities, opinions and ideologies (Baker, 2021; Van Heertum, 2022). In considering a path forward for higher education to reengage in the fight for the future of democracy, I think the work of Chenoweth (2021), who has become one of the most important voices in chronicling and contributing to movements against authoritarianism, can be informative. She has highlighted a host of successful and unsuccessful efforts, finding four strategies that have proven most effective: (1) mobilization of mass popular participation, (2) defection of people in authority (including elites, security forces and even opposition party members), (3) moving beyond mass demonstrations to include noncooperation (e.g., strikes and boycotts), and (4) staying disciplined, even in the face of increased repression.

While this list might, at first blush, appear to be more attuned to activists and NGOs, I believe there is a large role for those in postsecondary education to play as well. Universities and colleges have often been the breeding ground and intellectual foundation for mass movements for change. The revolving door between Corporate America and Washington D.C. also extends to universities and might be the most likely space to recruit defectors. Noncooperation has long been a strategy in higher education, and in concert with popular education efforts, postsecondary institutions can serve as a powerful resource to the community and student in planning and implementing these efforts. And, even as attacks on academic freedom and tenure proliferate, research and teaching are still powerful resources for keeping movements alive over time. Here I include seven pragmatic strategies academics can use in the service of working to revitalize democracy:

1. Undertaking research in service not just of social justice but democracy as well and disseminating that research outward through channels of the public sphere, focusing particularly on engaging in social media sites that can reach broader audiences most susceptible to fake news. This research must be translated to terms that are easily understandable to both the public and a mainstream media that often confuses correlation and causality and misreports findings to the detriment of reasoned debate. To fortify these efforts, faculty senates and progressive voices in higher education should continue to push for a shift in tenure and advancement decision-making to include engagement with the public sphere, moving away from the strong focus on academic publications alone.
2. Working to educate and empower students to become civically engaged themselves. I don't believe this entails teaching them about their own oppression or working to get them to think like we do, but instead creating the space to allow them to find their own place in the world and their own positions of interest. It includes getting them to understand the reality that change is the only constant in the universe through examples that are relevant to their own lives, reminding them of Heraclitus' point: we never enter the same river twice. Postsecondary institutions should be sights of pluralistic dialogue and interaction, rather than dogmatic sites where group think dominates open debate and thought police indoctrinate students into closing themselves off to any ideas outside the current collective consciousness of progressivism.
3. Teaching not just tolerance, but empathy and embrace of difference, most effectively by allowing students to see through other's eyes and not judging them, even when disagreeing with their perspective. This does not mean to forgive or excuse bad acts, but to start with the question of why, rather than with judgment, and to open spaces for alternative (including conservative) voices to be heard and openly debated, rather than feeding the rampant culture of indignation. Marshall McLuhan once argued "the opposite of violence is dialogue" and I think this should be the guiding principle to opening new channels for interaction and communication.
4. Modeling democracy by being authoritative rather than authoritarian in the classroom and inviting democratic participation whenever possible. I have increasingly done this in my own classrooms, giving students the opportunity to have real input in content and assign-

ments, which has led to deeper engagement overall. And this includes, when viable, working to make your assignments and content relevant to the current political, social and economic realities and to your student's lives. While I love *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Freire's other work, I think the most practical advice he provides in this regard is in his last book, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998). It is a guide to being a good teacher and public intellectual working to fight the cynicism at the heart of contemporary social life.

5. Safely engaging in political action ourselves. As Freire highlighted so often, we must be leaders not through our words alone, but our actions. Sure, political engagement comes with risks, but democracy often dies with the complicity of those unwilling to stand up and fight for its survival. That engagement can take a variety of forms including project-based learning to engage students with local social issues in ways that can inspire broader engagement or simply make them aware of efforts in campus politics. It also can include providing expertise, assistance and even students to local and national efforts to fortify democracy.
6. It has long been true that numbers are what sway policymakers to act and while the current state of the Republican party makes this less likely than in the past, it is important to try to work on both sides of the aisle to provide sound research that can help inform decision-making. As just one example, research could have staved off the poor decision decades ago to move from scholarship-based funding to student loans, which has saddled an entire generation with unreasonable debt while pushing many to forgo college completely.
7. Maybe most important in the current environment of received knowledge and fake news, academics must find creative new methods to get information and arguments to the public in ways challenging deeply held beliefs. This means engaging with the ways people communicate, learn and interact today and finding messages that can resonate across trenchantly drawn lines. It also entails working with politicians when possible to help with rhetoric, messaging and campaign strategies, as well as research-based policy reform suggestions.

Freire believed teachers should be public intellectuals, working to empower students and provide them with the critical thinking skills,

creativity and knowledge necessary to fight for a better future. Having taught in US colleges and universities for 14 years, what I find the most striking is a persistent cynicism among college students believing politicians are corrupt as a rule, the government is the problem rather than potential solution to social ills and things are unlikely to change for the better. I think this is a key area where professors can have an outsized impact, by inspiring students to hope and believe in the possibility of change and their ability to contribute to that change.

Broader reforms in higher education that could help educators play a more active role in the public arena may be a move toward a model incorporating service as a component of advancement providing the opportunity to engage community and more public research rather than relying solely on publishing that rarely crosses over into public view. Professors must also work collectively to reassert their power over institutional decision-making, including working to veto hiring decisions that further enshrine corporatization into governance. At the more basic level, they must work to redress both the attacks on tenure and the ways administration has weakened faculty senates. They also must work to reaffirm their academic freedom, particularly in the wake of a number of high-profile firings or tenure decisions that appear to have political undertones. More generally, professors should work to combat the attacks on the humanities and arts and attempts to commodify higher education as the training ground once charged to the corporate world itself.

CONCLUSION

The attacks on democracy have left the United States in a perilous state, with the future of the country residing in a battle between those who support popular rule and a diverse coalition who advocates for authoritarianism and violence. The commodification and instrumentalization of knowledge has played an important role in creating a political milieu antithetical to reasoned debate and thick democracy. Leaders across education and the public sphere must thus confront the political insularity, hyperpartisanship, and the direct and indirect attacks on our democracy, finding ways to alter the nature of debate and political discourse in the public sphere while helping students gain the critical thinking skills and inspiration necessary to challenge contemporary threats and challenges.

Yet how do we move forward in an environment increasingly hostile to science, reason and intellectuals themselves? As dictates of a prescribed

and proscribed curriculum increasingly infiltrate higher education, how is one to navigate the wrought space of administrative oversight, particularly if unprotected by tenure or academic freedom? I believe this starts with progressive teaching in the classroom, working to combat cynicism and tribal epistemological positions, but must be coupled with efforts to move research beyond what is cloistered from the public sphere and to translate it in ways so it can resonate with politicians and the public at large.

The central point is colleges and universities create specialized knowledge essential to the democratic project, and have access to multiple channels to disseminate knowledge and providence over the most radical space of possibility left in society—a college classroom with the door closed (hooks, 1994). We must reaffirm the importance of science and the scientific method to our students, the media and the larger American public, challenging the miasmatic cloud of skepticism that now fogs our world. We also must reassert the importance of legitimation and justification for truth claims and the power of hope and imagination in creating a better world. Otherwise, the death of democracy is nigh.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, S. (2021). *Reign of terror: How the 9/11 era destabilized America and produced Trump*. Penguin Random House.
- Baker, S. (2021, December 17). Education as a ‘consumption good.’ *Inside Higher Education*.
- Balz, D., Clement, S., & Guskin, E. (2022, January 1). Republicans and Democrats divided over Jan. 6 insurrection and Trump’s culpability, post-UMD poll finds. *The Washington Post*.
- Bateman, D. (2016). Race, party and American voting rights. *The Forum*, 14(1), 39–65.
- Beauchamp, Z. (2021). American democracy is tottering. It’s not clear Americans care. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2021/12/9/22824509/summit-for-democracy-biden-america>
- Brooks, R., & De Bruin, E. (2021, December 10). 18 steps to a democratic breakdown. *The Washington Post*.
- Charles, G.-U., & Fuentes-Rohwer, L. (2021, July 8). The court’s voting-rights decision was worse than people think. *The Atlantic*.
- Chenoweth, E. (2021). *Civil resistance: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.
- Cobb, J. (2019, July 3). The Supreme Court just legitimized a cornerstone element of voter suppression. *The New Yorker*.

- Cox, D. (2022, January 4). Why the Republican party isn't concerned with popularity. *FiveThirtyEight*. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-the-republican-party-isnt-concerned-with-popularity/>
- Daley, D. (2019, September 6). The secret files of the master of modern republican gerrymandering. *The New Yorker*.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. The Free Press.
- Diamond, L. (2021). Democratic regression in comparative perspective: Scope, methods, and causes. *Democratization*, 28(1), 22–42.
- Donegan, M. (2021, August 31). The US supreme court is deciding more and more cases in a secretive 'shadow docket.' *The Guardian*.
- Douglass, J. A. (2018). The rise of the publics: American democracy, the public university ideal, and the University of California. *Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkley*, 1(18).
- Edsall, T. (2021, December 15). How to tell when your country is past the point of no return. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/opinion/republicans-democracy-minority-rule.html>
- Feldman, M. (2020). *10 voter fraud lies debunked*. Brennan Center for Justice.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom*. Rowman & LittleField Publishers, Inc.
- Gambino, L. (2022, January 1). Republicans aim to sow outrage, Trump-style, with an eye on 2022 midterms. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/01/republicans-sow-outrage-trump-style-2022-midterms-house-senate>
- Gardner, A., Hamburger, T., & Dawsey, J. (2021, November 29). Trump allies work to place supporters in key election posts across the country, spurring fears about future vote challenges. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-allies-election-oversight/2021/11/28/3933b3ce-4227-11ec-9ea7-3eb2406a2e24_story.html
- Gellman, B. (2021). Trump's next coup has already begun. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/january-6-insurrection-trump-coup-2024-election/620843/>
- Gessen, M. (2016). Autocracy: Rules for survival. *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/10/trump-election-autocracy-rules-for-survival/>
- Halliday, E., & Hanna, R. (2021, October 25). State anti-protest laws and their constitutional implications. *Lawfare*. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/state-anti-protest-laws-and-their-constitutional-implications>
- Halpern, S. (2017). How he used Facebook to win. *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/06/08/how-trump-used-facebook-to-win/>

- Hasen, R. (2019, December 19). The decade of Citizens United. *Slate*. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/12/citizens-united-devastating-impact-american-politics.html>
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Horowitz, J. M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020). *Trends in income and wealth inequality*.
- Kaufman, D. (2021, October 26). Joe Manchin's deep corporate ties. *The New Yorker*.
- Kelly, M. L., Caldwell, N., & Valentine, A. (2021, December 31). Retired general warns the U.S. military could back a coup after the 2024 election. In *All Things Considered*.
- Kromydas, T. (2017). Rethinking higher education and its relationship with social inequalities: Past knowledge, present state and future potential. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8>
- Kleinman, D., & Vallas, S. (2001). Science, capitalism, and the rise of the "knowledge worker:" The changing structure of knowledge production in the United States. *Theory & Society*, 30(4), 451–492.
- Leonard, C. (2019). *Kochland: The secret history of Koch industries and corporate power in America*. Simon and Schuster UK.
- Lessig, L. (2021). Why the US is a failed democratic state. *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2021/12/10/why-the-us-is-a-failed-democratic-state/>
- Luscombe, R. (2022, January 3). US could be under rightwing dictator by 2030, Canadian professor warns. *The Guardian*.
- Macy, M. W., Ma, M., Tabin, D. R., Gao, J., & Szymanski, B. K. (2021). Polarization and tipping points. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(50), e2102144118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2102144118>
- Mayer, J. (2021, March 29). Inside the Koch-based effort to block the largest election-reform bill in half a century. *The New Yorker*.
- Montanaro, D. (2021, November 1). Most Americans trust elections are fair, but sharp divides exist, a new poll finds. In *All Things Considered*. NPR.
- Packer, G. (2021). Are we doomed? *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/imagine-death-american-democracy-trump-insurrection/620841/>
- Parker, A., Gardner, A., & Dawsey, J. (2022, January 5). How Republicans became the party of Trump's election lie after Jan. 6. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/republicans-jan-6-election-lie/2022/01/05/82f4cad4-6cb6-11ec-974b-d1c6de8b26b0_story.html
- Payne, K. (2017). *The broken ladder: How inequality affects the way we think, live and die*. Viking.

- Pengelly, M. (2022, January 2). One in three Americans say violence against government justified – poll. *The Guardian*.
- Perlstein, R. (2020). *Reaganland: America's right turn 1976–1980*. Simon & Schuster.
- Public trust in government: 1958–2021*. (2021). Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>
- Repucci, S. (2020). *Freedom in the world 2020: A leaderless struggle for democracy*. Freedom House.
- Roberts, D. (2017, May 19). Donald Trump and the rise of tribal epistemology. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology>
- Rooduijn, M. (2015). The rise of the populist radical right in Western Europe. *European View*, 14(1), 3–11.
- Satariano, A., & Mozur, P. (2021, October 22). Russia Is censoring the internet, with coercion and black boxes. *The New York Times*.
- Schaart, E. (2019). Far-right populists score stunning win in Dutch provincial vote. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/mark-rutte-to-lose-senate-majority-after-dutch-local-elections/>
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995). The primacy of the ethical. In *Current Anthropology*, 36(3), 409–420.
- Silverman, C., Timberg, C., Kao, J., & Merrill, J. (2021, January 4). Facebook groups topped 10,000 daily attacks on election before Jan. 6, analysis shows. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/01/04/facebook-election-misinformation-capitol-riot/?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most&carta-url=https%3A%2F%2Fs2.washingtonpost.com%2Fcar-ln-tr%2F35ab909%2F61d47d6f9d2fda3f8b8050ff%2F59730110ade4e21a84890813%2F10%2F70%2F61d47d6f9d2fda3f8b8050ff
- Snyder, T. (2017). *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. Tim Duggan Books.
- Snyder, T. (2018). *The road to unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. Tim Duggan Books.
- Sullivan, M. (2021, November 30). What happens to democracy when local journalism dries up? *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2021/11/30/margaret-sullivan-the-local-news-crisis/>
- Taub, A. (2021, January 7). It wasn't strictly a coup attempt. But it's not over yet. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/07/world/america/what-is-a-coup-attempt.html>
- Van Heertum, R. (2009). *The fate of democracy in a cynical Age: Education, media & the evolving public sphere*. ProQuest, UMI Dissertation Publishing.

- Van Heertum, R. (2021). Neoliberalism, neopopulism, and democracy in decline: The university under attack on multiple fronts. In I. K. Roth & Z. Ritter (Eds.), *Whiteness, power, and resisting change in US higher education: A peculiar institution* (pp. 103–127). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Van Heertum, R. (2022). Neoliberalism, neopopulism and the assault on higher education. In *Neoliberal schooling of selfishness and exploitation: Rubricization and corporatization of higher education*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Voting laws roundup: December 2021*. (2021). Brennan Center for Justice. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-december-2021>
- Wike, R., & Fetterolf, J. (2018). Liberal democracy's crisis of confidence. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(4), 136–150.
- Wike, R., Silver, L., & Castillo, A. (2019). *Many across the globe are dissatisfied with how democracy is working*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>