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An interview with David Pepper, 'Laboratories of Autocracy' author, about the GOP war on democracy (/stories/2021/11/28/2066084/-An-interview-with-David-Pepper-Laboratories-of-Autocracy-author-about-the-GOP-war-on-democracy)



David Neiwert (/users/david neiwert) for Daily Kos (/groups/main)
Daily Kos Staff

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David Pepper: Sure, and the point in my book that I try to make clear is I spend a lot of time in Ohio in the book, but the book's about the country.

What I'm describing happening in Ohio, as I say, this is a state that voted for Obama twice. It had a 10-8 Democrat/Republican democratic coalition—not coalition, delegation as recently as 2010, and now we look like this deep red state that's being governed like we're Alabama. If it can happen here, it can happen in a lot of places is the point, and it is happening. But I go back to the history of Ohio, that if you talk to any Ohioan, they'll tell you, "We thought of ourselves at the heart of it all. We were this manufacturing powerhouse. We had great education. We had great people coming from here, proudly so. We reflected the country as the quintessential swing state, but also, we had moderate down-the-line politics where there was a lot of balance."

If you had a Republican in charge in Ohio, they were generally like a George Voinovich, a little more moderate, and if you were a Democrat, you had to have enough authenticity like John Glenn to win over Republicans. So, we sort of represented—not just because of our electoral college total votes, but because we were this swing state—you sort of represented this more moderate world. So, I go through how all that's changed rapidly, and people like me—I was literally elected, named, at least, most likely to be president of the Cincinnati Board of Tourism in college or law school because I'd always brag about Ohio, and as I say in the book, we all do, but if asked now about Ohio, the story's horrible.

There are no unread comments at this time.

Our public outcomes are cratering. Our statehouse has been named, or our state politics have been named the most corrupt in the country, which back in a few years ago I would never have thought we would be named that, and they're legislating, again, like we're Alabama or Mississippi, and it's never changing. It's this downward spiral of poor outcomes, corruption—lack of democracy in the end, and those go together. So I try and use Ohio, this story in Ohio, and I'm already hearing they all relate to it, like, "Yeah, what the hell's happening? Why is this all happening here?" I think it's a case study.

Without democracy, all these things are almost inevitable. You have corruption that comes with a statehouse where people don't feel like they can ever lose, but the private players surround them, terrible public outcomes because there's no longer any incentive to deliver good public outcomes, but the necessity to keep rigging it all so that when you see these horrible outcomes and you get so extreme, you have keep democracy from reappearing or you'll lose your offices. So it's this system that sort of is self-reinforcing in a downward direction, and it's accelerating here, and it's accelerating in the same way elsewhere.

DN: Sort of a race to the bottom.

David Pepper: It really is, and everything each keeps building on the other. The more extreme, the more you have to have gerrymander districts to stay in power. The more corrupt, the more you got to protect yourself, and so this is ... I think one of the things to try and point out is there were a lot of people who rigged these districts in 2011 after Karl Rove was very sadly adept at targeting statehouses to flip. I don't think they even thought through how warped the consequences of an entire generation of politicians [would be] without democracy. It's far more extreme in how—I don't even know the right word for it—like I said, warped it is that I think people probably thought it would get. These are people who largely—and when I say largely, I'm not talking about ... They have generally a 60 to 39 majority, something like that. It's not like 30 of them are guaranteed their reelections, and the other 30 have to fight for them.

We're talking about almost every member of the majority is guaranteed a reelection by at least double digits, and most of them—50 out of 99—20 points or more. I mean, these are people who just literally have not experienced democracy in their own rise to power, and they're afraid of democracy, and Ohio is this glaring case study of what happens when you've had that for a generation, but sadly, Missouri or Tennessee or Florida, they're all seeing the same thing as Ohio is.

DN: Well, and one of the things that I deal with all the time is the psychological dimension of those in terms of how and why people are attracted to extremist movements and conspiracism and extremist belief systems, and ultimately,

authoritarianism, which is what all of those things lead to, and it's just really abundantly clear that these horrible social outcomes that you were describing, economic and otherwise, have a really powerful effect of driving people towards this sort of extremism, driving them towards adopting conspiracism because the world is seeming increasingly chaotic to them, and they are looking for security, and authoritarianism offers them that.

So, in every dimension, it is a fast-worsening problem, and it doesn't ... I don't know where we even see bottom to it.

David Pepper: Yeah. No, I agree. I mean, I don't get into that side of it in my book, but [it] connects to that. But I think the personalities of the legislators versus 15 years ago are reflecting that now in a way that they wouldn't have not that long ago. I mean, we're seeing it in Congress with the Madison Cawthorns and the Marjorie Taylor Greens—

DN: Jim Jordans.

David Pepper: There are hundreds of these people in statehouses, and here's the worst part: At least right now in Congress, they're not in the majority, so they're just talking or videotaping themselves. In statehouses, they're voting in the majority on laws that effect our districts and our voting rules.

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So imaging that psychology within the minds of multiple hundreds of legislators, who actually right now have the power and are acting on it to rewrite the laws of our democracy as we speak.

DN: I mean, you have this chapter on weaponizing statehouses into a national force, and that's exactly what we're looking at, is that a lot of the Republican program is not being advanced by Congress because actually, Republican Congress isn't doing a thing, and they're not passing a thing. They're just stopping anything from being passed, but in the Republican statehouse, they're actively passing these anti-voting laws, antiabortion laws, let's see, the anti-CRT laws, all of these things, laws that make it legal for people to run over protestors with a car.

David Pepper: Yeah. Yeah. I keep thinking about that last one in particular. If we saw another country do all these, but particularly that one, my guess is we'd almost issue sanctions that this country has fallen away from democracy so badly that we would treat them differently, and what's frustrating for me is we have a blind spot when it comes to our own country. We just assume that everyone buys into the democratic project, small D, and so when these series of things, attacks on courts and elections offices and independent offices, and trying to crack down on protests of those we don't agree with, to vigilanteism being encouraged, everything else we've talked about, rigging of districts, in our own country ... If that was another country, as I said, we would raise the alarm: "My gosh. They're moving away from democracy."

In our own country, I worry as I watch ... We compartmentalize each one. "Oh, my gosh. There's that bad law, and there's this bad law," and most people are not saying together, these are collectively just an attack on the fundamental pillars of democracy, as you said, and as you said when we started, the lesson of our history here and elsewhere is when all those things happen, you do get autocracy. You see, once you rip all those pillars away and you normalize it, it doesn't take very long for the place to flip, and that's what we've seen in Hungary and other places. Yeah, it's a pretty disturbing scene, and I worry, and this is ... I mean, I wrote this book ... I started writing it in April. I mean, I was not planning on writing a book. I did put together some proposal for somebody. I wrote the book because I see all this happening, a little bit of arms length since I stepped away as chair of the Ohio Party, and I just don't sense that there's an urgency among people in D.C., or really broadly; worse, I sense a lull, that we're just kind of letting it happen. We're not seeing it for what it is. So, I wrote the book as my own sort of feeling like, "Well, everyone's got to do something. I have a perspective from Ohio that shows how bad it is. Let me share it," because I worry that people are not putting it all together for how bad it really is.

DN: Yeah. It seems to me that there is ... People are so wedded to the necessity to believe that things will be normal, that things can be normal, that they're really blinkering themselves as to the reality of what we're dealing with right now. People just

don't want to see it. They don't want to know about it. Of course, there's a huge chunk of the population out there that pays zero attention to politics anyway because they don't believe it affects them, and I think the next few years might give them a rude awakening.

But more than that, I think within the mainstream Democrat Party, as well as within the mainstream media, there's really this desire to believe that, "Oh, things can be normal again. We can go back to normalcy," and I don't see normal returning for a long time, and especially not if we don't start putting our shoulders to the wheel.

David Pepper: Absolutely. I mean, I think that we will not have normal again until there's accountability in multiple ways, and there needs to be accountability for Jan. 6. There needs to be accountability for Trump and corruption that he brought, but the other thing that's happening is there is no accountability anymore in state-level politics. The reason they never stop attacking constitutional rights, be they voting rights or women's right to choose or whatever, [is] even when their laws that they pass are struck down, they never lose their office. Every once in a while there's a corruption prosecution, normally by the feds, because within states they just don't happen against their own party, but there's so rarely any accountability that there's never any pushback to more normal politics, even when—again, this Texas law, I don't think it's been brutal today. If it has been, I haven't seen the news, but my guess is that Texas law will be stopped by this court because of the mechanism of that lawsuit sort of part of it.

But in a normal world of politics, attacking women's right to choose in that way would actually cost people their offices in the next election, but in our current politics in these statehouses, we're essentially no longer working within democratic governance. I mean, these statehouses are no longer small-D democratic. They're about to get worse, and so these folks can just ... They keep doing this, and they never stop because there's never accountability. So, normalcy can be achieved if over the coming years we start getting accountability back into the conversation. Right now, there's just almost no accountability for the most antidemocratic behavior we're seeing.

DN: Yeah, and you see that, I think, as the key to reclaiming democracy, is standing for it, that pushing, creating accountability for all of these, and I would toss in there—I would toss in there accountability for police too, but ...

David Pepper: Yeah. I mean, that's a big part of it. I mean, I think that the reason ... It's a metaphor, but it's really how they're working. The reason these statehouses are, as my title describes, state laboratories of democracy is because they can keep going through thick and thin, through being found to have violated the law. They never stop. In Ohio, we saw it after the Obama win. They went after every part of the Obama coalition they could, and oftentimes they would fail. They would be struck down. They would write a law poorly, but they would win their next election because they're guaranteed to win. They do it again and again.

It was on the third time of trying they succeeded in getting rid of the week where people both vote and register at the same time. It took them three tries. But if there's never accountability, they just keep pushing and pushing. So I think accountability's part of it, and I also think there's a lot of other things we have to do. I mean, we can go through it all, but that's one key piece, though, is I think unless there's accountability, unless they fear a consequence from truly undemocratic and often illegal behavior, illegitimate behavior, unless there's any fear of a consequence, of course they're going to keep doing it. They have all the incentive to do it, they never pay a price for doing it, and they just keep going.

DN: What are some of the other things you think are key to reclaiming democracy?

David Pepper: I mean, I will say—and I don't want to blame an entire party because I think most Democrats in Washington agree with this—the federal government has to act. If this window closes, and hopefully we win the House and the Senate in 2022, but if we don't and the window closes, and they have not passed robust voter protections, as well as protections against the most egregious gerrymandering ... I have a 7- and a 4-year-old. They will spend much of their lifetime fighting to get back to where we are right now if they don't act in the next year. So, the federal government has to ... There

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are other ways the federal government has to act as well. I think they need to double down on protecting all the rights that these statehouses are attacking, be it, again, women's right to choose or union rights.

I mean, they're literally using these states to undermine national rights, federal rights, and federal law, and then again, in the national sense—and in my book I go through a lot of steps that I hope are very practical for everyday people to act upon, but before we get to those, and those are necessary, but federal action is essential. Without it, the history's pretty clear. If there's no federal pushback on this, at least our history tells us the attacks on democracy succeed. That's what happened that led to Jim Crow. But I also think we need to rethink our politics, because one side—the Koch brothers and ALEC and their allies—this is a war on democracy. They think their freedom and democracy are inconsistent, and essentially, mutually exclusive. So, they're warring against democracy every year, everywhere.

Our politics is still based on the presidential calendar and the Senate calendar, and the swing states that are in play in those races, or some of the swing congressional districts, which means they're on offense every year, everywhere. We contest in some states every two, and essentially, every four years. Well, if that's the terms, they're going to win. My older kid plays soccer. If one team's on offense the entire time, and you're on offense every once in a while, you're going to lose. So, we have to rethink this all as a long game for democracy that we have to fight everywhere, and we need to schedule our action accordingly. We need to use our resources accordingly. We need to think about running for office accordingly, and we're catching up in that mindset, but we're years behind. This sounds a little bit like, "Whoa, you really want to move some money away from the presidential year spending and put it into statehouse races?" The Koch brothers did. Look what happened. It worked.

If you took some percentage, 5% or 10% of your presidential year multibillion-dollar spending, and you spread it out among 50 states for four years, you not only would protect democracy better, you'd actually do better in the presidential year because you'd be building something. So, we have to really rethink, I think the way we frame politics, and the other advantage to think about it this way, Stacey Abrams is the best example. Once you define it in this way, you realize it's a long game. It's like a John Lewis long game for voting rights, or the suffragists' long game for women's suffrage, and then you start to see that the result is not determined by every result of every cycle.

We often have one bad cycle, we quit, we fire everybody, we start over. Stacey Abrams told us, even when she lost her governor's race for a lot of reasons that she explained were really illegitimate, she gained progress in that loss. She registered people. She fired up people, and that progress carried over to '20 in a way that we turned Georgia blue, just like running in every single statehouse district in every state. You're going to lose most of those races. We know that, but we should celebrate the fact that we're running in every district because every one of those candidates will register voters. They'll change minds at every door. They will have higher turnout, and maybe in two or four years, if they do it again, and we've seen this in states like Virginia, they win the next race.

So we've got to define it as a long game, and that means you see progress even in tough years if you're doing it right, and we've seen that in Ohio. We've seen that in other states, and the other thing we got to do—back to the broader politics—there are multiple elections that impact democracy. In Ohio, our biggest priority, especially when we realized that the National Party, although they support us generally, they didn't see the presidency as coming through Ohio. I get that. They felt they could win Virginia and Michigan. That's life. But that didn't stop us from prioritizing winning Supreme Court seats, because in our state, after we changed the Ohio Constitution to end gerrymandering, we knew that we needed a balanced Supreme Court to protect our new language, and we won three elections in four years.

We have a balanced Supreme Court. I think it will save us from the current attempt at gerrymandering. So, in some states it's secretaries of state. In others, it's state auditors. In others, it's courts. Focus on all the races that impact democracy, not just the ones that have the most exciting U.S. Senate candidate going, and that ... So,

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there's a lot to do, but once you define it as a battle for democracy, your priorities—they don't change completely, but all of a sudden there's a lot more you can do, and you can define success in a different way than just what happens every cycle at one level.

DN: Yeah. I can't help but reflect that the abandonment of Howard Dean's 50-state strategy after 2008 was really symbolic of Democrats losing their way on this, and because I thought the 50-states strategy reflected the recognition that these local races, even though you're going to lose some, they still matter. Having a presence in these communities—I can tell you as someone from Idaho, used to be actually a pretty purple state—I was mentored by Frank Church—that a lot of the transformation of these states into red states has a lot to do with, basically, Democrats having abandoned rural areas and focusing all of their ... I mean, from a certain strategic, numerical sense, it makes sense to focus on urban areas where you're going to get most of the votes, but I think abandoning rural America has had catastrophic consequences for the Democratic Party.

David Pepper: Yeah. No, and I would say the other thing we do, and I experienced it here in Ohio, when one of our states moves to red even a little bit ... Trump won Ohio a couple times. That was terrible for Ohio. You don't quit on that state, because then you take their temporary gain and you make it permanent. Did they quit when Virginia went for Biden by, what, eight or 10? No. They went back and won it a year later. They almost won in New Jersey. They're fighting everywhere, and we too often ... You've been around long enough. Missouri was pretty competitive not that long ago.

I don't want Ohio to be Missouri where all of a sudden it's like, "Oh, we think of it as a red state. We invest like it's a red state. We have to." By the way, Jaime Harrison, who's a friend of mine, he's tried to up investment in red states. So, I think the party is catching up. They realize that Howard Dean was right. For a while, they didn't do this. They're trying to catch up now. So, I give Jaime credit. He's from South Carolina. He understands this. But I do think that we have a tendency to just wash our hands of certain states once they feel red, not compete there, and then, like you said, it's a downward spiral from there.

By the way, I think there's a great case—and I've done some videos on this—there's a great case to make in rural America that trickle-down is what's killing them. And infrastructure that was just passed, they need that as much as anybody. They need health care as much as anybody, but what I've learned in Ohio, and I've tried to explain this to folks in the administration, if we don't go right to those places and say to them, "This infrastructure plan, you may not believe us, it's actually for your town too. It's not just for the city of Cincinnati and the very big bridge we have here. It's for your needed flood wall or your small street." Unless we actually really go to these places and say that, not through a big speech, but by walking down the street and looking at how terrible these towns are, the shape they're in, they don't think it's for them.

They think it's for somewhere else, and I think we have to be—whether it's Pete Buttigieg or Marcia Fudge, who knows Ohio well, or Tom Vilsack, or Biden and Kamala Harris themselves—they got to go to these towns and walk them and say, "This is for you," and then in a year or two, those towns need to see that their streets look better, or they have broadband, but unless we do that, they just assume these things are for somewhere else. But I think if we do it ... By the way, these towns pay the price of gerrymandering as much as big cities, because as I write in the book, one town near me is dying. They call their state senator. They ask him, "What are you going to do to help us?" and he tells them, "Well, sometimes you just have to move."

You don't say that unless you feel totally unaccountable to the voters. So, these voters are basically ... The people they elect are voting for a trickle-down privatization agenda that never helps these towns and only hurts them, and gerrymandering makes those people feel like even if the local outcome of the places they represent is terrible, they feel so bold as to tell those people they should leave as opposed to these guys being voted out of office. So, I think the lack of democracy is really hurting these small, rural towns as much as it's splitting up big cities.

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DN: Yeah. Unfortunately, my experience has been that it's just about impossible to get that message across in places where Fox News is playing in the local café 24/7. You know what I mean?

David Pepper: By the way, you don't have to get—yeah. But we don't have to get to 50% in these towns. You just can't be at 20, and Obama was at 40. You don't even need to be at 40 if you look at—Sherrod Brown won Ohio, but you need to be close to 40. You can't be where Hillary Clinton was, or even Biden, in the moderate to the low 20s.

So, you're never going to get to high 30s if you don't show up and say what I'm saying, and basically, they're not doing that, I think at least right now. But I do think that there's an opportunity with infrastructure and Build Back Better to go finally have something you can deliver to these places and be very explicit in making that clear.

DN: So, one of the things that I have been thinking about a lot in terms of the war on democracy that we're enduring is that in a lot of ways is the strategic architecture of that war was present on Jan. 6, that we saw ... That actually what Jan. 6 was in many ways—and my thinking about this came out of reading the stuff about the memo that Trump had that outlined plan to use the Senate, and Pence to throw Congress into disarray, which would then throw the vote into question, and everything would be delayed, and they could contest it inevitably until, say, legislatures could vote on it, which, of course, was part of their plan, because they know they control these state legislatures, as you more brilliantly documented here.

At the same time, they were planning on this mob descending on the Capitol, which is, of course, what we all have noticed, what we all noticed at the time. People haven't been paying attention. So, it was a classic inside/outside game thing. They were planning the game on the inside, but they also had an outside game with these mobs, with the radicalized insurrectionists who were willing to engage in violence in the name of defending Donald Trump. Yeah. That's actually the architecture we're looking at. So, in a lot of ways, I really see your work and mine being incredibly complementary, but in completely different ways, where we're both looking—I'm looking at the outside game, which I think is important, but I think also, we need to be really tuned in to what's going on with this inside game because that what actually is their intent, is changing the institutions themselves.

David Pepper: What's so scary to me is if they ... The thinking they put into Jan. 6 and that process that Eastman outlined in that memo, they came to it too late to have it have the impact they wanted. Well, now they've got a three—

DN: Yeah. Well, they weren't competent.

David Pepper: Yeah, and they weren't competent. But now they have a three-and-a-half-year head start, and like I say, they're always learning from their mistakes, and that memo or version of it will be in the hands of every state legislator, probably now or very soon. So, they had a long time to get the inside game figured out better than they did on Jan. 6, and by the way, there was some overlap. We know that some state legislators were part of the insurrection, or were part of Stop the Steal or were doing other things. So my worry is that the outside game matters because those legislators think, "Wow. We've got some really passionate people who really agree with us," but my biggest worry about '24 is if they stack the deck enough through the legislators who decide how states send their electors to D.C. on Jan. 6, they can do almost everything they did on Jan. 6 without storming any buildings.

They can take care of it. They can have legislators, and you get the same memo that Pence basically in the end rejected, and those legislators will say, "Yeah, we'll send a different delegation," or, "We'll contest a delegation," and Speaker McCarthy or whoever will be the one making decisions. So my great fear is that the outside and inside are both there, but if they really work the inside well, they can do everything they tried to do on Jan. 6 without anything looking as illegitimate as storming a building. The greatest fear is that ... You see these countries that the academics call competitive autocracies. They have the feel of democracies, but they're not legitimate because everything's predetermined.

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My deep worry is that's what they're trying to do here, and the key to that succeeding is the look and feel of legitimacy, and if statehouses are voting for things as part of their formal duties, most people think, "Well, that must be legitimate. The statehouse did it." What scares me is that they're going to figure out that there's a cleaner way to get the results they want without storming a building and attacking police and everything else they did. I can't imagine they're not all working on that as we speak, and that should scare the heck out of everybody.

DN: Yeah, yeah. Well, I actually also think that the same architecture could very well be in play for us in state races in 2022.

I think of states like Texas or Florida, which could very well have very close gubernatorial races, and I believe both of those states have passed laws that actually empower local officials, or the legislators to overrule local electors, if I'm not mistaken, so that they could actually seize these governors' races through clearly illegitimate means, and I imagine that there would be some protests out there, but from the left, from Liberals, people demonstrating against it, but now at the same time we have the right all ginned up to do what they call ... What the Proud Boys are telling leftist protestors right now is, "If you show up on the street, you're going to get Rittenhoused."

David Pepper: Is that their name?
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DN: That's become their new euphemism.

David Pepper: Let alone what laws that are literally giving people no liability if they hit somewhere with a car, and we're obviously seeing how deadly that can be. So, no, it is ... As you know, some of my book gets into history, and the specter and actual execution of violence was a key part of what happened that led to Jim Crow. It was voter suppression. It was courts not supporting rights to vote of particularly Black voters in the South. It was the federal government that over time let off pushing for those rights, and it was violence accompanying it all, and that was the toxic brew that took registration from hundreds of thousands or 100,000 down to 3,000.

So almost every element of one of the worst moments in American history—it's not as severe, clearly, but almost every element is literally rearing its head now that led to the end of democracy in the South, and the holding back of our entire country thanks to Jim Crow for almost all of the 1900s.

DN: Well, David, want to really thank you for having put this book together because I think it's really an important document for understanding this war on democracy. It's important for people understand how, as you say, the inside game is the one that they can win, even without the outside game.

David Pepper: Yeah. One thing I tried to do in the book, and I hope you'll mention this, is I don't ... Washington has to act. Schumer has to act. The filibuster should not get in the way of protecting democracy. There's no legitimacy to that argument if you read the Constitution, but I also in the book try and outline that every single citizen can add protective democracy as part of their own mission statement, part of what they do, whether it's making sure every single statehouse race is contested, or whether we battle the purging through ourselves, figure out how to make sure we're registering people in time.

So even though it's a pretty bleak first two-thirds of the book, I do try and give a roadmap on how every single person who cares can actually play a role, and not simply wait for D.C., but in their own state. We need D.C. to protect, but the best way to go on offense as states is if people themselves go on offense at these state-level and local offices. So I hope folks look at the book, partly because there's a little bit of a guide based on my own experience and talking to some others on how every single person who's concerned doesn't have to give up because D.C. isn't acting, and hopefully D.C. does, but they themselves can take some ownership and try and fight back as well.

DN: Yeah, and I think that that's actually the sort of toolkit everyone's looking for, that, "Well, what can I do?"

I thought the book was terrific for that because you went through not just how you can do it broadly, nationally, and statewide, but in person-to-person interactions, and I've found ... As someone who wrote a book about how to deal with conspiracy theorists, I thought your advice was extremely sound. Essentially, it ultimately comes down to valuing empathy, valuing basic common decency, and maybe reminding our neighbors that we actually are common, decent, normal Americans once in a while.

David Pepper: Right, absolutely. Thanks for the conversation. I appreciate it.

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David Pepper is no shining star, but I appreciate your taking the time to do an in-depth interview.

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Liberal Thinking (/users/liberal thinking)

Nov 28, 2021 at 06:14:29 PM

(/comments/2066084/82352972#comment_82352972)

Remember to Unfriend Joe Manchin (<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2021/11/11/2063573/-Unfriend-Manchin-Part-X-Final>). He is single-handedly blocking voting rights in the Senate. Unless he changes his position on the filibuster, we aren't going to get voting rights passed there.

David Pepper: I mean, I will say—and I don't want to blame an entire party because I think most Democrats in Washington agree with this—the federal government has to act. If this window closes, and hopefully we win the House and the Senate in 2022, but if we don't and the window closes, and they have not passed robust voter protections, as well as protections against the most egregious gerrymandering ... I have a 7- and a 4-year-old. They will spend much of their lifetime fighting to get back to where we are right now if they don't act in the next year.

Don't let dysfunction in the Senate doom democracy. You can't go off in the woods and start a new democracy. And with the power of the U.S., no one is safe if we become an autocracy.

If we lose democracy, we lose it everywhere and for all time.

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• **method init (/users/method init)**

Nov 28, 2021 at 06:14:48 PM

(/comments/2066084/82352978#comment_82352978)

Society's most serious and persistent problem is abuse of power. Aggressive war is abuse of power. Rape is abuse of power. Tyranny is abuse of power. The Declaration of Independence was about abuses of power. Political corruption is, at its core, abuse of power.

And short-cutting rights of equal protection of the law and equal representation is in a word, corrupt; an issue that comes up again, and again, and again. Tyranny is corruption in its most septic form. We were fools to let it get as far as it has, and will be very sorry fools if continuing dividing and conquering to progress further.

Government (of, by and for the people) was never the problem; corruption is. It always has been and always will be, with everything that matters at stake. Corruption poisons "liberty and justice for all".

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• **Knute Heimdall (/users/knute heimdall) ▶ method init**

Nov 28, 2021 at 07:46:57 PM

(/comments/2066084/82353499#comment_82353499)

Seeing the phrase 'abuse of power' I am not the only one (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abuse_of_power) carried to a gentle connotation of the phrase. The system is powerful against the abuses of power Nixon and Governor Rod Blagojevich (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_Blagojevich) displayed—those bad apples got their comeuppance. Similarly, the word 'corruption' is defined narrowly by so many of us to mean only kickbacks or bribery schemes. We can recognize 'being on the take'. We have laws against kickbacks. In fact, the Merriam Webster definition (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corruption>), the only showcased example is bribery.

It is unfortunate we constrain the scope of 'corruption' and 'abuse of power.' We miss other acts just as poisonous to democracy. We need to see anyone (politician or neighbor) who devalues empathy, denies facts, excuses dishonesty, puts privilege over fairness, or belittles common decency is a threat to our freedoms. For democracy to win over autocracy, the most destructive behaviors of Governor D of Florida, the insurrectionist caucus, right wing media, and TFG need to be considered in the definitions of corruption and abuses of power.

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**method init (/users/method init) ▶ Knute Heimdall**

Nov 28, 2021 at 09:18:05 PM

[\(/comments/2066084/82353871#comment_82353871\)](/comments/2066084/82353871#comment_82353871)

It's mean kids in the schoolyard which is not so harmless as adults in my youth seemed to think. It the abuse spouse. It is slavery and racism. It's the wrist slap Jeffrey Epstein has handed first round for pedophilia.

Bribery and treason are one of two crimes specified by the Constitution for which "all civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction", but the Supreme Court defines "bribery" so narrowly that prosecutors all but need to produce a signed, itemized invoice. In the case of Gov. Robert McDonnell the Court overturns his conviction arguing that his receipt of \$175,000 of personal gifts, from a businessman whose product the Governor used in position to promote did not meet the strict criteria of corruption. NBC said that "The businessman, Jonnie Williams, wrote checks to help McDonnell pay credit card and real estate debts and cover the cost of catering his daughter's wedding. Among the gifts were a Rolex watch, \$20,000 worth of designer clothes for McDonnell's wife, Maureen, and the use of a country club, a vacation home, and a Ferrari sports car", but what are friends for?

There are no unread comments at this time.

The massive company my father worked for fired several executives with purchasing power were fired for accepting gifts from suppliers to the company; not because a quid pro quo was proved, but because of prohibited "conflicts of interest". I know of other companies that prohibit such conflicts in a variety of ways. Those we elect and pay salaries to, however are subject to a different official standard.

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**FoggyDew (/users/foggydew) ▶ Knute Heimdall**

Nov 28, 2021 at 09:53:45 PM

[\(/comments/2066084/82353980#comment_82353980\)](/comments/2066084/82353980#comment_82353980)

Alas, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling and majority opinion (Roberts) in McDonnell v. United States (2016) vacated (ex-VA governor) McDonnell's bribery conviction and made new law that narrowed the definition of *quid pro quo* in the federal bribery statutes.

I agree with you that "corruption" should encompass more than *quid pro quo* acts. Enforcement of that broader standard will need to be political (loss of election) rather than judicial until Putin's grip on our Supreme Court loosens (it's ironic that, unlike President Obama, Putin was not born in the U.S., so Putin was not qualified to be U.S. president by proxy through Trump, despite Rep. Kevin McCarthy's frat boy encouragement of the conspiracy). I advocate a liberal sprinkling of "corrupt" and "corruption" into Democratic candidate speeches to draw attention to Republican/Russian behaviors' not being ok.

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**FoggyDew (/users/foggydew) ▶ FoggyDew**

Nov 28, 2021 at 09:59:21 PM

[\(/comments/2066084/82353992#comment_82353992\)](/comments/2066084/82353992#comment_82353992)

'Sorry, method init. I did not see your comment until after I posted mine.

Thanks for elaborating on the consequences of what the Supreme Court did.

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Officer Ronnie Peterson (/users/officer ronnie peterson)



• Nov 28, 2021 at 06:21:41 PM
 (/comments/2066084/82353031#comment_82353031)

DN, the title of his book in the photo caption is incorrect.

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• **David Neiwert (/users/david-neiwert)** AUTHOR ▶ **Officer Ronnie Peterson**
 Nov 28, 2021 at 06:27:24 PM
 (/comments/2066084/82353068#comment_82353068)

Thanks! Fixed.

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• **Officer Ronnie Peterson (/users/officer-ronnie-peterson)**
 ▶ **David Neiwert** AUTHOR
 Nov 28, 2021 at 06:35:28 PM
 (/comments/2066084/82353115#comment_82353115)

There are no unread comments at this time.

One more...

David Pepper: Yeah. I mean, that's a big part of it. I mean, I think that the reason ... It's a metaphor, but it's really how they're working. The reason these statehouses are, as my title describes, state laboratories of democracy...

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• **Officer Ronnie Peterson (/users/officer-ronnie-peterson)**
 Nov 28, 2021 at 06:52:20 PM
 (/comments/2066084/82353195#comment_82353195)

I took the time to read this in its entirety. Very good read, and I believe I will get Mr. Pepper's book.

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• **G2geek (/users/g2geek)**
 Nov 28, 2021 at 07:07:50 PM
 (/comments/2066084/82353291#comment_82353291)

David I read your article in its entirety.

I won't have time to read the book (my stack is overflowing as it is), but the major lesson I got from this is **the absolute necessity to pass any kind of voting rights bill ASAP.**


The John Lewis bill would be ideal, but the Manchin bill actually works: it's highly convergent with stuff I was proposing months ago, which means that a lot of other people must be thinking down the same trail and getting to the same place.

So I'll add this to my regular 'everybody GOTV & donate!' rants: we all need to write to our Senators to get them to dump the filthy filibuster and get either of those bills passed ASAP.

Something I've found useful: I don't need to know or comprehend everything, I only need to get to the point of finding a 'to do' item, an action item, and then **do it.**

We have got to trust each other as activists, and our elected Democrats, to do our jobs. Trust others to do their job, and then do your own job, and taken together it'll get done. It takes > 300 snow ploughs to clear a blizzard in New York, and every snow plough operator knows they can count on every one of their fellow workers to plough their respective routes, and **together they will get it done.**

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• **Major Kong (/users/major kong)**

Nov 28, 2021 at 07:31:50 PM

(/comments/2066084/82353428#comment_82353428)

I have lived in Ohio since 1993 and it's horrifying to watch the state turn into North Mississippi.

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• **Ernest T Bass (/users/ernest t bass) ▶ Major Kong**

Nov 28, 2021 at 11:47:17 PM

(/comments/2066084/82354230#comment_82354230)

There are no unread comments at this time.

I left Ohio in 1980 and don't recognize the place anymore.

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• **ArnieB (/users/arnieb)**

Nov 28, 2021 at 07:42:26 PM

(/comments/2066084/82353478#comment_82353478)

Here in Fascist Florida we're experiencing this downward trajectory firsthand because racism undergirds the two term corrupt gov. scott era that saw accountability take flight. Citizens no longer care about character just as long as they think their viewpoint wins out no matter how antidemocratic. Death Dealer Deracist is the epitome of a mentally unstable head of state that should be recalled but has been normalized to the state's detriment. FF even has a felon who continues to evade extradition to New York.

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• **MommaBear2 (/users/mommabear2)**

Nov 28, 2021 at 08:53:56 PM

(/comments/2066084/82353802#comment_82353802)

I have no idea of how to start it... but we need to dev elop an underground railway of activism. (As a back up plan to... firstly, fight like hell to push back GOP efforts... but underground in case the push back doesn't work. I'm thinking code talk/agenda. Dem implants who look GOP but will vote for democracy on certain legislation, planful \$ skimmed to local elections... etc....

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• **NYSuperLib (/users/nysuperlib)**

Nov 28, 2021 at 09:16:32 PM

(/comments/2066084/82353866#comment_82353866)

Stupid closed-minded people always believe they have the right to tell people what to do. That's part of why they are stupid and closed-minded.

The issue is that people have the misguided belief that they have the right to police the behavior of people that they do not have the right to police. They think they own them. It's a hold over from the racist bullshit they've been immersed in and "don't think there's anything wrong with."

However, it's a cycle.

He's probably right — we are about 12 months out from losing democracy in almost every state, and for a long time. There won't be shooting. They will financially empty you of all resources and block the access to be able to gain resources (like they do now to poc in inner cities — that's the model they'll use). You will be expected to change party, get reeducated, or commit suicide.

Hate almost always wins.

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jnklemmBORNINDC (/users/jnklemmbornindc)

Nov 28, 2021 at 11:48:29 PM

(/comments/2066084/82354232#comment_82354232)

Nonetheless, it's just a cycle !? Hate always "plays" given a hand.

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