

PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Threats to Democracy: A Danger to Social Justice for All

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This essay argues that threats to democracy—both global and domestic—pose an existential risk to the advancement of social justice. It explores how democratic backsliding undermines efforts to achieve social justice for all, examining anti-democratic practices such as misinformation, voter suppression, institutional dismantling, and the politicization of public service. Highlighting the interdependence between democratic institutions and social equity in public governance, the authors propose a multilevel response framework to foster democratic resilience through civic engagement, institutional accountability, and collective action. In this essay, members of the Board of the Section on Democracy and Social Justice (DSJ) of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) introduce a call to action for public servants, scholars, and civil society to reaffirm their commitment to democracy as essential for meaningful and enduring social justice.

Introduction

“Since its inception, a thorny challenge for democracy in the United States has been the lack of congruence between lofty and uncontested foundational democratic goals, such as “justice for all” and all persons being “created equal” against the stark reality of their woeful shortcomings in practice, including, for example, broken treaties with American Indians, the legal institution of slavery, Jim Crow policies, lack of equal rights for women, and a problematic history of both legal and practiced discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and ability status.”

(Gooden, Johnson III, McCandless, and Berry-James 2023, 2).

The 21st century has ushered in remarkable progress and existential threats to democracy, including populism, authoritarianism, and efforts to undermine the institutions and public values necessary to support democratic governance and engagement. This essay ar-

gues that democracy is not merely a political system, but the foundation upon which the pursuit of social justice, equity, and fairness depends. At the heart of contemporary notions of democracy is the notion of a social contract (think “John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers”) where the people agree to come together and to be governed (Guy and Ely, 2022, 18). Consequently, this contract is jeopardized when democracy falters; the rights and protections of society’s most vulnerable also diminish.

In alignment with the goals of *Promoting Social Justice*—a distinctive featured section of this journal (Wright 2023)—this essay examines the connection between democracy and social justice. The authors of this essay felt it necessary to respond to the current moment, helping to shed light on the situation and creating a resource for those who may be in places and spaces where relevant resources are scarce and/or prohibited. In this essay, we argue that when democracy is threatened, such threats undermine efforts to promote social justice: *there can be no equity, diversity, inclusion, or justice for everyone—or anyone—without a thriving democracy.*

The Global Assault on Democracy

The threats to democracy, and by extension to promoting social justice, are not localized to any particular geographic region or arena of civic life. A global understanding is crucial to deepening our understanding of threats to democracy and illuminating how anti-democratic forces manifest and evolve (Guy and Williams 2023). Examples from around the world confirm that the threats are growing. In Hungary, the government has been accused of weakening the power of the courts to control political decisions and seizing control of the free press and media to erode the rule of law and make public accountability and democratic discourse an impossibility (Human Rights Watch 2024; Shapiro and Végh 2024). In Brazil and Mexico, there have been concerns about political leaders spreading false information to undermine trust in elections (Bluth 2022; Rossini et al. 2023). Xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, and opposition to gender equity are on the rise across Europe and North America (Clarke 2024; Middle East Policy Council n.d.; Walton 2024). These international examples reflect a broader, coordinated erosion of democratic norms that is neither isolated nor incidental. As the next section illustrates, many of these same tactics—suppression of dissent, manipulation of information, and attacks on inclusive governance—are now taking root in the United States, demanding urgent scholarly and civic attention.

Democratic Backsliding in the United States

The United States—once regarded as a beacon of democratic ideals—now faces its own alarming patterns of democratic backsliding. Efforts to suppress discussions on race, gender, and inclusion mirror broader global patterns of democratic decay. Facing “a reawakening of the moral and social conscience of America” (Wright 2023, 20), we find ourselves facing many of the patterns seen in other countries of bulldozing through and decimating democratic and public service values, as well as governmental institutions (Allen and Smith 2025; Shapiro and Végh 2024; Wire 2025).

Democracy faces relentless daily assaults, on multiple fronts and with multiple tactics, from using administrative tools to instill fear, create moral panic, and further marginalization of nonhegemonic groups (Conyers 2025), to paralyzing DEI and government initiatives designed to foster and enhance democratic and civic engagement (Conyers and Wright Fields 2025), to weak-

ening the administrative state (Kasdan and Bowen 2025). These tactics take many forms including the dismantling of the Department of Education (Mimbela and Schifeling 2025; Walker 2025); the erasure of and recognition, observance, or celebration of all types of inclusion, diversity, and accomplishments by peoples “different” and “unique” from white Eurocentric Christian male English speaking conservatives (Davis 2025); executive actions undermining birthright citizenship (Super 2025); and the mass dismissal of federal employees across agencies including the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services (Allen and Smith 2025; Simmons-Duffin 2025; Wire 2025). The systematic decimation of government agencies not only erodes institutional checks and balances but also raises concerns about the capacity of these agencies to fulfill their basic mandates of serving the public. Collectively, these developments signal a perilous trend that jeopardizes democratic governance in the United States and calls for vigilance and urgent action from all stakeholders committed to preserving democratic norms and institutions. We must ensure that people don’t forget the critical importance of their voice—and their vote—because both matter and as such we must be vigilant and invest in and protect elections integrity (Battaglio and Hall 2020) while ensuring that we not forget lessons learned from previous points in time of democratic distress and disasters such as COVID-19 (Wright and Merritt 2020), domestic acts of terror (Yi 2013), and reactions and responses to events such as 9/11 (Skitka 2005).

Why Democracy Matters for Social Justice

Given the daily siege facing democracy globally and domestically, it is imperative to recommit to fundamental public service values, democratic principles, and the role of public administration in safeguarding democracy and promoting social justice. Democracy’s power stems from the people—the governed, the engaged, the vigilant—not with any particular government official or institution. Thus, the public service values undergirding *Democracy* must be upheld—and when needed, changed—by the people, for the people.

Below, we provide an overview of key principles relevant to this discussion:

- *Democracy* can independently and simultaneously refer to “an ideal or doctrine; or of a type of behav-

our towards others; or of certain institutional and legal arrangements” (Crick 2002, 11).

- *Justice* underpins democratic governance by emphasizing fairness, the rule of law, and equitable distribution of societal goods—what Sandel (2009, 19) calls “giving each person his or her due.”
- *Social justice* seeks to address systemic inequalities and promote equitable access to resources and opportunities, thereby shaping societies that honor the dignity of all individuals (Guy and Williams 2023; McCandless and Guy 2025).
- *Equality* distributes resources equally regardless of individual needs, while *Equity* distributes them based on what individuals require to thrive (McCandless and Guy 2025).
- *Social equity* is paramount in public administration and governance, as it underscores the necessity of ensuring that public services are delivered fairly, without bias, and proactively designed to mitigate systemic biases (Frederickson 1990; Gooden et al. 2023).

Together, these elements form a cohesive framework of democratic ideals of promoting social justice in public service because *threats to democracy also threaten social justice*.

Democratic Fragility and the Strength of Shared Values

Democracy is paradoxically both fragile and resilient, requiring active civic participation and public trust to endure. From ancient direct rule to modern systems emphasizing rights and safeguards (Crick 2002), democracy’s evolution reflects efforts to balance power and prevent tyranny. However, contemporary threats—such as misinformation, voter suppression, and political polarization—endanger its stability.

The erosion of democratic norms raises critical concerns about the people—what we do when faced with such situations, what we do as individuals and communities, and how we work collectively to sustain social justice and democracy. The consequences of democratic backsliding extend beyond disciplines, polarizations, media and information silos, or geographic boundaries. This underscores the necessity of a renewed commitment to the foundational principles of democracy, justice, equity, and civic engagement. To guide readers through these threats and potential solutions, we propose a multilevel response framework—individual, in-

stitutional, and community-based—as a lens to ground the interconnected strategies for democratic resilience and social justice that follow (see Table 1).

Shared Values, Active Participation, and Public Trust

Democracy thrives on shared values, civic engagement, and mutual respect (Guy and Ely 2022). Yet, complacency and disengagement impair and subvert democracy. Historically, civic and citizen engagement have played essential roles in strengthening democratic institutions, reinforcing the idea that an engaged populace is not merely a spectator but an active and necessary participant in governance (Irizarry and Evans 2022).

Active public participation—through voting, organizing, protests, and consumer activism (i.e., boycotting)—legitimizes governance and ensures alignment with societal norms, policy discussions, and legal frameworks, to proactively dismantle systemic racism and other inequities (Wright et al. 2022). When anti-democratic forces suppress civic engagement, trust in democratic systems erodes, threatening their legitimacy, along with the perceived legitimacy of democracy as a viable means for people to express their consent (Anderson and Meyer 2003; Gooden 2023). Declining participation fosters apathy, undermining social justice and making equitable outcomes harder to achieve.

Risks of Complacency

Complacency, misinformation, voter suppression, and deep-seated political and social polarization—especially among the civically disengaged—distort public understanding of policy and implementation and bureaucratic processes. Democracy’s inclusivity is further undermined by restrictive voting laws, gerrymandering, and policies that silence marginalized voices and limit peaceful dissent, expression, and accountability.

This underscores the importance of prioritizing the needs of the people over political factionalism. Open dialogue and civic participation can foster informed publics, equitable policy development and equitable outcomes and impacts (Bryson et al. 2014; Fung 2006; Roberts 2004). Yet, when political identities harden amid anti-democratic rhetoric, trust in democratic institutions erodes (Lee 2022). Public servants must genuinely help and serve all community members—

grounded in fairness, equity, and the common good. Unfortunately, many efforts are frequently focused on political retribution under the guise of social justice, which cannot truly promote equity. Such actions are often driven by resentment and a desire for revenge against perceived enemies rather than by sincere efforts to uplift and include everyone, ultimately hindering the creation of a fairer and more equitable society.

Democratic Fragility

Most democracies function with some sort of constitution, and as such, warnings of pending, current, and ongoing constitutional crises should not be ignored. Constitutional crises—often triggered by the erosion of democratic norms, abuse of executive power, or manipulation of elections—pose serious threats to democracy (Grove 2019). When core principles and institutions are disregarded, trust and civic participation decline, signaling democratic decay making social justice unattainable.

Ongoing threats to democratic integrity undermine the ability of public institutions—and those who study and shape them—to advance democratic values globally. While adaptation is necessary, reforms must remain legitimate, accountable, and publicly responsive (Christensen et al. 2016; De Boer 2023). Today, anti-democratic forces are actively dismantling the very mechanisms that enable democratic transformation.

Left unchecked, this trend could destabilize a country's political and social climate and act as a catalyst for the emergence of authoritarian regimes in other nations. While disillusionment can erode trust and weaken democracy, resilient participation in civic life and a commitment to ethical governance can reinforce democratic values, bringing about positive change. This resilience is not an inherent trait; it relies on the proactive engagement of both citizens and public administrators who are devoted to safeguarding democratic norms against authoritarian incursions. Resilience isn't easy, especially in the face of economic uncertainty and layoffs, but we must remember that the core of resiliency is remembering that we can do hard things and persevere.

Democratic Institutions and Civil Society

Resilient democracy depends on dynamic interactions between government structures, administrative func-

tions, and public actors. These relationships are essential for responding effectively, efficiently, and equitably to crises—from social unrest and economic instability to authoritarian threats against civil liberties. Democracy depends on the collaboration of institutions, civil society, and citizens to equitably address political, economic, and social challenges (Van der Wal 2020; Youngs 2023). Public servants actively uphold transparency, inclusivity, and equity in policy and practice (Kaufman 2001). Civil society—including media and nonprofits—acts as a watchdog, amplifies marginalized voices, and mobilizes collective action to sustain democratic values (Irizarry and Evans 2022). Civil society institutions bridge the gap between government and the public, enabling citizen voice, expression, and policy influence. Far from passive, civil society institutions actively shape democracy through participation, dialogue, and accountability.

Advancing the Work of Promoting Social Justice

This essay highlights a central point: *democratic backsliding is not just a governance issue—it's an existential threat to social justice*. Social justice is the ongoing process of ensuring fair treatment, equitable resource distribution, and full participation in civic and political life for all individuals—especially those marginalized and excluded—think Rawls (1971) veil of ignorance (see also McCandless and Guy 2025). Ensuring equity, fair treatment, and full civic participation requires more than theory. Social justice must be operationalized—enacted, applied, and protected—through deliberate and coordinated action across all levels of society. *Social justice must be actively practiced and protected!* Defending democracy demands coordinated action across society and a moral commitment to inclusion, fairness, and social justice (Frederickson 1990; Irizarry et al. 2023; McCandless and Guy 2025; Rawls 1971). This involves all actors—particularly public administrators, public servants, scholars, and community members alike—and is consistent with contemporary notions of public governance as articulated by Denhardt and Denhardt's *New Public Service* (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000).

Without inclusive, accountable, and responsive democratic institutions and social practices, social justice is unattainable. Undermining these norms and systems weakens the capacity to deliver fairness, equity,

social justice, and meaningful dialogue and civic engagement. Public administrators, public servants, scholars—all residents and citizens—must reaffirm social justice as a core democratic function—one that requires ongoing, collective efforts to ensure all individuals can fully participate in and benefit from civic life (Gooden et al. 2023; Johnson and Svava 2011). *Promoting social justice* is not simply a theoretical goal—it is the very practice of democracy in action. It involves daily, deliberate, and collective efforts to ensure that all people—regardless of race, gender, class, ability, immigration status, or other identity markers—can access the full benefits of a civil body politic. This is the core of Rawls’s (1971) argument that when making decisions without knowledge of social status or other individualizing factors, individuals would choose that all people had equal rights and that if protections favoring one group over another were needed, those would only be justifiable if they benefited those most marginalized in society—and thus all people (think of curb ramps, designed to help individuals in wheelchairs and yet beneficial to all people including parents with strollers, those with packages, etc.).

Public Servants

Promoting social justice in the face of democratic decline requires more than conceptual advocacy—it demands purposeful, values-driven public service. Social justice cannot be operationalized unless public servants intentionally design, evaluate, and adjust policies to redress structural inequities and challenge oppressive systems aided by similar efforts from the public at large. Public administrators must lead by example, embracing roles as ethical stewards and equity innovators who challenge injustice through their professional actions (Evans et al. 2023). This includes prioritizing equity in decisions, partnering with civil society to uplift marginalized voices, fostering inclusive democratic engagement, and building trust through transparency, accountability, and cultural responsiveness (Gooden 2023; Guy and Ely 2022).

In the United States, for instance, the bulldozing of the federal government through mass firings of otherwise qualified and well-performing public servants is not being received lightly—at the national or state and local levels (Barajas 2025; Baratz 2025; Elassar et al. 2025). Public servants yet to be terminated must remain

vigilant, dedicated to the public interest, and not hegemonic or oligarchic interests, and use the mechanisms that exist to hold our democratic institutions and their leaders accountable. It is worth noting that public servants who have been terminated or forced into accepting buyouts, and those strongly encouraged to leave don’t lose their ability to hold democratic institutions and leaders accountable just because they were forced out. They can still respond—and many are! They are speaking out, responding through the courts, making their stories known through the media, and rallying, demonstrating, and protesting (Barajas 2025; Oceneanu 2025; Rubin 2025). The people are speaking too—showing their support of federal workers as was seen by demonstrators supporting fired USAID workers forced to clear out their offices (Baratz 2025). Additional pro-democracy protests against the “hostile takeover” are occurring regularly throughout the country including at least 1,400 “Hands-Off!” demonstrations occurring in one day within all 50 US states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and in other countries including in Mexico, the UK, Germany, The Netherlands, Austria, and France (Clark 2025; Elassar et al. 2025). Together, current and fired public servants and the people are demonstrating resilience through unity and strength.

At the same time, public service professional development and training, as well as related university programs must retool curricula to equip future leaders for the challenges at the intersection of governance, democracy, and social justice (Irizarry et al. 2023). Public administration scholars are increasingly reassessing the role, function, and significance of public service education and how this translates into professional practice and civic engagement of the public (Berry-James et al. 2021). Recently, one scholar even posed the question: “Have we failed to teach—and to broadcast—what it takes to harness collective action in a way that is inclusive and pursues the greater good for everyone?” (Guy 2025, 1). As we engage with these pivotal questions, it is crucial for students, scholars, and practitioners to prioritize civic engagement, ethical governance, and equity-driven leadership within both teaching and practice (Mason et al. 2020; McCandless and Gooden 2024). Only in doing so can we authentically reimagine public service pedagogy and transform public and nonprofit administration, policy, and service delivery to advance equitable change in our government, communities, and institutions (Berry-James et al. 2021).

Table 1. Multilevel Response Framework—Advancing Social Justice Through Democratic Action

Level	Key Threats to Democracy and Justice	Actions for Advancing Social Justice
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic disengagement and apathy • Disinformation and media silos • Voter suppression • Polarization and loss of civil discourse • Normalized exclusionary rhetoric 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Eligible individuals must vote in EVERY election—local and national. 2) Engage in peer-to-peer civic education—join and/or host conversations—share nonpartisan civic education to raise awareness of issues. 3) Challenge misinformation in your circles and on various platforms. 4) Contact your elected officials, write editorials in local media outlets advocating for inclusive and just policies, and demanding accountability. 5) Volunteer with or donate to equity-focused organizations. 6) Support local journalism and independent media—to defend the free press. 7) Engage in consumer activism—boycott companies that fund anti-democratic efforts, or engage in boycotts by supporting those that uphold social justice values. 8) Be creative—design and share art, poetry, or memes that inspire democratic participation and affirm social justice causes.
Institutional (e.g., schools, agencies, nonprofits, professional associations, universities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-DEI policies and legislation • Institutional complicity in inequity • Lack of accountability and transparency • Politicization of public service • Suppression of truth telling 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Conduct equity audits of policies, programs, and service delivery mechanisms. 2) Protect inclusive curricula and challenge bans on books and on teaching race, gender, or civic history in all institutions of learning. 3) Center equity in mission, values, and actions. 4) Reenvision the social justice playbook and explore new ways to promote social justice. 5) Join and/or host regular “Social Justice in Action” open forums where community members help guide institutional priorities. 6) Publicly track and report progress on social equity and social justice commitments—be transparent, accountable, and reflexive.
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disenfranchisement of marginalized groups • Suppression of free speech • Xenophobic laws and policies • Distrust of institutions • Social fragmentation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Support and/or organize voter registration drives. 2) Hold teach-ins, civic circles, or town halls on democratic participation and community power. 3) Support local candidates who are committed to social justice. 4) Defend the right to dissent and peacefully assemble—join or support civil liberties groups. 5) Work with libraries, parks, and faith spaces to reclaim public spaces for inclusive civic dialogue. 6) Be creative—create a “Democracy and Social Justice Festival” in your city—combine celebration, education, and activism. 7) Form rapid-response teams to counter disinformation or organize community responses to local policy threats. 8) Build coalitions across issues and identities, emphasizing solidarity over siloed activism.

Collective Responsibility: Strength Through Unity

Democracy relies on collective responsibility—individual, institutional, and community-based. Civic engagement, from voting to advocacy and public deliberation, is essential to preserving democratic norms

and driving social change (García and Sanchez 2021). Division and apathy threaten democracy, but solidarity, civic virtue, and commitment to the common good can restore it. We must cultivate concern for the whole and address inequality’s civic consequences (Sandel 2009)—or as Ana Navarro put it, “wake up, stand up,

... speak up, and act up” (The View 2025)—because democracy depends on accountability and active engagement.

Preserving democracy requires unity—not uniformity, but shared commitment to social justice and democratic integrity. Public servants and engaged publics must support one another in developing innovative responses to today’s challenges, even when they differ from our own preferred responses, so long as we stand together to work toward the same goals. Strong communities grounded in social capital reinforce democratic resilience (Guy and Ely 2022).

Institutions play a key role by advancing transparency, equity, and inclusion, while communities sustain democracy through civic participation, grassroots action, and efforts to cultivate informed and engaged publics. Balancing personal beliefs with public duty can be complex, but collective agency and unwavering advocacy are essential. The *urgency* of the moment calls for action, as no external force will single-handedly preserve democracy. “*None of us are free until all of us are free,*” as noted by Emma Lazarus in 1882 (Partnow 2011, 168). Organizations like the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and its various chapters and sections may offer vital spaces for this work. Through collective agency, persistent advocacy, and unwavering commitment to social justice democracy will endure.

Operationalizing Social Justice in Democratic Practice: A Call to Action at Every Level

Social justice is more than fair resource distribution—it requires dismantling barriers to full civic participation and addressing historic and structural inequities. *Protecting democracy is not separate from social justice; it is the pathway to it.* To translate ideas into action, Table 1 outlines practical strategies discussed and implied throughout this essay at individual, organizational, and community levels aimed at preserving democracy while simultaneously promoting social justice. This multilevel framework highlights how threats to democracy manifest across different spheres and provides concrete actions for resistance and renewal—from voting and civic education at the individual level to coalition-building and institutional reform. By presenting interconnected strategies, the framework presented in Table 1 invites readers to locate themselves within this continuum

and consider how they, their organizations, and their communities might engage to preserve democracy and promote social justice. While not exhaustive, this framework serves as a starting point to ignite purposeful civic engagement.

Democracy does not preserve itself. Social justice does not arise organically from bureaucracy. No superhero or heroine will come to save the day. It is the people who must rise and stand firm to secure their own future, with each individual playing their part.

Preserving democracy and advancing social justice are active, contested, and often perilous pursuits—but they are necessary. *This moment calls for urgency, courage, and clarity.* As public servants, educators, and civic actors, we must not merely analyze these threats—we must respond to them and take action. And *in that action lies our collective power.*

Final Thoughts

The weakening of democratic values is a strong reminder for us to stand up for justice. *Social justice is not separate from democracy—it is a part of what democracy means.* It is the responsibility of public servants, scholars, and everyone in our communities to uphold this truth. The Section on Democracy and Social Justice (DSJ) of the American Society for Public Administration reaffirms its commitment to these important ideas. In the face of mounting threats, DSJ encourages everyone who reads JSEPA, as well as all members of ASPA and civil society to notice problems, speak out, and take action.

Public service students, scholars, practitioners, and all members of civil society in pluralistic democracies must resist democratic erosion by supporting inclusive, socially equitable, socially just, and accountable democratic values, processes, engagement, and institutions. Democracy is under threat—but with sustained commitment, it can be preserved and renewed. Although democracy faces unprecedented challenges, DSJ stands firm in its dedication to fostering an inclusive, participatory, and equitable public service landscape with the pursuit of activities aimed at individual, institutional, and community responsibility and fostering ways to address the inevitable conflicts arising. Connect with others, connect with us at DSJ, but whatever you do, stand together!

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