

MASSIVELY PARALLEL PROBLEM SOLVING AND DEMOCRACY BUILDING

AN ONGOING RESPONSE TO THREATS
TO DEMOCRACY IN THE U.S.

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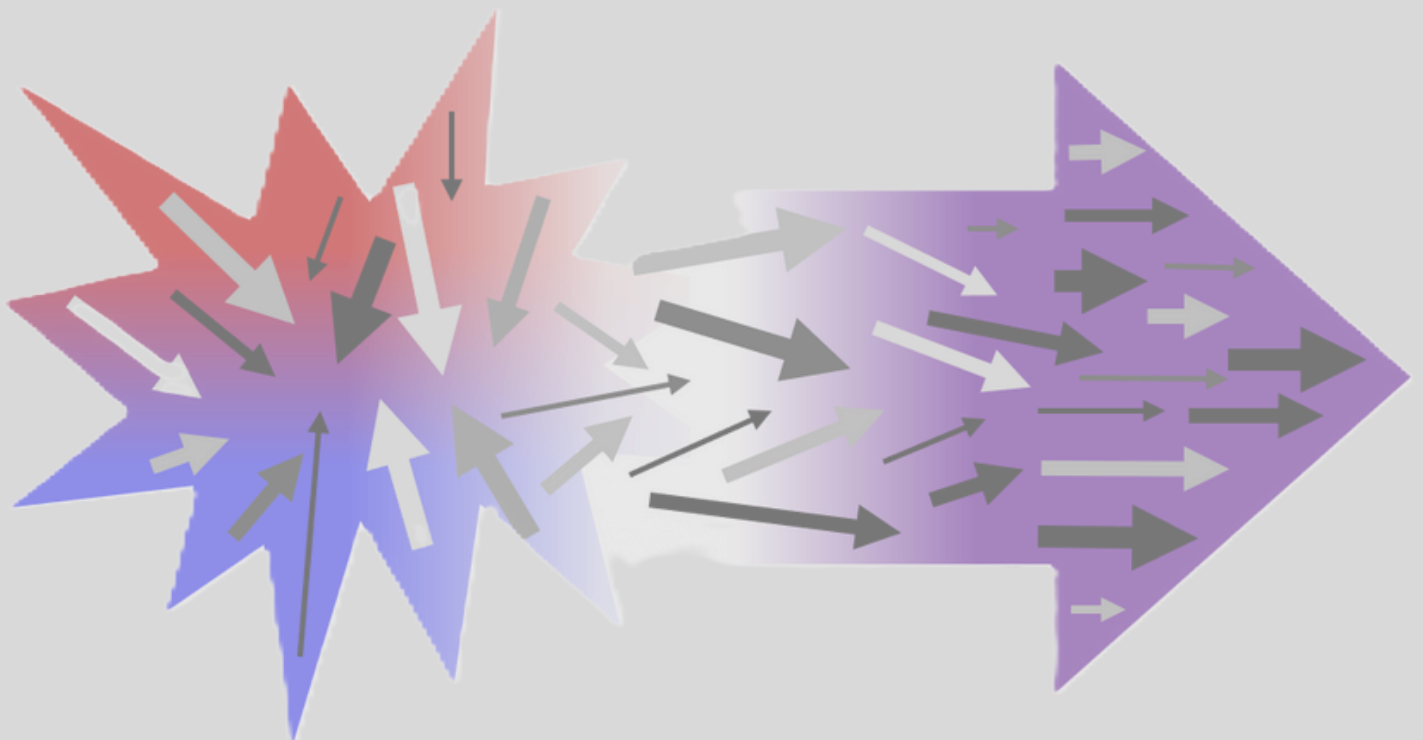
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Abstract

Scholars, conflict resolution practitioners, politicians, and grassroots citizens all seem to agree: democracy is in trouble in many places around the world. This is certainly true in the United States, which has long been considered—and has considered itself to be—a bastion of democratic strength. But most inside and outside the U.S. now agree that U.S. democracy is being attacked on many fronts, and the forces defending it may not be sufficient to save it.

However, the forces of resilience and adaptive change are here in more abundance than is often recognized. Instead of looking for a “silver bullet”—one solution to all our problems—this paper introduces the notion of “massively parallel problem solving and democracy building.” Taken from the computer term “massively parallel computing,” the notion is that the “solution” to failing democracy comes in the form of thousands or hundreds of thousands of different people and organizations, each working on their own little “thing,” which together add up to a massive societal response to all the various challenges democracy faces. Rather than being a hypothetical theoretical idea, massively parallel problem solving is already happening on the ground – on a surprisingly large scale. But it needs to be much more visible, which will give hope to those who have lost it, and then encourage some of them to find a way to join in the effort to help make sure democracy—and American citizens—not only survive, but thrive, in the future United States.[1]



Overview

DEMOCRACY AS A DISPUTE HANDLING SYSTEM

Having spent the last 35 years trying to catalogue what the peace and conflict resolution fields collectively know about the hyper-polarized intractable conflicts that are tearing apart so many societies, we approach democracy's ongoing struggles from a somewhat different perspective than many. As we see it, democracy is, at its core, a system for handling the vast stream of disputes that characterize all societies, in ways that the public believes will produce wise and equitable decisions. When democracies are able to successfully reconcile competing interests in ways that enjoy broad support (or, at least acquiescence), then citizens are willing to "trust the system" and forsake the use of extreme (and, potentially, violent) political tactics.

Successful democracies rely upon a vast and multi-faceted array of civic norms and institutions to perform six essential dispute handling functions:

1. Vision: Cultivation of a shared underlying vision for society that is capable of binding citizens (and non-citizen residents) together despite their many deep differences.
2. De-Escalation and De-Polarization: Limitation of destructive escalation and hyper-polarization dynamics that can make shared, democratic governance impossible.
3. Mutual Understanding: Promotion of mutual understanding through the effective use of a broad array of trust-worthy and trusted communication mechanisms.
4. Reliable Assessments: Reliable, fact-based and technical assessment of the nature and causes of societal problems and the advantages and disadvantages of alternative options for addressing those problems.
5. Collaborative Problem Solving: Utilization of collaborative problem-solving processes that are able to identify and take full advantage of mutually beneficial opportunities, to generate pragmatic solutions to intractable problems.
6. Equitable Processes: Equitable decision-making processes and institutions that resolve disputes in cases where voluntary, collaborative processes are unable to make consensus or compromise decisions.

THE CHALLENGES FACING DEMOCRACY

From our perspective, the challenges facing contemporary democracies are due largely to their inability to adequately perform these vital functions at the full scale and complexity of modern society with its: vast array of competing interest groups; large numbers of unscrupulous, bad-faith actors; and large numbers of people with legitimate grievances – grievances which are extremely difficult to address in ways which leave everyone feeling fairly treated.

These problems have produced a kind of dysfunctional politics that is sharply limiting the ability of democratic societies to protect themselves from increasingly aggressive authoritarian geopolitical rivals. These problems are also leaving a great many citizens so disillusioned that they are seriously considering abandoning the principles of democratic pluralism and embracing an all-out struggle for political dominance that leaves little room for fellow citizens who hold differing beliefs. This is often accompanied by an increasing embrace of "strong" leaders who promise to do whatever it takes to prevail — leaders who often tend to have corrupt and authoritarian ambitions.

Failure to successfully address these multifaceted challenges really does constitute an existential threat to democratic societies. If these democracies fail and succumb to the principal alternative, a kind of 21st-century, high-tech authoritarianism, it may well be impossible for them to ever recover. That is why we argue that our inability to constructively handle intractable conflict is the most serious threat facing humanity. It is destroying the democratic institutions that enable us to address all our other problems.

THE KEY TO DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCY: ADAM SMITH'S INVISIBLE HAND

Despite all of these problems, democratic societies have, for centuries now, proven themselves to be extraordinarily resilient and capable of surmounting many past difficulties and learning from (and correcting) their many shortcomings. This resilience is driven by the political equivalent of Adam Smith's invisible hand – the notion that all problems, including political problems, create opportunities for people who can figure out how to help solve them.

Unfortunately, this societal learning process is reactive – it lags behind the things that go wrong. The reason is that large numbers of people must first recognize the existence of a problem. They then must be willing to support people who are looking for and trying out ways to address the problem, rather than digging in and making the problem worse (as are people in the United States who use ultra-partisan approaches to problem solving which just deepen polarization and governmental dysfunction). It is this support for innovative solutions that gives people the incentive they need to work to solve each problem. While it would, of course, be preferable to anticipate and avoid problems in the first place, that is something that is even more difficult to do.

While many fear democracy is doomed, others recognize that there are potential solutions and have begun a myriad of “massively parallel” efforts to strengthen it.

MASSIVELY PARALLEL PROBLEM SOLVING

A great many people now recognize that the U.S. (and many other) democracies are struggling with crippling internal conflicts that are making problem solving all but impossible. While many fear democracy is doomed, and many others have just dropped out and put their “heads in the sand” (i.e. ignored the problems), others recognize that there are potential solutions available. A segment of these people has rolled up their sleeves, and gone to work, helping in myriad small ways to remedy one particular aspect of the problem, at least at one location. In conjunction with the [Beyond Intractability](#) substack, we have been assembling a preliminary inventory of these activities – efforts that often go unnoticed by academia and the mainstream media. We believe that if these efforts were more widely recognized, they would be able to attract additional support and participation by defusing the currently widespread sense of hopelessness.

The name that we give to this naturally occurring, societal learning process is “massively parallel problem solving” or “massively parallel peace and democracy building.” This approach relies on very large numbers of small, independent efforts, each trying to make a significant contribution to some specialized aspect of the larger problem. (The name came from the term “massively parallel computing,” in which many small computers work side-by-side to solve a problem that is far too complex for a single computer to solve on its own.) This approach contrasts sharply with all-too-common efforts to find some single grand solution or some political candidate that will somehow save us all. The problem is too complex for that. We really need a massively parallel, division of labour-based approach – one that mobilizes our collective insights and energies to address first, our inability to work together, and second, the problems we need to work together to solve.

RIGHT (AND LEFT) WING POPULISM: A SYMPTOM OF THE PROBLEM, NOT *THE* PROBLEM

Unlike many of our colleagues on the left, we do not see democracy's ongoing difficulties as stemming primarily or solely from the rise of right-wing populist movements which are demanding radical change and supporting often unscrupulous leaders with aspirations for authoritarian power. Those leaders and their followers are, indeed, part of the problem. But they are not all of it. So, too, are the populists found on the progressive left – a group that, in its own way, has become so deeply disillusioned with “the system” that they, too, are demanding radical changes to traditional democratic institutions that they see as merely tools of oppression. Like the right, they are also committed to pursuing their demands, even if it requires finding ways to work around, alter, or eliminate these “oppressive” democratic institutions.

More importantly, both sides are completely certain that they are right, and that the other side is wrong, or even evil. So, both are completely unwilling to consider the interests or needs of the other side as legitimate, and they are unwilling to use traditional democratic problem-solving mechanisms to come up with collaborative or compromise solutions. They see politics and democracy as an all-or-nothing game, where winning is all important, no matter how it is done, no matter the costs – even if the cost is democracy itself.

While much of the strength of these movements (on both sides) is attributable to the clever tactics employed by often unscrupulous leaders and the media which exacerbates conflict for profit, much more of it is attributable to legitimate grievances and complaints about the many ways in which democracy's elites have, in recent decades, left so many of their fellow citizens behind.

Solving these problems is going to require a multi-faceted array of efforts, each directed at a different aspect of the problem. This is something that we think is only possible with some sort of massively parallel approach – an approach that will enable us all to work together to craft a system that more wisely and equitably addresses the legitimate concerns raised on both the left and the right.

Advocates on both sides see politics and democracy as an all-or-nothing game, where winning is all important, even if the cost is democracy itself.

UNITED STATES FOCUS

We are presenting this way of looking at the challenges facing democracy in the context of struggles in the United States. As a U.S.-focused project, we lack the expertise needed to determine the degree to which these ideas might be adapted to the challenges facing other democracies. So, we will leave that to others. We have long been uncomfortable with outside experts who try to push their ideas onto societies that they don't really understand. That said, we do believe that this way of looking at democracy's problems does offer useful insights that are likely to be quite broadly applicable.

In this report, we will start with a review of the multifaceted threat to US democracy – a threat that goes far beyond the 2024 election and Donald Trump's candidacy. We then turn our attention to the primary and more hopeful theme of this paper, democratic resilience. Our goal is to highlight the highly decentralized, “massively parallel” process that has long enabled complex democracies to overcome serious difficulties in ways that yield a democracy that comes ever closer to living up to its ideals. We believe that the threats to democracy can most effectively be addressed first, by making existing solutions much more visible, so people develop some understanding and hope that change is possible. Then we need to help citizens understand the nature of these solutions and the ways in which they might contribute to their implementation. We then go on to describe six near-term goals for this massively parallel effort and the ways in which people in different roles can help the larger society to become a healthier, more equitable, and more resilient democracy.

Threats to U.S. democracy

While almost everyone is worried about the state of democracy in the United States, there is little agreement about what those threats are, with huge differences between left-leaning, right-leaning, and centrist perspectives.

THREATS FROM THE RIGHT

Progressives, liberals, and Democrats more broadly, together with many independents (people who do not belong to any organized political party) most often focus on Donald Trump and his supporters as being the gravest threat to U.S. democracy. They look at the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol and fear future break downs of the orderly transition of power, trust in elections, and norms against political violence. They look at the many attempts that Trump made to change the outcome of the 2020 election: trying to seat fake electors in the Electoral College, trying to get the Georgia Secretary of State to “find” non-existent votes, trying to pressure lawmakers and election officials in other states to change electoral votes from Biden to Trump, using his Justice Department to conduct bogus election-fraud investigations. After losing many judicial challenges to the vote count, Trump even went so far as to suggest that the U.S. Constitution should be “terminated” in order to allow him to overturn the 2020 election.

Trump is adding to these fears by promising to seek revenge and retribution if he is elected to a second term as U.S. president. He has said he would use the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate his adversaries and have them charged with crimes, using a special prosecutor to “go after” President Biden and his family. Going further, he has promised to prosecute anyone who has challenged or challenges him politically in the future and to fire all the unelected government workers who he deems are operatives of the illegitimate “deep state.” He is also planning to make sure everyone around him is a supporter who will not question his anti-democratic actions. He does not want the pushback he got from White House lawyers and cabinet secretaries, for instance, the first time around. He has promised in at least one speech, that if supporters vote for him this time, “they won’t need to vote again,” suggesting that he will end elections.

All of these actions, which are met with cheers and support from Trump’s base, are, indeed, deeply concerning. Also concerning is the fact that most Republicans still believe that the 2020 election was “stolen,” and they expect the same thing to happen again, if they don’t take massive efforts to prevent that, which Democrats see as anti-democratic electoral tampering on the Republican side (by making it harder for Democrats to vote, for example).

THREATS FROM THE LEFT

There are real threats to U.S. democracy coming from the Democratic Party as well. For example, in 2022, the Democrats tried to manipulate the Republican primary elections by contributing money to and otherwise supporting the campaigns of extreme Republican candidates, in an effort to get weaker opponents on the ballot in November. This may be what they are doing again by pursuing so many court cases against Trump during the 2024 election season and filing so many cases on dubious grounds (such as the mishandling of classified documents or efforts to conceal an illicit affair (remember President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky?). It would have been vastly better to have a definitive verdict on the core charge that President Trump had used illegal means to subvert the election. These court cases (which are widely seen on the right as political “lawfare” (“warfare through law”) may or may not weaken Trump (but his poll numbers seemed to rise every time more charges were filed.) They also focused the limelight on him constantly, taking the attention away from his would-be Republican challengers (before he won the nomination) who were not as tainted (and hence were perhaps stronger) than he is. While Democrats accuse the Republicans of gerrymandering (manipulating electoral district boundaries to unfairly favour one side), the Democrats do this whenever possible too.

In addition, Democrats have managed to drive their political agenda far beyond the ballot box to dominate K-12 [2] schools and higher education, as well as private enterprise, by demanding adherence to Democratic Party values (termed “DEI” or “diversity, “equity,” and “inclusion”) for hiring and retention. Most students, then, are being indoctrinated with these values that violate much of what half of the U.S. population believes. Even if these views are better than others, insisting that only one set of political (and often cultural) beliefs be taught in schools and universities, and followed by private enterprise, is a fundamental violation of freedom of speech and belief, a central tenant of the U.S. Bill of Rights and hence U.S. democracy.

In another highly contentious case, three states (Colorado, Illinois and Maine) tried to remove Donald Trump from their presidential primary election ballots, even though Trump has not yet been found guilty of any crime or “insurrection,” which is what was being charged. This effort was later overturned by the Supreme Court

OTHER THREATS

Other threats to democracy cross the political divide. One is the prevailing sense that the U.S. government no longer works. Most people think that it doesn’t work to protect our citizens (fear of crime is substantially up in recent years, even though actual crime rates are down) and the two parties are so polarized that they are widely seen as unable to govern effectively. According to a September 2023 Pew Research Center Poll,

When asked about various aspects of the job those in Congress are doing, such as working with members of the opposing parties or caring about the people they represent, Americans are critical on nearly every domain.

72% of respondents viewed Congress with disfavor, saying that they didn’t listen to the concerns of people in their district, they didn’t keep their personal financial interests separate from their work (implying they were corrupt), they didn’t work effectively with the opposing party, and they didn’t take responsibility for their actions. These assessments cross party, age, gender, race, and education.

Violations of the rule of law are a concern to both sides as well. Democrats see Trump’s many attempts to overturn the 2020 election as a massive attempt to subvert the rule of law, as, they charged, he often did with his executive orders when he was President. The Republicans, too, charge that Biden has been subverting the law with his executive orders, which, for example, bypassed Congress and the Courts in an effort to forgive student loans which heavily benefited his constituency, not the Republicans’.

Dis- and misinformation is another threat that crosses political boundaries (though those are terms that are largely used by the left and the term “fake news” is used more by the right.) Social media has become a primary source of information and “news” for many Americans, even though it has been flooded with fake facts and fake people by internal and external provocateurs. Rather than presenting the truth, or even the facts as article authors honestly see them, these “bad-faith actors” knowingly spread false information to deepen the political divide for their own benefit. “True believers”—people who consume this dis- and misinformation without questioning it and spread it further—contribute to the polarization. Most traditional or legacy media—newspapers, radio, and TV—also cater to narrowly focused segments of the United States’ highly polarized society. Media funding models in the United States rely on advertising, which relies on audience numbers. So, like social media, the traditional media tells people what they want to hear – regardless of whether it is true.

However, attempts to control this flood of bad information have sometimes gone too far. What has come to be called the “censorship industrial complex,” has not only blocked or countered actual mis- or disinformation; at times, it has also blocked legitimate contrary views.

Economic challenges are another threat to democracy that is bipartisan. Almost everyone has been hurt by inflation, and many feel less economically secure than they did in earlier years. The Democrats have also raised the fear of climate change to an existential threat, suggesting that its impacts will make it impossible for young people to have a secure and prosperous future. Taking all these things together, according to PRRI, 75% of Americans believe that “the country is going in the wrong direction,” while 55% believe that “American culture and way of life has changed for the worse since the 1950s.”

THE GROWING DESIRE FOR STRONG, AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS

These beliefs have led a disturbing number of people to see authoritarianism as a valid, even needed, response. According to the same [PRRI poll](#) cited above, taken in October of 2023, 38% of Americans agree with the statement: “Because things have gotten so far off track in this country, we need a leader who is willing to break some rules if that’s what it takes to set things right.” Nearly a quarter agree with the statement “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.” Agreement with this statement came from 33% of Republicans, 22% of independents and 13% of Democrats.

Distrust of the other—driven, of course, by manipulative media and social media—is another bipartisan problem that is driving these numbers higher. According to a study described in the [Washington Post](#), although few Democrats or Republicans say they would be willing to subvert democratic procedures or norms in a variety of circumstances, they estimated that their opponents would be very likely to do so. And, if their opponents did so, they would have no choice but to do so themselves. As the author [Jason Willick](#) observed,

All this helps show why the “democracy vs. autocracy” framing that has become popular among American elites doesn’t reflect the actual challenge to self-government in the 21st century. People who champion democracy can easily persuade themselves to undermine it if they think the other side is prepared to do the same. To the extent that there is a risk of authoritarianism in the United States, it doesn’t come from hostility to democracy. It comes from Americans’ deepening attachment to democracy and their growing fear that it will be taken away.

THE SPECTRE OF COMPLETE DEMOCRATIC COLLAPSE

In sum, the problems with American democracy include, but go far deeper than governmental dysfunction, which structural “tweaks” might fix. They go deeper than distrust in elections, the prevention of violence, and the re-establishment of the rule of law, although all these things are part of the story, and all need to be addressed.

The problems go from the top to the bottom: from our highest political leaders to the grassroots citizens (and non-citizen residents) trying to make a good life for themselves in this country. As was hinted at, but not explored deeply above, there is widespread distrust between American citizens, who increasingly see the other, not as “fellow citizens,” or even “people with differing views from mine,” but as [evil, even sub-human, existential threats](#), who must be neutralized.

And these views are reinforced by a continuing set of feedback loops between leaders and followers. Leaders are afraid of saying anything “nice” about the other side or working with or compromising with the other side for fear of appearing “weak” and losing the next election. Followers go along with the hateful statements that they hear from the leaders, their friends and associates, and on social media, for fear of looking like a “traitor.” Moderate, calming, de-escalatory voices are increasingly being silenced while extreme, hyperbolic voices are accentuated and amplified.

This distrust, fear, and hatred of the other is extremely dangerous, not just to democracy, but to peace. In fact, it is sometimes hard to understand why large-scale civil unrest has yet to break out. Should that happen, it wouldn’t be very hard to fall into something that starts to look like civil war (perhaps similar to the troubles in Northern Ireland).

In the wake of the explosion of global anti-Semitism that followed the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, and the open calls for the destruction of Israel that ensued (on U.S. campuses and many other places around the world), it has even become reasonable to fear outbreaks of genocidal violence. If the sins of those that the left views as “oppressors” are sufficient to justify the barbarity of Hamas’ attack, then democracy’s peaceful system for handling intractable conflicts is truly endangered.

And even short of civil war or genocide, if we don't start now to remedy the problems listed above, we are quite possibly looking at increasingly widespread governmental and/or societal breakdown, or, perhaps, the almost complete domination of one side (the left or the right) over the other. This could easily be blended with something that looks like true authoritarianism.

THE RESILIENCE OF U.S. DEMOCRACY

Despite the depressing litany of threats to democracy outlined above, there are three principal reasons for optimism. First, we do have many tools for approaching these problems, and second, many of them are already being implemented much more widely than is known. Third, Americans are extremely creative. We have come up with astonishing solutions to a vast array of challenges in the past, and we can do so again.

One of the cornerstones of the massively parallel approach to problem solving is the fact that all problems create opportunities for those who can figure out how to solve them. If we think of all the problems listed above as opportunities for people who can figure out how to solve them, then we have a good chance of building the kind of society in which we would all like to live. By combining our collective efforts and insights, we can move democracy beyond its past failings and emerge from this difficult and threatening period to a more peaceful, just, honest, and merciful society than the one we had before.[3]

A massively parallel response to the threats facing democracy

The basic idea behind the massively parallel approach is that thousands, even tens of thousands, of people and organizations work in a wide range of specialized roles, each focused on making a significant contribution to the larger democracy-strengthening effort. Since democracies are complex adaptive systems, they are self-organizing. There is no central leadership that controls everything. No one is directing who does what or how; those choices are made by the individual actors.

This approach is organized in ways that are analogous to free economic markets. In the material economy, people identify needs to be met and they develop and then manufacture a product or provide a service that fills that need. Then they advertise these products and services to potential customers, and if they are good enough, and priced reasonably right, they sell well. If they are not, the effort fails, and the would-be entrepreneur tries something else.

Massively parallel democracy building works the same way. People identify problems that need fixing, most often in their local communities, but also at higher levels, and then they work together (often as nonprofits or lobbyists) to develop a process or propose a structural change to address that problem. Then they market that idea, recruit "employees" (often volunteers) and paying "clients/supporters." If their proposal or process is good enough, it "sells well." If it doesn't work, they go back to the drawing board. This is the system through which the collective judgment of all of the potential beneficiaries of each activity decides what succeeds and what fails.

Also a part of this massively parallel process are the democracy-building equivalents of "trade associations" with which economists and business leaders are familiar. These organizations provide economies of scale to relatively small, local efforts by providing a framework in which they can work together in mutually supportive ways that involve various types of coordination, collaboration, and joint learning. So, in the business world, there are organizations such as the Computer and Communications Industry Association, and the National Coffee Association. Such trade associations provide consumer, market, and production data, which help members decide where it might be most profitable to sell what goods.

Likewise, with Massively Parallel Democracy Building, there are organizations that are helping coordinate efforts, such as the [Inter-Movement Impact Project \(IMIP\)](#), and the recently created [Practitioner Mobilization for Democracy \(PMD\)](#) program. Both meet regularly to allow members to network and explore collaborative ideas, and they provide resources for recruitment, training, marketing, and other “business efforts.” Though both efforts are growing rapidly, they still reach only a small fraction of the people and organizations involved in the larger MPDB effort. The National Civic League has, for example, been assembling a map of as many of the entities involved in this work in the United States as they can. This map is not yet public as of this writing, but a spokesperson for the NCL said it had over 10,000 entries several months ago. It is probably significantly bigger now.

Some organizations involved in this effort are working to enlist participants, not just for their projects, but for the whole massively parallel effort. PMD is trying to recruit facilitators and mediators who have been working in other domains, and get them involved in the democracy domain. [The Bridge Alliance](#) runs a website called [Citizen Connect](#) that asks visitors on its home page if they are “sick and tired of America’s broken politics?” It then has links to information on ways individuals can get involved to “do something” about it. Visitors can find initiatives and organizations focused on all sorts of different things in their local communities, and that are welcoming new people. The [Listen First Coalition](#) (made up of four “bridging organizations,” [Listen First](#), [Village Square](#), [Living Room Conversations](#), and the [National Institute for Civil Discourse](#), holds an annual [National Week of Conversation](#) to draw many more Americans into the bridging movement and the work of Coalition Partners. Many other organizations are doing their own outreach, as are top-down initiatives such as the National Governors Association’s [Disagree Better Campaign](#).

The massively parallel approach is based on the realization that there is no one response, no magic bullet, or simple solution to democracy's many challenges.

Just as businesses in the computer and communications field are doing different things, the participants in IMIP and PMD, the Listen First Coalition, and the broader massively parallel democracy building effort are also doing different things. But they are all working toward a similar set of goals: reducing political polarization; breaking political stalemates and actually reaching mutually beneficial agreements; reducing intergroup fear, distrust, hate, and profound injustice; and so on. The system (or as Adam Smith called it, “the invisible hand”) does the coordination, such that the individual efforts combine into much more than the sum of the parts.

The massively parallel approach is based on the realization that there is no one response, no magic bullet, or simple solution to the many problems listed above. The scale and complexity of these challenges must be recognized, and any solutions proposed and implemented must be able to function at this scale and level of complexity.

This is not to say that limited, local projects are useless. In fact, that is the level where most of the work is being and needs to be done. To have a system-wide impact, these local projects need to be undertaken in many localities and need to be accompanied by other projects that address different aspects of the problem. We call the multitudes of small-scale local efforts, all working simultaneously to improve some aspect of democratic governance, at the local, state, or federal level, “massively parallel problem solving” and “massively parallel democracy building.”

Rather than being a hypothetical idea that has yet to be implemented, the massively parallel approach is just our word for a natural process that is already going on in a big way, with thousands of people and hundreds of organizations working in different communities and in different ways to make things better for their citizens. (The U.S. National Civic League is soon to release a map that shows over 10,000 such efforts.)

But the media is so focused on bad news, on conflict, and on how bad “the other side is,” that these initiatives often have little, if any, visibility. The only people who know about them are the direct participants. If these efforts can be made much more visible, they are likely to give people hope in the knowledge that democracy is not “doomed,” and that they, too, can and, indeed, must become part of this massive democracy-strengthening effort. As many people have said, “democracy is not a spectator sport.” If we want democracy to succeed, we cannot sit on the sidelines rooting for one “team” or the other. We need to “get in the game” and start working for the issues and outcomes we care about. But we need to do that in an inclusive, not a divisive way.

It is the strategy of encouraging the natural mobilization of large numbers of independent projects, each trying to meet a need that project participants have identified in their own community, that allows the massively parallel approach to work “at scale,” even when centralized top-down approaches aren’t working. (Centralized, one-size-fits-all approaches fail to account for the fact that different communities have different problems, and often define similar problems in different ways. Thus, is it very hard to get people to agree on one definition of a problem and one response to it. They also fail to take full advantage of the differing insights that different individuals with different perspectives, skills, backgrounds, and geographical expertise bring to a problem.)

Massively parallel democracy building has at least seven goals.

Massively Parallel Goal #1: Cultivate Compromise

Another advantage of the massively parallel approach is that it encourages people to focus especially on aspects of democracy’s problems that have win-win potential and are not unavoidably win-lose. It encourages people to seek creative solutions which would enable each side to uphold its values and effectively pursue its most important interests and needs.

Of course, not all problems can be solved in a win-win manner. But if you assume from the start that the only way one side can win is if the other side loses, you are setting yourself up for a protracted struggle. When the power of the competing sides is about equal (as it currently is between Democrats and Republicans in the United States) this struggle can last for a very long time, prevent both sides from making progress on their goals, and do a great deal of damage to all sides along the way.

The same is true if you refuse to compromise, if you see compromise as “weak,” and if you view compromisers as “sell outs.” After all, a key tenet of democracy is the pursuit of compromise between people and policies that are different and, sometimes, even completely opposed. If one or both sides are unwilling to compromise, democracy grinds to a halt.

Massively Parallel Goal #2: Cultivate Respect for Society’s Many Identity Groups

One of the interesting opportunities for change is based on the fact that many of today’s political struggles revolve less around interests, and more around identity. People are afraid to compromise because they feel compromise is selling out “their tribe.” But as John Burton and other human needs theorists long ago pointed out, while fundamental human needs, such as identity and security, cannot and will not be compromised, it is possible to maintain one’s identity and security without having to compromise.[4] Indeed, the more security one side feels, the less likely it is to attack the other side. The more one side feels secure in its identity, the less it will feel a need to attack the other side’s identity. So, one key to a healthy democracy is developing a healthy respect for all the identities that make it up, rather than trying to place the various identity groups in some sort of hierarchical order of superiority. While this sounds a lot like the goals of “diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs” in the United States, these programs often bifurcate identity groups into two categories: the virtuous “oppressed” and the evil “oppressors.” This, too, is a recipe for protracted struggle, while true respect for all people and groups (including those who are considered by the left to be “oppressors”) is the off-ramp to effective democracy and stronger societies that are better able to work together to address their many joint problems.

Of course, not all problems can be solved with respect for the other, and not all problems have win-win solutions. And, certainly, not all people deserve respect. But giving respect, even to those who do not deserve it, costs little. Respect does not mean acquiescence. It does not mean dropping one's challenges of other people's behaviour or beliefs. It simply means refraining from calling people names, refraining from dismissing their views without considering them, and refraining from ignoring them or using illegitimate means to attack them. (Challenging people you disagree with through legitimate administrative, legislative, or judicial processes is still acting with respect.) Above all, it means do not dehumanize them.

In healthy democracies, when win-win agreements cannot be found and tough decisions have to be made, losers still need to believe that the decision-making process was fair. If everyone is given a chance to be heard, and the decision-making process is transparent and follows the law, losers are much more likely to accept the decision than they are if they consider the process to be unfair — if decisions are made in secrecy, without following precedent or law, or otherwise violating standard procedures.

Also, to the extent that laws are passed, or policies are put into place, that so violate one side's values that they cannot live satisfactory lives after the decision is made, that is also a recipe for trouble. For instance, the Dobbs decision that made it legal for states to outlaw abortion completely has resulted in women being unable to get treatment for miscarriages or to abort non-viable fetuses that threaten the mother's life. The result is an extreme voter backlash against Republicans who advocated for such strict laws.

Massively Parallel Goal #3: Preserve Electoral Integrity and Continuity

In healthy democracies, people must feel that, even if they lose one election and the winners enact policies that they (the losers) find unacceptable, they (the losing side) can regroup and try again in the following election. If people fear that losing one election or one decision will make it impossible for them to uphold their values or meet their needs forever, they will fight as hard as they can to win – even by cheating or using violence or other destructive strategies in an all-out effort to prevail.

This is why the 2024 U.S. Presidential election is so frightening to so many people. Donald Trump has made no secret of his intentions to disregard Constitutional constraints and become much more autocratic in a second term, quite possibly throwing his opponents in jail, simply for opposing him. (He apparently sees that as “retribution” for the many attempts Democrats are currently waging to convict him of a vast number of criminal charges and possibly put him in jail.) Republicans, too, are angry and frightened, believing the Democrats are trying to change election procedures in ways that undermine Republican chances, while also implementing policies that threaten right-leaning groups through policies that give preferential treatment to those primarily affiliated with Democrats.

If we are to avoid escalating anti-democratic manoeuvres on both sides to assure victory above all else, election officers and candidates and parties must make clear efforts to protect and uphold U.S. electoral and democratic processes and not threaten to use non-democratic means to win, even if one thinks the other side is doing so. If the other side is violating the rules, the thing to do is to call them on it and try to get the actions stopped through legitimate (usually judicial) channels. That is the way democracy is supposed to work. If we go around the established processes, even for ostensibly “democratic purposes,” we lose our legitimacy, and possibly, our democracy as well.

This is, of course, easier said than done. In a bitterly fought election like this one, both sides are likely to use a variety of clandestine, dirty tricks – often very close to election day. Then the short timeframe makes it functionally impossible to remedy the problem before the election and remedying it after the election becomes much more difficult.

Massively Parallel Goal #4: Expose and Delegitimize “Bad-Faith Actors”

Another key to a successful democracy is its ability to discredit, and to the extent possible block, the actions of “bad-faith actors” – people who try are trying to subvert or destroy democratic institutions and processes to advance their own selfish goals. Although it seems very clear to most Democrats that Donald Trump is one such “bad-faith actor,” (an assertion that is hard to dispute, given his hatemongering tactics, continual lying, and repeated vows to act autocratically if elected to another term), there are more such actors on both sides of the political divide (although most others are less flagrantly extreme). For example, there are social and traditional media outlets that intentionally spin and falsify stories in ways that inflame tensions, in an effort to build their audiences and thus their profit. So, too, are there politicians on both the right and the left who are primarily interested in gaining power, prestige, and money, and are less (or not at all) interested in working to advance their constituents’ interests. This behaviour needs to be exposed and denounced, not ignored because those doing it are “on your side.”

Massively Parallel Goal #5: Promote Reconciliation

Contrary to common assumptions, just because someone disagrees with you over a host of policy issues, that does not make them a bad-faith actor. We need to recognize that America is a very diverse society and, as [Ebrahim Rasool](#) said (with respect to South Africa, but he implied it also for the United States), “it belongs to everyone who lives here.” This line is not intended to make a comment about those who are in the United States illegally, but rather it is copied from the statement made by the ANC in South Africa at the end of apartheid. It was key to allowing the peaceful reconciliation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa to take place. In using this phrase in the American context, we want to stress that both progressives and conservatives “belong” in America, and their needs, interests, and rights need to be reconciled or at least seriously considered, both in terms of process and outcome. Only then will we be able to create an America in which everyone would like to live.

As Rasool also pointed out (though using different words), reconciliation needs to be both retrospective and prospective. Parties need to be able to learn the truth about, and make and receive amends for, what happened in the past. And they must do so in a way that allows them to live together successfully in the future. To be successful, reconciliation needs to be what John Paul Lederach calls a “[meeting place](#),” the point at which “truth,” “justice,” “peace,” and “mercy” are balanced”; none can take precedence over the others.

Massively Parallel Goal #6: Promote Effective Communication and Problem-Solving

Effective communication is another key to successful democracies. Leaders and grassroots citizens must be able to understand: the nature of the problems we face; the concerns, interests, and needs of all of the stakeholder groups (not just their own); and the advantages and disadvantages of options for addressing those problems, concerns, interests, and needs. Many traditional conflict resolution processes, such as dialogue, consensus building, problem-solving workshops, and communication and conflict education and training can be useful in this regard. However, whenever possible, these tools need to be deployed in a way that scales up beyond the limited number of people who get to participate in such small-group processes.

Using mass media and social media for such ends, rather than using it for bad-faith purposes, is one way to scale up such efforts. Peacebuilding NGO [Search for Common Ground](#) has been a pathbreaker in this area for decades, pioneering the [use of soap operas](#) to teach conflict resolution communication and decision making skills in deeply divided and post-conflict societies. A newer approach is using people who are now called “influencers,” widely followed role models who can set the tone for more constructive interactions between individuals and groups on different political sides. Two examples are Utah Governor Spencer Cox, who, as head of the National Governor’s Association, started the “[Disagree Better](#)” Program. He was recently joined in that effort by the Governor of Colorado, Jared Polis, who is now the leader of the National Governor’s Association.

The Disagree Better initiative will look at the problems of polarization, elevate the solutions that groups around the country are already implementing, and feature Governors showing what disagreeing better looks like. Through public debates, service projects, public service announcements and a variety of other tactics, Americans will see a more positive and optimistic way of working through our problems.

When scaling up isn't possible, these tools need to be implemented widely and need to be supplemented with other tools that do scale. Examples of other tools include citizen assemblies, advisory committees, policy dialogues, and other processes that come out of the fields of public policy and public administration.

In addition to widely implementing such integrative processes, existing democratic structures and processes need to be examined to determine whether they are:

1. Operating as intended, and if not, what changes are needed?
2. Delivering decisions that are seen as wise (decisions that do, in fact, yield the expected and desired outcomes, and are reasonably equitable to all groups)? If not, what changes might be helpful?
3. Delivering decisions that earn public trust? If not, what changes might be helpful?

The principal “enemy” we face is not each other, but rather, the hyper-polarization dynamics that are destroying the democratic institutions that we all rely on.

Massively Parallel Goal #7: Limit Massively Parallel Partisanship

The Achilles Heel of this whole approach is the fact that massively parallel processes for organizing complex systems can also function in ways that drive the hyperpolarization spiral higher. Right now, in the United States, most people are, indeed working roughly toward the same goal. But it is not any of the goals listed above. Rather it is the goal of decisively defeating “the other side,” “the enemy.” The result is massively parallel hyper-polarization, or as we have called it elsewhere, “massively parallel partisanship.” That is the dominant dynamic in the United States going into the November 2024 election.

Escaping from this dynamic requires a great reframing in which people come to realize that that the principal “enemy” they face is not each other, but rather, the hyper-polarization dynamics that are destroying the democratic institutions that everyone relies on to protect their interests. They need to come to understand that their preferred leader is not going to be able to “save democracy” if that leader ignores the will of close to half of the U.S. population. As people come to this realization, they will discover that, rather than being on opposing sides, they have a shared interest in working together to make democracy work.

It then becomes possible to develop a set of shared principles that guide personal and political interactions – such as vowing to listen respectfully to each other, even across lines of difference, looking for areas of common ground and pursuing those, looking for possible compromises when disagreements remain, and if compromises cannot be found, then agreeing on a standardized process for making a legitimate (though not consensual) decisions, such as passing a law or pursuing a court case. Such principles can, in turn, make major collaborative, cross-party or trans-partisan efforts viable.

Massively parallel democracy building roles

To help potential participants better understand the many different roles that need to be played by the people and organizations working on this massively parallel effort (thereby helping people figure out where they might be able to fit in and “make a difference,”) we find it useful to distinguish between strategic roles and action roles.

Strategic roles are “left brain” roles – the people who figure out what needs to be done. They include people who are trying to look at the big picture, figure out what is going wrong, and what, in principle, can be done to fix to those problems.

Action roles are the “right brain” roles played by people who are actually “on the ground,,” doing the work of implementing the fixes suggested by strategists. They tend to be more narrowly focused, both in terms of the location of their work, and the nature of the activities they undertake.

Both groups are essential and complement one another. (In practice, of course, many people can simultaneously act as strategists and actors – this is what “reflective practice” is all about.) What follows is a very quick overview of these roles. For a more extensive and detailed description of these roles, please see the complete list in [Beyond Intractability](#).

CONFLICT STRATEGISTS

There are at least three broad categories of conflict strategists, each of which are made up of several discrete roles.

1. **Lookouts** are people and organizations which warn of impending problems. They include:

- Conflict Early Warners (such as the [Trust Network](#) which has an early warning/early action system that is on the lookout for politically-motivated violence in the United States),
- Discrimination Fighters (such as [Black Lives Matter](#) and the [Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism](#)).
- Governmental Watchdogs, such as the [Project on Government Oversight](#), that keep an eye out for governmental overreach.
- Geopolitical Threat Monitors which warn of external threats (for instance from Russia, Iran, or North Korea), and
- Canaries who warn about non-political threats (such as climate change, or pandemics).

2. **Democracy Firsters** are people and organizations which try to help the larger society understand that democracy’s problems are preventing their societies from successfully addressing all other problems. As such, fixing democracy ought to be everyone’s first priority. This is a big part of what we are trying to do with [Beyond Intractability](#) (and this paper). So, too, are the organizations [Democracy First](#) and [Issue One](#).

3. **Complexifiers** are people and organizations which help us get beyond the cognitive biases that encourage us all to pursue simple answers and us-versus-them thinking, and instead, see our complex problems for what they really are. One such person is [Amanda Ripley](#), the journalist who first introduced the concept of “complicating the narrative,” and the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) which developed a Complicating the Narrative (CTN) training program for journalists and newsrooms who help us better understand the complexity of each of the topics they cover, and the challenges each of those topics pose. Other Complexifier roles include System Thinkers who try to help us understand how complex systems work, and Political, Behavioural, Communication, Social, Technology, and Economic Thinkers who try to understand the complex dynamics present in each of those domains.

CONFLICT ACTORS

We focus on the eight principal types of conflict actors – people who do the work of making the democratic dispute handling system function effectively. They include:

1. **Grassroots Citizens** who (in this context) conscientiously exercise their civic responsibilities, while also supporting the larger democratic system and people working in the many other roles outlined here. They do not have special training; they are not playing one of the other roles. They are just engaging responsibly in their role of “citizen” and taking that role seriously, realizing that it not only entails rights, but also responsibilities.

2. **Visionaries and Healers** who help us imagine a society in which we would all like to live (and be willing to work to help create). This includes people who help us look forward to envision a society in which everyone would feel secure, as well as those who help us look backwards and heal from past wrongs. Examples of forward-looking Visionaries are the ANC which we described earlier as deciding that “South Africa belonged to all who lived there.” American examples include the New Pluralists, and the Liberal Patriot, both of which are trying to help people imagine a society in which disparate groups can live together in peace. An example of a Healer would be the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the many restorative justice programs we have in the United States.

3. **De-Escalators** who help us reverse escalation and polarization dynamics, stop and prevent future violence, and cultivate mutual trust. They include:

- “Escalation Educators,” such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who warn about the dangers of escalation and polarization,
- Mediators and Conciliators who help disputing parties improve their relationships and come to agreements, (such as the U.S. Community Relations Service) and
- Crisis Responders who try to quickly defuse crises before they get even worse. Examples include, again, the U.S. Community Relations Service and the Chicago “Violence Interruptors.”

4. **Constructive Communicators** who communicate across difference in constructive ways and who can model and teach others to do the same. This category also has a large number of roles, and fortunately, a large number of organizations already working in each role. They include:

- Bubble Bursters such as AllSides, who work to get people out of their narrow information bubbles,
- Communication Skill Builders such as Essential Partners, who train people to use dialogue to help “build relationships across differences to address their communities’ most pressing challenges.
- Bridge Builders such as Braver Angels and Living Room Conversations, which try to help people build bridges and understanding across divides,
- Mass Communicators such as Search for Common Ground which has successfully used soap operas to teach peace and conflict resolution skills (although they are not yet doing this in the United States).
- Free Speech Advocates such as FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) and the Institute for Free Speech
- Convenors/Facilitators such as The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), a very large network of organizations that convene processes to help people better understand each other, the challenges they face together, and how best to work together to address those challenges.
- Disinformation Fighters such as AllSides, and Ad Fontes Media that report on media bias and Comparitech which monitors censorship
- Media Reformers such as the Solutions Journalism Network which helps journalists cover problems fairly and in depth, focusing on solutions, not divisions, and
- Conflict Educators and Trainers who help people engage in conflict more constructively.

5. **Issue Analysts** help us understand the specifics of a particular complex problem and evaluate possible solutions. There are at least four different roles here: Technical Experts, Technical Reporters (who translate technical jargon into understandable language), Evaluators who help to incorporate public values into the analytical process because science cannot do that, and Science Reformers who focus on holding scientists and technical organizations to high professional standards and protecting them from political pressures that undermine the quality of their work.

6. **Collaborative Problem Solvers** are people who help us move beyond our us-vs-them/win-lose mindsets and help us work together collaboratively to address our many common problems. This category includes Negotiators, Mediators, Consensus Builders, Peacebuilders, Constructive Advocates (who are people who help activists and advocates use conflict resolution knowledge to make their cases most effectively, without unnecessarily alienating opponents), Global NGOs, and Philanthropists. This is another category that is well represented by many people and organizations – but there is always room for and the need for more.

7. **Power Balancers** are people who enable us to wisely and equitably make tough decisions in cases where mutually acceptable solutions aren't achievable, and also organizations that help low power groups gain power by networking, organizing and building their civic skills. Roles in this category include:

- Civic Skill Builders who teach citizens about the advantages of democratic systems and how to engage with those systems constructively. K-12 civic educators are an example of this role.
- Civic Reformers who work to strengthen institutions in ways that promote wise and equitable problem-solving, while limiting incentives that lead to hyper-polarization and corruption. The [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#), and the [Rebuild Congress Initiative](#) are two excellent examples here.
- Ethical Politicians such as Spencer Cox, mentioned above, who started [Disagree Better](#)
- Civic Participants who go beyond political hobbyism, voting, and contributing money to causes and candidates, to contributing their time and ideas on advisory committees, citizen assemblies, the other opportunities for meaningful involvement.
- Network Builders which are all the organizations which bring people together to empower all such as [The Trust Network](#), and the [National Association for Community Mediation \(NAFCM\)](#)
- Arbitrators and Adjudicators such as those provided by the [American Arbitration Association](#) and [JAMS Mediation, Arbitration, and ADR Services](#)
- Law Enforcement Officials who work proactively to improve police community relations, for example [Police2Peace](#)
- Empowerment Leaders are, perhaps, the most important of the power balancers. Their focus is on highlighting and correcting the society's most egregious power inequities and the unfairness that results from those inequities, through nonviolent action. Examples include [The King Center](#), [Pace e Bene](#), the [Addie Wyatt Center for Nonviolence Training](#), and [On Earth Peace](#).

8. **Defenders:** People and organizations who study the tactics of bad-faith actors and develop ways of defending the larger society from their actions. Examples include Senators Susan Collins and Joe Manchin who sponsored and championed the [Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act of 2022](#) that revised aspects of U.S. voting, vote certification, counting, and the Presidential transition process in an effort to prevent another crisis similar to the one that occurred on January 6, 2022, when President Trump tried to use loopholes in the Electoral Count Act of 1887 to overturn the election of Joe Biden.

Altogether, there are 53 roles listed above, and many we have probably missed. Many of these roles have many organizations actively engaged in them; others are less well covered. But our hope is that people will look at this list and gain confidence that there really is a massively parallel movement to defend democracy well underway. And there is a place for pretty much anyone in it.

Conclusion

The United States' democracy is an enormously complex conflict handling system that is not working nearly as well as it needs to work. This complex problem requires a similarly complex solution. It is not simply a matter of voting the “good guys” in and the “bad guys” out. It is not simply a matter of changing a few laws (such as the Electoral Count Act) or reforming electoral processes (by implementing ranked choice voting or nonpartisan primaries or Congressional reforms), although all those things can help to fix one part of the complex system.

It is more a matter of examining all the diverse systems, sub-systems and processes, determining what is broken, how it is broken, who is being helped, who is being hurt, and how it might be fixed in order to best meet the needs of the whole society, not just part of it (particularly, not just helping Democrats or Republicans, or certain races at the expense of others). Changes should help everyone, or at least as close to everyone as possible.

The only way we know of doing such a large-scale analysis and intervention is by utilizing a massively parallel approach which has myriad people and organizations working in different substantive and geographical areas to assess local problems and fix those “little things.” But together, these “little things” can build on and reinforce each other, such that the entire system starts to become more effective. And once innovations become valuable locally, the pressure to institute similar changes at the national level will grow. Ideally, that will enable leaders and their constituents to work together much more effectively than they do now. This, in turn, will enable most everyone to work together to start addressing our myriad substantive challenges including immigration, climate, health, education, inequality, and racism.

NOTES

[1] Both the challenges and the responses that we describe in this essay undoubtedly apply outside the United States as well. But our practice and scholarship has always been focused on the United States, so we do not extrapolate our observations beyond that. We hope others, with expertise on other countries, can themselves sort through what might apply in other contexts and what not.

[2] K-12 in the U.S. education system means elementary, middle, and high school.

[3] The call for a more “peaceful, just, honest, and merciful society” builds off John Paul Lederach’s assertion that reconciliation is the “meeting place” of peace, truth, justice, and mercy in John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace*. United States Institute of Peace Press. January 1, 1998. 23-35.

[4] John Burton, ed. *Conflict: Human Needs Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 1990. and John Burton. *Conflict: Basic Human Needs*. New York: St. Martins Press. 1990.



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