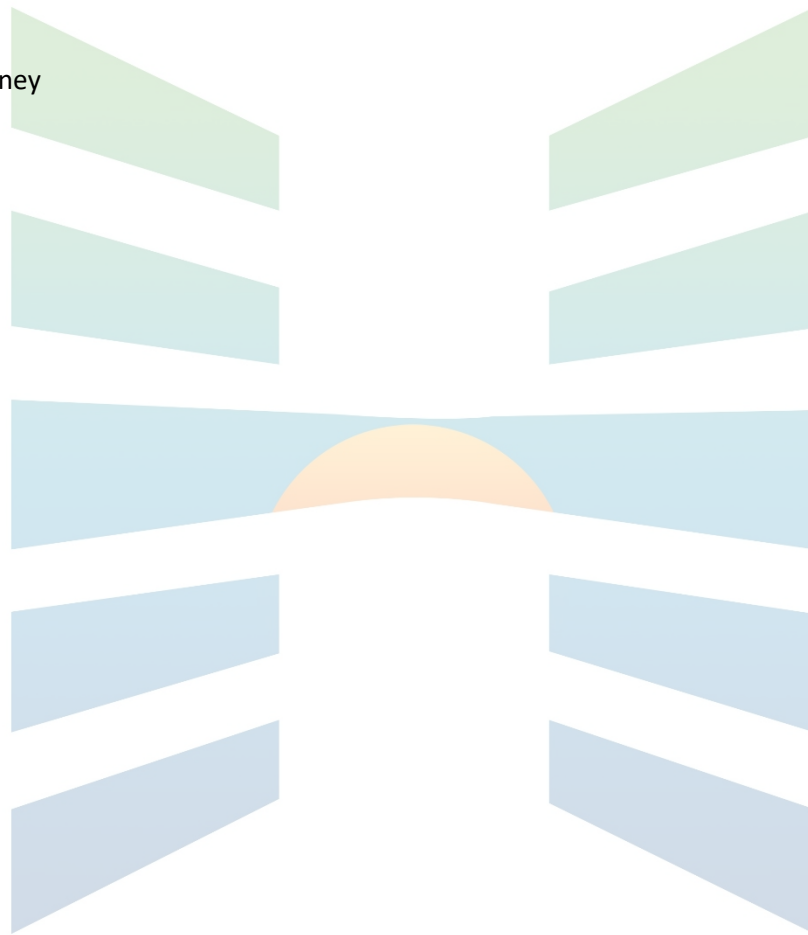


Mapping Pillars of Support for State-Level Authoritarianism in the United States

A Research Process and Codebook

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HORIZONS
PROJECT



Introduction

The goal of this project is to describe the state-level manifestations of rising authoritarianism in the United States and map the key “pillars of support” that are maintaining those state-level systems.¹ The resulting description of authoritarianism and mapping of key pillars is intended to serve as a resource for organizations and social movements in the pro-democracy space to identify avenues of outreach, engagement, and pressure to disrupt the system of authoritarianism and help protect, restore, and advance democracy in the United States.

This guide lays out the initial process for collecting, analyzing, and coding data for this project. This project is intended to follow an iterative development process, in consultation with key partners, and thus will be likely to change and expand.

Why Focus on States?

Much of the debate on rising authoritarianism in the United States has focused on the national level, in particular on the breakdowns in democratic norms and practices that took place during the Trump administration, and the failed attempt by former President Trump and his allies to steal the 2020 presidential election, culminating in the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Such national-level backsliding is deeply troubling, and certainly warrants significant attention. We focus on state-level authoritarian systems for three reasons.²

- **Importance:** Research shows that, while many of the most high-profile breakdowns in democracy have happened at the national level, the most substantive declines in democracy have happened at the state level.³ The United States’ federal system means that significant amounts of governance, including election administration, happen at the state level, and that state and even local politics can have an outsized impact both locally and nationally. For example, the attempted stealing of the 2020 election hinged on the actions of several state-level officials, such as Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in Georgia.⁴
- **Neglectedness:** The nationalization of politics in America means that much of the attention and energy, even of the most committed activists, tends to focus on the national level. State-level policies and practices often do not capture public attention, even when they have significant impacts on Americans’ actual lived experience. Focusing a detailed mapping effort on the state level can help highlight an area that has received less attention.

¹ The term “pillars of support” in a nonviolent resistance context originates from Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking about the Fundamentals* (Albert Einstein Institute, 2004). See also discussions in Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² This three-part framework is inspired by Benjamin Todd, “A Framework for Strategically Selecting a Cause,” 80,000 Hours, December 19, 2013, <https://80000hours.org/2013/12/a-framework-for-strategically-selecting-a-cause/>.

³ Jacob Grumbach, *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

⁴ David Wickert and Greg Bluestein, “Inside the Campaign to Undermine Georgia’s Election,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, accessed March 28, 2023, <https://www.ajc.com/politics/election/georgia-2020-election-what-happened/>.



- **Tractability:** Given the size of the United States, affecting national-level politics is typically beyond the reach of local-level organizers and activists. This can foster a feeling of hopelessness and paralysis. In contrast, the relatively higher levels of access and lower levels of resources necessary to achieve change make state-level politics a more tractable area to focus efforts.

Who Can Conduct This Mapping Project?

We have designed this research process to be accessible to a wide range of organizations or individuals and easily implementable with a minimal investment of time and resources. A few characteristics will make the mapping process easier:

- One key part of the research process involved combing through a database of media sources to identify connections between key authoritarian practices, leaders, and pillars of support. We used the NewsBank [Access World News](#) database because it systematically collects thousands of state and local news sources in the United States. This is a resource that we accessed through university library subscriptions. If your organization has access to a university library subscription, this will be the easiest and most comprehensive way to access these resources. However, if you don't have such access, then you can conduct similar (though not as comprehensive) searches on publicly available news aggregators such as Google News.
- A second key part of the process involved semi-structured interviews with key organizers, political figures, and journalists. While reaching out to these individuals would be possible for anyone, both identifying who was most important to talk to and establishing trust with them was facilitated by having our key interviewer be a well-networked local organizer.
- Turning the data collected through this process into an accessible network map will also be easier if the organization has at least one individual who is familiar with data visualization or network analysis. We used [Kumu](#) as our mapping platform, which is very accessible but comes with a modest subscription cost. There are several other options available, including the free software [Gephi](#).

Defining and Operationalizing Key Terms

To understand the purposes of this project, it is first key to have a common understanding about its common points of reference. This common understanding then shapes how the mapping process goes forward. So, we start by defining and discussing a few key terms.

Authoritarianism

For the purposes of this project, authoritarianism is a political system in which government is dominated by a small group and that group is not accountable to the people they govern.⁵ This means that policies are determined and enacted primarily for the benefit of the dominating minority, and legal political institutions for the majority to hold governments accountable (such as elections) are either non-existent

⁵ Scholarly definitions of authoritarianism vary widely. For a recent discussion see Marlies Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is...and Is Not: A Practice Perspective," *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (2018): 515–33.



or made ineffective through tools such as anti-democratic institutional design, misinformation, or violence.⁶

The primary traits of authoritarianism vary depending on context. In many countries, forms of authoritarianism such as single-party political systems (China) or absolute monarchies (Saudi Arabia) have been the dominant way of organizing the political system for generations. In the United States authoritarianism primarily manifests itself in two ways:

- Undermining existing democratic institutions for personal and/or partisan benefit.
- Exerting violent social control and systematic disenfranchisement against historically excluded groups.

Each of these general tendencies has many specific policy and practical manifestations. To identify the scope of authoritarianism at the state level we focus on a few key indicators:

- Undermining democratic institutions
 - Denying the legitimacy of free and fair elections.
 - Seeking to manipulate electoral rules to privilege one party or identity group over another (gerrymandering, voter ID laws)
 - Weaponizing the non-political agencies of government (law enforcement, tax collection, regulatory agencies, courts) to punish or harass political opponents.
 - Placing restrictions on the civic rights (freedom of expression and association in particular) of political opponents.
 - Spreading mis/disinformation to reduce faith in institutions and heighten polarization.
- Violent social control
 - Using violence or the threat of violence to control historically excluded groups and political opponents or disincentivize their political participation.
 - Passing laws that explicitly or implicitly deny or limit basic civic and social rights for historically excluded groups.

As a state government exemplifies more and more of these traits, that government can be characterized as authoritarian.⁷

Pillars of Support⁸

Pillars of support are the key organizations, institutions, and individuals that provide a political regime with the resources it needs to stay in power. All political and social systems rely on pillars of support.

⁶ The Horizons Project, "Authoritarianism: How You Know It When You See It," *Horizons* (blog), June 13, 2022, <https://horizonsproject.us/authoritarianism-how-you-know-it-when-you-see-it/>.

⁷ While much of the debate on authoritarianism in the United States has focused on polarization, we do not include polarization as a component of authoritarianism. This is because, while polarization may facilitate authoritarianism in some cases, it is not itself a constitutive component of authoritarianism. Some of the least polarized periods in US history were also deeply authoritarian, as in the mid 20th century when a national-level political consensus was built on the backs of the systematic disenfranchisement of Black people in the Jim Crow south. See Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (Simon and Schuster, 2020).

⁸ The pillars of support framework comes from the work of Robert Helvey, building on the political theories of Gene Sharp. See Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*; and Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973).



Without these pillars providing monetary, moral, and skilled personnel resources, the leaders of an authoritarian system very quickly find themselves unable to continue to remain in positions of power and influence.

A pillars analysis seeks to first understand the key resources necessary for a political system to remain in place, and then to understand the channels through which those resources reach the key nodes at the center of that political system. Analyses may focus on any number of resources or forms of power, depending on the system being considered. For this analysis, we focus on a few key resources:

Financial Resources: The authoritarian system in the United States requires money. Money allows potential authoritarians to run for office, funds the spread of misinformation and disinformation, allows authoritarians to put pressure on their opponents, and gives authoritarians significant advantages in bringing on human resources to accomplish their goals. A pillars analysis of financial resources involves identifying the key flows of funds from organizations and individuals who are not at the center of the authoritarian system to those who are.

Moral/Ideological Resources: Authoritarian systems in the United States require a moral or ideological justification. This is particularly true because of the importance of freedom and individual liberty as core American values, and because of the significant role played by religious institutions in American political life. Moral and ideological resources also involve propaganda or misinformation, that spread deliberate falsehoods or simply flood the information space with “bullshit.” A pillars analysis of moral and ideological resources involves identifying the organizations and individuals who either formulate and disseminate the moral or ideological frameworks that justify authoritarian practices, or who lend their moral or ideological capital to endorse or refuse to condemn authoritarian practices.

Information/Expertise: The current authoritarian system in the United States has relied significantly on the intelligence and expertise of key civic organizations to provide the policy levers and tools that authoritarians have used to consolidate their power and undermine democratic processes. For example, political analysts and data scientists have provided their expertise to create custom-made gerrymander maps that consolidate minority rule and undermine free and fair elections. A pillars analysis of information and expertise involves identifying the organizations or individuals who regularly provide this expertise to those at the center of the authoritarian system.

Human Resources: Money, moral justification, and information are useless without the ability to mobilize individuals to actively support the authoritarian system. One of the most basic ways of mobilizing human resources in a declining democracy is recruiting individuals to vote for authoritarians or to volunteer for authoritarian political campaigns. However, institutions that train and funnel talented individuals into key positions of influence in authoritarian power structures also play a role. A pillars analysis of human resources involves identifying the key organizations and individuals who provide the people who keep the authoritarian machine working,

Physical Force: Finally, the authoritarian system in the United States relies on the use or threat of physical violence. All authoritarian systems, at their core, rely on violence to suppress dissent and hold the population they dominate in fear. This violence may come from state agents (such as police forces, national guard, or the military), or it may come from non-state groups that are allied with the authoritarians (such as militia groups).



Four Key Pillars

An analysis of the pillars of support for an authoritarian system can rapidly expand to include almost every aspect of social and political life. This makes the analysis unwieldy both to perform (since the forms of data to be collected increase with each new pillar) and to interpret (since depicting the system becomes almost impossible). When designing this project we sought to avoid this problem by focusing on four key types of organizations that have historically played an outsized role in upholding systems of power in the United States. Other analyses could focus on different types of organizations and individuals, depending on the specific ways that authoritarianism manifests in the state being examined.

Business: The United States' economic structure and the capitalist ideology developed to support it have given an outsized role to organized business interests throughout its history. Business groups have also played an important role in supporting authoritarian systems in other countries. Out of the key resources described above, business certainly contributes financial resources, yet they also play an important role in shaping the moral/ideological environment. The close connection between free market principles and core tenets of US civic religion means that the pronouncements of business leaders come with great ideological weight. Business can also serve as an important source of human resources for authoritarianism, both in mobilizing votes and in providing the expert staff to support authoritarian political institutions.

Religious/Faith Groups: The United States is, by far, the most religious developed country in the world. While the dominance of religion is declining and an increasing percentage of Americans report no faith affiliation, over 70% of Americans report identification with at least one of the major world religions,⁹ and roughly half state that faith plays an important role in their lives.¹⁰ Religious organizations primarily provide moral/ideological resources to authoritarianism, by giving a divine endorsement to the actions of aligned authoritarians, and human resources, by serving as key mobilizational hubs and social networks to support authoritarian institutions.

Civic Organizations: The United States has one of the densest networks of not-for-profit civic organizations in the world. Many of these organizations are distant from the political sphere and may be solely focused on local concerns. Yet others are deeply embedded in the political process and play a central role in shaping our political system. Civic organizations primarily channel information/expertise to the authoritarian system, for instance through providing ready-made policies that can be immediately implemented upon achieving power. Yet they also serve as important sources of human resources and moral/ideological resources, and, depending on the organization's tax status, may also provide significant financial resources. Professional associations, for example, are often significant financial backers of state and local candidates.

Veterans and Military Families: Veterans and military families have held a venerated position in U.S. civic culture for much of its history due to a strong sense of civic duty and sacrifice in the name of protecting democratic norms and freedoms. Supporting the troops and their families is often seen as a

⁹ Reem Nadeem, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, "How Religious Are Americans?," Gallup, December 23, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx>.

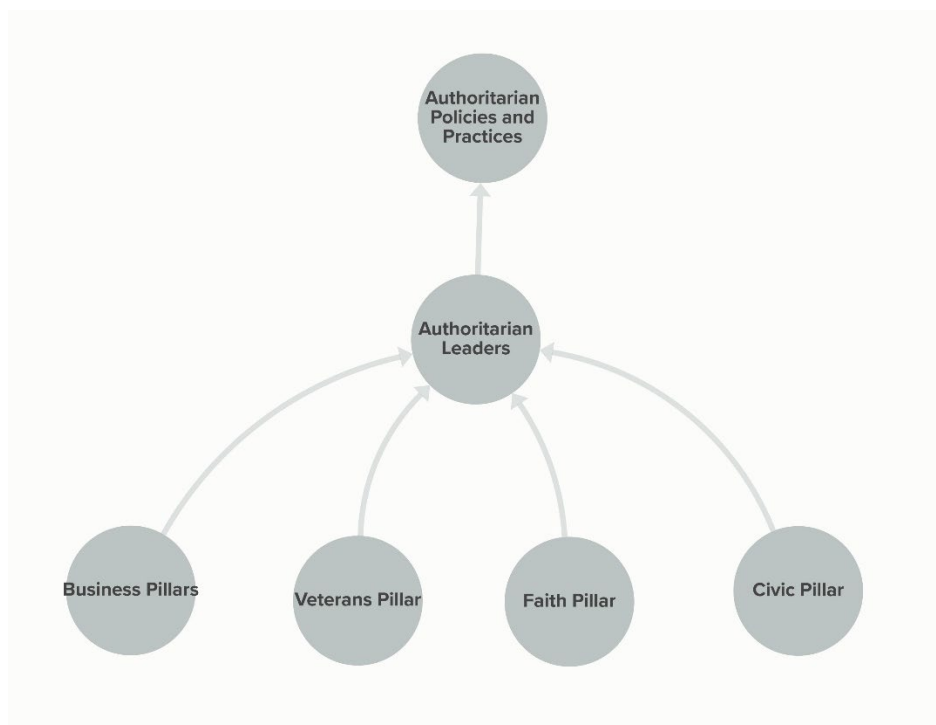
vital qualification for those seeking political legitimacy. Authoritarian leaders often leverage the respected status of veterans, military families, and current servicemen and women to maintain power by using them as political pawns and [targeting](#) them with anti-democratic misinformation and disinformation. More troublingly, White supremacist extremist groups, including militias, explicitly seek out this community for recruitment, hoping to use their discipline, skills, and credibility as an important source of physical force to support authoritarians and to punish dissent.

Research Design

This section lays out the steps for constructing a pillars of support map.

Building a Network Map

Given the framework of pillars of support laid out above, we considered the best way to construct a map of pillars of support was in the form of a *hierarchical network* like the one in the picture below. A hierarchical network has three components to it: *elements* (also called *nodes*), *connections* (also called *edges*), and *levels*. The elements are the individuals, organizations and policies that make up the authoritarian system and its pillars. Connections are the flows of power and resources between them. Levels are a way of structuring the elements in the map to make it easier to interpret.



We structured our map with a top level where the elements are authoritarian policies and practices, and draw connections between the policies and practices that relate to or support each other. This focuses attention on the systemic nature of authoritarianism. On the level below that, we put the leaders who support those policies and practices, and draw connections between them and the specific policies and practices they support. On the third level, we put the individuals and organizations who are in the pillars



of support that are upholding those authoritarian leaders and draw connections between the elements within the pillars and the leaders they support.

Most network software (including Kumu and Gephi) make it straightforward to create a network like this using two simple spreadsheets: one that captures the *elements* and one that captures the *connections*. The *levels* can be captured as an attribute of the elements that you record on that sheet. For more on this, [see this guide](#) from Kumu on structuring network data. [This site](#) provides a short and accessible introduction to building a simple network in Kumu.

You can customize the specific columns in your *elements* and *connections* spreadsheets depending on what kind of information you're interested in capturing. Our pilot spreadsheet for Georgia had the following variables:

Elements Sheet

Column Name	Column Description
Label	The name of the element that should appear on the network map
Description	A short description of the element (2-3 sentences) that should appear when a user clicks on the element
Type	Is the element a policy/practice, individual, or organization?
Pillar	Is the element a policy/practice, political leader, or member of one of the pillars (business, faith, civic, or veterans)
Size Calculation	A variable for making the elements vary in size depending on a measure of their importance. More details on how we coded this are below
Image	A link to an image file online that should appear on the element. Wikipedia is a good source of images that are in the public domain.
Coded By	Indicator of which person working on the project entered the information for this particular element
Notes	Short description of why this element was added, anything that stood out to the person entering it, etc...
Sources	Where the information came from to enter this element



Connections Sheet

Column Name	Column Description
From	The element that this connection comes from. Note that whatever is entered here must match the “Label” column on the Elements sheet.
To	The element that this connection is going to. Note that whatever is entered here must match the “Label” column on the Elements sheet.
Label	Optional – you can fill this in if you want connections to have text labels on the network map
Type	A categorization of the different types of connections on the map. We categorized these as “Policy Support,” “Organizational Relationship,” “Personal Relationship,” and “Donation.”
Amount	For connections that were donations, what was the amount of the donation?
Description	A short (1-2 sentence) description of what constitutes the connection
Coded By	Indicator of which person working on the project entered the information for this particular connection
Notes	Short description of why this connection was added, anything that stood out to the person entering it, etc
Source	Where the information came from to enter this connection

So, with that as the basic structure, how do you go about identifying, collecting, and codifying the relevant data for the pillars of support map?

Step 1: Identifying the State-Level Authoritarian System

The first step in mapping the authoritarian system and its pillars of support is to map the policies and practices that constitute authoritarianism in that state. To figure out which policies fit into this framework, we recommend starting with the brief definition of authoritarianism in the earlier section of this codebook. We also recommend checking out the Protect Democracy [overview of the authoritarian playbook](#) or our brief “[Authoritarianism: How You Know It When You See It](#)” post. You can then refer back to these resources when questions arise about whether or not a particular policy or practice “counts” as authoritarian.

To compile these policies, and the connections between them, the first step should be an expansive examination of state-level politics, based on a wide-ranging series of interviews and consultation with publicly available third-party sources.

Public Sources

Check the following sources to identify key authoritarian policies

1. [States United Democracy Center](#) for legislation that subverts free and fair elections.
2. [Protect Democracy](#) for a variety of resources on legislation, litigation, and other threats to democracy.
3. [Major State and Local Newspapers](#) either individually, or, more easily, through a news aggregator database like [Access World News](#), which is typically available through a university library account.



Interviews

We have developed a semi-structured interview template to use in your interviews for this mapping process. The template, which is set up to be easily modifiable for new states, is in Appendix A of this process guide.

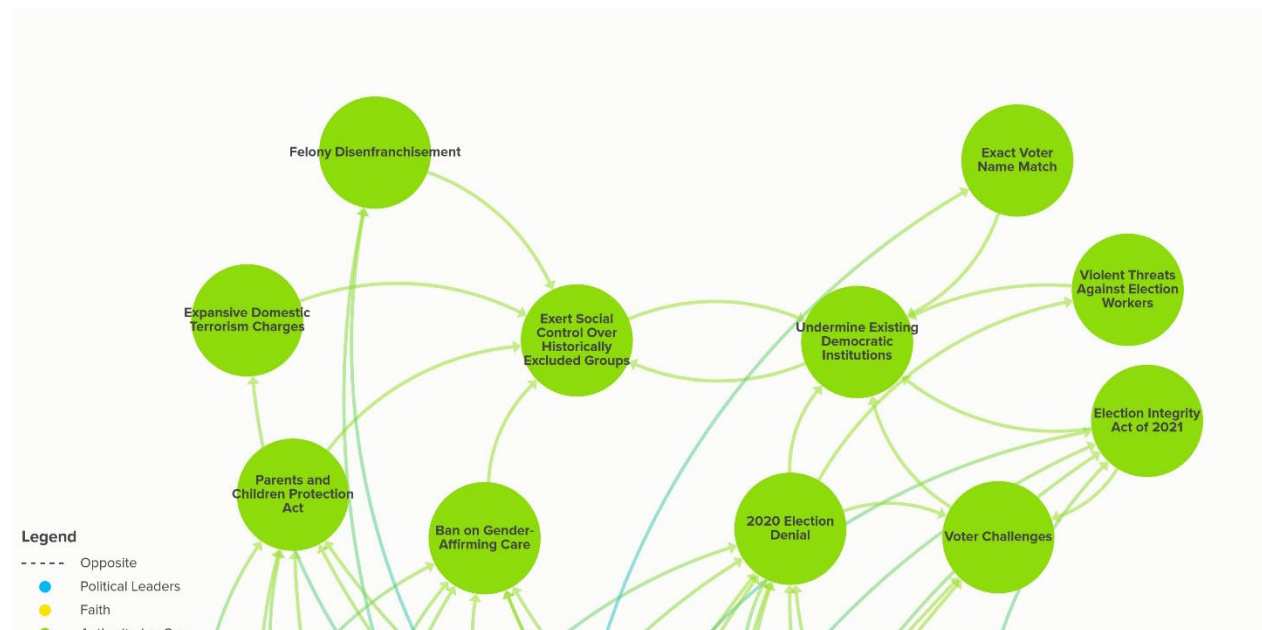
We recommend a wide range of interviews to triangulate various perspectives on state-level politics and get as full a picture as possible. Here are the profiles of some of the people we recommend reaching out to:

- **Activists and Organizers:** Activists and organizers working on democracy issues are likely to have a particularly clear view of the issues that they work on, and the ways in which those issues threaten democracy, but may not have a broader perspective on how other issues that their organization does not prioritize impact democracy. They are also typically eager to discuss their work with researchers, and thus may be easier to connect with for interviews.
- **Journalists:** Local news is the backbone of making sense of state-level politics. Journalists who focus on the state legislature or other state-level political issues are likely to have a good sense of the overall picture of state politics but may downplay the impact of certain less visible pillars of support.
- **Academics:** Academics who focus on state politics are likely to have a good sense of the historical overview of policies and practices that may threaten democracy, as well as stronger knowledge of the theories of democracy and authoritarianism that can inform your overall picture.
- **Lobbyists:** Lobbyists are often a great way to understand what is happening behind closed doors in state politics and may have a good sense of the relationships between key players. They may be a little more hesitant to speak to researchers, unless you already have a relationship with them or you can invest some time into building trust.
- **Members of the Pillars:** Well-connected leaders in the specific pillars of support you are investigating are likely to have significant inside helpful information for you to build out the map, but may be hesitant to engage with you given their embeddedness in the authoritarian system.
- **Political Leaders:** Political leaders, if they trust you, can be very helpful interviewees. However, if they don't trust you, they can both be a lot of work to set up interviews with, and can also be inconsequential interviews if all they're willing to do is give you the party line.

We recommend conducting interviews “on background,” meaning that you can use the information from interviews to inform the map, but that you won't directly attribute any of the information to the specific person who said it to you. This can help folks to speak more freely, in particular since many of these issues may be politically risky to discuss.

We also recommend structuring policies and practices around their relationship to the two key aspects of rising authoritarianism in the United States that we described above: undermining existing democratic institutions and exerting violent or coercive social control over historically excluded groups, recognizing that these two basic categories reinforce one another. For example, we structured our policies and practices in Georgia like this:

Georgia Authoritarian Policies and Practices



Step 2: Identifying the State-Level Authoritarian Leaders

The second level will be identifying “who are the leading authoritarians” in this state. We identified these leaders based on two key criteria: level of statewide influence, and level of advocacy for key authoritarian policies.

We first identified all state-wide elected officials and key leaders in the state legislature, and examined their campaign sites and media coverage of their actions to answer the following questions:

1. What are their actions and public statements towards policies that undermine the freedom or fairness of elections?
2. What are their actions and public statements towards patently and demonstrably false conspiracy theories that undermine the democratic system?
3. What are their actions and public statements towards policies that undermine fundamental freedoms necessary for participation in civic life?
4. What are their actions towards political violence against their opponents?

We measured answers to all four of these questions on a five-point Likert scale with points representing: “Actively Condemn,” “Passively Condemn,” “No Observed Action,” “Passively Support,” and “Actively Support.” If a leading state-wide political figure actively supports any of the four indicators, then we added them to the map.

In addition to this systematic examination of state-wide elected officials, we added officials to the list who were key players in advancing particular authoritarian policies. To perform this identification, we both carefully examined the media, scholarly, and NGO sources in our first step to see who were the key political leaders advancing each of the policies and practices identified as key to the authoritarian system. We also asked interviewees to identify key political leaders who were advancing authoritarian policies. We then examined individually each of the political leaders identified in interviews, seeking whenever possible to add external confirmation to any individual named in an interview.



We recommend keeping a separate spreadsheet or document where you go through all the potential authoritarian leaders and then adding identified leaders to your final *Elements* sheet and their connections to key authoritarian policies and practices (and to each other) to the *connections* sheet once you have completed going through all the major potential authoritarian leaders.

Step 3: Identifying the Pillars of Support

The third level of the map is identifying the individuals and organizations who constitute the key pillars of support for those authoritarian leaders.

Business and Civic Associations

Our primary focus for both the business and civic pillar was on financial contributions. Our primary data source on financial contributions was the National Institute on Money in Politics' [campaign finance data](#). Searching this database by candidate is relatively straightforward.

We took all the candidates or primary state-level authoritarian leaders identified in the second stage and identified all major donors to those leaders. Specific financial thresholds for identifying who is a “major donor” can be tweaked depending on the dynamics of donations in your state. Our standards were if the leader had received donations of more than \$100,000, we continued adding donors up to the top twenty. If the leader had fewer than twenty donors who had given more than \$100,000 we included all donors above this threshold and then the ten next largest donors. If the leader had no donors who had contributed more than \$100,000 we included the ten largest donors who had given more than \$10,000. If the leader had no donors who had contributed more than \$10,000, then we simply included their top five donors.

Since our focus was on business and civic associations as a financial pillar of support, we did not include donors who were either the candidate donating to their own campaign, or political party organs donating to the campaign. However, we did include both individual donors and organizational donors.

For each donor, check first whether the donor has already been included on the pillars database. If they have, do not add them to the *Elements* sheet a second time, but simply include the new donation on the *Connections* sheet.

For each new donor added, once you have added their donation to the authoritarian leader you originally discovered them on, check whether they have made donations to other authoritarian leaders included in the map as well (that have not been previously captured). If they have, add those donations to the *connections* sheet.

Most businesses and civic associations got onto our map through donations data, but we also asked interviewees about businesses and civic associations that provided other kinds of support for authoritarian leaders, policies, or practices. This resulted in some additional civic organizations being added to our map.

Religion

To identify key religious pillars of support, our first data source was the state-level [Association of Religion Data Archives](#), in particular their American Religion Census data, which gathers state and county-level data on religious congregation membership. To begin, we identified all denominations in the state that the American Religion Census reports had at least 100,000 members or at least 1% of the state's population, whichever of those numbers was smaller.



We entered each of these entities on a spreadsheet and conducted research on them to try and answer the following questions:

Variable Name	Question	Options
Endorse_auth	Have prominent leaders in this religious denomination explicitly endorsed an authoritarian candidate or candidates in the last two election cycles? ¹¹	Yes, more than one Yes, one No
Endorse_auth_candidate	If the answer to the above question is yes, which candidates?	Put candidate/official names. If more than one, separate candidate names with semi-colons
defacto_endorse_auth	Have prominent leaders in this religious denomination <i>de facto</i> endorsed authoritarian candidates in the last two election cycles, for instance by distributing election materials that are clearly intended to demonstrate one candidate's superiority over another?	Yes, more than one Yes, one No
Defacto_endorse_candidate	If the answer to the above question is yes, which candidates?	Put candidate/official names. If more than one, separate candidate names with semi-colons
Auth_platform	To what extent have congregations in this denomination given a platform to an authoritarian candidate to speak or otherwise spread their message?	Frequently Regularly Rarely Never
Auth_platform_details	If answer to the above question is not "never," which candidates have been platformed by this denomination	Open text field, can list candidate names and some details of how platformed.
Auth_policies	To what extent have prominent leaders in this denomination explicitly endorsed or supported anti-democratic or authoritarian policies?	Frequently Regularly Rarely Never
Auth_policies_details	If answer to the above question is not "never," What anti-democratic or authoritarian policies specifically have prominent leaders in this denomination explicitly endorsed or supported?	Open text field, describe in a few sentences the specific policies that the prominent leaders have supported
Democratic_policies	To what extent have prominent leaders in this denomination made statements or otherwise advocated in favor of democracy, or explicitly opposed authoritarianism?	Frequently Regularly Rarely Never

¹¹ Explicit endorsements are likely to be rare, given IRS regulations that prohibit 501(c)3 entities from making explicit political endorsements. However, there are a growing number of explicit endorsements from faith leaders.



If prominent leaders in the denomination have endorsed or *de facto* endorsed an authoritarian candidate, or frequently either platform authoritarian candidates or express support for authoritarian policies, and have *not* frequently advocated in favor of democracy, then they should be included on the pillars of support map.

De facto endorsement is a particularly tricky variable to code, given the kinds of data that are available to us. Here are specific things to look for when coding *de facto* endorsement:

- Distribution of campaign literature, or literature intended to show an authoritarian candidate's superiority over another.
- If an authoritarian candidate comes from a particular faith community, mentions their position as a member of that faith community, and there is no effort to condemn or otherwise repudiate the authoritarian candidate by the leadership of the faith community.

To research religious pillars, begin with the list of denominations and seek to identify the key congregations and leaders within that denomination. For example, in Georgia the Catholic church is divided into two components (The Archdiocese of Atlanta and the Diocese of Savannah), led by an archbishop and a bishop. Searching for their public statements and news coverage of their activities would be a good way to start researching the Catholic Church in Georgia. Look for official publications from the denomination or congregation, public statements by prominent leaders, and news coverage that mentions prominent leaders or congregations.

For some denominations, the relevant body to consider as the pillar of support may not be the denomination but individual congregations (e.g. the Southern Baptist Convention has a decentralized structure that makes it more relevant to focus on individual large congregations), or sub-state regions.

Once you have identified the key leaders and congregations to focus on, we recommend conducting a broad search on state and local media sources to try and answer the questions in the above table. We conducted this on Access World News, using the following keyword search string:

CHURCH/LEADER NAME AND after 01/01/2010 AND (candidate, republican, endorse, politics, policy, representative)

Sort the results by most relevant and make a note of how many hits you get. If the number of hits is greater than fifty, then just look at the top fifty results and simply note that future researchers could go back and examine additional results about this congregation.

Non-Denominational Churches represent a particular challenge since they are often very politically influential (in Georgia, for example, they are the third largest denomination, with over 700,000 adherents), but are not affiliated with a larger institutional body. One very helpful resource is the "Database of Megachurches" from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, available [here](#). This database allows you to identify by name the largest non-denominational churches in the state you are examining.

Once you have identified the influential religious denominations and congregations, you can then add them to your pillars of support spreadsheet. If church leaders or church bodies have endorsed or *de facto* endorsed one of the authoritarian leaders identified in step 2 then you can code a connection



between the two of them. If they have advocated for a particular authoritarian policy, then you can code a connection between the faith body and the policy.

Religious Memberships

In addition to identifying the most influential faith bodies in the state that have provided support for authoritarian policies or leaders, we also sought to identify the faith communities that authoritarian political leaders directly affiliate with and add them to the map. The easiest database through which to identify these relationships is [VoteSmart](#), which collects data on political leader religious affiliations. If such information is unavailable from VoteSmart, you can often find it on political leaders' candidate websites. If you are still unable to identify a religious affiliation, then a search on Access World News of the leader's and a search string of **church OR congregation OR temple OR mosque** should help you identify it.

Veterans Groups

We followed a similar process for identifying key veterans groups as with identifying religious groups. Our first source was [CauseIQ](#). We searched CauseIQ for state-level veteran's organizations and then selected the top 20 groups by revenue, combining local branches of a statewide or national-level organization into one (for example, combining multiple entries for local American Legions).

Once we generated that list, we conducted a search on Access World News using the following search string:

ORGANIZATION NAME AND after 01/01/2010 AND (candidate, republican, endorse, politics, policy, representative, election)

We also added the names of the primary authoritarian political leaders that we previously identified. We then went through the search results to attempt to code answers to same questions we examined for religious organizations (in the table above), providing notes and links to the search results whenever possible.

If prominent leaders in the organization endorsed or *de facto* endorsed an authoritarian candidate, or frequently either platformed authoritarian candidates or expressed support for authoritarian policies, and had *not* frequently advocated in favor of democracy, then we included them on the pillars of support map.

We also conducted a follow-up search in Access World News with the word "veteran" and each of the key political leaders identified earlier in the research process, as well as relevant keywords for each of the key authoritarian policies, limiting the search results to 2020 through the present.

In our pilot process in Georgia, while this process yielded significant insight into the Veterans ecosystem in that state, it did not uncover significant support by veterans' organizations for authoritarianism. Thus, for that state, we ended up focusing our map on the business, civic, and religious pillars. In other states, however, the process might reveal stronger connections between veterans groups and authoritarian policies, practices, and leaders.

Revising the Map

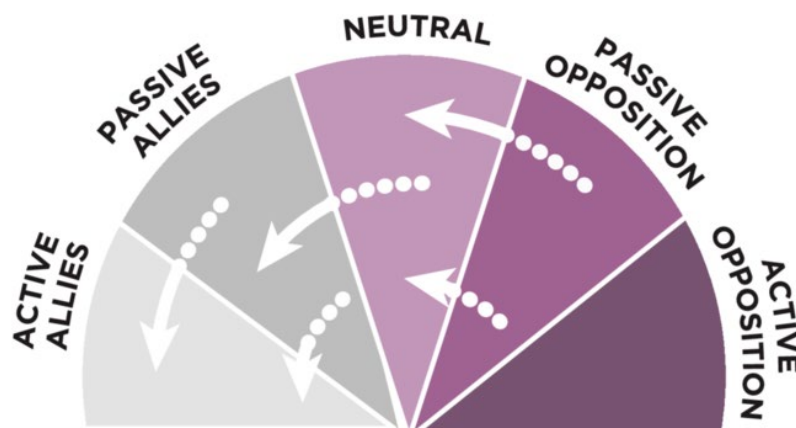
When you have completed the mapping process, we recommend planning at least one workshop with activists, organizers, or other knowledgeable figures from the state in question to share the map and make revisions based on their insights. Share the map at least a week ahead of time and encourage workshop participants to explore it, identify interesting and unexpected relationships, and in particular focus on what is missing from the map, from policies to political leaders to pillars.

In the workshop, start by sharing the process for generating the map, and ask participants to comment on what is unexpected and what is missing. Collect feedback and incorporate it into a round of revision for the map, adding additional relationships based on partners' inputs.

Putting the Map to Use

Once you have put the map through at least one round of revision, you could then try using it during a strategic planning session with a diverse group of fellow pro-democracy organizers and activists. For this convening, one particularly useful avenue for exploration would be combining a deep dive into the map with a "Spectrum of Allies and Opponents" exercise. This exercise is simple to conduct and can provide significant insights into future strategic planning.

To conduct this exercise, draw a half-circle divided into five segments, labeled as in the picture below. Then pick individuals and organizations from the pillars map and try to place them into the appropriate section on the spectrum. Depending on time and the scope of your map you may either choose to include every entity on the pillars map, or pick a subset of key individuals and organizations to focus on. You could select these based on the amount of resources that are flowing from them to the key authoritarian leaders and practices (such as picking top political donors), or based on their centrality in the network – one actor may not be the largest contributor, but may be a key node connecting many different political leaders in the authoritarian system.





*The Spectrum of Allies and Opponents.*¹²

Keep the categorization simple. Here is a good way to think about the boundaries between the different positions on the spectrum:

- *Active Allies*, or people who agree with you and are fighting alongside you;
- *Passive Allies*, or people who agree with you but aren't (yet) doing anything about it;
- *Neutrals*, or the unengaged and uninformed;
- *Passive Opposition*, or people who disagree with you but aren't actively trying to stop you; and
- *Active Opposition*, or people who not only disagree with you, but are actively organizing against you.

Placing individuals and organizations on the spectrum of allies and opponents then directly informs the key strategic action needed to expand your movement. Individuals and organizations are unlikely to move all the way from active opposition into active allyship. Instead focus on how to turn passive allies to active allies, neutrals to passive allies, and so on.

Being unable to place an individual or organization from the pillars map on the spectrum is also helpful! Those entities may need more research so that you can better understand what strategies will be most effective for moving them towards active allyship.

Note that, just because an individual or organization is currently providing support to an authoritarian system does not mean that they are necessarily an opponent. While entities on the pillars map are unlikely to be active allies, they can easily fall anywhere else on the spectrum. For example, the members of a professional association may be very sympathetic to pro-democracy causes but provide donations to authoritarian leaders to advance their professional interests. A faith community may provide moral or ideological support for an authoritarian leader because they are uninformed about the negative consequences of his policies.

Conclusion: Maintaining and Updating the Map

The information in this map is likely to be most useful if kept regularly updated. We recommend at least a quarterly rapid check of the map to add new elements that were not captured in the first iteration. If discussion with local organizers reveals other key pillars of support that would be particularly important to map, this process could be used to map those pillars as well. The key factor to keep in mind is identifying the core aspects of authoritarianism as a system, and what that system needs in order to maintain itself.

We're eager to hear how organizations use this process, as well as to help as people develop their own pillars of support maps. If you have questions about anything in this document, or to coordinate with us on producing your own pillars map, reach out to Horizons Director of Applied Research Jarvis Williams (jarvis@horizonsproject.us), and the guide's original author Jonathan Pinckney (jonathan@horizonsproject.us).

We hope this process guide will be useful as we all strive for a better, more democratic America.

¹² Image drawn from "Spectrum of Allies" exercise on *Beautiful Trouble*.
<https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/spectrum-of-allies/>



Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Template

The set of questions below are designed to be followed in a [*semi-structured interview*](#). The semi-structured interview approach has a general flow to it, and focuses on specific themes, but allows the interviewer to add additional follow-up questions, or explore other topics that come up during the interview, as well as dropping questions that may be less relevant for particular interviewees.

For each interview, ensure that you have done basic background research ahead of time (including reading or skimming publicly available written products from the interviewee on these topics) to ensure that you have a clear sense of who we're talking to and what questions will be most relevant for them.

Introduction

This text meant to be general guidelines for introducing the interview, not to be read word for word

- **Introduce your organization:** Give a short description of your organization's work (no more than a couple sentences).
 - Example text: The Horizons Project does research and networking among a wide range of actors (organizers, bridgebuilders, faith groups, business groups), others interested in protecting and advancing democracy.
- **What is this project?** This project is about understanding challenges for democracy in the United States: challenges over free and fair elections, polarization, rise in political violence and violent threats, weaponization of government for partisan objectives, restrictions on free speech, etc... We're doing some mapping of the political and social institutions that have played a part in these challenges, focusing on the state level and in particular focusing on the role that business, faith communities, civic groups, and veteran's groups have played in shaping democracy and authoritarianism in **[State]**.
- **What are these interviews?** Trying to interview a wide range of people with insights into **[State]** politics, across the political spectrum and folks who are involved in lobbying, organizing, policy analysis, etc...
- **How is the interview going to work?** Interviews are all being done "on background," with no attribution unless you give your explicit permission for specific quotes or pieces of information. Interview should be no more than an hour.

General Questions

1. [Brief introductory question about them]. How did you get interested in this work? What are some of the issues that you feel most passionate about?
2. As someone deeply familiar with **[State]** politics, what policies or practices do you see as particularly challenging for democracy in **[State]**?
3. Who are the key political figures that are advancing **[policy or practice x mentioned in question 2]**?
4. What groups and organizations are the key partners for **[political leader y mentioned in question 3]**? Who do they listen to or rely on for funding, votes, ideas, moral or ideological support?
5. How do you see **[each of the pillars – business, faith, civic, and veterans]** contributing to or pushing back against **[policy mentioned in question 2]**? Are there specific groups within these communities that have played a particularly important role?



Specific Policy Questions

You should ideally come to your early interviews with a few specific policies to ask about. Here are a few examples of how to frame these specific policy questions, based on our interviews in Georgia:

6. One thing we've focused on is election denialism, in particular the claims that the 2020 election in Georgia was fraudulent, and the attempt to replace Georgia's electoral college voters with an alternate slate of electors.
 - a. **Repeat questions 3 through 5 for election denialism**
7. Another policy that we're investigating is the 2021 election law, SB202. I'd be curious to hear your take on that law, and how it's affected politics in Georgia.
 - a. **Repeat questions 3 through 5 for SB202**
8. Another area is the increase in violent threats towards public officials, and growth of armed militia groups, such as the 3% group (that provided security for Marjorie Taylor Greene). Do you see this as a challenge in Georgia?

Wrap-Up

9. Is there anything you wish I'd asked you about that would help me to better understand the current state of Georgia politics?
10. Who else would you recommend I reach out to for an interview?