



Introducing the Pillars of Support Project

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Executive Summary

IN BOTH THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD, political leaders have undermined democratic institutions and norms as part of a nearly two-decade global trend of rising authoritarianism. From the January 6 capitol attack to the weakening of Hungarian opposition parties and attacks on Brazilian journalists, anti-democratic forces have grown in strength. Yet these forces have not gone unchallenged. Organizations, institutions, and ordinary people have organized and mobilized to protect, repair, and advance democracy. In this report, we highlight how key social groups or “Pillars of Support”—businesses, faith communities, professional associations, unions, and veterans and security forces—have played an integral role in this counter-balancing movement to support democracy.

We document an array of tactics that these pillars have used to challenge autocrats, such as unions coordinating economic shutdowns to veterans refusing to accept high honors. It is our hope that an understanding of this tactical diversity will expand the imaginations of pro-democracy actors in the US. We focus on the lessons that can be drawn across time and space, including campaigns such as the US civil rights movement, Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, Pakistan’s Lawyer’s Movement, and many others.

Drawing from over 30 case studies of pro-democracy actions, we highlight the importance of building movements that are large, diverse, and tactically innovative. By mobilizing the participation of many groups across the pillars of support and by drawing on their unique strengths—such as businesses’ economic power or veterans’ patriotic appeal—pro-democracy movements have been successful in challenging autocrats. This record of success makes clear just how powerful ordinary people from across the political and ideological spectrum can be in their roles as churchgoers, business owners, or union members.

Introduction

The United States has had a long history of authoritarianism, including the rise of fascism in the 1920-30s and the consolidation of racial apartheid and single-party rule in the South following the end of Reconstruction. In recent years, however, the US has experienced a troubling resurgence in anti-democratic trends. (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2024). This is perhaps best illustrated by the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. The capitol attack both stemmed from and intensified years of rising racism, political violence, increasing polarization, executive overreach, and the erosion of democratic norms.

How can individuals, groups, and organizations respond to these threats while working to both protect and advance American democracy? This report introduces and presents findings from one attempt to provide insights to that question. It does so by examining resistance to autocratic trends in the US and around the world by key social and political institutions, which we, building on long standing scholarship, refer to as [Pillars of Support](#).

The Pillars of Support project begins from the fundamental insight that any political system — whether democratic or autocratic—relies on the support, legitimacy, and resources provided by groups and institutions, like media outlets, military institutions, bureaucracies, and religious organizations. If we imagine a political system as a building, with the government as the roof on top, these institutions are the pillars holding up that roof. We are all embedded in various pillars of support, from the businesses where we work to the faith communities where we worship. This embeddedness gives us real influence over the political system.

We focus on five pillars that have historically played a key role in maintaining political power in the US and abroad: businesses, professional associations, unions, faith communities, and veterans' groups. The US's capitalist economy empowers business groups, professional associations, and, at times, unions. High levels of US religiosity empower faith communities. Finally, the US's civic culture respects veterans.

The different pillars of support may push back against or enable attempts to erode democracy. Many are familiar with the courage and strategic savvy shown by (especially African American) churches during the civil rights movement, or with the Joint Chiefs of Staff [message](#) promising to defend the constitution following the January 6 capitol attack. Many other actions have occurred from many other pillars.

Our project draws on a rich tradition of pro-democratic civic action by members of different pillars, which have pushed back against both autocrats and elected leaders with autocratic aspirations. They have done this by removing the sources of power and legitimacy needed by autocrats to maintain control. Ordinary people from diverse backgrounds have shown extraordinary courage in working to

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uphold hard-won democratic freedoms. Their tactical choices have exhibited extraordinary creativity.

We provide a few stories from this vast and growing tradition of pro-democracy activism. Each story is organized around the unit of a campaign, which are short sequences of strategic interactions between incumbent office-holders and challengers. Each campaign is summarized in a “caselet” that describes the tactics used as well as the outcome. We analyze campaigns at the intersections of the five aforementioned pillars of support and six tactics of action (dialogue and engagement, institutional action, nonviolent intervention, non-cooperation, protest, and material support). This yields 30 types of action, e.g., non-cooperation by unions, protest by faith actors, material support from business. We highlight this tactical diversity because not all pro-democracy action looks the same. A comprehensive campaign to protect US democracy will involve conversations behind closed doors, meetings in churches and union halls, and protest marches on the streets.

The goal of this project is to expand the strategic imaginations of pro-democracy actors. Many of the tactics we document are not usually associated with resisting autocracy, such as [Cacerolazo](#),

[Haunting or Bird-Dogging](#), and [Deliberate Inefficiency and Selective Noncooperation by Enforcement Agents](#). These examples are part of a much [wider repertoire of nonviolent actions](#). Knowledge of this repertoire makes clear just how many choices exist to pro-democracy advocates, who can find inspiration in both the past and present, as well as at home and abroad.

The Pillars of Support project is not a partisan endeavor, but rather, a pro-democracy endeavor. Partisanship and support for democracy are often conflated in the US because anti-democratic trends have accelerated in Repub-

lican-controlled states and under the Trump administration (Williamson 2023). However, democracy is not a partisan concept, but a way to fairly determine how partisan actors share power. People from across the political and ideological spectrum have actively participated to challenge autocrats of all stripes, including avowed leftists like Hugo Chávez, Daniel Ortega, and Mikhail Gorbachev.

We begin by defining our key terms and discussing some academic research that helps us understand how pro-democracy movements succeed. Next we provide some data about the 32 caselets written for this project, followed by an analysis of what the US democracy movement can learn from the diverse campaigns these caselets describe. We know from previous research that large, diverse, and tactically innovative movements have succeeded in countering autocratic threats. Size makes it harder for autocrats to repress or ignore pro-democracy movements. Diversity enables movements to draw on the strengths of each pillar of support. Tactical innovation enables pro-democracy movements to cater to participants’ needs and respond to autocrats’ attempts to neutralize specific tactics.

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Key Terms

Democracy and Democratic Backsliding

For the purposes of this project, democracy is a political system that more or less approximates two ideals:

- (1) **Elections** for top executive and legislative positions are free and fair. Voting is not forcibly prevented, political parties accept election results, and fraud is minimal.
- (2) Citizens are guaranteed political **liberties** or freedoms, including equal rights for all independent of religion or gender, and freedoms to speak and assemble. Those who lack these liberties cannot hope to publicly challenge incumbents or may be discriminated against (Coppedge et al. 2024).

Many countries, including the US, Chile, South Korea, and Spain approximate both ideals. Autocracies fail to approximate either or both ideals (Herre & Roser 2023).

Democratization involves changes moving a country closer to democracy (Lindberg et al. 2018). Examples include introducing secret ballots, guaranteeing opposition parties greater access to news media, and respecting the right to protest. Important historical examples include the fall of the Soviet Union and end of military rule in Brazil in 1985.

Finally, democratic backsliding involves changes away from democracy. Important historical examples include the end of the Weimar Republic in Germany and beginning of military rule in Pakistan in 1958. The US has also recently experienced democratic backsliding. For example, Freedom House [downgraded the US' global freedom score](#) between 2020 and 2021 from 86/100 to 83/100, citing “partisan pressure on the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, harmful policies on immigration and asylum seekers, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.” At the same time, these changes have not been so dramatic as to justify viewing the US as on par with Indonesia or Hungary, countries that Freedom House characterizes as “Partly Free.”

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Pillars of Support

Whether they are democratic or autocratic, political regimes cannot survive without the support of key institutions and organizations. To use Robert Helvey’s (2004) metaphor, the “roof” of any political regime is held up by various “pillars of support.” Pillars provide incumbents with social, political, financial, and technical resources and a sense of popular legitimacy among citizens or subjects (Helvey 2004). For example, union workers generate much of the wealth on which incumbents depend. Faith actors can provide religious legitimacy for or against public policies.

Political leaders' power is threatened when the moral and material resources derived from these pillars are restricted or cut off. This may involve the refusal to perform ordinary acts (e.g., security forces disobeying orders to repress anti-government protesters or workers withholding their labor) or the performance of forbidden acts (e.g., news media praising protesters or teachers staging a walk-out).

The pillars of support can both enable and push back against attempts to erode democracy. Argentina's Catholic clergy supported the 1976-83 military autocracy while official news media continues to support the Putin regime in Russia. By contrast, peasant associations in India's independence struggle pushed back against colonial autocracy.

Campaigns and Tactics

Each caselet in this project analyzes a campaign, which is long enough to encompass actions by elements of a pillar over time (Ackerman & Kruegler 1994). But they are not so long as to include the actions of many pillars over an indefinite time. For example, Quakers' activities during the US civil rights movement counts as a campaign; faith actors' activities in the struggle for racial justice more generally would be many campaigns.

Successful pro-democracy campaigns must utilize specific actions or tactics in furtherance of an overall goal or strategy. Gene Sharp (1973) identified nearly 200 nonviolent tactics that pro-democracy activists around the world have utilized. This project builds on a similar [database](#) of over 300 such tactics, analyzing how democracy movements have creatively protested, disrupted, and refused to cooperate in the face of democratic backsliding.

How Pro-Democracy Movements Succeed

This project draws on two bodies of scholarship to understand how pro-democracy movements succeed: (1) *Civil resistance*, the study of how nonviolent action furthers the goals of social movements, which are networks of individuals, groups, and organizations with shared solidarities. (2) *Democratic transitions*, the study of how political regimes become more democratic. There is a long tradition of thinking about how to successfully and nonviolently effect democratic change. For example, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. argued that violence is both inconsistent with the pursuit of truth and ineffective in prodding observers into action (Chakrabarty 2013). Their varied tactics—including noncooperation, boycotts, and civil disobedience—inspired many other pro-democracy movements, including the struggles against Apartheid in South Africa and communism in Eastern Europe (Lodge 2009). Civil resistance does not rely on moral persuasion nor does it require opponents to be democratic or civilized - rather, it works by systematically removing the pillars of support that tyrants need to maintain power and control.

Size and Diversity: Large movements that mobilize diverse social groups are more likely to succeed (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011, Dahlum 2023). As the movement grows, autocrats struggle to repress

citizens and international observers become more likely to take an interest. Meanwhile, diversity enables social movements to draw on the strengths of each pillar of support. Consider India's anti-colonial movement, which was not only large but encompassed different caste, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups. Similarly, the US civil rights movement mobilized churches, unions, women's groups, and a host of national, state-level, and local organizations. Success may not require the active participation of especially large numbers of people: nonviolent campaigns averaged between about 1% of the population in the 2010s to 3% of the population in the 1990s (Chenoweth 2020, Chenoweth & Belgioioso 2019)

As social movements grow and diversify, the autocrat's repression enrages onlookers (Hess & Martin 2006). Regime elites may *shift their loyalties*, viewing continued repression as unsustainable and the social movement as unthreatening (Neptstad 2011). This is especially likely when elites stop receiving benefits from the regime and perceive it as weak (Nepstad 2013, Reuter & Szakonyi 2019). In Chile, military elites played a key role in preventing Augusto Pinochet from rigging or annulling the 1988

plebiscite, ultimately leading to his ouster (Huneus 2009). Similarly, white South African business owners, facing a widespread boycott and divestment campaign, ultimately pressured the South African government to negotiate with the African National Congress, ushering in a democratic transition.

Tactical Innovation: Successful social movements find ways to offset their lack of structural power. This entails using innovative tactics, especially when incumbents attempt to neutralize existing tactics (McAdam 1983). In

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the US, segregationists responded to the civil rights movement's use of bus boycotts with violence and legal obstruction; in response, civil rights activists began using sit-ins. Innovation is likely when social movements are made up of multiple groups, who seek to distinguish themselves from one another. For example, when civil rights activists organized alongside anti-Vietnam War protesters, the former often "occupied" buildings while the latter held vigils for killed combatants (Wang & Soule 2016). There has been an explosion of innovative tactics in the past decades, shaped in part by the digital revolution (e.g., social media hashtags), growing human rights activism, and participation by previously excluded groups (e.g., women and gender/sexual minorities) (Beer 2021).

Nonviolent Resistance and Discipline: Revolutionary nonviolent resistance movements have achieved their goals more than twice as often as violent movements (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011). This is because nonviolent action enables large, varied groups of people to participate and claim ownership for the movement's success (Chenoweth & Schock 2015, Dahlum et al. 2023). Violence tends to beget more violence as well as a climate of mistrust, which decreases the likelihood of future democracy (Karatnycky & Ackerman 2004, García-Ponce & Wantchekon 2017, Pinckney 2022). Successful movements must discipline their violent "flanks" and convince members to

remain nonviolent for strategic reasons, even when violently provoked. For example, in 1922, Indian anti-colonial protesters attacked and set fire to a police station, killing everyone inside. In response, Gandhi intervened, went on a 5-day fast, and halted the non-cooperation movement.

It should be noted that nonviolent resistance campaigns have become slightly less successful, especially since 2010 (Chenoweth 2020). For one, the average size of campaigns has decreased. And tactically, these campaigns have tended to rely on mass demonstrations (instead of more innovative tactics, see above) as well as on digital organizing, which is easier for autocrats to surveil. Further, violent flanks have become more common and less likely to be disciplined.

Finally, it is also crucial that responses to democratic backsliding are quick and decisive (Nord et al. 2023). The longer a movement waits, the higher the chance that autocrats have consolidated their power (e.g., as Viktor Orbán did over Hungary's judiciary and bureaucracy). Democracies can be resilient in the face of autocratic threats; however, when autocratization has already begun, democracies struggle to avert wholesale breakdown (Boese et. al 2021).

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Descriptive Data From Caselets

The 32 caselets identify over 30 unique tactics that pro-democracy movements have deployed. As noted above, these tactics have been drawn from a database of over 300 tactics. Some tactics are fairly common: civic engagement, media outreach, signed letters of support or opposition, and protests all occurred 5 or more times across the 32 caselets. In terms of time and place, 4 caselets occur in the twentieth century, beginning in the 1950s. 16 caselets analyze the US, while Brazil, India, Poland, Ukraine, and Venezuela all have 2 caselets. For at least some of the time periods under consideration, 5 countries arguably failed to meet one or both of the democratic ideals discussed above: Hungary, India, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Venezuela. In Ukraine, pro-democracy activism helped end autocratic rule in 2005. In other cases like Pakistan, activism helped make autocracies more democratic while remaining broadly autocratic.

Different kinds of events preceded the campaigns in question. The most common precipitating events in the US surround the Trump presidency and its aftermath: the 2020 election, the January 6 Capitol attack, and George Floyd's murder. The three US civil rights movement campaigns occur against the backdrop of legalized segregation and single party autocratic rule in the South. Outside

the US, the most common precipitants were autocratic practices, especially state repression, e.g., in Ukraine, Pakistan, Brazil, and Poland.

Some of the precipitating events were not intrinsically connected to democratic backsliding. In other words, not every campaign was a response to phenomena like canceling elections or imprisoning opposition leaders. For example, South Korean unions gained mass support after a scandal surfaced, revealing that a sunken ferry had been improperly regulated. And at the Standing Rock protests in North Dakota, veterans defended those concerned with water contamination and the desecration of sacred sites.

Findings From Caselets

The caselets are broadly consistent with the factors analyzed in section 3. We mainly focus on the importance of size and diversity as well as tactical innovation.

Size and Diversity: Across every caselet, large, diverse campaigns garnered success. To illustrate this, consider the work of Brazilian physicians in the 1980s. Facing a powerful military autocracy, the physicians coordinated mass protests and work stoppages with large and diverse unions. This included automotive workers, teachers, and other public sector employees. Their broad coalition withstood the autocracy's repression and enabled pro-democracy physicians to marginalize their anti-democratic colleagues (whom the autocrat tried to co-opt). Sustained, unified action ultimately paved the way for Brazil's democratization.

Looking at other international examples, during Ukraine's Orange Revolution, a broad coalition of civil society organizations, business organizations, and veterans' networks helped compel the country's Supreme Court to annul the results of a rigged election. Meanwhile, Indian farmers mobilized hundreds of thousands of people across multiple states, language groups, and religious groups in response to a 2020 bill that was passed without consulting the farmers. The farmers' dedication and resilience prompted the bill's withdrawal. And in South Korea, unions coordinated protests of over 2 million people at their peak in late 2016, ultimately leading to President Park Geun-Hye's resignation.

Successful US democracy campaigns have also found ways to organize in large numbers with participation across different sectors of society. During the civil rights movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organized among churches and unions—including the Teamsters, United Packinghouse Workers of America, and United Auto Workers—under the banner of “jobs and freedom.” Similarly, groups as disparate as the US Chamber of Commerce, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the National African American Clergy Network forged a coalition to demand that all votes be counted in 2020 and that there be a peaceful transfer of power, an important example of broad front organizing.

Even broad movements that failed to oust autocrats or reverse democratic erosion still managed to loudly convey their opposition to autocracy. For example, almost every sector of the Venezuelan economy coalesced against Hugo Chávez's (successful) attempts to erode democracy in the early 2000s, including banks, shopping malls, newspapers, private schools, and professional baseball players. And in their ongoing fight against xenophobic parties—who have enjoyed some electoral success—German business groups have been supported by professors, politicians, and professional sports figures, among others.

A national campaign to uphold US democracy will similarly benefit from mobilizing many different social groups. This is crucial in the US' increasingly polarized political space. Recent research has shown that polarization itself can drive democratic backsliding (Svolik 2019, Haggard & Kaufman

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2021). In some cases, coordinating across different religious, economic, and racial groups has proven difficult in the US; this arguably impeded efforts to respond in a unified way to autocratic threats during the Trump presidency. In other cases, however, coordination has been quite effective. For example, lawyers, civil rights activists, business and labor leaders, and politicians joined together to oppose Trump's Muslim ban. Similarly, leaders from all five pillars condemned Trump's attempted coup.

Tactical Innovation (Action): Successful pro-democracy campaigns have engaged in remarkably innovative action. Pakistan's Lawyers' Movement illustrates this well: after the unjustified suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry by autocratic President Pervez Musharraf in 2007, Pakistanis organized weekly strikes, marched throughout the country holding black

flags, and wrote pro-democracy poetry. Meanwhile, judges and lawyers lectured on the rule of law, wrote op-eds for international newspapers like the *New York Times*, and formed alliances with exiled politicians. These innovative tactics helped the movement keep momentum and galvanize widespread support. The lawyers adapted in the face of leaders' arrests and broadened their goals from restoring judicial autonomy to President Musharraf's outright resignation. Their resilience paid off as Musharraf resigned and the suspended or fired judges were restored.

Elsewhere we find similarly innovative action. Looking again at India, Sikh protesters set up large *langar* community kitchens, drawing on a long tradition of providing communal meals to all at their temples. The *langars* helped sustain the protest activities and morale of an estimated 300,000 farmers, who may have otherwise grown weary. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) forced judges into early retirement and circumvented the Supreme Court's jurisdiction. PiS defended its actions by portraying judges as unaccountable. In response, judges associations hosted teach-ins

at schools, nurseries, cafes, and rock festivals, educating their fellow citizens about how the erosion of judicial autonomy harms democracy. And in Germany, business groups mobilized against the far-right by running weekly pro-democracy advertisements in local newspapers as well by providing training programs for employees on topics like Neo-Nazism and misinformation.

The caselets also illustrate the power of refusing to perform ordinary acts. For example, in Venezuela, 42 retiring veterans refused to accept the military's highest honors in 2000, sending a strong message about Hugo Chávez's autocracy. And in Hungary, evangelical pastor Gábor Iványi refused to attend Viktor Orbán's inauguration in 2010, this despite Iványi having officiated Orbán's wedding and baptized his two eldest children.

In the US we also find significant tactical innovation. The Wisconsin Business Leaders for Democracy, a bipartisan group, found innovative ways to set democratic "redlines" and enforce them: the group publicly requested gubernatorial candidates Tim Michels and Tony Evers to promise to respect the outcome of the 2022 elections. When Michels did not respond, the business leaders ran advertisements condemning his actions and supported Evers. In response to the Trump travel ban, hundreds of attorneys voluntarily conducted legal research on behalf of the largely Muslim populations affected, filing amicus briefs and testifying at the Supreme Court. Finally, Evangelical pastors —notably Russell Moore— built a non-profit organization called The After Party in 2023, seeking to help pro-democracy Christians fight against Christian nationalism.

The US democracy movement will benefit from expanding the diversity of its tactics. Following Chenoweth (2020), large-scale protests may be newsworthy or easy to organize, but they may fail to address the specific problems facing communities harmed by democratic backsliding. By providing services like voter registration drives, civic engagement forums, and resources to combat misinformation, democracy organizers can support practical needs while strengthening community resilience.

Tactical Innovation (Rhetoric): The caselets also attest to innovative ways of framing the grievances and aspirations of specific pillars. These framings or rhetorical strategies draw on the different resources provided by each pillar as well as its distinctive interests.

One consistent tactic across the *faith* pillar is the use of scriptural language to frame democratic agendas. To see this, consider Poland, where the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) increased its control over the executive branch and media while portraying Muslim immigrants as dangerous to the Polish people. Polish bishops forcefully denounced PiS's agenda as inconsistent with Catholic values. For example, PiS's anti-refugee policies were framed as "[\[lack\[ing\] the spirit of Christ](#)" and "incompatible with 'loving thy neighbors'," while proposed constitutional changes were criticized as "[an](#)

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[offense to God.](#)” These well-crafted messages enabled the bishops to expose PiS’ Christian nationalism as hypocritical, all while appealing to a deeply Catholic citizenry. The bishops’ rhetoric not only mobilized the public but also influenced president Andrzej Duda’s decision to veto a law undermining judicial autonomy. PiS was ultimately defeated in Poland’s 2023 parliamentary elections.

Similarly in Hungary, Evangelical leaders denounced Viktor Orbán’s so-called “Christian Liberty” governing philosophy as [“a slogan for exclusionary, hate-filled and corrosive policy.”](#) And in Brazil, Evangelical leaders condemned Bolsonaro’s religious rhetoric as [“a power-grabbing instrument... That is dangerous \[and\] undemocratic.”](#)

US faith leaders have used similar framings. For example, during the civil rights movement, the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference framed the [\(mis\) treatment of “Negroes \[as\] a basic spiritual problem.”](#) More recently, Southern Baptist Convention leaders denounced denialism about the January 6 capitol attack as inconsistent with Christian values of truthfulness and integrity. Finally, Rusty Bowers—Speaker of the Arizona State House and a practicing Mormon—framed his opposition to the January 6 capitol attack by calling it an assault on our [“divinely inspired” constitution.](#)

Leaders from the *business* pillar have also found innovative ways to frame pro-democracy campaigns, using the

language of profit, incentives, and market stability. These tactics parallel social science findings that it is risky for businesses to support anti-democratic leaders: consumers, investors, and employees all value democracy; these groups may boycott businesses who act otherwise, decreasing profit and the likelihood of recruiting high-quality employees (Quinn & Woolley 2001, Knutsen 2020).

To see these business-oriented framings in action, consider Germany, where business leaders have recently highlighted the importance of European integration and immigration in strengthening the economy. Meanwhile, major US businesses have recently removed ads on their websites from Steve Bannon, Breitbart, Tucker Carlson, and the Russian state, among many others. Through projects like the [Check My Ads Institute](#), it has become clear to business leaders that being associated with anti-democratic pundits as well as foreign autocracies serves to decrease profitability.

The *veterans* pillar also framed its actions using innovative patriotic appeals. And in Oregon, veterans spoke with active duty police officers about the importance of their shared oath to defend the constitution as well as protesters’ first amendment rights.

US democracy movements will similarly benefit from framing their campaigns in language specific to the pillars with whom they are working. Members of the business pillar could follow the lead of [Civic Alliance](#), which emphasizes how democratic engagement rewards investors and builds loyalty among employees. Similarly, Leadership Now releases a [“Democracy Report Card”](#) for businesses and emphasizes how democratic backsliding negatively affects trade, investment, and reputation.

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Nonviolent Resistance and Discipline: Nearly all of the cases exemplify leaders and masses remaining nonviolent, even in the face of violent provocation. This is especially evident amongst veterans, who found creative ways to protect their fellow citizens from repression, forming human protective

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walls in Oregon and visibly shedding their gas masks and body armor in North Dakota. Movement leaders have found compelling arguments to justify nonviolent action, both morally and strategically. For example, US civil rights leader Bayard Rustin drew on his Quaker faith and strategic sensibilities to condemn violence as destructive of integrity and success.

Meanwhile, there is some evidence that failing to uphold nonviolent discipline can strengthen autocrats. For example, in Venezuela, demonstrations between pro- and anti-Chávez demonstrators turned violent. In response, Chávez used the violence to delegitimize his opponents and to justify further autocratization.

Conclusion

The Pillars of Support project is an examination of how pro-democracy movements have leveraged the influence of key social groups or “pillars” to counter autocratic threats. Businesses, professional associations, unions, faith communities, and veterans and security forces have found creative ways to mobilize their influence and resources in support of elections and freedoms across time and space. As autocrats and their supporters continue to challenge democratic institutions and norms, it is imperative that organizers draw tactical lessons from both American and global experiences of pro-democracy resistance.

As the US faces autocratic challenges at the federal, state, and local levels of government, the lessons from this project can inspire conversations about the creative and varied roles different pillars can play in upholding and strengthening democracy. The tactics we present—drawn from struggles against both right- and left-wing autocrats—can be utilized by actors from across the political and ideological spectrum seeking to stem the tide of democratic backsliding

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