

Active Citizens

A Syllabus for Recognizing and Responding to Democratic Backsliding

Democracy does not fail all at once. It erodes through procedural changes, institutional appointments, and the slow normalization of conduct that accumulates beneath public attention. This syllabus treats recognition and response as learnable civic skills. Forty-nine works across nine modules build two capacities simultaneously: the diagnostic vocabulary to name what is happening and the practical capacity to act on that knowledge.

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Key Concepts

This syllabus develops a working vocabulary drawn from comparative political science, democratic theory, and organizing practice. Core concepts include:

- **Democratic backsliding:** the incremental weakening of democratic institutions through legal and procedural means rather than through a single coup or constitutional rupture.
- **Authoritarianism:** political consolidation that erodes the distinction between the ruling party and the state.
- **Structural minority rule:** electoral and institutional mechanisms that allow a political minority to govern persistently.
- **Institutional capture:** the replacement of nonpartisan professionals with partisan loyalists across courts, agencies, and election bodies.
- **Guardrails theory** (Levitsky and Ziblatt): mutual toleration and institutional forbearance as the norms that distinguish functioning democracies from those in decline.
- **Ten fascist strategies** (Stanley): the recurring rhetorical and political moves authoritarian movements use to mobilize support and delegitimize opposition.
- **Six rules for surviving autocracy** (Gessen): a short operational protocol for citizens facing post-election authoritarian consolidation.
- **Twenty lessons** (Snyder): practical civic ethics for defending institutions, drawn from European fascism and Soviet communism.
- **3.5% participation threshold** (Chenoweth and Stephan): the empirical finding that nonviolent movements mobilizing 3.5% of a population consistently succeed.
- **Public story** (Ganz): the organizing practice of linking a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now.
- **Politics of eternity** (Snyder): manufactured nostalgia that substitutes a mythic past for the politics of possibility democratic engagement requires.
- **Positive freedom:** freedom to participate in collective self-governance, as distinct from freedom from interference.

Purpose

American democracy faces threats that are both obvious and subtle. Some arrive loudly: authoritarian rhetoric, political violence, direct attacks on elections. Others accumulate quietly through procedural changes, institutional appointments, legislative maneuvers, and the slow erosion of norms that most people never notice until the damage is done. The comparative political science literature has a name for the second pattern: **democratic backsliding**, the incremental weakening of democratic institutions through legal and procedural means rather than through a single coup or constitutional rupture.

This syllabus exists because recognizing both patterns is a skill, and responding to them effectively is a practice. Neither comes automatically. Both can be learned.

The forty-nine works collected here span books and one long-form essay, organized into nine modules across two parts. Part I builds the diagnostic vocabulary needed to name what is happening. Part II develops the practical capacity to respond. Monitoring tools, legal resources, field guides, and practitioner reports are collected in Appendix A with brief annotations. A glossary of frameworks and concepts the syllabus draws on is in Appendix B. A set of prompts for updating, localizing, and extending this curriculum with any major large language model is in Appendix C.

The syllabus draws on named frameworks the reader will encounter repeatedly: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's guardrails theory of democratic stability, Jason Stanley's ten fascist strategies, Masha Gessen's six rules for surviving autocracy, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's 3.5% participation threshold, Marshall Ganz's public story framework, and Timothy Snyder's twenty lessons from twentieth-century authoritarianism. These are not isolated claims. They are analytical tools the reader builds into a working kit over the course of the curriculum.

Before You Begin

Two documents bracket this syllabus. Read them once at the start. Return to them at the end. They are the reference texts that every module, in some form, comes back to.

The Declaration of Independence (1776)

Read the Declaration as a set of commitments about equality and collective self-governance, not as a founding artifact or ceremonial text. The document's opening paragraphs make a specific argument: that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and that the people retain the right to alter or abolish governments that systematically violate that consent.

Module 1 includes Danielle Allen's close reading of this text, which will substantially change how you read it. After Module 1, read the Declaration again. The second reading is the one that matters.

The United States Constitution, with all amendments (1787, amended through 1992)

Read the Constitution as a living mechanism, not a venerated text. Pay particular attention to the structure of elections (Article I, Sections 2 and 4; Article II, Section 1; the Twelfth, Fifteenth, Seventeenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Third, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments), the separation of powers (Articles I through III), the structure of rights and their enforcement (the Bill of Rights and the Civil War Amendments), and the mechanisms of accountability (impeachment in Article I, Sections 2 and 3; oversight throughout).

Module 8 includes the work of Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith on executive power reform, and David Cole's argument that constitutional meaning is made through citizen organizing rather than by courts alone. After Module 8, read the Constitution again. Citizens who know their constitutional architecture can engage institutions as participants rather than observers.

Both documents are in the public domain and freely available from the [National Constitution Center](#) and the [National Archives](#).

How to Use This Syllabus

Who this syllabus is for

This syllabus is written for one reader: an engaged citizen who wants to become an experienced organizer. "Engaged citizen" means you already pay attention, already vote, already hold opinions, and already sense that attention and voting are not enough. "Experienced organizer" means you eventually work with others to build the kind of collective power that protects democratic institutions and expands democratic participation.

The arc from the first reader to the second is not automatic. It requires a specific progression: developing the diagnostic vocabulary to name what is happening (Part I), developing the practical capacities to act on what you have named (Part II), and building the structures and relationships

that sustain the work across years rather than weeks (Module 9 and the two persistent tools introduced below). The modules are sequenced to support that progression. The engagement activities in each module build specific capacities that separate a citizen from an organizer: relational conversation, power analysis, coalition work, strategic campaign design, voter protection, institutional monitoring, and public narrative.

If you start from less engagement than described above, the curriculum still works, since the early modules simply do more of the vocabulary-building work. If you are already an experienced organizer, the curriculum still works, since it gives you a more rigorous frame for what you already do and connects your practice to a wider literature.

Reading the annotations

Every reading in this syllabus carries three pieces of metadata. Understanding them before you begin saves confusion later.

Diagnostic or prescriptive. At the end of each annotation, a label indicates what kind of intellectual work the reading does. **Diagnostic** works analyze what is happening and why. They give you frameworks for naming and understanding democratic threats and democratic structures. **Prescriptive** works tell you what to do. They offer strategies, tactics, and operational guidance. **Both diagnostic and prescriptive** works do substantial work in both modes, typically by linking an analysis of a problem to a program for responding to it. Part I is dominantly diagnostic; Part II is dominantly prescriptive; the "both" designation indicates works that bridge.

Reading tier. Each module organizes its readings into three tiers:

- **Start Here.** Essential for all readers. These works establish the module's core vocabulary and argument. Read them before anything else in the module.
- **Going Deeper.** Extends the Start Here foundation with longer analysis, narrative history, or essay collections. Appropriate for citizens building their understanding.
- **For Practitioners.** Books with direct operational application for organizers, advocates, and civic professionals already in the work.

The tiers are not rigid. A motivated first-time reader can work through For Practitioners texts; an experienced organizer will still find value in Start Here texts. The tiers are a sequencing recommendation, not a gate.

The power throughline marker. Some readings are marked [**power throughline**]. This marker identifies works that make race, class, or gender dynamics explicit as mechanisms of democratic failure rather than as separate topics. Follow these markers across modules. The dynamics they point to are not a subsection of the material. They are the operating terrain of the material, visible in every module whether they are named or not. Module 4 is devoted to making that visibility explicit.

Two persistent tools

Before beginning Module 1, set up two documents you will maintain throughout the full syllabus. Every module feeds into both. The tools are what convert the syllabus from a study program into operational intelligence about your own political environment.

The Threat Journal. A running document organized by module. As you read, log real-world examples of the mechanisms you are studying. A news story about a state legislature removing a county election official belongs in Modules 3 and 6. A court ruling expanding executive immunity belongs in Modules 2 and 8. After two modules, your journal is already original intelligence about your current political environment. After the full syllabus, it is a threat map of the present moment that no outside source could have produced for you.

The Local Index. A single living document covering your city, county, or state. Each module adds a section: who runs elections, what redistricting maps are in effect, what civic organizations exist, what oversight mechanisms are under pressure, what legal resources are available. By Module 9, you will have produced a comprehensive local democratic intelligence document calibrated to your specific terrain.

Cross-cutting protocols

Apply these practices across all nine modules.

Form a reading cell. Four to eight people, rotating facilitation, meeting every two to three weeks. The cell is not a book club. It has an operational purpose: to move from analysis to action together. Each session ends with one concrete decision. Cells work best when members bring different vantage points: different professional backgrounds, different neighborhoods, different generations, different political histories.

Apply the "Therefore, I will" rule. End every reading session by writing one sentence beginning with *Therefore, I will*. The sentence can be small. It must be concrete, first-person, and time-bound. The rule exists because democratic commitment is built in small public declarations, not large private convictions.

Why this sequence

Part I comes before Part II because action without diagnostic vocabulary is indistinguishable from reaction. Citizens who can name the specific mechanism of backsliding they are confronting make better strategic decisions about where to apply pressure than citizens operating on general alarm. Part II comes after Part I because diagnostic vocabulary without practice becomes passive, a way of watching the problem rather than working on it.

A suggested timeline:

- **Months 1–3:** Complete Part I. Priority outputs: baseline Local Index, Threat Journal established, personal power analysis drafted.

- **Months 4–6:** Complete Part II, Modules 5–7. Priority outputs: Civic Asset Map, Coalition Map, one relational organizing practice launched.
- **Months 7–9:** Complete Modules 8–9. Priority outputs: Legal Resource Map, Oversight Monitoring Protocol, Public Story developed and in active use.
- **Month 10:** Full cell debrief. Reassess your Local Index against the baseline. Identify the three most significant changes in your understanding and the three most significant changes in your practice.

Adjust sequencing as events demand. Some modules will require immediate attention depending on what is happening in your jurisdiction. The Threat Journal and Local Index are the instruments that connect this syllabus to the ground beneath you.

PART I: UNDERSTANDING

Part I develops the diagnostic vocabulary needed to recognize threats to democracy in their many forms: the overt, the procedural, and the structural. Modules 1 through 3 move from general framework to specific threat type. Module 4 makes the power dynamics that cut through all of them explicit.

Module 1: Foundations

How Democracy Works and How It Fails

Democracy is not a stable condition. It is a set of institutions, norms, and practices that require active maintenance. This module builds the core diagnostic vocabulary the rest of the syllabus depends on: what democratic backsliding is, what institutional and normative guardrails prevent it, and how the specific history of the United States shapes the form that erosion takes here.

Two foundational concepts enter the curriculum in this module. The first is the **guardrails framework**, developed by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, which identifies two core norms that distinguish functioning democracies from those in decline: **mutual toleration** (the acceptance of political opponents as legitimate rivals rather than existential enemies) and **institutional forbearance** (the practice of not pushing constitutional powers to their legal limit for partisan advantage). The second is the idea of democratic backsliding as a comparative phenomenon: the erosion of democratic institutions across countries follows recognizable patterns, and the American case is not unique enough to be exempt from comparison.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Democratic backsliding as a comparative phenomenon, guardrails theory, and the American constitutional structure read for its democratic strengths and weaknesses.
- **Why it matters:** The diagnostic vocabulary built here is what the rest of the syllabus depends on; without it, every subsequent module is harder to apply.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Name a healthy democratic norm, recognize guardrail erosion in an institution they interact with, and read the Declaration as a working argument rather than a ceremonial text.

Reading List

Start Here

1. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (2018) Two Harvard political scientists apply a comparative framework (drawn from cases ranging from interwar Europe to Latin America to contemporary Turkey) to contemporary American democracy. The book introduces the guardrails concept and identifies four warning signs of authoritarian politicians: rejecting democratic rules, denying the legitimacy of opponents, tolerating or encouraging violence, and curtailing civil liberties. This is the essential primer on democratic backsliding and the book the rest of this syllabus builds on. *Diagnostic*.

2. Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017) The Yale historian distills twenty concise lessons from European fascism and Soviet

communism and applies them to contemporary American democracy. The lessons emphasize professional ethics, linguistic clarity, and active institutional defense as first-order civic responsibilities. Short enough to read in an evening; dense enough to revisit throughout the curriculum. Snyder's twenty lessons are a named framework in the broader democratic defense literature. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

3. Heather Cox Richardson, *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America* (2023) A narrative history of American democracy organized around the ongoing contest between the ideals of political equality and the forces resisting them, traced from Reconstruction through January 6. Accessible and historically grounded, the book gives American context to the comparative frameworks in the other Start Here readings. **[Power throughline]** *Diagnostic.*

4. Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (2014) A Harvard political theorist offers a close reading of the Declaration as a document about collective equality rather than individual liberty. Allen's reading challenges interpretations that reduce the founding to a defense of property and autonomy and recovers the Declaration's argument that political equality is the foundation, not the byproduct, of self-government. After reading Allen, return to the Declaration itself. *Diagnostic and theoretical.*

Going Deeper

5. Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (2018) A Harvard historian's comprehensive single-volume history of the United States, organized around a single question: whether the founding promises of political equality, natural rights, and popular sovereignty have ever been realized, and by whom. Long but readable; the definitive narrative backbone for every module that follows. **[Power throughline]** *Diagnostic.*

6. Robert Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (2002) A concise argument from one of the twentieth century's most important democratic theorists that the American constitutional structure (the Senate, the Electoral College, judicial review, the amendment process) systematically underrepresents democratic majorities. The book gives readers the structural vocabulary for understanding constitutional constraints on democratic reform. Brief and rigorous. *Diagnostic.*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Name what you're defending. Before beginning this module, write your working definitions of democracy, civic norms, and rule of law. Not dictionary definitions. Your definitions, based on

what you've lived. After finishing the Start Here readings, rewrite them. The gap between the two versions is the beginning of your political education. Share your revised definitions with your reading cell. What you can name clearly, you can defend deliberately.

Take your democracy's pulse. The guardrails framework identifies mutual toleration and institutional forbearance as the core norms that keep democracies functional. Choose one institution you interact with directly (your local school board, your state legislature, your professional association) and assess whether these norms are intact, under pressure, or broken. Write one page and add it to your Local Index. This is not an alarm; it is a baseline. Healthy democracies have healthy guardrails, and knowing which ones are intact is as important as knowing which are stressed.

Write your democratic autobiography. Drawing on the American history and founding theory in this module: when and how did you first participate in democratic life? Where were you included? Where were you excluded? Where did you feel the promise of the Declaration working, and where did you feel it fall short? This is the personal foundation for the power analysis you will build in Module 4, and the beginning of your public story.

Advanced

Establish your community's democratic baseline. Using the Freedom House scoring framework and Protect Democracy's *Authoritarian Playbook* as scaffolding (both in Appendix A), assess your jurisdiction across five dimensions: electoral integrity, civil liberties, rule of law, executive constraint, and civic participation. One to two pages. This is not a damage assessment. It is a health record. A community that knows its democratic strengths can defend them. Share it with your reading cell and update it at the end of the full syllabus.

Module 2: Overt Threats

Authoritarianism, Political Violence, and Executive Overreach

Authoritarian movements share recognizable features across time and geography: the appeal to a pure people against corrupt elites, the delegitimization of political opposition, the erosion of the distinction between the ruling party and the state, and the gradual normalization of conduct that would previously have been disqualifying. This module develops the pattern recognition skills needed to identify these features in contemporary American politics.

Three named frameworks enter the curriculum in this module. The first is **Jason Stanley's ten fascist strategies**, the rhetorical and political moves fascist movements use to mobilize support, suppress opposition, and delegitimize the institutions that constrain them. The second is **Masha Gessen's six rules for surviving autocracy**, written in the week after the 2016 American election by a journalist with direct experience of authoritarian government. The third is Timothy Snyder's analysis of the **politics of eternity**: the manufactured nostalgia (the story of a mythic past under constant threat from internal enemies) that authoritarian movements substitute for the politics of possibility that democratic engagement requires. Together, these three frameworks give the reader a vocabulary for naming authoritarian moves in real time rather than retrospectively.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Authoritarianism, political violence, executive overreach, and the politics of eternity.
- **Why it matters:** These are the threats that dominate public attention, and citizens who cannot recognize them in real time remain reactive rather than prepared.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Identify the ten fascist strategies in contemporary rhetoric, apply Gessen's six rules as an operational stance, and track authoritarian moves in the Threat Journal.

Reading List

Start Here

7. Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (2020) A Pulitzer Prize-winning historian examines why intellectuals across the West (in Poland, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and the United States) have embraced authoritarian movements over the last two decades. Applebaum writes from inside the conservative tradition the book partly critiques, which gives it unusual cross-audience credibility. The book is analytically rigorous without being academically dense. *Diagnostic*.

8. Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (2018) A Yale philosopher systematically identifies ten rhetorical and political strategies common to fascist movements: mythic past, propaganda, anti-intellectualism, unreality, hierarchy, victimhood, law and order, sexual anxiety, appeals to the heartland, and the dismantling of public welfare. Contemporary American examples run throughout. Stanley's ten strategies are a widely cited named framework in the contemporary authoritarianism literature. *Diagnostic*.

9. Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018) The most substantive single analysis of Russian ideological influence on American and European democratic erosion. Snyder traces how the politics of eternity, manufactured nostalgia organized around a mythic past under siege, disables democratic agency and enables strongman rule. Dense and essential. The book is the analytical companion to *On Tyranny* (Module 1) and prepares the reader for *On Freedom* (Module 9). *Diagnostic*.

10. Masha Gessen, "*Autocracy: Rules for Survival*" (New York Review of Books, November 2016) (essay) A Russian-American journalist's six rules for not normalizing autocracy, written in the week after the 2016 election from direct experience of living and reporting under authoritarian governments. The rules include "believe the autocrat" and "do not be taken in by small signs of normality." The single most efficient assignment in the module. Read it first. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive*.

Going Deeper

11. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (2020) A historian's comparative study of authoritarian leaders from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, identifying the personality, rhetorical, and institutional patterns that define strongman rule. Ben-Ghiat gives particular attention to masculine authoritarianism as a political structure: the ways strongman politics organizes itself around gendered appeals, sexual domination, and violence as performance. **[Power throughline]** *Diagnostic*.

For Practitioners

12. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2004) A Columbia historian's scholarly account of fascism as political practice: how it seizes power, what sustains it once in office, and what distinguishes it from adjacent authoritarianisms. Paxton provides the analytical vocabulary practitioners need to distinguish genuine fascism from looser usage, a distinction that matters for both strategic clarity and credibility. *Diagnostic reference framework*.

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Train your pattern recognition. Over two weeks following your reading, scan local and national news for current examples of each of Stanley's ten fascist strategies. Record them in your Threat Journal. Citizens who recognized these patterns earliest in Poland, Hungary, and Turkey organized most effectively. The goal is not to feel more frightened. It is to stop being surprised.

Say it out loud. Read Gessen's six rules aloud to someone. Speaking them and explaining them forces a different kind of internalization than silent reading. Then ask each other: which rule is hardest to follow, and why? That conversation is a form of community accountability that democratic culture depends on. The rules exist because democracies survive partly through people who refuse to normalize what should not be normal.

Recover your political clarity. Name one development from the last three years that initially alarmed you and gradually stopped alarming you. Write it down. Naming it breaks the spell. Bring it to your reading cell. The capacity to see the present clearly, rather than through the lens of what has become familiar, is a civic skill worth building deliberately.

Advanced

Map the full democratic terrain in your state. Using the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Year in Hate and Extremism* (Appendix A) alongside Paxton's analytical framework, identify authoritarian actors operating in your state (organized hate groups, militia networks, elected officials using authoritarian rhetoric, funders of anti-democratic infrastructure) and map their relationships. Then map the democratic organizations operating in the same space: civic groups, legal organizations, faith communities, labor unions. Add both to your Local Index. Movements that only track threats miss the assets already on the ground.

Take the stated agenda seriously, then find the response. Apply Gessen's first rule, believe the autocrat, to twelve months of public statements by political figures you assess as overt threats. Identify three commitments your organization has been treating as rhetoric rather than intent. For each, identify the democratic resource (legal, organizational, electoral) that already exists to respond. Threat assessment and asset inventory belong in the same document.

Module 3: Slow Erosion

Procedural, Technocratic, and Institutional Backsliding

The most dangerous threats to democracy rarely announce themselves as such. They arrive as administrative appointments, legislative amendments, regulatory changes, funding cuts, and procedural modifications that individually seem technical and collectively constitute a systematic transfer of power away from democratic accountability. This module develops the capacity to recognize backsliding in progress rather than in retrospect.

Two analytical frames organize the module. The first is **institutional capture**: the gradual takeover of public institutions (agencies, courts, election boards, school boards) by actors who use procedural and appointment powers to realign those institutions with a particular political or ideological project. The second is **structural minority rule**: the use of legal and procedural mechanisms (gerrymandering, Senate malapportionment, the Electoral College, voter suppression) to secure outcomes that do not reflect majority preferences. Both are legal. Both operate within democratic forms. Both erode democratic substance.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Procedural backsliding, institutional capture, gerrymandering, structural minority rule, and administrative hollowing.
- **Why it matters:** Most actual backsliding in consolidated democracies happens through quiet procedural mechanisms rather than dramatic ones, and this material goes largely uncovered in public discourse.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Recognize procedural erosion in legislation and appointments, map minority-rule structures in their jurisdiction, and track slow erosion alongside overt threats.

Reading List

Start Here

13. Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (2020) A systems analysis of how political polarization has been institutionally manufactured and personally internalized in the United States over the past fifty years. Klein traces how party alignment with racial, religious, geographic, and cultural identity has produced a polarization that is more than disagreement. It is structural, affective, and self-reinforcing. Essential for understanding why democratic erosion does not trigger the alarm it should: it operates through structures people experience as normal. *Diagnostic.*

14. Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (2016) An investigative journalist's account of how a coordinated

network of donors, centered on the Koch brothers and extending through think tanks, legal advocacy organizations, and political infrastructure, systematically funded the capture of courts, state legislatures, and regulatory agencies over four decades. The definitive account of plutocratic democratic erosion. [**Power throughline**] *Diagnostic*.

15. Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (2017) A Duke historian traces a coordinated ideological project, rooted in the public choice economics of James McGill Buchanan, to constitutionalize minority-rule plutocracy. MacLean argues the project aims not to win democratic majorities but to insulate economic elites from them. *Note: some historians dispute specific source interpretations. Engage the argument critically. Diagnostic.*

Going Deeper

16. David Daley, *Ratf\ked: Why Your Vote Doesn't Count* (2016) A journalist's investigation of REDMAP, the Republican Redistricting Majority Project, which systematically gerrymandered state legislatures and congressional maps after the 2010 census. The book documents how structural minority-rule advantages are locked in through procedural means and how one well-funded, well-timed campaign reshaped American electoral geography for a decade. *Diagnostic.*

17. Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (2020) A detailed investigation of the Christian nationalist movement's coordinated campaign to capture school boards, state legislatures, courts, and federal agencies. Stewart reports from inside the movement's organizing infrastructure, making the slow-erosion story visible as the ground-level institutional work it is. *Diagnostic.*

18. Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (2017) A Naval War College professor's argument that the deliberate dismissal of expertise across medicine, law, economics, and governance disables the democratic public's capacity to evaluate what its government is doing. Epistemic erosion is political erosion by another name. *Diagnostic.*

For Practitioners

19. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012) A Harvard political scientist and her collaborator produce a rigorous sociological study of how the Tea Party captured local and state Republican infrastructure in the years after 2009. The book is the essential case study in how democratic

institutions are taken over from within at the sub-federal level, and what that looks like in real time. *Diagnostic.*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Follow the thread. Choose one procedural or technocratic mechanism (redistricting, election administration appointments, judicial selection, school board elections, regulatory agency staffing) and trace what has changed in your state over the last eight years using public records. Write one page for your Local Index. Slow erosion is only visible in sequence; a single snapshot looks like normalcy. Citizens who track institutional change over time become their community's institutional memory, which is itself democratic infrastructure.

Follow the money, then find the counter. Identify the three largest donors to state-level political campaigns or PACs in your state over the last two election cycles. Research their organizational affiliations. Then identify who is doing accountability journalism or legal monitoring of those same networks in your state. Add both to your Threat Journal. Understanding how concentrated private power operates is necessary; knowing who is already watching it is equally so.

Advanced

Read the capture playbook, then audit for resilience. Using the Tea Party case study as your analytical template, assess one local or state institution (a party committee, a school board, an election board, a city council) for signs of coordinated capture from within: rapid membership turnover, litmus-test issues, exclusion of longtime members, alignment with national movement infrastructure. Then assess the same institution for signs of democratic resilience: long-tenured members, transparent processes, diverse leadership, strong procedural norms. Recognizing what capture has not yet reached is as important as recognizing where it has.

Build an early warning system connected to people who can act on it. Using the States United Democracy Center and Brennan Center for Justice reports (both in Appendix A) as sources, identify five specific legislative or administrative actions in your state to track over the next six months. Set calendar alerts for committee hearings. Identify the reporters covering those beats. Identify also the advocacy organizations and legal groups already working those issues. An early warning system that connects to organized capacity is democratic infrastructure. One that only generates alerts goes nowhere.

Module 4: Power and Exclusion

Race, Class, and Gender as the Terrain of Democratic Struggle

This module makes explicit what the power throughline markers in other modules point toward: the mechanisms of democratic erosion have never operated uniformly across the American population. Voter suppression, authoritarian mobilization, and institutional capture consistently operate along racial, class, and gender lines. Understanding that is not a matter of ideology. It is a matter of accuracy.

The argument the module advances is not that race, class, and gender are additional topics to be added to a primary democratic analysis. The argument is that democratic struggle in the United States has always been structured by these dynamics and cannot be accurately analyzed without them. Voter suppression after the Voting Rights Act's weakening is not incidentally racial; it is racial by design. Plutocratic capture is not incidentally class-based; it is a contest over whether economic inequality translates into political inequality. Authoritarian movements are not incidentally gendered; they consistently organize themselves around patriarchal authority and the exclusion of women from full political agency.

The works here are the throughline made explicit. Read them alongside works in every other module.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Race, class, and gender as the operating terrain of democratic struggle in the United States.
- **Why it matters:** The mechanisms studied in Modules 1 through 3 operate through and around inequality; treating that as a separate topic misreads the whole curriculum.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Read every subsequent module with the power throughline visible, conduct a power analysis of their own position, and identify where structural exclusion is producing the threats earlier modules named.

Reading List

Start Here

20. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) A civil rights lawyer and legal scholar argues that mass incarceration functions as a system of racialized social control, replicating the structure of Jim Crow while remaining invisible to colorblind ideology and formal democratic inclusion. The book fundamentally reshaped public understanding of the criminal legal system as a democratic issue. *Diagnostic.*

21. Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy* (2018) An Emory historian provides a concise, accessible account of how voter suppression (voter ID laws, registration purges, polling place closures, cuts to early voting) has systematically targeted Black voters since the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* gutted the preclearance provisions of the Voting Rights Act. The book is direct, empirical, and essential background for Module 6. *Diagnostic*.

22. Adam Serwer, *The Cruelty Is the Point: The Past, Present, and Future of Trump's America* (2021) A staff writer at *The Atlantic* collects essays arguing that racial cruelty is not incidental to American authoritarian politics but its organizing principle, traced from Reconstruction through the present. The collection reads as diagnostic commentary in real time on the decade that produced it. *Diagnostic*.

Going Deeper

23. Heather Cox Richardson, *How the South Won the Civil War: Oligarchy, Democracy, and the Continuing Fight for the Soul of America* (2020) A historian argues that the Confederate vision of hierarchical order, organized around whiteness, maleness, and property, migrated west after the Civil War and was never fully defeated. Richardson reframes the current democratic struggle as Reconstruction's unfinished work. A powerful companion to her *Democracy Awakening* in Module 1. *Diagnostic*.

24. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016) A Princeton scholar-activist provides a historical and political analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement as a response to the failure of formal democratic inclusion to deliver substantive equality. The book is essential for understanding why voting rights and racial justice are inseparable democratic questions rather than adjacent ones. *Diagnostic*.

25. Stacey Abrams, *Our Time Is Now: Power, Purpose, and the Fight for a Fair America* (2020) Both a personal account of voting rights organizing in Georgia and a political argument for how voter suppression operates and how it is contested. Abrams bridges the diagnostic analysis of suppression mechanics with prescriptive community power-building and electoral strategy. The book transitions the reader from Part I's diagnostic frame toward Part II's operational one. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive*.

For Practitioners

26. Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (2nd ed., 2016) A Vanderbilt political scientist provides rigorous empirical evidence that elected representatives systematically respond to the preferences of wealthy constituents and are

statistically unresponsive to the preferences of low- and middle-income Americans. The book is the quantitative foundation for class-based democratic capture arguments and a necessary check against any democratic analysis that treats policy responsiveness as uniform. *Diagnostic analytical framework*.

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Know your position on the field. Identify three ways your own social position (race, class, gender, educational credential, regional background) has shaped your relationship to democratic institutions. This is not an exercise in guilt. It is an exercise in accuracy. Citizens who understand their position on the democratic terrain make better decisions about where their effort has the most leverage. Add this analysis to your Local Index as the foundation for the coalition work in Module 7.

Listen before you act. Interview someone whose democratic experience differs substantially from yours. Not a debate. A forty-five-minute listening session organized around three questions drawn from your reading in this module: on voter suppression, civic inclusion, or institutional trust. Write up what you learned and add it to your Local Index under community democratic experience. Democratic movements that begin from a single community's experience consistently misread the terrain they're trying to change.

Advanced

Map the full power structure. Using Bartels' class analysis and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) extremism intelligence (Appendix A) as frameworks, map the formal and informal power structure around your organization's primary issue: who has institutional power, who has organized power, who has disruptive power, where alliances exist and where fault lines run. Then map the democratic power in the same space: organized constituencies, legal resources, civic relationships already present. Update the map quarterly. Power maps that only show threat miss the democratic infrastructure available to work with.

Assess your organization's democratic culture. Who holds formal leadership? Who holds informal power? Whose voices are centered in strategic decisions? This is a strategic capacity assessment, not a diversity exercise. Organizations that replicate exclusion internally build fragile coalitions. Bring your assessment to your leadership with three specific proposals. The internal work and the external work are the same work.

PART II: ACTING

Part II moves from understanding to action. Having built the diagnostic vocabulary in Part I, and having mapped, in Module 4, the power terrain on which democratic work actually operates, the reader now develops the specific capacities that distinguish an organizer from an engaged citizen: practicing democracy before defending it, protecting elections, building collective power, defending institutions, and sustaining the work across time.

Module 5: Civic Life and Democratic Culture

Participation, Deliberation, Norms, and Local Democracy

Democracy is practiced before it is defended. This module addresses the everyday texture of civic life: what it means to participate in shared decisions, what norms make democratic community possible, and what has eroded in both. The primary skill this module builds cannot be developed through reading alone. It is built through doing the structured civic practices the engagement activities specify.

Two frameworks enter the curriculum in this module. The first is **bridging versus bonding social capital**, a distinction developed by Robert Putnam: bonding capital strengthens ties within existing groups (a church, a neighborhood association, an identity-based organization), while bridging capital builds relationships across lines of difference. Healthy democratic cultures require both, but bridging capital is the harder to sustain and the first to erode. The second is the **constitution of knowledge**, journalist Jonathan Rauch's term for the network of institutions, norms, and practices (free press, peer review, professional journalism, evidence standards) that produce the shared factual basis democratic deliberation requires. When the constitution of knowledge is under attack, democratic deliberation collapses into competing realities.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Bridging and bonding social capital, deliberation, local civic ecosystems, and the civic commons.
- **Why it matters:** Organizing in a thin civic ecosystem requires different practices than organizing in a dense one, and most American communities now operate in thin ecosystems.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Map their community's civic assets, distinguish bridging from bonding relationships in their network, and begin building the relational infrastructure that Modules 6 through 9 depend on.

Reading List

Start Here

27. Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (2020) A Harvard social scientist and his collaborator present a data-driven analysis demonstrating that current atomization and polarization are not inevitable. The United States experienced a similar period of fragmentation in the late nineteenth century and emerged from it through deliberate civic and institutional investment between roughly 1900 and the 1960s. The book makes the historical case that civic renewal is possible without pretending it is automatic. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

28. Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (2021) A journalist and Brookings scholar argues that the social norms and institutions that produce reliable shared knowledge are themselves democratic institutions under deliberate attack. Rauch frames the defense of truth as a civic practice requiring the same active work as the defense of courts or elections. Essential for understanding why disinformation is a democratic issue, not an epistemic one. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

For Practitioners

29. Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power and Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (2021) A Johns Hopkins political scientist and her collaborators produce a rigorous sociological study of how civic organizations translate individual engagement into collective power. The book is grounded in case studies across the organizational spectrum and gives organizers empirical tools for evaluating whether their organization is actually building power or only appearing to. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

30. Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (2003) A Harvard political scientist provides a historical analysis of the shift in American civic organizations from mass-membership organizations (fraternal orders, the PTA, labor unions, traditional political parties) to professionalized advocacy groups. The book documents the structural erosion of participatory democratic culture that set conditions for the current crisis. **[Power throughline]** *Diagnostic.*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Practice democracy, don't just study it. Use the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums facilitation materials (Appendix A) to design and host a ninety-minute deliberative conversation on one contested local issue. Recruit eight to twelve people across lines of difference. Debrief using the NIF guide. The norms democratic culture depends on (listening across disagreement, weighing evidence, reaching workable conclusions together) are built through practice, not reading. You are building them in your community while they are under pressure elsewhere.

Know what's already there. Identify every civic organization, formal and informal, active in your town or neighborhood. Categorize by type: membership, advocacy, service, faith-based, professional. Identify which ones build bridging social capital across difference and which build bonding capital within existing groups. This civic asset map goes in your Local Index and becomes

the foundation for Module 7's coalition work. Most communities have more democratic infrastructure than their citizens realize. Knowing what exists is the first step toward using it.

Advanced

Assess your organization's civic function. Drawing on the analyses in *Prisms of the People* and *Diminished Democracy*, assess your organization on two dimensions: depth of membership engagement (transactional versus transformational participation) and civic infrastructure function (does your organization build leaders, or does it consume them?). Produce a one-page capacity memo with three specific recommendations. Organizations that develop leaders rather than deploy volunteers are doing two things at once: pursuing their immediate goals and strengthening the democratic culture that makes those goals achievable.

Module 6: Electoral Defense

Voting Rights, Election Administration, and Legal Protection

Elections are the most direct mechanism of democratic accountability, and they are under pressure from multiple directions simultaneously: legal restrictions on voter access, administrative changes that introduce partisan control into previously nonpartisan functions, procedural modifications to certification and canvassing, and rhetorical campaigns that undermine public confidence in results. This module addresses all four.

The central distinction organizing this module is between **voting rights** (who is legally permitted to vote and how easily they can access the ballot) and **election administration** (how elections are conducted, counted, certified, and defended from subversion). Both are under attack. The attacks on voting rights are older, better documented, and more often discussed in civic terms. The attacks on election administration are newer, more technical, and more dangerous in the short term because they aim not to suppress turnout but to permit the rejection of legitimate results. Practitioners need fluency in both.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Voting rights, election administration, voter suppression, voter protection, and the legal infrastructure of elections.
- **Why it matters:** Elections are the most concrete site where democratic backsliding is contested, and knowing how elections run converts general concern into specific protection.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Identify the election administrators and legal resources in their jurisdiction, recognize suppression mechanisms operating in their state, and plug into an existing voter protection effort.

Reading List

Start Here

31. Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* (2015) A *Mother Jones* journalist tells the narrative history of the Voting Rights Act from passage in 1965 through its gutting in the 2013 Supreme Court decision *Shelby County v. Holder*, naming the people and forces on both sides across half a century. Essential historical and legal grounding for anyone doing electoral defense work. **[Power throughline]** *Diagnostic*.

32. David Daley, *Unrigged: How Americans Are Battling Back to Save Democracy* (2020) The prescriptive companion to Daley's *Ratf\ked* in Module 3. The book profiles citizens, organizers, and reformers winning victories on redistricting reform, ranked-choice voting, automatic voter registration, and nonpartisan election administration. Demonstrates that the

slow-erosion infrastructure documented earlier in the syllabus is contestable, and by whom. *Prescriptive.*

33. Richard L. Hasen, *Election Meltdown: Dirty Tricks, Distrust, and the Threat to American Democracy* (2020) A UCLA election law scholar provides a systematic analysis of four distinct threats to election integrity: voter suppression, administrative incompetence, disinformation and dirty tricks, and presidential delegitimization rhetoric. Hasen's typology helps practitioners distinguish between threats that look similar but require different responses. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

Going Deeper

34. Richard L. Hasen, *Cheap Speech: How Disinformation Poisons Our Politics and How to Cure It* (2022) Hasen's follow-up argues that the collapse of gatekeeping in political communication, driven by social media platforms, has created a disinformation ecosystem with direct consequences for election integrity. The book engages with the legal doctrine that must adapt to protect democratic self-governance and is a useful companion to Rauch in Module 5. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Show up where democracy is administered. Attend a local election board meeting before finishing this module. Observe who is in the room, who is not, what decisions are being made, and what public comment opportunities exist. Write one page: what seemed healthy, what concerned you, what did you not know before you walked in? Add it to your Local Index. Election administration is democracy made operational. Citizens who know how it works can support it when it functions well and defend it when it comes under pressure.

Know the structure. Trace your state's election chain of command from the Secretary of State to your county clerk to your local precinct. Identify every appointed versus elected position. Flag any procedural changes to certification or canvassing rules in the last four years. Understanding the structure is a form of protection: what is known can be watched, and what is watched is harder to quietly dismantle.

Advanced

Assess the damage, then identify the repair targets. Using the Brennan Center for Justice voting laws data (Appendix A) and the analytical framework developed by Carol Anderson in Module 4, identify every voting restriction enacted in your state since *Shelby County v. Holder* in

2013. Estimate the affected population for each. Then identify which three are most vulnerable to legal or legislative challenge and which organizations are already working those challenges. This is a repair agenda, not just a damage report.

Train your community before the next election. Using Fair Fight Action's training materials (Appendix A) as a template, design and deliver a two-hour voter protection training for volunteers in your community. Cover eligibility, polling place rights, provisional ballots, and what to do when something goes wrong. Debrief afterward to identify what your community most needs to know. Revise and repeat before the next election cycle. Voter protection work simultaneously counters suppression and ensures more voices are heard.

Module 7: Organizing and Collective Action

Community Power, Grassroots Resistance, and Coalition Building

Organized collective action is the most reliable mechanism democratic movements have. This module covers the theory and practice of building it: how to convert individual concern into shared capacity, how to design campaigns that achieve specific results, how to build coalitions that hold, and what distinguishes organizing from mobilizing.

Three named frameworks enter the curriculum in this module. The first is the **3.5% participation threshold**, an empirical finding by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan: across more than three hundred campaigns of mass political resistance between 1900 and 2006, no nonviolent campaign that achieved sustained active participation from 3.5 percent of the population failed to produce significant political change. The figure is neither magical nor sufficient; it is a threshold that reframes the question of what mass participation actually requires. The second is Marshall Ganz's **public story framework**, built on three components: story of self (what called you to this work), story of us (what connects you to others doing it), and story of now (what is at stake and why this moment demands action). The third is Jane McAlevey's distinction between **mobilizing and organizing**: mobilizing activates people who already agree with you, while organizing builds new capacity and leadership in communities not yet with you. The former produces visible action; only the latter produces durable power.

The three Start Here works in this module represent three distinct traditions in democratic collective action: strategic civil resistance, emergent and relational practice, and current tactical organizing manual. Read them together.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Grassroots organizing, coalition building, strategic campaign design, nonviolent civil resistance, and mutual aid.
- **Why it matters:** Collective capacity, not individual conviction, is what protects democratic institutions at scale.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Conduct relational organizing conversations, build and maintain a coalition map, design a strategic campaign, and apply the 3.5% threshold as a mobilization benchmark.

Reading List

Start Here

35. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (2011) The most rigorous empirical study of civil resistance published to date. Two political scientists analyze 323 campaigns of mass political

resistance between 1900 and 2006 and find that nonviolent movements succeed at roughly twice the rate of violent ones. The book establishes the 3.5% participation threshold and provides the strategic vocabulary (pillars of support, backfire dynamics, resilience under repression) that the contemporary civil resistance literature builds on. *Diagnostic and strategic framework.*

36. adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) A Black feminist movement facilitator offers a framework for organizing practice rooted in complexity theory, the writing of Octavia Butler, and decades of movement experience. brown argues that the shape of the work must embody the world you want to build, with direct implications for organizational culture, meeting design, conflict practice, and coalition dynamics. The book sits in a different tradition than Chenoweth and Stephan; read them as complements rather than alternatives. **[Power throughline]** *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

37. Indivisible, *A Practical Guide to Democracy on the Brink* (2024) The most current comprehensive organizing manual for opposing the second Trump administration and the Project 2025 agenda. The guide covers local chapter organizing, constituent pressure campaigns, coalition tactics, and escalation strategy. It is specific, actionable, and updated for current conditions. Where Chenoweth and brown provide frameworks, Indivisible provides immediate operational doctrine. *Prescriptive.*

Going Deeper

38. Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Workers Movement* (2009) A Harvard Kennedy School lecturer and veteran of both the United Farm Workers and the Obama 2008 campaign offers a foundational organizing theory text. Ganz analyzes why the UFW succeeded where better-resourced organizations failed and introduces the named frameworks (strategic capacity, relational organizing, and the public story) that underpin contemporary progressive organizing practice. **[Power throughline]** *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

39. Beautiful Trouble Collective, *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution* (2012, expanded) A practitioner's compendium of tactics, principles, theories, and case studies from creative nonviolent direct action, structured as a searchable field reference rather than a linear read. Use it as a working tool alongside the strategic frameworks in Chenoweth, brown, and Ganz. *Prescriptive.*

For Practitioners

40. Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (2016) A veteran labor and community organizer delivers a rigorous critique of advocacy and

mobilizing models dominant in twenty-first-century progressive politics. McAlevey argues that deep organizing, building organic leaders within communities and workplaces through structured, time-intensive relational work, is the only path to durable democratic power. The book is the definitive statement of the mobilizing-versus-organizing distinction. [**Power throughline**] *Prescriptive strategic framework.*

41. Hahrie Han, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century* (2014) A Johns Hopkins political scientist's empirical study distinguishing civic organizations that develop sustained activist networks from those that do not. Han introduces the **transactional versus transformational organizing** distinction with empirical precision and is the natural companion to *Prisms of the People* in Module 5. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

42. George Lakey, *How We Win: A Guide to Nonviolent Direct Action Campaigning* (2018) A veteran Quaker trainer and practitioner provides a working guide to designing and executing nonviolent direct action campaigns, from strategic framing through escalation, negotiation, and sustaining momentum after initial action. Lakey's book translates the Chenoweth findings into operational practice. *Prescriptive.*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Build relationships, not just a list. Complete ten relational one-on-ones. Not surveys. Not canvassing. Forty-five-minute structured conversations with ten people in your community about their values, concerns, and civic experiences. Use the three-part public story framework: story of self, story of us, story of now. After ten conversations, identify three people who might be ready for deeper civic engagement. The conversations are not preliminary to the work; they are the work.

Calculate what's possible. Apply the 3.5% participation threshold to your context: calculate 3.5% of the population of your city, county, or congressional district. Map existing civic organizations against that number. What fraction of the threshold is currently organized? What would it take to reach it? This exercise almost always reframes scale in the direction of feasibility. Most people underestimate how much organized capacity already exists.

Advanced

Build a campaign brief that names both what you're for and what you're opposing. Apply the tactical framework in the Indivisible guide to your current or planned campaign. Specify: who is your target, what is the specific ask, what is the pressure mechanism, what is the timeline, what are the coalition commitments, where does this fit in an escalation ladder. Then add one sentence: what democratic principle does winning this campaign advance? Campaigns with a clear civic purpose sustain participation better than campaigns defined only by opposition.

Move from mobilizing to organizing. Audit your last three campaigns: did you engage existing supporters, or build new capacity in communities not already with you? Redesign one element of your outreach strategy to move toward organizing rather than mobilizing. Then assess where the new relationships you build belong in your coalition map. This is the structural work that makes democratic movements durable rather than episodic.

Map the full coalition field. Using your civic asset map from Module 5 and your power map from Module 4, identify every organization that should be in coalition with you on your primary issue. For each, assess the current relationship, likely alignment, what you can offer, and what they need. Identify the three relationships most worth investing in over the next six months. Coalition is not a list of allies. It is a set of relationships under active cultivation.

Module 8: Institutional and Legal Defense

Courts, Administrative State, Rule of Law, and Policy Reform

Democratic institutions do not defend themselves. Courts, inspectors general, independent agencies, civil service protections, legislative oversight mechanisms, and prosecutorial independence all depend on citizens and practitioners who understand what they are, how they work, and what their loss would mean. This module builds that understanding and connects it to specific defense and monitoring practices.

Two central claims organize the module. The first, from the reform-oriented literature, is that institutional guardrails built on norm rather than law are vulnerable once norms have been broken and require statutory reinforcement to survive. The second, from the civil rights and movement literature, is that constitutional meaning is made not only by courts but by organized citizens who push courts and legislatures toward particular interpretations. The defense of institutions is not a specialist task left to lawyers but a citizen responsibility that specialist lawyers support.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Courts, the administrative state, executive power reform, constitutional lawyering, and policy reform.
- **Why it matters:** Institutions do not defend themselves; they are defended by citizens who understand how they work and where the reform levers sit.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Name the institutional reform agenda for executive power, track pending legislation and litigation in their state, and engage elected representatives as a participant in institutional design rather than an observer.

Reading List

Start Here

43. Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith, *After Trump: Reconstructing the Presidency* (2020) A Democratic former White House counsel (Bauer, under Obama) and a Republican former Assistant Attorney General (Goldsmith, under George W. Bush) jointly propose concrete legislative and executive reforms to constrain future executive overreach. The book is one of the only rigorously cross-tradition institutional reform documents in this literature, which is precisely what gives its recommendations credibility across audiences. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

44. David Cole, *Engines of Liberty: The Power of Citizen Activists to Make Constitutional Law* (2016) The Georgetown law professor and longtime ACLU national legal director argues, through detailed case studies of marriage equality, gun rights, and disability rights, that constitutional change in America is driven by organized citizen movements rather

than by courts acting alone. The book reframes institutional defense as a citizen responsibility and gives organizers the conceptual vocabulary for understanding their own work as constitutional practice. *Prescriptive*.

Going Deeper

45. Laurence Tribe and Joshua Matz, *To End a Presidency: The Power of Impeachment* (2018) A Harvard constitutional scholar and his former student provide a rigorous constitutional analysis of impeachment as a democratic accountability mechanism: when it applies, how it works, what its limits are, and what its political effects are. The book is essential background for any citizen who wants to evaluate impeachment as a response to executive misconduct rather than treating it as a generic political instrument. *Diagnostic legal framework*.

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Read your constitution as a participant, not a tourist. Read the relevant sections of your state constitution: provisions covering elections, the executive, the judiciary, and rights. Identify three provisions that function as democratic guardrails. Identify any that have been tested or circumvented in the last four years. Then identify one that is working as designed and add it to your Local Index. Citizens who know their constitutional architecture can engage institutions as participants rather than observers.

Know your legal community before you need it. Identify the legal organizations operating in your state that work on voting rights, civil liberties, and democratic accountability. Record their names, areas of work, and contact information. This is your legal rapid-response network. Building these relationships in advance is an act of democratic preparation that also supports the organizations doing the work.

Advanced

Build an oversight monitoring protocol that connects to action. Using Protect Democracy's executive accountability reports (Appendix A) as a template, identify five federal or state oversight mechanisms most relevant to your issue area. Set up alerts for personnel changes, budget cuts, and scope-of-authority disputes. Document a baseline and a tripwire: the specific change that would trigger an organizational response. Pair each tripwire with the organization or coalition partner responsible for responding. Monitoring without a response plan is intelligence that goes nowhere.

Run a Know Your Rights training before your next action. Using American Civil Liberties Union materials (Appendix A), design a one-hour Know Your Rights training specific to the activities your community or organization undertakes: protest, canvassing, election monitoring, public comment, media work. Have a lawyer review it. Deliver it before your next major action. This training protects participants and signals to your community that their safety is a priority, which builds the trust that sustains long-term engagement.

Module 9: Sustaining Movements

Resilience, Narrative, and Long-Term Democratic Renewal

Democratic defense is not a sprint. The threats documented in Part I compound over years and decades. The organizing work in Part II requires sustained effort across election cycles, legislative sessions, and moments of discouragement and defeat. This module addresses what makes long-term democratic engagement possible: the psychological, cultural, and narrative resources that allow people to persist when progress is slow and setbacks are real.

One named framework enters the curriculum in this module to close the arc begun in Module 2. Timothy Snyder's earlier *On Tyranny* (Module 1) and *The Road to Unfreedom* (Module 2) diagnose the pull of authoritarianism; his *On Freedom* (2024) develops the positive vision the diagnosis implies. Snyder's argument turns on a distinction philosophers call **negative versus positive freedom**: negative freedom is freedom *from* interference and restriction, while positive freedom is freedom *to* act, participate, create, and belong. Democratic renewal, Snyder argues, requires recovering a substantive account of positive freedom rather than settling for a defensive account organized only around what government should not do.

In This Module

- **Covers:** Resilience, public narrative, long-term movement maintenance, joy and pleasure as political practice, and democratic renewal.
- **Why it matters:** Most movements fail not from defeat but from exhaustion, fragmentation, and narrative drift; sustaining the work across years requires specific practices.
- **After this module, the reader can:** Develop a working public story, identify the conditions under which their own engagement sustains or erodes, and treat the full curriculum as the beginning of a long practice rather than a completed course.

Reading List

Start Here

46. Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (2004, expanded 2016) A writer and historian offers a meditation on political hope grounded in the concrete history of social movements. Solnit argues that change is nonlinear, that victories are often invisible at the moment they occur, and that despair is a political trap set by those who benefit from democratic disengagement. Short, clear, and essential. *Prescriptive (orientation and psychological).*

47. Timothy Snyder, *On Freedom* (2024) Snyder develops a philosophical and practical argument for positive freedom as the animating vision of democratic renewal. The book extends

and completes the diagnostic frame of *On Tyranny* into a forward-looking democratic vision and closes the three-book arc that began in Module 1. *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

Going Deeper

48. adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019)

An anthology exploring the proposition that movements must be sustainable and life-giving rather than depleting. The collection brings together essays and interviews on joy, rest, bodily autonomy, and embodiment as political practices that enable long-term work. Read as companion to brown's *Emergent Strategy* in Module 7. **[Power throughline]** *Both diagnostic and prescriptive.*

49. Paul Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times* (revised 2010)

A longtime civic writer profiles long-term activists and argues that sustained democratic engagement requires cultivating specific psychological and social resources (community, narrative, a realistic relationship with incremental progress) to persist through failure and discouragement. The book is the psychological counterpart to Solnit's historical argument. *Prescriptive (psychological).*

Engagement Actions

Foundation

Develop your public story. Using the three-part framework introduced in Module 7, write a public narrative: story of self (what called you to this work), story of us (what connects you to others doing it), story of now (what is at stake and why this moment demands action). Speakable in four minutes. Practice it with your reading cell. A public story is the primary tool democratic citizens use to invite others into the work. The movements that sustain themselves are the ones whose members can answer *why are you still here* in a way that makes others want to stay.

Build for the long arc. Name three things that most reliably sustain your civic engagement when it becomes difficult, and three things that most reliably erode it. Design one concrete change to your routines that protects a sustaining factor or removes an eroding one. Share it with your reading cell and ask them to do the same. Sustained democratic movements are made of ordinary people with deliberate sustainability structures. Building those structures is part of what the work requires.

Advanced

Assess your organization's culture as a democratic practice. Drawing on brown's two books (Modules 7 and 9), assess your organization across five dimensions: how decisions are

made, how conflict is handled, how members are recognized, how failure is processed, and how rest and recovery are structured. Bring one specific culture change proposal to your leadership. The culture of the movement is an argument about the culture of the democracy it's trying to build.

Apply Chenoweth's post-2010 analysis, then find your offsets. Chenoweth's follow-up essay "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance" (Appendix A) updates the findings in *Why Civil Resistance Works* with evidence that civil resistance campaigns have been less successful since 2010 and identifies three failure modes: repression sophistication, security force loyalty, and digital counter-strategy. Assess your movement's exposure to all three. Write a one-page strategic risk memo. For each vulnerability, identify one democratic asset (a legal resource, a coalition relationship, a communications capacity) that partially offsets it. Share it with your core team. Strategic self-assessment and strategic asset inventory belong in the same document.

Appendix A: Curated Resources

Full citations for the forty-nine in-module works appear within each module. The resources below (monitoring tools, legal guides, deliberative democracy frameworks, and scholarly essays) support the module work and are referenced throughout the syllabus.

Category	Resource	Authoritative URL	Why it matters	Type
Assessment and Monitoring	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World</i> (annual, US chapter)	freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world	Applies a consistent democratic scoring framework across years. The U.S. chapter and rubric are useful for tracking backsliding over time and building a repeatable local health assessment.	Diagnostic tool
Assessment and Monitoring	Protect Democracy, <i>The Authoritarian Playbook</i> (2021)	protectdemocracy.org/work/the-authoritarian-playbook	A concise field guide to autocratic tactics mapped to the American institutional context. Useful as a standalone primer or as scaffolding for a local democratic health assessment.	Diagnostic
Assessment and Monitoring	Protect Democracy, executive accountability and oversight reports (ongoing)	protectdemocracy.org/threat-tracker	Ongoing analysis of threats to inspectors general, independent agencies, civil service protections, prosecutorial independence, and related oversight mechanisms.	Both diagnostic and prescriptive
Assessment and Monitoring	States United Democracy Center, election subversion tracking and legal analysis (ongoing)	statesunited.org/resources/democracy-crisis-june-2023	Tracks state-level legislative and administrative efforts to politicize election certification, replace nonpartisan officials, and create pathways for rejecting legitimate results.	Diagnostic with practitioner application

Category	Resource	Authoritative URL	Why it matters	Type
Assessment and Monitoring	Brennan Center for Justice, voting laws and election security reports (ongoing)	brennancenter.org/topics/voting-elections	Continuously updated legal and policy analysis of voting restrictions, election administration threats, and state-by-state developments.	Both diagnostic and prescriptive
Assessment and Monitoring	Brennan Center for Justice, judicial independence and presidential power reports (ongoing)	The Courts Executive Power	Tracks attacks on judicial independence and executive overreach, including court restructuring, emergency powers, and related rule-of-law issues.	Diagnostic with practitioner application
Assessment and Monitoring	Southern Poverty Law Center, <i>Year in Hate and Extremism</i> (annual)	splcenter.org/resources/reports/year-hate-extremism-2024	Annual tracking of hate groups and domestic extremist movements. Useful practitioner intelligence on the far-right ecosystem feeding authoritarian mobilization.	Diagnostic
Assessment and Monitoring	Southern Poverty Law Center, <i>Whose Heritage?</i> and related extremism intelligence reports (ongoing)	splcenter.org/resources/reports/whose-heritage	Tracks Confederate symbols, Lost Cause narratives, white nationalist infrastructure, and the relationships between extremist memory politics and mainstream politics.	Diagnostic
Electoral and Voter Protection	Fair Fight Action, voter protection organizing guides and training materials	fairfight.com	Practitioner-facing voter protection resources combining legal strategy, community organizing, and voter contact tactics.	Prescriptive
Legal Resources	American Civil Liberties Union, <i>Know Your Rights</i> guides and legal defense resources (ongoing)	aclu.org/know-your-rights	Practical rights information across protest, policing, speech, surveillance, and related civil-liberties domains.	Prescriptive

Category	Resource	Authoritative URL	Why it matters	Type
Deliberative Democracy	Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums, facilitation guides and deliberative democracy resources (ongoing)	kettering.org nifi.org/issue-guides	Structured frameworks for public deliberation on contested civic questions, especially useful for facilitators and civic educators.	Prescriptive
Essays and Working Papers	Masha Gessen, "Autocracy: Rules for Survival" (<i>New York Review of Books</i> , November 2016)	nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/10/trump-election-autocracy-rules-for-survival	Six rules for not normalizing autocracy, written immediately after the 2016 election by a journalist with direct experience of authoritarian rule. Also appears as item 10 in Module 2.	Both diagnostic and prescriptive
Essays and Working Papers	Erica Chenoweth, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance" (<i>Journal of Democracy</i> , 2020)	journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-future-of-nonviolent-resistance-2	Strategic update to <i>Why Civil Resistance Works</i> assessing why nonviolent campaigns have become less successful since 2010 and what movements are doing differently.	Diagnostic and strategic
Essays and Working Papers	Marshall Ganz, "Leading Change: Leadership, Organization, and Social Movements" (Harvard Kennedy School, various)	hks.harvard.edu/publications/leading-change-leadership-organization-and-social-movements	Theoretical essays on public narrative, strategic capacity, and relational organizing that underpin <i>Why David Sometimes Wins</i> and much contemporary movement training.	Prescriptive theoretical framework

Appendix B: Glossary of Key Frameworks and Concepts

Terms and named frameworks the reader will encounter repeatedly in this curriculum. Listed alphabetically. Primary location in the syllabus is noted for each entry.

3.5% participation threshold. An empirical finding by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan that across 323 campaigns of mass political resistance between 1900 and 2006, no nonviolent campaign that achieved sustained active participation from 3.5 percent of a population failed to produce significant political change. The threshold is not a sufficient condition, only a necessary one, and less reliable for campaigns after 2010 as authoritarian regimes have adapted. Primary location: Module 7.

Authoritarianism. A political system or movement characterized by concentration of power in a single leader or ruling elite, limited political pluralism, and the erosion or rejection of independent institutions that constrain that power. Contemporary authoritarianism often preserves the formal structures of democracy (elections, legislatures, courts) while hollowing out their substance. Primary location: Module 2.

Bridging versus bonding social capital. A distinction developed by political scientist Robert Putnam. Bonding social capital strengthens ties within existing groups (a congregation, a neighborhood, an identity-based association); bridging social capital builds relationships across lines of difference. Democratic cultures require both, but bridging capital is harder to sustain and the first to erode. Primary location: Module 5.

Civil resistance. Organized mass political action conducted through nonviolent means (strikes, boycotts, protest, civil disobedience, noncooperation) to produce political change. The academic study of civil resistance documents its strategic logic and empirical effectiveness. See also 3.5% participation threshold. Primary location: Module 7.

Constitution of knowledge. Journalist Jonathan Rauch's term for the network of institutions, norms, and practices (free press, peer review, professional journalism, evidence standards, judicial fact-finding) that produces the shared factual basis democratic deliberation requires. When the constitution of knowledge is under attack, democratic deliberation collapses into competing realities. Primary location: Module 5.

Democratic backsliding. The incremental weakening of democratic institutions through legal and procedural means rather than through a single coup or constitutional rupture. Distinguished from democratic collapse (sudden, visible failure) by its gradualism. The concept is central to comparative political science and is the organizing diagnostic frame of this syllabus. Primary location: Purpose and Module 1.

Fascism. A specific form of authoritarianism historically associated with interwar Italy and Germany and characterized by ultranationalism, rejection of liberal democracy, rhetoric of national rebirth from perceived internal and external enemies, cult of leadership, paramilitary

mobilization, and the fusion of party and state. Robert Paxton's *The Anatomy of Fascism* provides the scholarly reference definition. Primary location: Module 2.

Guardrails (democratic). A framework developed by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt identifying two core norms that distinguish stable democracies from those in decline: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. When both guardrails are intact, democratic competition operates within shared limits. When either breaks down, democratic backsliding becomes possible. Primary location: Module 1.

Institutional capture. The gradual takeover of a public institution (an agency, a court, an election board, a party committee, a school board) by actors who use procedural and appointment powers to realign the institution with a particular political or ideological project. Capture typically operates through legal mechanisms and is visible only in retrospect without deliberate monitoring. Primary location: Module 3.

Institutional forbearance. One of two democratic guardrails in the Levitsky and Ziblatt framework. The practice of political actors not pushing constitutional and legal powers to their maximum limit for partisan advantage, even when doing so would be technically permitted. The collapse of forbearance produces procedural maximalism (using every available legal tool against political opponents), which accelerates democratic breakdown. Primary location: Module 1.

Mobilizing versus organizing. A distinction developed by organizer Jane McAlevey. Mobilizing activates people who already agree with you and counts attendance and participation as success. Organizing builds new leadership and capacity in communities not yet with you and counts durable institutional power as success. Both have their place; only the latter produces the kind of power that sustains democratic movements. Primary location: Module 7.

Mutual toleration. One of two democratic guardrails in the Levitsky and Ziblatt framework. The acceptance by political actors of their opponents as legitimate rivals, as citizens with a rightful claim to political power, rather than as existential enemies who must be defeated by any means available. Democracies collapse when mutual toleration collapses. Primary location: Module 1.

Politics of eternity. Timothy Snyder's term for the manufactured nostalgia, organized around a mythic past under constant threat from internal enemies, that authoritarian movements substitute for the politics of possibility democratic engagement requires. The politics of eternity disables the sense of democratic agency (the idea that collective action today can produce a different future) and replaces it with permanent grievance. Primary location: Module 2.

Positive versus negative freedom. A distinction from political philosophy. Negative freedom is freedom *from* interference, restriction, or coercion by government or others. Positive freedom is freedom *to* participate, create, belong, and exercise meaningful agency. Timothy Snyder's *On Freedom* argues that democratic renewal requires recovering a substantive account of positive

freedom rather than settling for a defensive account organized only around what government should not do. Primary location: Module 9.

Power throughline. A marker used in this syllabus to identify readings that make race, class, or gender dynamics explicit as mechanisms of democratic failure rather than as separate topics. The marker signals that the dynamics those readings engage are operating across every module, not only the ones where they are named. Module 4 is the dedicated treatment; the markers elsewhere track the same mechanisms across the full curriculum.

Public story framework. Marshall Ganz's narrative framework for organizing and civic leadership. A public story has three components: story of self (what called the speaker to this work), story of us (what connects the speaker to others doing it), and story of now (what is at stake and why the present moment demands action). A well-developed public story is speakable in three to five minutes and is the primary tool by which democratic citizens invite others into shared work. Primary location: Module 7 and Module 9.

Relational organizing. An organizing practice, developed most rigorously by Marshall Ganz, that builds political power through sustained one-on-one conversations about values, concerns, and shared interests rather than through transactional contact. Relational organizing builds the kind of relationships that sustain long-term engagement. Contrasted with transactional outreach (canvassing, surveys, call lists) and with mobilizing models that assume existing agreement. Primary location: Module 7.

Stanley's ten fascist strategies. Philosopher Jason Stanley's identification of ten rhetorical and political moves common to fascist movements historically and currently: mythic past, propaganda, anti-intellectualism, unreality, hierarchy, victimhood, law and order, sexual anxiety, appeals to the heartland, and the dismantling of public welfare and unity. The framework is widely used for real-time pattern recognition of authoritarian politics. Primary location: Module 2.

Structural minority rule. The use of legal and procedural mechanisms (gerrymandering, Senate malapportionment, the Electoral College, voter suppression, judicial appointments for life) to secure political outcomes that do not reflect the preferences of democratic majorities. Structural minority rule is legal; it operates within democratic forms; it erodes democratic substance. Primary location: Module 3.

Transactional versus transformational organizing. A distinction developed by political scientist Hahrie Han. Transactional organizations exchange discrete services or actions with members (sign this petition, attend this rally, donate this amount) without building their capacity. Transformational organizations build members' leadership over time, producing durable networks of people who can lead the next cycle of work. The distinction has empirical consequences for which organizations generate sustained democratic engagement. Primary location: Module 5 and Module 7.

Twenty lessons (Snyder). Timothy Snyder's twenty short lessons drawn from twentieth-century European resistance to fascism and Soviet communism, applied to contemporary American civic life. The lessons are a named framework frequently referenced in the democratic defense literature and one of the most widely distributed civic primers of the past decade. Primary location: Module 1.

Appendix C: Structured Prompts for Continuing the Analysis

The prompts below are designed to extend, update, or adapt the analysis presented in this syllabus. Each can be used with any major large language model (Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, or similar). They encode this syllabus's analytical framework as reusable instructions, allowing readers to apply the same methodology to new data, different contexts, or adjacent questions as conditions change.

Prompt 1: Update This Reading List

Use this prompt to identify high-priority works published after this syllabus was curated that belong in the pro-democracy and democratic backsliding literature. It produces a ranked update list with annotations matching the syllabus format.

You are a political theorist and research librarian specializing in American democratic theory, civil rights history, and civic organizing practice. The following reading list was curated for a nine-module syllabus on recognizing and responding to democratic backsliding, organized across two parts: Understanding (Modules 1–4, covering foundations, overt threats, slow erosion, and power and exclusion) and Acting (Modules 5–9, covering civic life, electoral defense, organizing, institutional defense, and sustaining movements). Identify up to ten books or long-form essays published in the last two years that belong in this curriculum. For each, specify: (1) which module and reading tier (Start Here, Going Deeper, or For Practitioners) it belongs in; (2) which existing work it supplements or could replace; (3) a two-to-three sentence annotation in this style: concise, diagnostic or prescriptive label at the end, no hedging. Flag any works that should carry a power throughline marker. Present as a ranked list with the highest-priority additions first.

Prompt 2: Localize the Syllabus to Your State

Use this prompt to generate state-specific resources, threat actors, and civic organizations that would populate the Local Index and Threat Journal described in this syllabus. It produces a structured local intelligence brief organized by module.

*You are a civic researcher and democratic accountability analyst. Using the nine-module framework from Active Citizens: A Syllabus for Recognizing and Responding to Democratic Backsliding (Matthews Geographics LLC), generate a localized intelligence brief for the following state: **State:** [insert your state] For each of the nine modules, identify: (1) the most significant current local threat or development relevant to that module's subject matter; (2) the civic organizations, legal groups, or journalists doing accountability work in that space in this state; (3) one publicly available data source or report specific to this state that a reader could add to their Local Index. Format as a module-by-module brief. Use publicly available information only.*

Prompt 3: Design a Reading Cell Curriculum

Use this prompt to structure a six-month reading cell program drawn from this syllabus, with session agendas, discussion questions, and action outputs for each meeting. It produces a complete facilitation guide.

You are a civic educator and community organizer trained in the Marshall Ganz public narrative framework and deliberative democracy facilitation. Using the nine-module structure of Active Citizens: A Syllabus for Recognizing and Responding to Democratic Backsliding (Matthews Geographics LLC), design a six-month reading cell curriculum for a group of six to eight citizens meeting every two to three weeks. For each session: (1) identify the Start Here readings assigned; (2) write three discussion questions: one diagnostic, one that connects to local conditions, one that leads to a concrete action commitment; (3) specify the session's action output (what the group produces or decides before adjourning); (4) note which persistent tool (Threat Journal or Local Index) the session updates. Present as a complete session-by-session agenda. The final session should function as a full syllabus debrief and forward planning meeting.

Prompt 4: Apply the Diagnostic Framework to a Current Threat

Use this prompt to run a structured democratic threat assessment on any current political development using the analytical vocabulary developed across Modules 1 through 4 of this syllabus. It produces a structured memo suitable for sharing with a reading cell or civic organization.

*You are a democratic accountability analyst applying the diagnostic framework from Active Citizens: A Syllabus for Recognizing and Responding to Democratic Backsliding (Matthews Geographics LLC). That framework distinguishes between overt threats (Module 2: authoritarianism, political violence, executive overreach), slow erosion (Module 3: procedural, technocratic, and institutional backsliding), and power and exclusion dynamics (Module 4: race, class, and gender as the terrain of democratic struggle). Analyze the following current development using all three diagnostic lenses: **Development to analyze:** [describe the political development, legislation, court ruling, or institutional change] For each lens, assess: what mechanism is operating, what precedent or pattern it matches from the comparative or American historical record, what the proximate democratic risk is, and what existing legal, organizational, or civic resource is positioned to respond. Conclude with a one-paragraph threat summary and a one-paragraph asset summary. Format as a structured memo of 600 to 900 words.*