# Social Work, The Vote & Democracy

#### Mimi Abramovitz

Bertha Capen Reynolds Professor of Social Policy Silberman School of Social Work Hunter College & The CUNY Graduate Center

Co-Chair: VOTING IS SOCIAL WORK The National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign

Board Member: The Social Work Democracy Project



Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work

#### VOTING IS SOCIAL WORK.ORG

# What Does *Voting is Social Work Do?* We:

Engage and mobilize social workers, students, faculty, agency practitioners, and the community to register people to vote.

Ensure that people get to the polls and cast their votes, especially those targeted by voter suppression.

Promote ongoing civic engagement in social work education, social service agencies, and the community.

For more information go to: VOTING IS SOCIAL WORK.ORG Thoughts on Democracy and the Vote

As co-chair of the National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (Voting is Social Work.org.) I have been asking myself the following question for months. > How have voter suppression, election subversion, and false claims of voter fraud affected our democratic institutions?

As the co-chair, I also spend much of my making sure that Voting IS Social Work. *Since voting rights and democracy go hand in hand, I want to step back a bit today to REFLECT on the current attack on US democracy.* 

First Reflection

THE CHANGING PRINCIPLE OF THE DAY

# REMEMBER THAT DEMOCRACY CAN'T BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED.

**@RAYDALIO** 

Second Reflection Voting is the most basic right in our democracy.

But it was not easy to get here.

# Women Fight for the Vote



<u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s\_suffrage#/media/File:Woman\_suffrage\_headquarters\_Cleveland.jpg</u>

# **Civil Rights Movement Fought For & Won The Right to Vote in the 1960's**



https://static01.nyt.com/images/2019/09/14/obituaries/14Abernathy-obit1/13Abernathy2-articleLarge.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp&disable=upscale

# LBJ Signs Voting Rights Act: 1965



https://cdn.kastatic.org/ka-perseus-images/d09b125068956595848880df28be576aac2b524b.jpg

Thírd Reflection

Role of Systemíc Racísm

We cannot assume that the US was a well-functioning democracy before the Capitol insurrection.

History reveals that each expansion of voting rights threatened white supremacy, male domination, and class power--and immediately came under attack.

## History of Voting Rights: A Repeated Pattern of Struggle, Progress, & Backlash

#### **THE STRUGGLE & PROGRESSS**

#### 1. Civil War;

Followed by Reconstruction (1865-1876) [US guaranteed Black *men* the right to vote, participate in the political process, acquire land, and hold elected office]

 <u>Civil Rights Movement</u> (1948-1968)
 [Led Congress to enact Desegregation and Voting Rights Laws]

3. <u>Election</u> First Black President & rise of <u>Black Lives Matter Movement</u> (2008 -2016) > THE THREAT >

The Gains Challenged White Supremacy

#### THE RESPONSE: RESTOREWHITE SUPREMACY.

**Racial Violence** Black Massacres (1866-1923): Lynching (1866-1950) : **Ongoing Police Brutality Voter Suppression** Post-Reconstruction (1865+) Poll taxes. Literacy Tests Felon disenfranchisement/Voter Intimidation etc. Civil Rights Era (1960+) Weak Enforcement of Voting Rights Laws Manipulation of Political Process: Filibuster/ Gerrymandering Current Attack on Voting Rights (1975+) Supreme CT ends preclearance requirements; Voter Suppression **Election Subversion** 

# The Right to Vote is Still Under Attack Today



Still seeking to preserve white supremacy, the current attack has revived all the old tactics:

**Voter Suppression:** Intentionally designed to demoralize the electorate.

**Election Subversion:** Intentionally interferes with the administration of elections and overrides the will of the voters.

**Gerrymandering:** Intentionally redrawing maps of election districts to systematically disenfranchise Black and Latinx voters.

# **Voter Suppression: BY DESIGN**



# Access to the ballot for ALL viewed as a threat to those in power

# Voter Suppression: Designed to Demoralize the Electorate

Suggests that the system is <u>rigged.</u>

Makes people believe that <u>voting</u> does not matter.

Makes people think their <u>vote does</u> not count.

Overall, lawmakers in <u>39 states</u> have considered at <u>least 393 restrictive bills</u> for the 2022 legislative session *up from 75 bills in 24 states in 2021*.



Catalog of Current Voter Suppression Laws

- 1. Purging voters from registration lists
- 2. Reduced early voting
- 3. Restricted use of provisional & absentee ballots
- 4. More Voter Id Requirements
- 5 Lack of language access
- 6 Disenfranchising felons
- 7 Creating at-large local offices diluted minority vote
- 8. Reduced voting hours
- 9. Fewer polling place
- 10 Lack of funding for elections
- 11. Intimidating and deceiving voters
- 12. Poorly trained poll workers
- 13. Slowing down the delivery of the US mail
- 14. Less time to collect of 2020 census data
- 15. 2020 Census count confirmed an emerging
- multiracial America > New intensified

# **Election Subversion**





HOLEE ADMINISTRATION

**Election Subversion:** Interferes with the administration of elections and overrides the will of the voters by:

Replacing existing election administrators with highly partisan officials.

Substituting preferred candidates for those the voters chose.

Criminalizing the election certification process.

Damaging the legitimacy of and trust in the government and the democratic process.

Since January 2022, <u>27 states have intro-</u> duced at least <u>148 election interference</u> <u>bills that will subvert, overturn, or</u> *undermine elections* 



# **Gerrymandering** / Redistricting



Since the 2020 census, states have redrawn district lines.

Based on racially gerrymandered maps many of the new districts systematically disenfranchise Black and Latinx voters.

Along the way **The Supreme Court** eviscerated the Voting Rights Act (not to mention abortion).

### Impact of the Attacks: Fewer Persons of Color Vote

2020: Record Voter Turnout Largest in 120 years.

Yet 71% of white persons but on only 58% of persons of color voted.

This racial gap worsens with new restrictive voting laws.



#### **No Shows are the** <u>Largest bloc of voters in presidential elections</u>

2016: 100 million or 43% of the eligible voters stayed home
2020: 80 million or 33% of the eligible voters stayed home--despite highest turnout
since 1900
2020: United States ranked 24th among industrial countries in voting participation.

Nonvoters: more likely to be lower income, less educated, non-white, unmarried & ignored by campaigns

#### CONSEQUENCES of NO-SHOWS:

#### Marginal Wins and Undemocratic Outcomes

**<u>2000 - Bush vs Gore -</u>: Total National Vote** Gore: 48.4% (50, 999, 897) Bush: 47.9% (50,456, 020)

Gore won popular vote by 547,398 votes Bush won Florida by only 540-votes Bush won the presidency because he won the electoral college by one vote (271-266) (270 votes needed to win the electoral college

**<u>2016 - Trump vs Clinton - Total National Vote</u>** Clinton 48.2% (65,853, 510) Trump 45.1% (62,984, 825).

#### Clinton won popular vote of almost 3 million votes

**Trump won the presidency because he won the electoral college 306 to 232 If Clinton had won** just one more vote <u>in each state.</u> she'd have won the electoral college and the presidency

#### **2020 - Trump vs Biden - Total National bote**

Biden 51.3%(81, 282, 916)Trump 46.8.%(74, 223, 369)Biden won the popular by more than 7 million votesBiden won the electoral colleges 306 to 232and the presidency

#### **YES, VOTING MATTERS!!**

# An Attempted Coup

On January 6, 2021, we witnessed an attempted coup.

An insurrectionist mob–falsely claimed that the election was stolen.

It stormed the Capitol to stop Congress from counting the electoral college votes.



# We Were Warned:



In <u>How Democracies Die</u> two political scientists identify <u>four warning signs</u> that mark democracies in trouble.

#### The signs include:

-Rejecting Democratic Norms or The Rules of The Game
-Denying Legitimacy of Political Opponents
-Curtailing Opponent's Civil Liberties Including the Media.
-Tolerating or Encouraging Violence

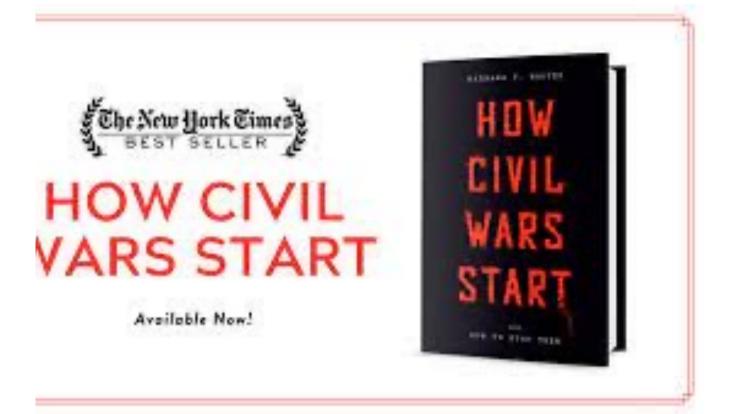
Nearly all the signs evident in the US today

#### The authors conclude:

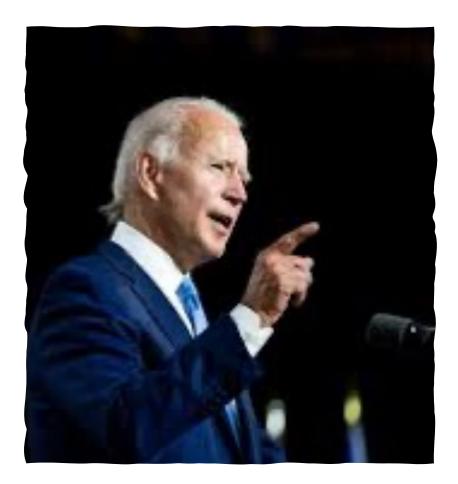
Democracy does not necessarily end with a bang, a violent military revolution, or by a coup. Rather, it ends with a whimper

<u>The slow, steady weakening of critical institutions</u> (i.e., the vote, elections, the press, the courts, the media, etc.)

A New Book "How Civil Wars Start" (by Barbara Walters) takes this a step further!



# **Even President Biden declared**



"The long-standing guardrails of US democracy have been shaken."

"They have placed a dagger at the throat of democracy."

1/6/22

It Is Not Just The Vote:

**Guardrails of Democracy Have Been Further Shaken By Mounting Attacks on Other Democratic Institutions.** 



# Other Institutions of Democracy Under Attack

#### **Banning Books:**

39 states have introduced more than 150 bills to ban than 1000 books on any topic that might make students "uncomfortable."

#### Less Independent Press: From 1970 to 2020

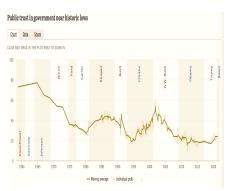
# of Daily papers (down 28%)# of Investigative journalists,(down 50%)Meanwhile, large media corporations own 80% of all daily newspapers.

#### Less Trust in Government

In 1960. *three-quarters of Americans trusted* the federal government -- *"always or most of the time."* Today, it is 20% an all-time low.







#### **DEMOCRACY IN TROUBLE**

#### The Democracy Index (DI)

Calculated by *The Economist* (British) since 2006

DI ranks 167 countries from 0 to10 based in 5 measures of democracy

Places countries in 1 of 4 categories. Full Democracy. Flawed Democracy, Hybrid Regimes, Authoritarian Regimes

US <u>Ranking by year</u> <u>2006:</u> Full democracy ( 822) <u>2016:</u> Flawed democracy (7.98)(even before Trump) <u>2020</u>: Flawed Democracy (7.92) <u>2022</u>: Flawed Democracy (7.85) The democracy scores fell in 74 (44%) of the 167 countries.

DEMOCRAC

# Highest scoreNorway925US falls behind:Canada :8.87UK8.61US7.85

#### **DI concludes**

The decline "reflects erosion of public trust in government and elected officials.

## **The Democracy Index**

#### Democracy Index (DI) *ranks the US* <u>as</u> <u>sitting between democracy and</u> <u>authoritarianism.</u>

Over the past 10 years, the number of democratic countries <u>fell from 42 to 34</u> representing only 13% of the world's population.





# **The Next Threat to Democracy:**



#### **Populist Authoritarianism**

Emerges by hollowing out democracy from within.

Feeds on and fuels the decline of trust in elections, the press, the government. and increased polarization.

#### Appeals to people who:

Prioritize social order, hierarchies, & the status quo.

Are threatened by increased diversity, influx of "outsiders", and changing social norms.

Experience a sense of insecurity when faced with such changes.

# Populist Authoritarianism is "Activated"

# When Someone with a large megaphone:

Plays to voter's fears and insecurities.

Suggests that a hidden conspiracy backed by "the other" is undermining 'our way of life."



Rationalizes the violations of basic values, norms, laws, constitutional protections, and violence.

#### When Populist leaders

Claim that voters cannot trust current experts, judges, or the media.

Suggest that only they can fix things (i.e. ensure law and order)

Paint themselves as ultimate arbiters of what presents as a threat.

Refuse to denounce right wing actions and groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters)

(Think: Charlottesville; 2020 Presidential debate; Jan 6 Congressional Investigation)

These threats to democracy take place in the context of record high inequality

Supreme Court Justice, Lewis Brandeis (1856-1941) warned:

"We can either have democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both."

# What Can Social Workers Do?

We are good at diagnosing individual and social problems.

Yet, we along with many other Americans, are not always ready or comfortable with assessing the status of our democratic institutions.

## We Need To Up Our Game!



# We Can and Must "Up Our Game" by Registering Voters to Strengthen Democracy

- $\succ$ It is the right thing to do!
- It supports the profession's mission and social justice values.
- ➤We are in the right place!
- ➢ We sit at the intersection of the individual and society where we are best-positioned to:

1.Witness and address the harms brought by a faltering democracy.

2 Bring voter registration into the community, civic participation into agencies, & human rights into the US.



Imagine if all 700.000 social workers in the US registered three voters... and then they registered three more voters...and *so on*.

#### **NO NEED TO IMAGINE!**

Join the Power of Three Voter Registration Campaign



# The Power of 3 Campaign

Goal

Each Person Registers 3 People to Vote

#### Resources

QR code linked to Turbo vote The Why Vote? Campaign Tool Kit and Much more on the VISW website (voting is social work.org)

#### **Information and Training**

Webinars hosted by NASW, CSWE, SPEAK, SWAA, Macro United & other VISW endorsers and the VISW Field Education\* Directors team

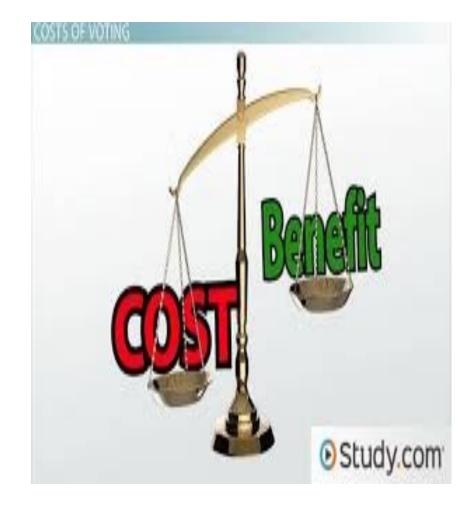
\*Field Education is the HUB of *Voting is Social Work* 

# THE BENEFITS OF VOTING

*For Individuals*: Higher levels of health and mental health, stronger social connections, better employment outcomes, and a greater sense of individual efficacy.

*For Communities:* Communities with high voter turnout receive more attention, quicker responses, and greater resources *from legislators* than communities with low voter turnout.

*For the Profession:* Voting elevates our visibility and voice. It supports programs and services that benefit our clients, communities, and wider society.



## SO.....

# Never forget: What has been done, can be undone!!



# DREAM. VOTE. ORGANIZE OUR LIVES DEPEND ON IT

## You can Speak OUT!



10-23

# Thank you!