

UCLA

# BLUE PRINT



ISSUE 24 / FALL 2026  
**DESIGNS FOR A NEW CALIFORNIA**  
A PUBLICATION OF THE UCLA LUSKIN SCHOOL OF  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND UCLA EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

**DEMOCRACY IN PERIL**  
CHALLENGES NEW AND OLD, NEAR AND FAR

# EDITOR'S NOTE

## BLUEPRINT

A magazine of research, policy, Los Angeles and California

### REFLECTING ON THE PARLIAMENT ACT DURING A 1947 DEBATE, WINSTON

Churchill famously framed democracy as “the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Like so many of Churchill’s observations, that one is often misquoted, misunderstood or misrepresented, twisted to suggest he lacked faith in democracy or to suggest that his confidence in it was failing.

To the contrary, democracy was, in Churchill’s view and in the experience and research reflected in this issue of *Blueprint*, the only system that reliably adheres to the interests of the public it attempts to represent. No one claims perfection for it. Churchill acknowledged that it was not “all wise.” But democracy rests on the premise that the people are sovereign and that they — we — are entitled to govern ourselves.

Why, then, is democracy under such pressure today, in the United States, in state and local governments and around the world? And how is democracy holding up under that pressure? Those are the questions at the heart of this issue of this magazine.

The research featured here covers the gamut — from the shaky state of some democracies around the globe, to the frazzled nerves around the upcoming U.S. midterms, to the complicated efforts to refashion the governmental structures of Los Angeles city and county government. All of those projects are consequential and difficult, and all are made harder by swirling falsehoods that undermine public confidence in elections and their outcomes, here and abroad.

At the level of Los Angeles County, the search for effective government starts with questions about representation. A government that represents nearly 10 million people but has never had an elected leader responsible for all of it is about to get one. That’s a step forward for representation, as is the county’s project to expand the board of supervisors, but the devil is very much in the details. Throwing elected officials at a problem can help, but it might not. The American architecture of checks and balances has

never been replicated by Los Angeles County; now it’s embarked on the difficult process of trying to do so.

At the level of the federal government, other issues dominate. President Donald Trump and his supporters have railed about election security ever since 2016, when Trump complained that millions of California votes were illegally cast by noncitizens, a claim that he has never come close to substantiating. But in an era where facts seem to matter less and less, the mere doubt looms large over the midterms, an ominous gathering of storm clouds that may test Americans’ confidence in elections — and each other.

Elections are the fulcrum of any democratic system, which elevates representation as the key to government’s usefulness. But even reliable elections do not guarantee democratic success. People want their voices heard and their needs met. That’s where democracy — whether seated in Washington, Sacramento or the county Hall of Administration — either delivers or fails.

The often-misquoted Churchill, in fact, made that clear in the same speech that is so often clipped for the purposes of the quoter. Here, then, is the rest of Churchill’s thought: “There is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of ministers who are their servants and not their masters.”

That is the test of democracy.



**JIM NEWTON**

Editor-in-chief, *Blueprint*

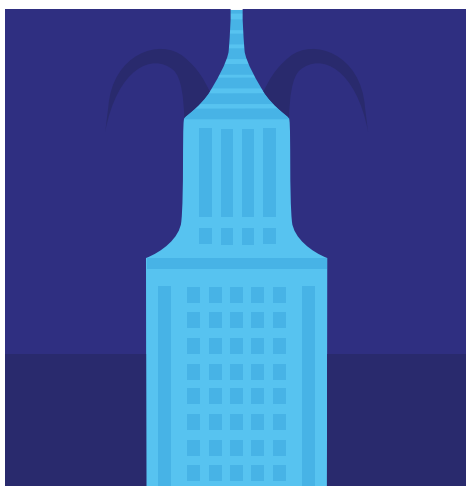
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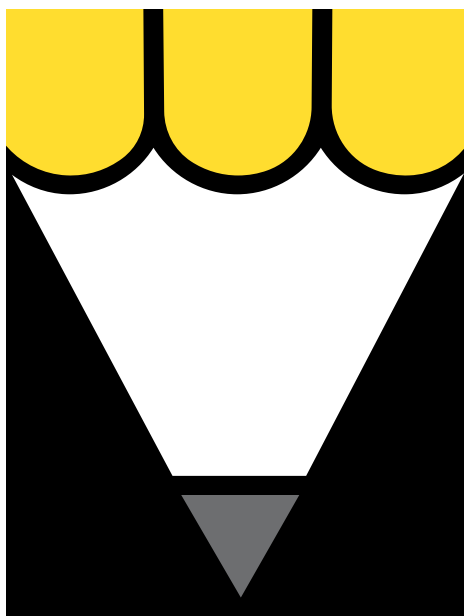


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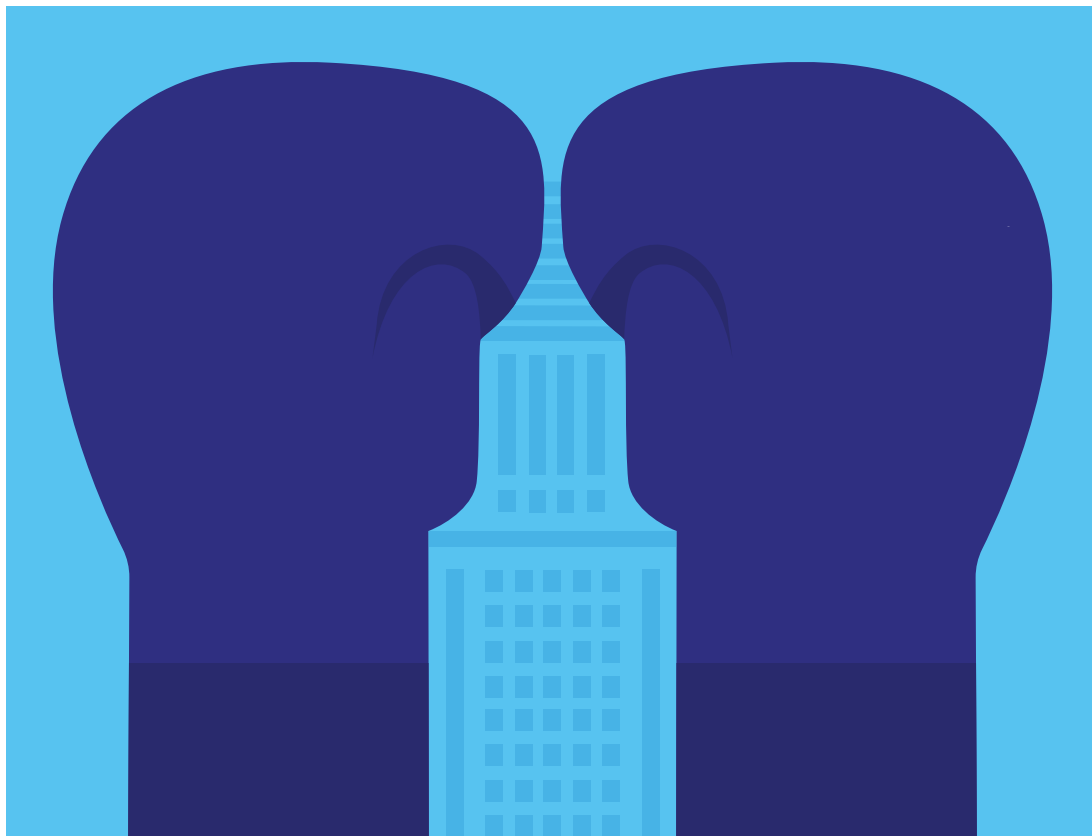
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# LANDSCAPE BLUEPRINT



## WHO WILL LEAD L.A.? AND HOW?

**Incumbent Karen Bass faces challenger Nithya Raman in a contest over what the city is**

**LOS ANGELES MAYOR KAREN BASS HAS FACED** exactly the re-election campaign she hoped to avoid: locked in a close struggle not with a White businessman — she'd won that fight before — but against Councilmember Nithya Raman, a woman of color and former ally who came at the mayor from her left.

Their contest, now in its final weeks, has tested Los Angeles' political complexion and may update the profile of its evolving electorate. It also has offered a case study on the subtle differences between liberal Democrats and Democratic socialists, along with the periodic reminder that races for mayor are ideological, yes, but also fundamentally judgments about leadership and promise.

Do Angelenos want a seasoned and tested veteran for the next four years, albeit one whose experiences have not all been positive? Or will they opt for a younger, dynamic but still largely unknown alternative? Those questions may be just as germane for voters as any broader conclusions about which candidate is more liberal or more homeowner-friendly.

The runoff election between Bass and Raman nearly did not happen at all. Raman waited until the last minute, after a couple of business-oriented White guys had passed on the race, to put her hat in the ring. That created a three-way contest on the June ballot, with Bass and Raman forced to navigate the distracting, though ultimately

feckless, candidacy of ex-reality TV star Spencer Pratt, whose furious but mostly idiotic campaign drew national attention but hardly budged the Los Angeles political dial.

Pratt spent months fulminating about the city government having burned down his house, then squandered public sympathy with a memoir that revealed himself as having blown hundreds of thousands of dollars on luxury items and ammunition, not to mention his bizarre belief in the power of crystals and his willingness to sell out his friends to advance his ambition.

He lost, to the amazement of President Donald Trump but to the surprise of no one who watches Los Angeles and California politics closely.

Instead, the liberal Bass was left to face the even more liberal Raman, a former friend who spied the opening created by Bass' shaky approval numbers and signed up for the campaign just hours before the deadline.

Their campaign has been both invigorating and complicated. On the one hand, it has given Angelenos a genuine chance to consider the differences, small though they are, in the philosophies and styles of these two leaders. Their differences are partly ideological: Bass is more supportive of policing responses to crime and more willing to push hard to remove homeless

**DO ANGELENOS WANT A SEASONED AND TESTED VETERAN FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS ... OR WILL THEY OPT FOR A YOUNGER, DYNAMIC ALTERNATIVE?**

encampments. Raman tends to see police as more threatening, and she is inclined to counsel the homeless into shelter rather than to push them in that direction.

Both candidates talk about affordability — it's the watchword in a cycle where President Trump has so conspicuously failed to bring down inflation, especially since his decision to go to war in Iran has disrupted international oil prices — and they work to outdo each other in their promises to protect immigrants against a ravenous federal government.

But the mayor's office is not a hotbed of ideological purity. Bass is the sixth mayor of Los Angeles whom I've covered, and if there is a consistency across those leaders, it is that the problems mayors face tend to strip away their political preconceptions.

Mayor Richard Riordan ran as a businessman "tough enough to turn L.A. around," and ended up devoting much of his work to the region's schools. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa started as a labor organizer and became a sharp critic of teachers unions. All mayors discover that there is not a Republican or Democratic, or Democratic socialist, way to fill a pothole.

This election has underscored that. The same Nithya Raman who champions rent control and government action to make L.A. more affordable recognizes that the government doesn't build housing. She enthusiastically campaigned on a platform of reducing government regulation to clear the way for housing construction.

And the same Mayor Bass whose early forays into community action included criticizing the LAPD for its racism and brutality and challenging elected officials who treated addiction as a crime rather than an illness now pushes to expand the police department and involve its officers in cleaning up MacArthur Park. She is a more nuanced leader today than she was four years ago, when she trounced Rick Caruso for this office.

If national politics tends to polarize candidates, local politics does the opposite. It reminds those at the heart of it that problems need solutions, not programs. Not everyone gets that, but Raman and Bass do. It's one of many things they have in common.

Los Angeles ducked a bullet in this cycle. If Spencer Pratt had been just a little better received the city would have been forced to weather a long summer and fall of empty rhetoric and moronic arguments. Instead, Los Angeles got the choice that reflects its electorate at this juncture — one divided between moderate Democrats, many of them longtime residents, homeowners, some with kids in school; and Democratic socialists, younger, newer to the city, renters.

The former camp has Bass, the latter Raman, though each attracts some crossover (some younger voters value experience; some homeowners support rent control). In November, we will learn who the next mayor is. And what kind of city Los Angeles is.

— **Jim Newton**

## NUMBERS GAME: THE BEAUTY IN DATA

### Cities make public reams of new information

**IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2026, THE CITY** of Los Angeles' 311 system fielded 425 calls about bees or beehives. The greatest number (73 reports) occurred in San Fernando Valley territory covered by Council District 12.

In that same period, the dozens of candidates running for a local political office received nearly 30,000 individual donations — more than 12,000 went to Spencer Pratt, who finished third in the June election for mayor, proving that lots of donations is not enough to guarantee a spot in the runoff. Also during that time, 909,792 parking tickets were handed out across the city; 25.6% were for parking in a street cleaning zone, and of those, white vehicles were zapped 54,854 times.

I learned all of that not from months of filing and waiting for public records requests, but rather from spending about 30 minutes perusing publicly available city datasets. That's the tip of the iceberg — there's data on foreclosure filings, homeless encampment complaints, building permits and more.

Unbeknownst to many, Los Angeles has a rich repository of public data. And it's not alone. As governments embrace demands for "transparency," data has become ubiquitous. From beehive

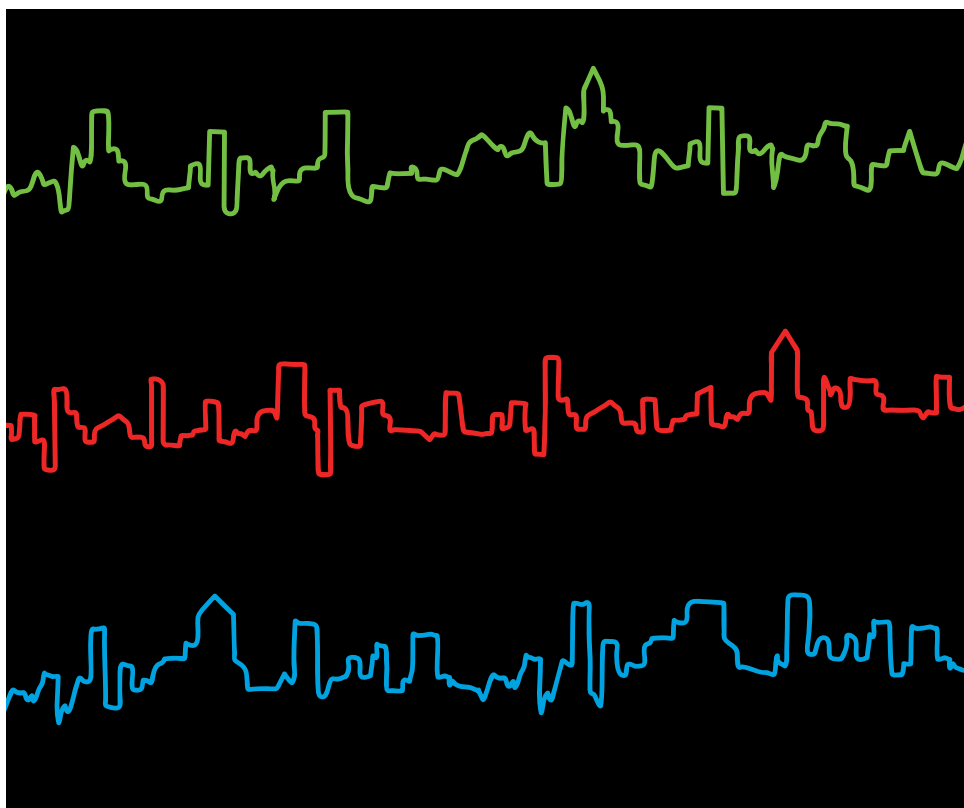
calls to crime reports, cities are gathering and releasing more data than ever before.

Sometimes this produces mere trivia — drilling down on those street cleaning infractions reveals that three white limousines were ticketed. However, the data also can prove useful to local leaders and community residents. For example, knowing that the Westside's Council District 11 gets more complaints about potholes than any other district means repair crews could, at least in theory, be deployed there before the next winter storm.

Though the terms seem similar, I'm talking about data, not statistics. This is not one page assembling, say, overall counts of specific categories of crime, or the total number of unhoused people in the city and county. Instead, I'm referencing "raw data," which in the case of those parking tickets means a dataset with 909,792 lines — one for each citation — and dozens of columns holding numbers or text about the type, location, fine amount and more. At first glance, it's an endless, mind-bending scroll.

Learning how to use it is not easy, but you also don't need a Ph.D. in math. Available filtering tools can break down dates and locations, for instance, allowing anyone to make sense of and localize the information (or you can download an entire dataset and utilize artificial intelligence). In fact, many people do this. The city's data catalog includes "community created" options — one person used Department of Finance data to build a rundown

### FROM TRIVIA TO HOMICIDE STATS, DATA REVEALS DETAILS ABOUT THE LIVES OF CITIES.



## CHICAGO PROVIDES ALTERNATIVE FUEL LOCATIONS. NEW YORK OFFERS RESULTS OF RESTAURANT INSPECTIONS. MANY CITIES SUPPLY CRIME DATA.

of 597 full-service restaurants in Council District 5; it has been viewed 40,000 times.

I began learning about this through my work with Crosstown, a nonprofit newsroom launched by USC professor Gabriel Kahn, which allows journalists across the country to mine local data for stories of community importance. Crosstown's proprietary technology allows the information to be applied on the neighborhood level, and I've written chart-filled pieces on topics such as illegal dumping (Van Nuys and Sun Valley get hit most frequently), streetlight outages (downtown recorded the most service requests in 2024) and pool permits (huge numbers in the Valley; very few in South L.A.).

More and more cities are making data publicly available. Chicago has a dataset showing alternative fuel locations, and its 311 database can identify rat complaints. A New York City dataset breaks down restaurant inspections across the five boroughs (there were 819 instances of inadequate personal cleanliness in the first half of 2026). San Francisco offers ready information about arsons, burglaries, homicides and other crimes.

Frustratingly, crime data in Los Angeles is currently unreliable. Although for many years the LAPD made copious information accessible, leading to Crosstown stories about which neighborhoods suffered the most burglaries, vehicle break-ins or identity theft, that changed when the department began transitioning to a new crime-records management system in March 2024. A supposed six-month changeover has still not been fully rolled out, meaning not only incomplete data about robberies and stolen vehicles but also missing information about other things the LAPD tracks, such as traffic collisions. It's a huge loss in terms of both information and civic transparency.

Meanwhile, though, the city has expanded its 311 reporting — the aforementioned data on potholes and bees are new, and Angelenos can now track complaints about e-scooters cluttering the sidewalk, or tree emergencies. A dataset for 2026 foreclosures reveals that the most (302) were registered in South L.A.'s Council District 8.

Again, the data can lead to action — if a neighborhood suffers an overwhelming number of foreclosures, then knowing this is happening and directing financial resources to that area can help prevent more people from losing their home.

The data is out there.

— Jon Regardie

## "A LIGHTER LOOK" — LAUGHING

Rick Meyer's regularly appearing column takes a lighter look at politics and other issues around the world. This month: "A SURPRISING LAUGH!"

**YOU NEVER KNOW WHERE YOU'LL FIND A** laugh.

Riding in the front seat of the pope's limousine?  
No laughs there, you would guess.  
Guess again.

Before he died, Pope Francis told this joke. Not just publicly, but very publicly. The New York Times adapted it from his book "Hope: The Autobiography," and published it at Christmas time in 2024.

It was a gift to the world.

"Jokes about and told by Jesuits are in a class of their own," Francis wrote. "And I've been told one that concerns me directly. ...

"As soon as he arrives at the airport in New York for his apostolic journey to the United States, Pope Francis finds an enormous limousine waiting for him. He is rather embarrassed by that magnificent splendor, and then thinks that it has been ages since he last drove, and never a vehicle of that kind, and he thinks to himself: OK, when will I get another chance?

"He says to the driver, 'You couldn't let me try it out, could you?' ... He insists and insists, until the driver gives in.

"So Pope Francis gets behind the steering wheel, on one of those enormous highways, and he begins to enjoy it, presses down on the accelerator, going 50 miles per hour, 80, 120 ... until he

hears a siren, and a police car pulls up beside him and stops him. A young policeman comes up to the darkened window. The pope rather nervously lowers it, and the policeman turns white.

"'Excuse me a moment,' he says, and goes back to his vehicle to call headquarters. 'Boss, I think I have a problem.'

"'What problem?' asks the chief.

"'Well, I've stopped a car for speeding, but there's a guy in there who's really important.'

"'How important? Is he the mayor?'

"'No, no, boss ... more than the mayor.'

"'And more than the mayor, who is there? The governor?'

"'No, no, more.'

"'But he can't be the president?'

"'More, I reckon.'

"'And who can be more important than the president?'

"'Look, boss, I don't know exactly who he is. All I can tell you is that it's the pope who is driving him!'"

Francis made humor an important part of faith — the part that encourages the faithful to use laughter to be themselves. He hosted comedians at the Vatican.

Stephen Colbert. Whoopi Goldberg. Chris Rock. Julia Louis-Dreyfus.

His successor, Pope Leo, encourages the same kind of faith. Cameras show him joking with fellow Augustinians about the spiritual gift of listening.

Leo began his first media audience with a joke about falling asleep during his remarks.

Both popes offer humor as an antidote to troubled times.

Francis wrote: "When it becomes hard to cry seriously or to laugh passionately, ... we become anesthetized ... and do nothing good."

Spoken like a pope. With a sense of humor.

— Rick Meyer



UNSPASH/ASHWIN VASWANI

# THE RACE FOR GOVERNOR



# Tani Cantil-Sakauye

## Former chief justice works to defend democracy

WRITTEN BY

**MOLLY SELVIN**

PHOTOS BY

**IRIS SCHNEIDER**

**TANI CANTIL-SAKAUYE WAS A CALIFORNIA** judge for 32 years, donning the black robes of impartiality and rising to become the state's chief justice, leading the nation's largest state system of trial and appellate courts.

When she stepped down as chief in 2023, she could have retired to spend more time playing tennis, a passion since college, or with her two dogs, a standard poodle and a "blind, incontinent rescue who teaches me patience and kindness."

Instead, she became president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California, whose mission is to conduct nonpartisan, data-focused policy research on state issues.

The move "gave me a different route" to influence policy, she said.

PPIC also allows Cantil-Sakauye to pursue a long-standing commitment to civics education that took root when her family lost its home to eminent domain, the house where she grew up destroyed to make room for a mixed-use, commercial and residential area that would support the city's tax base.

That experience taught her that "government affects your life — whether you pay attention or not."

Now, as the second Trump administration uses its authority to punish California and other Democratic-leaning states, denying researchers access to grants and even withholding money to help homeowners recover from fires, Cantil-Sakauye worries that federal actions threaten state institutions and the constitutional rights of Californians. She and her PPIC colleagues, collaborating with researchers at other organizations,

are working to mitigate the impact of these federal attacks on the state and its residents.

**A SACRAMENTO NATIVE, CANTIL-SAKAUYE** grew up in an extended Filipino American family that lived in a cluster of residences in a poor neighborhood slated for redevelopment. She was 8 years old when the city filed eminent domain proceedings to take her family's home.

Too poor to hire an attorney, her immigrant mother, who had only a high school education, represented the family in court — and lost.

"I had never seen my mother so dejected, so upset, and I gleaned it was from how she was treated as a pro per in front of a judge in Sacramento," she said. Forfeiting the properties caused a lasting rift in the family. Passions divided relatives, who became estranged. The government action left a lasting sadness over the family, and left young Cantil-Sakauye determined to understand it better.

"I needed to understand how government works, what the levers of power are," she recalled.

Now in her 60s, Cantil-Sakauye spoke on Zoom from the Sacramento home she shares with her husband, Mark Sakauye, a retired police lieutenant. Despite a low-grade fever that had kept her from PPIC's San Francisco headquarters for a few days, she talked easily, occasionally pausing after answering a question to ask her interviewer, "What do you think?"

The couple have two adult daughters.

Cantil-Sakauye earned her undergraduate and law degrees at UC Davis, working briefly as a blackjack dealer at Harrah's Tahoe to help with law school expenses.

A stint with the Sacramento prosecutor's office, where she worked as a deputy district attorney, followed. In 1990, Gov. George Deukmejian appointed her to the Sacramento Municipal Court. Governors Pete Wilson and Arnold Schwarzenegger elevated her to the Superior Court and the Court of Appeal, respectively.

Elevated again by Gov. Schwarzenegger, Cantil-Sakauye became California's second woman chief justice (Rose Bird, appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown in 1977 and removed from office in 1986, was the first) and the first person of color.

The state's courts then faced the single largest budget cut in its history — over \$1 billion — part of the long tail of the 2008 recession.

To address the shortfall, Cantil-Sakauye surveyed the state's more than 1,800 judges, asking for ideas on how the courts could operate more efficiently. Many of those suggestions were later adopted by the California Judicial Council, the courts' policy-making arm, along with a formula to make trial court funding more equitable across the state.

She also pushed for reforms that might have made a difference to litigants like her mother.

To encourage Californians to learn about and participate in their government, Cantil-Sakauye worked with educational leaders and the legal community, launching the Power of Democracy campaign, a blueprint for revitalizing civics education and promoting civil discourse. She invited students to mock court sessions, "swearing in" robed elementary school "judges," and improved language access for those with limited English.

"It was remarkable how engaged the chief justice was in actively addressing the glaring void

***"I HAD NEVER SEEN MY MOTHER SO DEJECTED, SO UPSET, AND I GLEANED IT WAS FROM HOW SHE WAS TREATED AS A PRO PER IN FRONT OF A JUDGE IN SACRAMENTO."***



in civics education for young people,” said Raphael Sonenshein, now executive director of the Haynes Foundation, who headed the Pat Brown Institute for Public Affairs at Cal State L.A. when the institute honored Cantil-Sakauye for that work in 2015.

Sonenshein saw Cantil-Sakauye’s move to PPIC as a logical step. “At the Supreme Court, you’re mostly dealing with things that are brought to you,” he said. “It’s not a shock that in her post-court career, she would find a place where she could take the initiative in areas she considered to be of critical statewide importance.”

#### PPIC’S POLICY RESEARCH SPANS A BROAD

range of issues of concern to Californians and their leaders, including affordability, poverty, inequality, environmental policy, immigration and education. PPIC was founded in 1994 with an initial \$70 million endowment from the Hewlett Foundation, and all of its publications, webinars and public opinion surveys are publicly available without charge.

Comprehensive, reliable data is critical to the rigor of PPIC’s analysis and the strength of its policy conclusions.

However, recent Trump administration changes in how the federal government collects data are presenting new challenges to the work of researchers and lawmakers in California and other states as they craft effective policy and plan for the future.

One example: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics long reported monthly counts of job openings, layoffs and workers switching jobs in each state as well as nationally. At present, the BLS still reports these numbers nationally each month but only provides state-level data annually.

“Now all we know is what is happening nationally,” said Sarah Bohn, who directs PPIC’s Economic Policy Center. “We don’t know what’s happening in California until the end of the year.”

Not having those monthly numbers is “unfortunate,” said Somjita Mitra, chief economist for the California Department of Finance. Her team develops the official economic forecasts for the state, which the state constitution requires as part of the annual budgeting process. President Donald Trump’s on-again, off-again tariffs have made accurate forecasting even more challenging, she said, as has the war against Iran, with its rippling effects across oil trade through the Strait of Hormuz and the world economy that relies heavily on that oil. Lawmakers now have a harder time deciding where to target scarce state dollars to best help residents.

Analysts such as Mitra and Bohn sometimes look to privately collected data and collaborate with other institutions, linking existing databases, to possibly make up for the missing numbers. But federal counts, reports and surveys have long been the gold standard.

Job numbers are one of many areas where the federal government either no longer collects data or has changed how it reports. Widespread layoffs

## “I HAVE FAITH THAT ONE ADMINISTRATION CANNOT UNDO 250-PLUS YEARS OF DEMOCRACY.”

and firings in early 2025 eviscerated or eliminated many agencies, and two government shutdowns since last October paused all but essential services for a time.

Although some economists say they initially feared the administration would make even deeper cuts, government reporting on food insecurity, trends in substance abuse and mental health disorders, pregnancy complications and maternal mortality has suffered.

“We want to produce good answers to what’s actually happening that resonate with people, so they know how policy changes affect them,” Bohn said. “That’s where the trust in government comes into it.”

This “disappearing data,” as Cantil-Sakauye calls it, presents a major problem for California lawmakers as well as those in other states. If governments can’t accurately measure how their citizens are faring, it becomes harder to craft policy solutions to improve their lives.

Without solid estimates of layoffs or of families who can’t afford groceries, for example, state lawmakers might set aside too little money for jobless benefits or food assistance. When that happens, frustration with government can grow and faith in democratic values can wane.

Cantil-Sakauye views these data issues as part of a broader “administration effort at really testing the outer limits of the Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the United States.”

She also worries about attempts by the federal government to erode powers granted to the states under the 10th Amendment “to craft their own responses, their own solutions to their most imminent needs and priorities,” she said.

Her concern is long-standing. In 2017, during the first Trump administration, Cantil-Sakauye was the first state chief justice to protest the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in California courthouses.

Her widely publicized letter to then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions characterized ICE agents as “stalking” undocumented immigrants, using

courthouses as “bait.” She reminded Sessions, “[E]ach layer of government — federal, state, and local — provides a portion of the fabric of our society that preserves law and order and protects the rights and freedoms of the people.”

The letter drew an equally blunt response from Sessions, who blamed state lawmakers for enacting policies “that occasionally necessitate ICE officers and agents to make arrests at courthouses and other public places.”

#### THE CURRENT, DRAMATIC SURGE IN FEDERAL

immigration enforcement has generated a similarly defiant reaction from state lawmakers.

Two bills introduced in February by Democratic state Sen. Sasha Pérez, who represents Pasadena and neighboring communities, assert the state’s responsibility and power under the 14th and 10th Amendments to guarantee equal protection and protect the safety, well-being and fundamental rights of its people.

One bill would allow the state Department of Public Health to conduct unannounced inspections at immigration detention facilities to ensure conditions are “sanitary, hygienic and safe.” These are the same standards that apply to other state-licensed residential health facilities.

The other bill bars state law enforcement agencies from cooperating with federal officials if that assistance involves racial or identity profiling.

The state Senate has passed both measures and they are now before the Assembly.

Legislation such as that — and California’s broader unwillingness to back down in the face of the Trump administration’s assertions of authority — causes Cantil-Sakauye to retain her optimism.

“I have faith that one administration cannot undo 250-plus years of democracy,” she said. “I think it can be battered; we can have loss; we’ll have to make up time.” But she draws strength from “the roots and the DNA of this country, that we as people generally will not stand for oppression and suppression.”

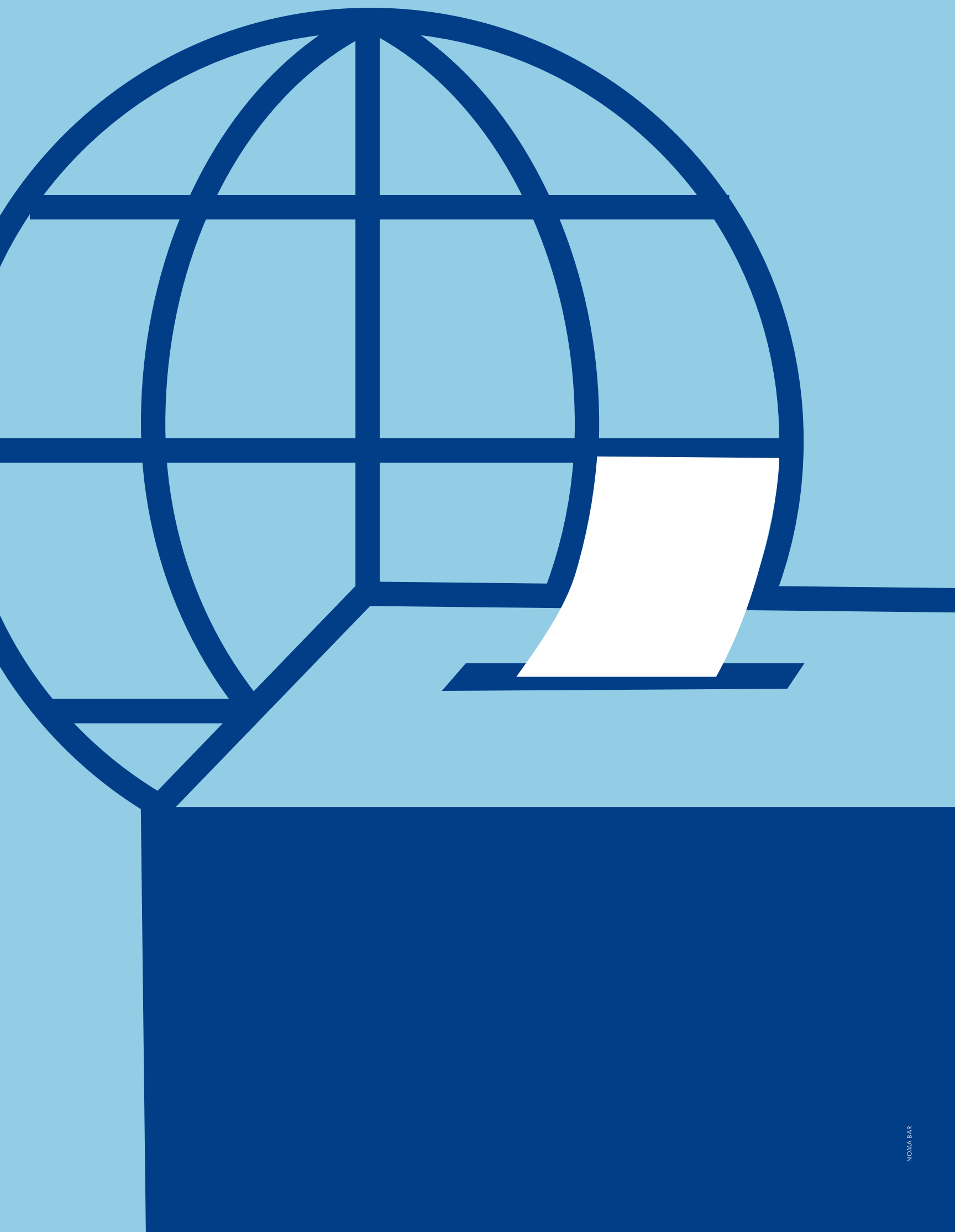
“That’s my hope,” she added. ▀



# DEMOCRACIES AROUND THE WORLD

WRITTEN BY  
**JEAN MERL**

They deliver better than other systems, but they struggle to maintain support



# “HAVING A DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS NOT ENOUGH TO MAKE DEMOCRACY SURVIVE IN THE INTERMEDIATE OR LONG TERM.”

— Helmut K. Anheier, creator of the BGI

→ Left: Russian President Vladimir Putin chairs a meeting with members of the Security Council via videoconference at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence outside Moscow, Russia. (Sputnik via AP/Vyacheslav Prokofiev) Right: Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Greenland's government leader Jens-Frederik Nielsen hold a press conference after the security agreement with the USA is signed, on the roof of the Danish UN mission in New York on Tuesday, September 22, 2026. (AP Photo/Ritzau Scanpix)



## THERE'S GOOD NEWS FOR THOSE CONCERNED about the state of democracy.

The Berggruen Governance Index (BGI) report, released in May, analyzed data from 145 countries falling into one of four forms of governance and concluded that democratic states led their counterparts in all three areas that matter most: democratic accountability, state capacity and public goods provision. The democracies also were best equipped to face future challenges and maintain improvements in the quality of life.

Democracies have “higher fiscal capacity, stronger rule of law, more resilient health and educational infrastructure and the least climate vulnerability,” the report found.

But there's bad news, too. Despite the functional superiority of democracies, many “face risks from institutional drift and complacency,” which threaten their ability to continue to provide a good quality of life for their people.

Those are among the latest findings from a periodic look at the political world that has become a staple of the international assessment of the state of democracy. The report is a joint project of the Berggruen Institute and the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

While the world has not become more democratic in the first quarter of this century and “the quality of government has shown no consistent improvement, the quality of life has generally risen” across all forms of government, the report found.

Can improvements in the quality of life be sustained in the face of future challenges? And which

governments are most likely able to do so? Again, there's something to be said for democratic rule: Democracies “lead on virtually every measure of preparedness, just as they do on governance performance.”

**HELMUT K. ANHEIER, CREATOR AND PRINCIPAL** investigator of the BGI and an adjunct professor in the Luskin School of Public Affairs, noted that the latest look at governance around the world contains some sobering facts for the leaders of democracies. Effective as it is as a form of government, it is nevertheless a hard system to maintain, he said.

“Having a democratic system is not enough to make democracy survive in the intermediate or long term,” Anheier said in an interview from Berlin, Germany, where he is also a part-time professor at the Hertie School. The BGI originated there.

For democracies, he stressed, the test often comes down to whether people are confident that their government is genuinely serving their interests. “When you have a democratically elected government,” he said, “that government has to deliver and the people have to feel that democracy works for them and not against them.

“That's a very, very difficult task to master for most countries,” as it can fall prey to a lack of resources, or slide into corruption or meet other obstacles that cause their citizens to feel that democracy doesn't work. That's one of the main messages of the report and helps explain why the so-called “golden age of democracy,” which arose

in the late 1980s and early 1990s, around the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fell short of expectations, he said.

Investor/philanthropist Nicolas Berggruen and journalist Nathan Gardels founded the Berggruen Institute in 2010, forming a global network of thinkers to devise solutions to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Based in downtown Los Angeles' Bradbury Building, the institute has offices in Beijing, China, and Venice, Italy. It is developing an approximately 450-acre campus, dubbed Monteverdi, in the Santa Monica Mountains near the 405 freeway.

The institute launched the governance index with Anheier soon after its founding, and the institute and the Hertie School published its first report in 2019.

**GARY M. SEGURA, A UCLA PROFESSOR OF** public policy, was dean of the Luskin School in 2020, when the Berggruen Institute awarded Luskin a grant to produce and disseminate the BGI. He oversaw the transition from Hertie and helped bring Anheier back to UCLA.

Segura, a member of the BGI advisory board, sees several important roles for the governance index, including evaluating the effectiveness of governments in meeting the needs of their people and providing solid data to guide leaders in improving how well a government carries out its given tasks. That's especially important if a government is transitioning from authoritarian to democratic.



“There needs to be scientific information on what to emulate and what not to,” Segura said, noting that political scientists and public policy shapers are especially interested in the BGI.

He also sees the index as a way of “calling balls and strikes” on governments, which are not in a position to objectively evaluate their own performances.

“Governments are not ever to be trusted as their own judges or referees,” Segura said. “And so what I think political scientists and public policy folks do that’s different is that we bring measurement and data to issues where many people bring ideology and emotions.”

**COUNTRIES THAT FORM DEMOCRACIES TEND** to stay that way — but not always.

The BGI’s report found little movement from one form of governance to another during the first quarter of the century. Only Jamaica moved into the consolidated democratic states cluster of 39 countries, which includes the United States and Canada, most of Western Europe, South Korea, Costa Rica and Uruguay.

But five countries — Argentina, Botswana, Hungary, Poland and Hong Kong — left the democratic cluster, four falling into the category of “capacity constrained” states while Hong Kong, which passed from British to Chinese rule, moved into the authoritarian category as China tightened its control over the peninsula and island.

The report described capacity-constrained states as those with “reasonably strong democratic accountability but with governments that struggle to deliver.” They include 45 nations, including India, Indonesia, much of Latin America and Croatia, and the recent entries of Hungary and Poland, whose democracies have faltered in recent years and have dropped into this group.

Authoritarian and hybrid states include 29 countries, among them China, Russia and Vietnam. “With few exceptions,” the report found, “their quality of government remains held down by high levels of corruption, casting doubt on how sustainable gains in quality of life will be in the long run.”

The 32 countries dubbed low-capacity developing states — including Haiti, Pakistan and much

of sub-Saharan Africa — were found to have “the steepest hill to climb on every governance dimension. They are not only the most exposed to future crises and challenges, but they are also the least prepared and lack institutional resilience.”

Anheier said he was struck by “how rarely countries improve their governance performance in significant and sustainable ways.”

Despite their comparatively high rankings, democracies “face many pitfalls,” Anheier said, a major one being that, “because of the political calculus that you have in a democracy, politicians have a tendency to attack shorter-term issues and not think longer than that.”

What democracy does better than other forms of governance is “allow the government to set priorities. Elections are a priority-setting exercise,” Anheier said. “But democracy is not only elections, it’s also important having a rule of law, and having stable institutions like the judiciary and a separation of powers.

“Think of democracy as a package deal,” he added, “that in the medium to long term is better able to deliver a higher quality of life than any other form of governance.”

That’s a principle that is being tested in America today, he noted, as the “Trump administration is creating a lot of damage to the checks and balances in the U.S.”

As with democracy itself, there is reason for both hope and worry: The damage, he said, “can be undone ... but unfortunately, it takes longer to fix it than to destroy it.” ▀

## “GOVERNMENTS ARE NOT EVER TO BE TRUSTED AS THEIR OWN JUDGES OR REFEREES.”

— Gary M. Segura, UCLA professor of public policy

# Justice on Fire

As the American midterms approach, scholars warn that the rule of law is suffering

**IN THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS**, concerns about democracy in the United States have gone from hot to boiling.

In a July prime-time address, President Donald Trump reiterated debunked claims about his 2020 election defeat and sought to paint a portrait of a voting landscape beset by fraud and lax security. The argument was roundly refuted by experts, and was largely ignored even by Republicans, many of whom seemed embarrassed by Trump's preoccupation with past elections.

Democrats have spent the period sounding alarms and kicking against the salvos coming from the White House. At the NALEO conference for Latino/a elected and appointed leaders, held in Los Angeles a couple days before the president's speech, Gov. Gavin Newsom, a frequent Trump foil, boiled down the opposition message.

"It's a five-alarm fire, what's happening to our democracy," Newsom said. "It's not the rule of law anymore. It's the rule of Don."

The takes of Gov. Newsom and President Trump reflect vastly different (and partisan) views on the state of American democracy. But while many people are focused on the stakes in this election, Newsom's statement also reflects something academics on opposite ends of the country, and legal experts throughout the United States, are watching closely — the rule of law, and how Trump has undermined it since returning to the White House.

WRITTEN BY  
**JON REGARDIE**

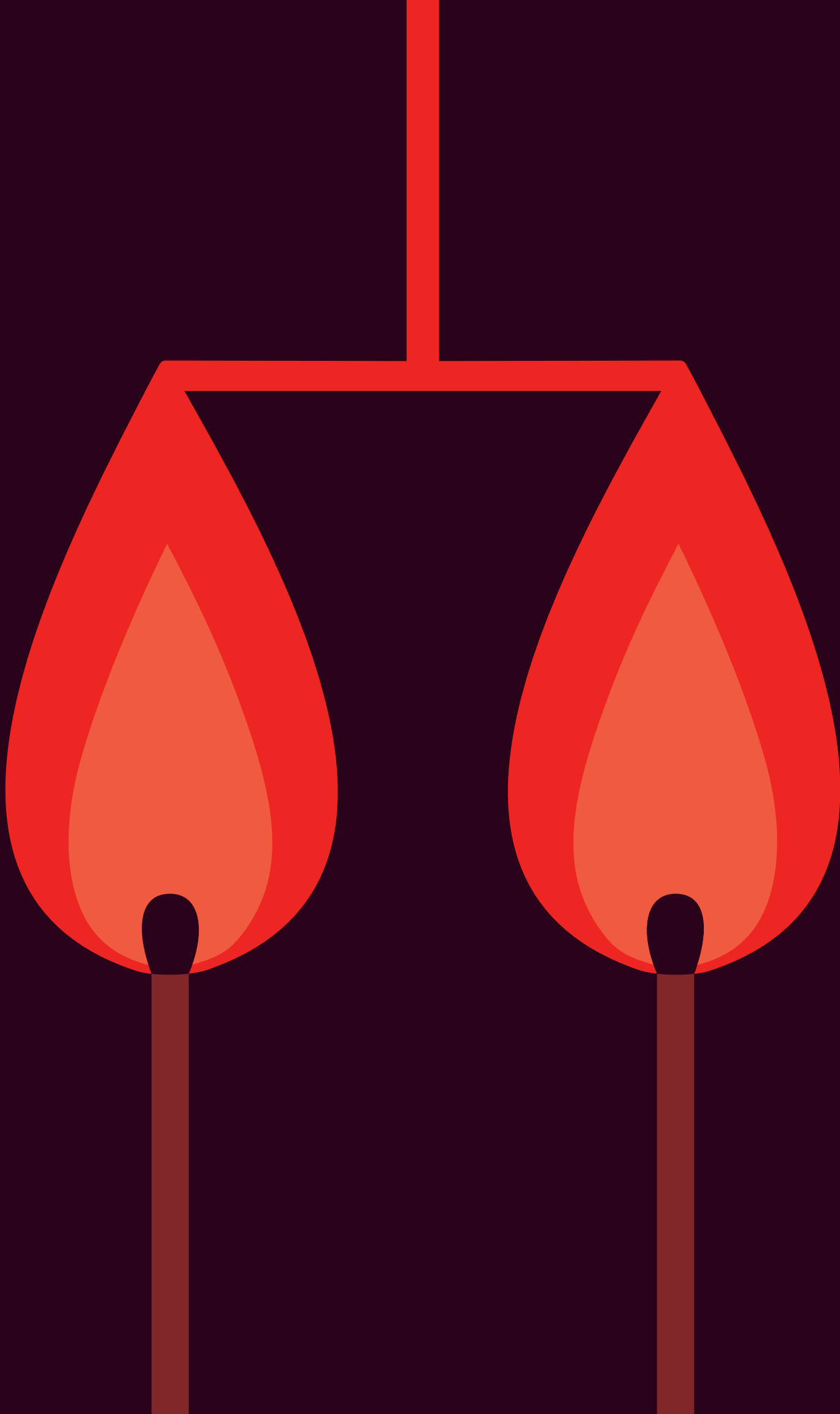
In May, the Safeguarding Democracy Project at the UCLA School of Law joined with Bright Line Watch to release a sobering survey of hundreds of top legal minds. The key takeaway: These scholars "perceive a significant erosion of the rule of law since Trump returned to office, including politicized law enforcement, a dysfunctional separation of powers, and executive-branch overreach."

Those surveyed believe that adherence to the rule of law is at the lowest point in more than a decade, and the vast majority feel Trump's second term presents more of a threat to that principle than his first term did. The experts cited serious concerns about the operations of elements of American government, including investigations conducted by the FBI and decisions from the Supreme Court.

What is "rule of law"? According to Professor Richard Hasen, who founded the Safeguarding Democracy Project in 2022, it's the idea that no matter a person's background, ideology or position in society, that person should be treated fairly under a known set of laws, with rules that are applied consistently.

Hasen observed that the legal experts see a greater threat than did a sample of the general public who were also surveyed.

"Lawyers understand ideas like the rule of law better than the average person," said Hasen, who is also the Gary T. Schwartz Distinguished Professor of Law. "So what we see is that lawyers and law professors and judges who were surveyed are much more concerned about these things than the general public, and that should serve as a wake-up call that our democracy is in some trouble."



**THE REPORT BUILDS ON WORK THAT HAS BEEN ONGOING FOR NEARLY**

a decade. Brendan Nyhan, a professor of government at Dartmouth College, has been involved with Bright Line Watch since its 2017 founding (he is one of four co-directors). The group has conducted 28 surveys, and historically, Nyhan said, it has gathered input from political scientists and others to address perceived threats to democracy.

With a broader aim to examine rule of law, Nyhan reached out to Hasen, who helped design both the survey and the population of experts who would participate (Dartmouth students were enlisted to help). This resulted in a pool of 23 federal judges, 113 “elite” lawyers, 193 law professors from top institutions, and hundreds of political scientists. There were legal conservatives (those who believe the Supreme Court should base rulings on an understanding of what the Constitution meant as originally written) and legal liberals (who think rulings should reflect a “living Constitution” whose meaning evolves over time, giving fresh perspectives to ideas such as “due process” or “equal protection”). Responses were gathered by email from Feb. 19 through March 6, and a survey firm was enlisted, so that researchers never knew how individual experts responded.

The findings yield a seemingly unending list of concerns in the wake of bold-faced actions undertaken by the second Trump administration, from the president’s pardoning of Jan. 6 defendants, to the issuing of executive orders targeting law firms that had represented his political opponents, to the investigations of former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James, and, of course, to attempts to assert federal control of elections.

The survey is broken down into sections, with sometimes alarming findings. Under the “State of the Judiciary,” for instance, the report concludes: “Most legal experts agree that Trump is using executive power excessively.” Additionally, it found that just 20% of respondents “agree that the Supreme Court has made appropriate use of the emergency docket since Trump returned to office.”

The “Politicization of Justice” includes equally dramatic findings: The survey states that eight in 10 legal experts report that federal officials regularly fail to comply with court orders, and nearly 90% say Trump political appointees “mislead federal judges somewhat or very often.”

Nyhan drew attention to the finding that more than nine in 10 legal experts believe that the Trump administration has used the Department of Justice to go after political enemies or to benefit allies. He noted that this is consistent among both legal conservatives and legal liberals, a startling point of agreement that reflects the administration’s abandonment of standards that have governed the Justice Department for more than half a century.

“In the post-Watergate period we had very strong norms against the politicization of the Department of Justice and the FBI,” Nyhan said. “They were supposed to be intensely nonpartisan, and insulated from partisan influence, especially over individual cases, which is precisely the kind of influence Trump is seeking.”

The stark findings continue: About half of federal judges fear harassment if they rule against the federal government; 18% of lawyers said their firms’ decisions on whom to represent were affected “somewhat or very often by fear of adverse action by the federal government.” During Biden’s presidency, just 2% of those interviewed believed their firms acted out of fear of government retaliation.

The concerns extend to the Supreme Court, where three justices were appointed by Trump in his first term. Fewer than half of respondents report being “very or somewhat

“Most legal experts agree that Trump is using executive power excessively.”

— Conclusion of a survey of American judges, lawyers and law professors

# Once the votes are counted, what then?

WRITTEN BY  
JON REGARDIE

**PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP’S** efforts to control parts of the voting process have been well chronicled.

Although the Constitution makes running elections the province of the states, Trump has sought to limit mail-in balloting and force states to open their voter rolls to federal authorities, supposedly to halt voting by non-residents. He has aggressively pushed his SAVE America Act, which would require voters to show documents such as passports or birth certificates in order to cast ballots — research by the Brennan Center for Justice found that more than 21 million American lack access to these documents.

As the midterms approach, concerns have arisen that militarized personnel could be directed to polling stations, with the idea that the presence of troops would dissuade certain minority, Democratic-leaning voters from casting a ballot. But UCLA School of Law Professor Richard Hasen is warning of a different threat.

If the battle to control Congress appears to be close, Hasen said, “I worry not on the front end in terms of voters being blocked going to the polls, but on the back end: pressure to try to interfere with the tabulation of ballots, or the certification of election results, or the seating of members of Congress.”

How would this happen? Hasen, who founded the UCLA Safeguarding Democracy Project in 2022, says that because all members of the House of Representatives are up for election every two years, once votes are counted, the first order of business is to swear in the new members and elect a speaker.

That generally is the prerogative of the majority party, but that majority could be in doubt, if the election is close and those who appear to be on the losing end contest the results. Who, then, would control the House?

“At that point there is no Speaker of the House. Mike Johnson is no longer Speaker of the House. He might become Speaker of the House again,” Hasen said. “But there are all kinds of machinations that could potentially happen if things are very close and there’s a fight over who’s the legitimate winner of particular congressional races.”





↑ The United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., where the results of the House and Senate races will be certified at the midterm elections. (Unsplash/Mayer Tawfik)

If this were to happen, Hasen anticipates the battleground would not be in major cities, which he noted tend to have large Democratic majorities. Rather, he said results could be contested “in any number of states where there are competitive elections.”

That, in turn, could create districts, or even states, where the outcome is in doubt for some time, complicating the organization of the House and potentially the Senate as well.

Hasen and others have noted that Trump's repeated questioning of the results of the 2020 election, and his unfounded allegations of cheating by Democrats, have managed to undermine the confidence some people have in the election system. I asked him if there is an irony in the president pushing the SAVE America Act, supposedly seeking to strengthen voting and election integrity, when experts note there has never been widespread election fraud — nowhere near enough to overturn the outcome of a national election — and that this could result in fewer people casting ballots.

“I wouldn't use the word ‘ironic,’” Hasen said. “I would use the word ‘Orwellian.’ It's really turned on its head the idea of election integrity — trying to mess with elections in the name of protecting election integrity.” ▸

## “That should serve as a wake up call that our democracy is in some trouble.”

— Richard Hasen, UCLA professor of law

confident the Court will issue impartial decisions in cases involving the Trump administration.”

Here there was a significant divide: 82% of legal conservatives believe the court is impartial, while the figure is 19% for legal liberals.

**IT IS, OF COURSE, NOT HARD TO** find warnings against presidential moves and perceived overreach. “No Kings” rallies have drawn huge crowds across the country. Hasen and other academics, such as Harvard professor and “How Democracies Die” co-author Steven Levitsky, are common sources for journalists.

Prominent political figures also regularly speak up. The morning before Trump's speech, California

Sen. Alex Padilla convened a roundtable discussion commemorating the legacy of late U.S. Rep. John Lewis, at which a bevy of officials blistered the machinations in Washington, D.C. “We're not fooled by what this extreme Supreme Court is doing. They've been after voting rights for a long time,” said Georgia Sen. Raphael Warnock. Washington Sen. Maria Cantwell added, “Our constitutional rights for civil liberties and for voting are under threat by the president of the United States. Who would have thought that at our 250th birthday?”

The Safeguarding Democracy Project stands out in part because Hasen launched it two years into the Biden presidency, when many (prematurely) assumed Trump was out of the picture. But Hasen said that, at the time, there had already been a “mushrooming of election litigation.”

The Safeguarding Democracy Project's primary focus, expressed through research, advocacy, legal briefs and more, is to protect the right of eligible individuals to cast a ballot freely and fairly, with the results accurately tabulated and a peaceful transition of power. It's work that prompted Hasen's call for a constitutional amendment guaranteeing this right, defined in his 2024 book “A Real Right to Vote.”

With the midterms at hand, Hasen believes that the biggest threat is not, as some worry, National Guard or other troops being dispatched to polling places.

“If there are risks, they're much more likely to happen either through trying to change the rules ... as to who's allowed to vote, like rules related to mail-in ballots, or after the election, to focus on tabulation or certification,” he said.

The situation is compounded, as he and others noted, by Trump's dogged efforts to undermine confidence in elections, even if there is no credible evidence of fraud that could change outcomes.

That may be why, no matter what the results are in November, the legal experts in the survey do not anticipate any quick change. When asked to look into the future, the respondents predicted that the rule of law rating in 2032 would be above today's nadir but still well below the level in 2015 — before Trump took office.

The report authors also expect that neither the 2026 nor 2028 elections will settle things. Nyhan said, “It will be really important to continue to defend and uphold the rule of law long after [Trump is] gone, because the threat is unlikely to disappear.”

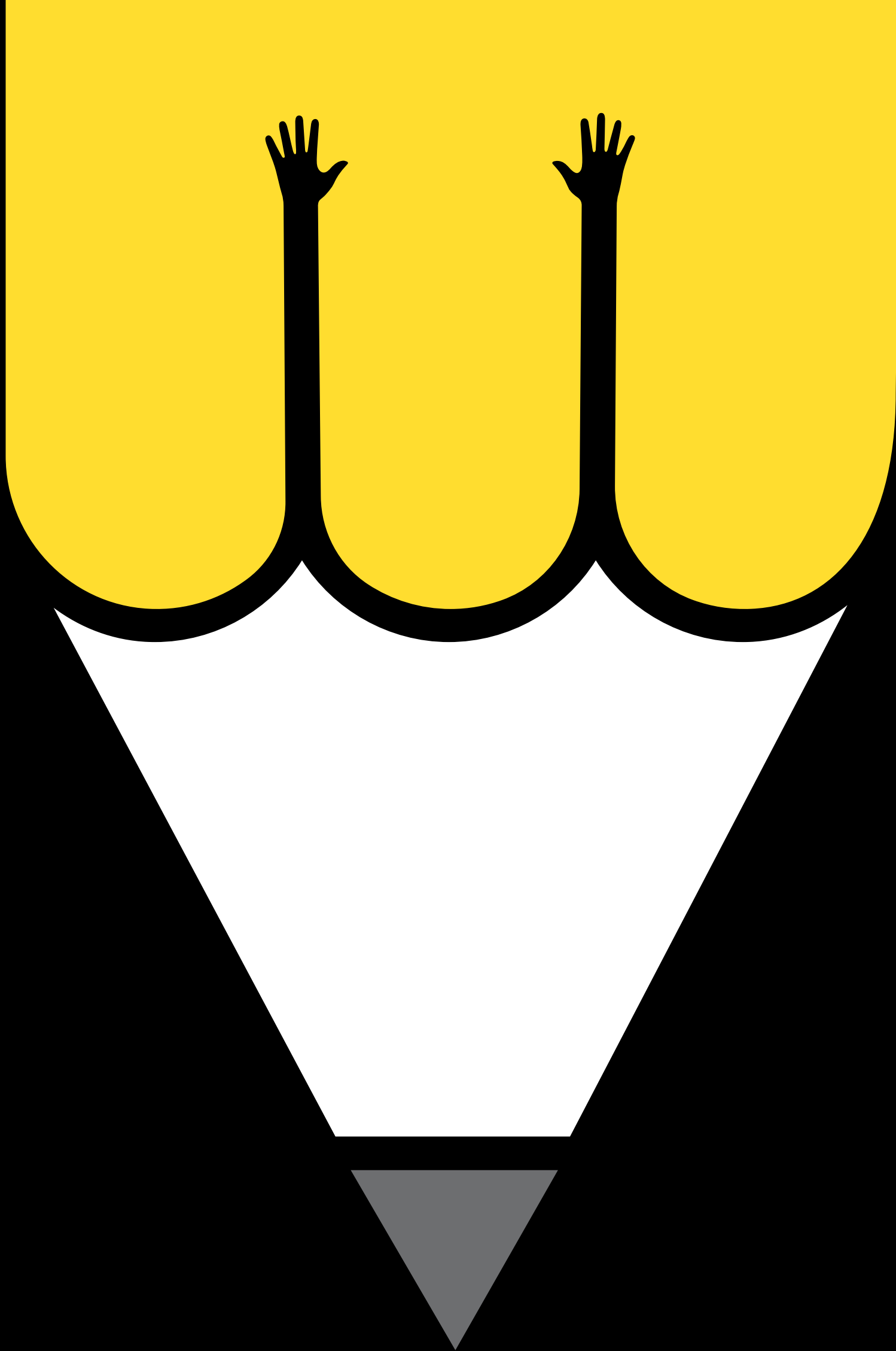
Hasen concurs, saying that some underlying weaknesses pose challenges.

“We have a hyper-decentralized [voting] system, and weak constitutional protections for the right to vote, and so it leaves lots of opportunities for contestation and for malicious actors to try to take advantage of that,” he said. “So I'm afraid what I've termed the ‘voting wars’ are likely to continue for the foreseeable future, even after Donald Trump has left the scene, unless we make some fundamental changes to how we conduct our rules for our democracy.” ▸

# TEACHING THROUGH COLLAPSE

Polarization finds its way into schoolyards,  
bringing danger with division

WRITTEN BY  
**LISA FUNG**



# "THE BREADTH OF THE IMPACT IS BREATHTAKING."

— JOHN ROGERS, UCLA PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION

## JOHN ROGERS SPENDS A LOT OF TIME STUDY-

ing the ways in which partisan politics has shaped education. He's researched the challenges public schools face amid rising political conflict in blue, red and purple states. So he's accustomed to troubling information. Still, he is haunted by a recent finding.

"A large number of young people are missing school or going to school every day with fear of whether or not they'll see their family members again when they come home," he said. "The vast majority of America's public schools have felt the impact of immigration enforcement."

Rogers, a UCLA professor of education and associate dean for research and public scholarship, and Joseph Kahne, a distinguished professor of education at UC Riverside, conducted a survey of 606 high school principals nationwide on the impact of immigration enforcement policies launched during the first months of the second Trump administration.

Among the findings:

- More than half, or 63.8%, reported that students from immigrant families missed school because of politics or political rhetoric directed at immigrants.
- More than one-third, or 35.6%, of students from immigrant families reported they had been bullied or harassed at school.
- More than three-quarters, or 77.6%, of the principals said they have established plans to respond to visits from federal immigration agents, and nearly half, or 44.8%, created professional development for staff on how to support students from immigrant families.

Those are big numbers and across a varied landscape. It is not just immigrant-rich communities in the Southwest or urban areas that are feeling the impact. It stretches across the country and affects neighborhoods of every type. "The breadth of the impact," said Rogers, "is breathtaking."

Immigration enforcement's effects on schools is only a small slice of Rogers' broader research, which focuses on the social, financial and psychological challenges school officials face as partisan politics seep into the education system.

Political conflict is costly, and children pay those costs. A separate survey in 2024 found that, on average, a school district serving 10,000 students and experiencing high levels of culturally

divisive conflict spends about \$812,000 annually for increased security, legal fees, communications efforts to correct misinformation and other expenses — funds that could otherwise be spent on student enrichment. In total, researchers found, the cost of conflict for public schools nationwide in 2023-2024 was about \$3.2 billion.

"We need a certain level of safety to build on and to promote learning because real learning entails taking risks and working with other people, and you need a certain level of comfort for that," said Rogers, who is in the process of analyzing newly collected data on immigration enforcement and public schools. "When we're teaching and promoting students' development amidst a climate of fear, everybody loses."

**BRANDON WILSON HAS SPENT 22 YEARS IN** classrooms around Los Angeles, most recently teaching media literacy and film at a charter school in Watts where the student body is about 75% Latino and 20% Black.

"Twenty years ago, there was a lot more tension in the air, especially between Latino and/or Latina students and African American students," Wilson said. "Now there's pretty universal outrage about Trump. The students are just trying to understand what's going on because so many things that they've been assured of during their lives — what couldn't happen, wouldn't happen — are happening. And they want to understand how is this possible."

Wilson saw firsthand the impact of partisan conflict on the students during the 2025 raids in Los Angeles.

"That was an enormous source of anxiety that led to people being absent a lot, disengaged,

depressed," said Wilson, whose school went on lockdown at one point because ICE agents were believed to be in the neighborhood. "Nobody wants to feel like armed goons are going to be on your campus or could be outside."

Still, Wilson said, in some ways, the shared tension brought students together.

"My sense is that African American students understand that immigration enforcement may not directly affect them, but there's no sense of, 'Well, that's you guys' problem,'" he said. "I think that's very positive."

In Ohio, partisan politics has played out in other ways. Fifth-grade language arts teacher Amy Kutschbach said her school is feeling the pinch of the state's Republican-backed voucher program, which has lured students away from public schools and with them crucial tax dollars.

The school district is about 90% to 95% White, she said, so they don't face some of the challenges that other schools may face. Kutschbach, who has been teaching for 25 years, recalls an instance when the school was considering a new reading series and a book under consideration was flagged by colleagues as something that might offend some members of the community, which she described as "conservative."

"We didn't go with the book I wanted — we got something different," she said. "I didn't want to rock the boat."

With more schools nationwide dealing with declining enrollment and funding cuts, the strain of a contentious political climate adds to the pressure educators already face as they work to ensure they provide a safe and nurturing environment for students.

"It's a really hellish time to be a teacher in some ways, but this is also kind of a great time because this is a real test of our profession and of us individually to rise to this challenge," Wilson said. "I think more than ever teachers need to be very good listeners. We really have to listen and be very patient with the students because they are going through a lot."

## SCHOOLS, ROGERS SAID, SHOULD BE PLACES

where young people learn how to foster a "diverse democracy," one that brings together people from different communities and with different leanings, experiences, identities, beliefs and interests to solve common problems. The goal is not to force students into any particular ideology or belief system but rather to encourage them to appreciate difference — and to learn from it.

The idea of schools as fertile ground for nurturing democracy is not new. Rogers regularly draws upon the work of John Dewey, whose 1916 "Democracy and Education" argued that students learn to become creative members of society through experiential learning rather than through lectures and rote lessons, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who saw education as a means to a multiracial democracy in the United States.

But in recent years, Rogers said, partisan polarization has had a "chilling" effect on public schools.

They also found that teachers in schools most affected by increasing levels of conflict are the ones least likely to get professional support, including training to help students better judge the credibility of online content.

In the last 18 months, the most pitched rhetoric “has diminished somewhat,” Rogers said, “but I think that space has been filled by other troubling things, so it’s not all a positive. There is a line that we need to recognize between constructive participation and participation that ultimately is doing harm to the very work that our public schools are supposed to do.”

While financial costs, fear and anxiety levels have been significant, Rogers said, a less tangible result of the political strife is the “extraordinary distraction” for teachers and administrators.

“The biggest cost is time,” he said. “There is a feeling that the conflict both created greater stress and also took time away from that important work of school improvement and from the work of making schools places that were responsive to meeting the wellness needs of young people to make sure they felt safe and affirmed and psychologically supported.”

The disruptions forced educators to put extra time and effort into ensuring that schools are secure and healthy. At the same time, many superintendents reported threats to themselves and to their staffs.

“People should have strongly held beliefs about our public schools,” Rogers said. “But when that anger turns into violent rhetoric, when that anger seeks to ostracize or do harm to vulnerable minorities within the school setting, when that anger is tied up with the spread of misinformation, then you have a set of anti-democratic dynamics that are undermining the institution of public schooling.”

**RESEARCHER YOUNG WHAN CHOI RECENTLY** began noticing a worrisome trend: High school students were showing less interest in living under democracy and less of a responsibility to democracy as a system of governance.

“The lack of commitment that I was seeing in a lot of the data from this next generation, Gen Z generation, was just kind of alarming to me,” he said, “and I thought, well, how do we more directly address that in terms of thinking about curriculum and the experiences that our students are having in school?”

Choi, a curriculum director and lecturer at UC Berkeley in the Graduate School of Education, has been working with Rogers and Kahne to find ways to help teachers develop curricula that promote democratic values, principles and practices in students.

“We’re really trying to meet the need in the moment by saying, Let’s figure out how to engage students and educators with a curriculum that allows them to bring up the tensions in a way ... that provides a container for how to talk about democracy at a time when even the word ‘democracy’ is weaponized,” he said.

That involves discussions about the principles

in a way that is divorced from politics and instead grounded in compromise, laws, evidence and respect, or CLER. “Rather than talking directly about unlawful things that Trump’s doing or violations of our Constitution or things that can become highly political, they tackle tangible school-based experiences of injustice or conflict that will then surface the types of principles that matter to have a well-functioning society,” Choi said.

By studying laws and justice through the lens of hypothetical scenarios involving, say, a student who is suspended for smoking marijuana or a cellphone that is confiscated by a teacher, the students become more invested in the lessons.

The goal is to help students with diverse political views examine shared experiences within school, then come to an understanding of the basic tenets of how democracy and the rule of law function.

“Young people relate to the kinds of adolescent challenges and the challenges of being a student within the school system as a microcosm for how we function within the larger society,” he said. “So that’s why we really wanted to ground these lessons in the experience of students within school.”

**THE FUTURE OF A DIVERSE DEMOCRACY LIVES** in the very classrooms that are under attack. Rogers’ research has found that educators who are more civically engaged are more likely to accept some responsibility for educating toward a diverse democracy.

“Those educators, despite the partisan context, are more likely to speak out for the importance of protecting LGBTQ youth, they’re more likely to talk about the value of addressing issues of race and racism in our society,” he said. “They’re more likely to talk about educating around issues of inequality and just giving young people the opportunity to debate and deliberate.

“People who are practiced in democratic life,” Rogers added, “are going to both be more committed and more skilled in that project.”

Despite the current political climate, he sees reason for optimism.

“Rather than backing away and feeling more chilled in this moment of heightened contention, we need to take this opportunity to reimagine what our schools do, and do that in a way that takes us forward to a better place,” Rogers said. “That’s what public schools do. They’re supposed to be about building toward a better place.” ▀

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, highly organized special-interest groups such as Moms for Liberty emerged. Some challenged masking policies; others objected to Critical Race Theory, access to certain books and policies on LGBTQ+ rights. Vocal parents and community members began showing up at school board meetings, at times spreading misinformation and occasionally threatening violence.

“Part of what’s challenging,” Rogers said, “is that it doesn’t take a majority of parents or community members to create an environment in which professional educators feel afraid.”

After the pandemic, the researchers surveyed a representative sample of 682 principals nationwide. More than two-thirds reported substantial conflict over hot-button issues. Principals in purple communities were far more likely than those in red and blue communities to report acute levels of community conflict.

Other findings included:

- Sixty percent of principals reported that students rejected information sources used by teachers, while nearly half, or 49%, reported multiple instances of students making unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources.
- More than two-thirds, or 69%, reported that students wrote derogatory or hateful emails to classmates for expressing political views, either liberal or conservative.
- Almost half, or 48%, reported that parents or community members sought to challenge or limit LGBTQ+ rights. The same percentage reported that parents or community members sought to limit or challenge teaching or learning about issues of race and racism.



# Special Report: Los Angeles County

*The Age of Reason comes  
to California's biggest  
local government*

WRITTEN BY  
ROBERT GREENE

**EVERY OTHER WEDNESDAY** evening for more than a year now, and likely for two more years to come, 13 civic leaders meet in rec rooms and auditoriums across Los Angeles County to redesign a municipal government that operated for a century and three-quarters without one of the most basic features of American democracy: checks and balances.

The members of the Governance Reform Task Force are doing the seemingly prosaic work of studying the implementation details of Measure G, a 2024 county ballot measure that for the first time will create an elected executive and convert the Board of Supervisors — which until now has been a mish-mash of executive and legislative powers — into a strictly legislative and oversight body.

Voters will elect their first independent county executive in 2028. The Board of Supervisors will expand from five to nine members in phases following the 2030 U.S. Census and the subsequent designation of new districts.

The historic revamp will have profound implications for the Los Angeles region, including the 88 cities inside the county and numerous unincorporated communities.

— Members of the Governance Reform Task Force, charged with implementing an overhaul of Los Angeles County government. (Courtesy of the Malibu Times)

Debates over democracy generally focus on voting, which is, after all, at the core of any democratic process. But democracy as practiced in the United States also has come to suggest other principles — the rule of law, protection of minority rights, separation of powers — that are meant to bolster protections that complement majority rule.

Separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers is a government design theorized by Montesquieu and John Locke during the Age of Reason, adopted and adapted by the framers of the U.S. Constitution, defended by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in the Federalist Papers, imitated by every U.S. state, and put in place by nearly 7,000 counties across the nation.

But not in California. Counties here instead have relied on local government formats that resembled corporate boards of directors more than the federal model. They looked for ways to, somehow, remove politics from democracy. Unaccountable county government was one result. Only one, San Francisco, which is a city as well as a county, adopted a structure that mimics the federal government's separation-of-powers model.

The result is that Los Angeles County, one of the two largest local governments in the United States (New York City has a larger budget, though Los Angeles County serves more people), starkly departs from the government organization most familiar to Americans. And that has not always served it well.

**L.A. COUNTY'S SMALL BOARD** and powerless appointed administrator have been deeply criticized at least since 1976 — the nation's bicentennial, when democracy was celebrated as the greatest American achievement. In that year, the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation published a report titled “To Serve Seven Million,” calling for a county government with separated executive and legislative branches to provide checks and balances, to impose a measure of accountability.

The county was always democratic, in the sense that the people elected their leaders. But that wasn't enough.

“Democracy formally is rule by the people,” current Haynes Foundation Executive Director

Raphael Sonenshein said. “But that system can't sustain itself if it's not well-governed.”

Los Angeles County was not well-governed, as evidenced by the failure of Martin Luther King medical center, unspeakable abuses of children at MacLaren Hall, a close brush with bankruptcy and growing homelessness.

To former supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, now director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, the governance structure he was part of for 20 years — and which is soon to be phased out — was “arcane.”

When five people are in charge, he said repeatedly as a supervisor, no one is in charge. The resulting lack of accountability harms the people the county is supposed to serve, most notably those living in poverty or caught up in the child protection or criminal justice systems. The buck stops nowhere, as supervisors blame one another, or the bureaucracy, or individual county employees or contractors, when things go wrong and innocent people are hurt.

“You can't run a \$50-billion organization by committee,” he said. “It runs counter to any organizational logic that I can think of.”

**IN 2024, SUPERVISORS LINDSEY** Horvath and Janice Hahn presented their plan for a revamped county government with separated powers and checks and balances. Los Angeles County voters adopted it in November.

In the same election, there was change afoot in the city of Los Angeles.

Even in Los Angeles, voters get mixed up between the city and the county, but they are two distinct jurisdictions, each with their own charters and their own histories of reform. The city has approximately 4 million residents, the county 10 million. Every voter in the city is a county voter as well, but many county voters live in other cities, or in areas that are not included in a city at all.

In the city election, voters adopted a charter amendment to finally strip the City Council of power to draw its own district boundaries, an indirect and much-delayed response to secret recordings that captured some members' brutally self-serving and blatantly race-based redistricting ideas.



*“What powers will be invested in the executive? ... The time has come to make some decisions.”*

— Zev Yaroslavsky

← Top: (Left to Right) The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Janice Hahn, Hilda Solis, Lindsey Horvath, Kathryn Barger and Holly Mitchell. (Courtesy of the LA Board of County Supervisors)  
Bottom: Zev Yaroslavsky speaks at a local event. (Courtesy of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council)

Unlike the county, the city already had a formal separation of powers, with an elected mayor as chief executive empowered by reforms a quarter century earlier.

But the ugly recordings had awakened in many Angelenos a desire to redesign their government even beyond the redistricting measure.

A new Charter Reform Commission held a series of hearings over nine months beginning in 2025 and proposed a host of reforms, including enlarging the council and giving it more power over the Police Commission. The City Council blocked almost everything in favor of further study over the following months amid concerns that the reforms could further gum up a city government that already struggles to get things done.

Is there irresolvable tension between democracy and responsiveness, and is L.A. County making a mistake by embracing checks and balances over the corporate model?

Sonenshein, who was the executive director of one of two Los Angeles city charter reform commissions 30 years ago, said no. Local government's legitimacy requires both representation and effectiveness, he said.

"Measure G is not a fad," he said. "Twenty percent of counties in the nation have governments with checks and balances."

Yaroslavsky called Measure G the most important governance reform in the county's history, but noted that it left out most of the details. That's because the process was backwards, by traditional standards. Voters agreed only on broad checks-and-balances strokes, leaving the details to be worked out later.

"What powers will be invested in the executive?" Yaroslavsky asked. "What will be the power dynamics between it and the board? Who will represent the county on the [Metro] board, or the Air Quality Management District, or on several other boards on which the county is represented? These and other details were left to be determined, and the time has come to make some decisions."

In the same year that county voters passed Measure G, city voters adopted independent redistricting and U.S. voters re-elected Donald Trump to a second presidential term. Constitutional law scholar Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the UC Berkeley

*"Measure G is not a fad. Twenty percent of counties in the nation have governments with checks and balances."*

— Raphael Sonenshein, former executive director of L.A. charter reform commission

law school, wrote a book ominously titled "No Democracy Lasts Forever." Its outlook for American democracy is not optimistic.

That said, it's noteworthy that Chemerinsky was president of the other of the two Los Angeles charter reform commissions in the 1990s, and that he and his colleagues and counterparts in both commissions worked to invigorate local democracy with neighborhood councils and other reforms.

Chemerinsky noted that residents of Los Angeles, along with Minneapolis, Washington, D.C., and many other cities around the nation, have protested Trump's brutal overreach in enforcing immigration laws, and that elected local governments "are focused on fighting construction of ICE facilities in cities."

They are providing a check on administration actions at a time when Congress and the courts are failing to do so. That, too, is democracy at work. ▀

# Erwin Chemerinsky

American democracy's defects — some new,  
some there from the start

## DEMOCRACY HAS FEW BETTER FRIENDS

than Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the law school at UC Berkeley and prolific writer on American law and politics. Cheerful even when discussing the gravest threats to democracy and American institutions, Chemerinsky has for decades devoted his powerful intellect to the understanding of the legal system, sketching a broad vision of its responsibilities — and shortcomings. Nor has his work been confined to the academy. His books are popular with lawyers and law professors but also with lay people, and he is frequently sought out by journalists and others attempting to understand rulings of the Supreme Court. His 2024 book, “No Democracy Lasts Forever,” is an extended look at failures in American democracy.

In the late 1990s, Chemerinsky chaired the Elected Los Angeles Charter Reform Commission, which exhaustively reviewed the city charter and proposed a sweeping set of reforms that touched on almost every aspect of city governance and representation. The commission joined forces with an appointed counterpart and the package they submitted to voters was overwhelmingly approved in June 1999.

Interviewed by *Blueprint* editor-in-chief Jim Newton in his Berkeley office, Chemerinsky discussed the myriad threats to American democracy. It was, in a sense, just the most recent chapter in a conversation about governance and democracy that the two have been having for nearly 30 years.

**Blueprint:** When you talk about democracy and some of the challenges this democracy is facing, you mean more than just voting. You're talking about the rule of law, due process, protection of minorities, a lot of principles

that we associate with American democracy but that are only indirectly related to voting. How should we think about “democracy” and its relation to those other ideas, and how is it faring today?

**ERWIN CHEMERINSKY:** What we mean by democracy, of course, is the government where those who hold office are elected by the people, and at regularly scheduled elections.

The Constitution, of course, creates a presidency, a Congress, and at the state level, the governor, the legislature. ... That's the most simplistic definition.

And then, of course, there's a huge literature on what's required for democracy to be effective.

I think our democracy has been flawed from the beginning. ... Look at the branches of the government that are created by the Constitution. The Electoral College is not chosen by the people. In fact, early in American history it was state legislatures that chose the electors... It was very much about protecting the political power of the states that had slaves. And that was recognized at the time. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention from North Carolina and from Virginia praised the Electoral College because it would give more political strength to slave states than they would otherwise have had.

And the reason, of course, is, by that point, the convention had already chosen the three-fifths clause [granting slave states representation based on their White population as well as counting each slave as three-fifths of a person for census purposes]. And that's why almost every president elected for the first decade of American history was from the South.

More recently, twice in this century, we've had someone chosen as president who lost the popular vote, and it almost happened two other times. It's hard to see the Electoral College and the choice of president as democratic as we'd normally define it.

**BP:** And then there's the Senate, two senators per state regardless of the size of the state.

**EC:** The Senate is the only elected body in the United States that doesn't have to follow the principle of one person, one vote. In the time of the Constitutional Convention, the difference between the most populous state and the least populous state was about 10 to 1. Now it's more like 68 to 1 [California, the most populous state, has roughly 40 million residents while Wyoming, the least populous, has about 590,000. Both, of course, have two senators].

In the first two years of the Biden presidency, there were 50 Democratic senators and 50 Republican senators, but the 50 Democratic senators represented 42 million more people than the 50 Republican senators.

And then, of course, for good reason, the federal judiciary, the Supreme Court, federal judges are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, so there's no sense of those being democratic.

What that means is that only the House of Representatives was created to be representative. And the Supreme Court's willingness to allow

**“IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY, THERE WERE 50 DEMOCRATIC SENATORS AND 50 REPUBLICAN SENATORS, BUT THE 50 DEMOCRATIC SENATORS REPRESENTED 42 MILLION MORE PEOPLE THAN THE 50 REPUBLICAN SENATORS.”**

partisan gerrymandering undermines democracy in that body as well.

So in that sense, I think that the structure of the government is very flawed relative to democracy.

**BP: And those flaws, at least in terms of democracy, were there from the beginning. But you also see it getting worse?**

**EC:** There’s a whole political science literature that shows that because of population shifts, we are

much more likely to have a candidate lose the popular vote and win in the Electoral College. It never happened in the 20th century, but it’s happened, obviously, in 2000 [when Al Gore won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College to George W. Bush], and in 2016 [when Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but Donald Trump prevailed in the Electoral College]. And it nearly happened in 2004: Had John Kerry won Ohio, it would have happened then, too.

**BP: As you point out in your book, the way the American population is distributed at this point makes it very unlikely that a Democrat would lose the popular vote and win the Electoral College, so while these observations about the Electoral College are not partisan, they have partisan implications.**

**EC:** That’s right.

**BP: I was struck by something I had never thought of until I read it in your book, that there might be a nonconstitutional amendment route to the abolition of the Electoral College.**

**EC:** So let me start by saying it’s not going to happen.

**BP: We can dream ...**

**EC:** Constitutional amendments modify the text of the Constitution. Here’s an easy example: Were it not for the First Amendment, Congress could use its commerce power to license newspapers. But the First Amendment means that the government can’t license newspapers, so the amendment modifies the text.

When it comes to the Electoral College, the Supreme Court has said, in interpreting equal protection [guaranteed by the 14th Amendment], that it creates a requirement of one person, one vote. Well, the Electoral College is inconsistent with one person, one vote. [The Court could, therefore, hold that the 14th Amendment made the Electoral College unconstitutional.]

**BP: OK, so if we assume for a moment that this Court is unlikely to do that, how else could the Electoral College be changed in order to make it more democratic?**

**EC:** Congress could pass a law eliminating winner-take-all [which in almost every state awards the popular vote winner all of that state’s electors]. Winner-take-all is not in the Constitution, as you know.

And yet, 48 states, all but Maine and Nebraska, use winner-take-all.



Congress can set the rules for federal elections, so Congress could say that no state can use winner-take-all and then you could, for instance, allocate its electors on the basis of congressional districts ...

**BP: There would still be inequality in that a California congressional district has many more people than Wyoming's only district, but at least it would be closer than winner-take-all.**

**EC:** I think the best that we could hope for would be for Congress to say, eliminate winner-take-all. And the same goes for partisan gerrymandering. This may be even more realistic. Congress could pass a law that says that every state in drawing congressional districts must use an independent commission, and that the commissions cannot engage in partisan gerrymandering. Congress can't do that for state and local elections, but Congress could do it for House of Representatives elections.

**BP: And one can imagine the politics of that lining up. It's easy to be against gerrymandering, whether you're a Republican or a Democrat.**

**EC:** Exactly.

**BP: Do you give any weight to the idea that candidates pay more attention to small states because of the Electoral College?**

**EC:** I don't know how much it matters. In our world of media, of course, candidates are always choosing where to pay attention.

And ultimately, I ask the question: So what? So what if the candidate doesn't make an appearance in Wyoming? Why is that more important than having the winner of the popular vote win the election?

**BP: Talk about the Senate, which, as you've already said, is this anomalous institution. And it's not because of the bicameralism, the fact that we have two chambers of Congress, it's the fact that we allocate a fixed number of senators per state. And it would be very difficult to fix — that is the one thing I can't think of a fix for ...**

**EC:** ... because Article Five of the Constitution says it's one of the two provisions that can't be changed by amendment. [The other was the original Constitution's prohibition against interfering with the slave trade for 20 years after adoption of the Constitution, a provision that long ago became moot.]

**BP: The only remedy for the Senate, then, is a constitutional convention. Am I right?**

**EC:** But a constitutional convention can't change that either. Oh, because remember, Article Five says that the two provisions that can't be amended ...

**BP: Wouldn't a new constitutional convention produce a new constitution?**

**EC:** In theory, I mean, it could. The reason I'm hesitating is if you take seriously Article Five, what it says is, no matter how you go through the amendment process, this provision can't be changed.

There's two ways to amend the Constitution. One way is what all 27 amendments have done: Win approval from two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-quarters of the states. But Article Five also has an alternative way of amend-

***"I'M SKEPTICAL THAT HAVING SMALL STATES OVERREPRESENTED IN THE SENATE DOES ANYTHING TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF THE MINORITY."***

ing the Constitution: When two-thirds of the states call for a constitutional convention, that convention meets and proposes something. Then if that's approved by three-quarters of the states, it's a constitutional amendment, but it's still an amendment, and Article Five still says you can't change the Senate.

So in theory, the only way to change it would be a new constitution.

**BP: It would appear that we're stuck with the Senate, at least for the foreseeable future, and with it, the obviously anti-democratic fact that it gives the voters of small states vastly more power than the voters in big states.**

**EC:** And of course, all of it's made worse by the filibuster, because it means that an ever-smaller percentage of senators representing an ever-smaller percentage of population can block things.

**BP: But if reforming the Senate is the most difficult of the various measures that might make**

**the United States more democratic, ending the filibuster is the easiest. It doesn't take a new constitution or even a constitutional amendment or even a statute. It's just a Senate rule.**

**EC:** It's just a majority vote. The Senate could do it tomorrow. But as much as Trump has pushed the Senate to eliminate the filibuster, the Republicans don't want to do it because they know that they could be in the minority someday soon, and this is the protection.

**BP: There's a part of me that hesitates over all of this, that wonders about being careful what to wish for. We could certainly have a much less hindered democracy if we enacted the reforms you're talking about here. But would we want that? Do we risk endangering the rights of minorities if we embrace democracy completely? Is there a logical limit to democracy in all of this?**

**EC:** I want to answer your question by saying, initially, that I don't think that the institutions that the Constitution creates achieve that. I don't think the Electoral College does anything in terms of protecting the rights of the minority.

I'm skeptical that having small states overrepresented in the Senate does anything to protect the rights of the minority in the sense that we're talking about. Maybe it helps to protect small states as small states ...

What we've come to over time is that we really want the courts to be the institution to protect minorities. That doesn't mean they always, or even often, succeed in that. But I think what we've come to think of is the real check on the access is the majority process. ... And that's why I'm very skeptical of those on the left now who really want to attack judicial review. ... And this has become very trendy among progressives, and I understand why. And yet ... at this moment in time, with this president, our only guardrail has been the courts. They haven't always held, but it does feel like they've been the last resort many times. If there's going to be a protector for minorities in the way we talk about it, it is much more likely to come from the judiciary than from the political process.

**BP: Earl Warren often said that he didn't think that if the American people were presented with the Bill of Rights today, they would approve them. Are you at all worried, if we could convene a new constitutional convention, that things like gun rights or abortion rights or privacy or free speech — things that many of us in various combinations hold quite dear — might suddenly be on the block?**

**EC:** Yes. Let me start by saying that at some point there will be a new constitution. No constitution, no form of government, lasts forever. The

question is the when and the what, and the when will probably be long beyond our lifetimes.

I'm not sure what will come of it. And it's hard to project what the issues of the moment will be, but I never imagined we would see a threat to democracy from the president. We've never had a president with so little regard for the rule of law, for the norms of the office. And I don't know what follows from that either, but at some point, there's going to be a realization that we need a constitution for the world we live in today.

The more the Supreme Court says the Constitution means only what it meant in 1787, the more certain that we will need a new constitution. And there is a great danger that the constitutional convention could lead to something worse.

But it could also lead to something better. And I think whatever came from it would be a huge compromise.

**BP: You've had some actual experience with this, as the president of the elected Los Angeles Charter Reform Commission. You didn't write a new national constitution, but you wrote a city charter, and did so through a long, often difficult process.**

**EC:** Charter reform is on a smaller scale. ... But what we learned from the experience was that everything was going to be a compromise, and that we wanted our efforts to be fruitful. That the reason that George [Kieffer, president of the city's appointed charter reform commission, which operated in parallel to the panel headed by Chemerinsky] and I came together to negotiate the Unified Charter was the recognition that unless we did that, all our efforts would fail.

And for a constitutional convention ... the people involved would know that they're going to be judged long into the future by how they performed in that role. The desire to have their efforts be fruitful, and their desire to be judged positively by history will, I think, cause people to be better than they otherwise might be.

**BP: I'd credit you with real experience in that regard. That's not an optimism just hatched in this office. That is an optimism born of the experience of actually working through a city charter, not a national constitution, but a foundational document.**

**EC:** And everything was deeply contested. There were disagreements over everything. In the end, what we wanted to do is produce a document that was better than what existed. Obviously not what any of us would have done on our own. And that ultimately passed with 60% of the vote.

So my hope is that, in that sense, that experience of people compromising, people wanting their efforts to lead to something, because if it's too extreme, it won't be approved.

Imagine that one side or the other captures the constitutional convention. It produces a document that then has to go to the people.

Those who came to the original Constitutional Convention included some very brilliant men, but they performed better because of the sense of the importance of their role, and that's my hope.

**BP: When it comes to the core of democracy, voting, we have an unusual problem at the moment, which is that doubts about the voting process emanate from the president himself. And that creates a terribly difficult problem for democracy if the president sows such doubts about the fundamental exercise of the franchise, even though it's the same process that brought him to power. Has any prior president ever sown such doubts about democracy?**

***"THE MORE THE SUPREME COURT SAYS THE CONSTITUTION MEANS ONLY WHAT IT MEANT IN 1787, THE MORE CERTAIN THAT WE WILL NEED A NEW CONSTITUTION."***

**EC:** There never has been a president who has done this. And even losing presidential candidates who could have done that, did not. Richard Nixon could have said that he was cheated, and he very well may have been cheated [in 1960]. Al Gore had a strong argument ... but he said no.

Trump not only continuing to say that he won the 2020 election with no evidence to support it, but fostering such distrust in the electoral process, is unique.

I don't know how you build trust. Let me go to a larger point, which I write about in the book but believe even more now. Our government, and for that matter, all of the major institutions of society, have really lost the faith of the people. Congress has its lowest approval rating ever. ... The Supreme Court is at its lowest approval rating in history. The president is in the low to mid-30s, which is basically his core support. Universities are at their lowest approval. The media has its lowest approval.

And so one of the things that causes me really to fear for democracy is to wonder whether democracy can survive where none of the institutions, either of government or outside the government,

have the faith of the people. And so when you ask about the confidence in the elections, I put it into a much larger loss of confidence.

**BP: Meanwhile, though, work goes on, especially at the local level. L.A. city adopted the charter that you helped create. L.A. County is now in the business of revamping its structures — expanding the board of supervisors, creating a countywide elected leader. Do you hold out hope that those efforts can yield tangible benefits for people in places like Los Angeles city or county, even amidst all the rest of this?**

**EC:** Yes. Take an easy example. States can provide protection of rights where it doesn't exist under the Constitution or federal law. So states can provide protection of abortion rights, for instance.

States don't have to follow a federal mandate. Los Angeles has long had the police regulation that it won't [stop people based solely on suspicion about their immigration status]. Because otherwise witnesses or victims of crime won't come forward? School systems can say we're not going to do it because we don't want kids to miss school. Public hospitals can do that. So that's a way in which I think local governments can push back.

**BP: And in terms of democracy?**

**EC:** Well, the Board of Supervisors is expanding and creating the position of a countywide CEO or mayor. Those are really democratic changes. Having just five supervisors for a county the size of Los Angeles is a real problem in terms of democracy. ... So I think those are pro-democratic changes.

I still believe the city council ... should be a much larger, and [the city's system of] neighborhood councils [created by the charter reforms that Chemerinsky helped lead] are contributing.

**BP: They are clearly a place where people come together.**

**EC:** To work on solutions. And they are a resource. It's democratic and allows for popular participation.

There is the opportunity for local governments to make a difference, and local governments can be even more democratic as neighborhood councils are expanding.

**BP: That's something to hold onto. Thank you.**

**EC:** I still believe that history shows tremendous expansion of freedom and equality. And I still believe our country will get through this, but I'm worried about it. ►

# Shirley Weber

Veteran California leader defends the state's democratic institutions

**SHIRLEY WEBER IS ONE OF** the most highly educated people in California government. She holds an undergraduate degree, a master's degree and a Ph.D., all from UCLA. And she got them the hard way. Born in Hope, Arkansas, she is the daughter of a sharecropper who brought the family west after a lynch mob threatened his life. He counseled his daughter to shrug off insults such as he had borne, to be "better, not bitter." She has lived up to that charge.

At the end of 2020, when Kamala Harris left the U.S. Senate to serve as vice president to Joe Biden, Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed then-Secretary of State Alex Padilla to fill Harris' seat, and he named Weber, a veteran of the California Legislature, to take over as Secretary of State. She was confirmed in early 2021, was elected to the office in 2022 and has held it since.

Plainspoken, charming and incisive, Weber now oversees the election machinery of California. She spent much of the summer fending off false charges from President Donald Trump and his supporters that the system here was "rigged" — and curiously so, in that those doing the rigging somehow managed to throw the Los Angeles mayoral runoff to a democratic socialist while still allowing a Republican, Steve Hilton, to make the gubernatorial runoff against Xavier Becerra. Weber stood by the results, though she acknowledged that Trump's blast furnace of false allegations has taken a toll. She's preparing for another round of deception and distraction as the midterms approach.

Dr. Weber met via Zoom with *Blueprint* editor-in-chief Jim Newton earlier this fall, in the lull between elections.

**BLUEPRINT:** Are elections in California safe? Can voters of this state be confident that their votes are being counted accurately, and that voting is limited to those who are entitled to vote?

**SHIRLEY WEBER:** You know, we've been asked that so much. Not only us, but also all of the research institutes and the various folks who deal with elections up and down the state and various

universities have all looked at this and said, for all intents and purposes: The elections in California and across the nation are safe elections. ...

One of our researchers went back 35 years and only found four or five people who had actually committed any level of fraud in terms of elections. The administration talks about it, creates a frenzy about it. ... And so it becomes very frustrating not only to us but also to the public. ...

You hope at some point that Californians kind of wake up and see what's going on.

When you don't have the person at the top of the ticket, the president of the United States, defending its own institution and its own process, it creates an unbelievable sense of distrust.

**BP: President Trump lost to Hillary Clinton here in 2016 by 4 million votes, and he blamed that loss on illegal voting by undocumented immigrants, or, in his words, "illegal aliens." So let me ask you directly: Has there ever been any shred of evidence of illegal votes in that election that cost Trump a victory here?**

**SW:** No. There hasn't been that information anywhere. And if it were, they would present it, I mean, they would present that evidence to us.

To say, "I would have won California if it weren't for all those undocumented [what he calls] illegal aliens and those kinds of things, 4 million votes," ... is really disheartening.

I think people are losing interest in listening to the president with regard to the information he presents. When we first got into this office, most folks in the press were kind of hesitant about saying the man is not telling the truth. They would say, "Well, it's distorted information." Now, you guys just boldly say, "We all know he's not telling the truth, but this is what he said today."

It's unfortunate, but it's also very sad that we have to be confronted with this, and that some people still have a tendency to think there might be some truth to it.

**BP: The president also has alleged that Spencer Pratt was improperly denied a spot in the runoff in the L.A. mayor's race — although he doesn't seem to have complained about the results that put Steve Hilton in the runoff in the governor's race on the same ballot. So may I just again ask you directly: Has any evidence come to your attention of any fraud in the L.A. election that would have caused Pratt to fall short?**

**SW:** Not at all. ... Anybody who knows about elections knows that you go into an election night with some votes still out there and coming in later. Folks who vote by mail have greater resources and so forth and so on. And they're going to vote early. ... And anybody who's dealt with elections for any length of time knows how things worked in different communities, poor neighborhoods.

To say that, you know, all of a sudden, this guy Pratt was denied ... well, it's convenient.

**BP: I've been writing about Los Angeles elections now for more than 30 years, and I must say that the notion that there's something suspicious about an election in which a very liberal city chooses two fairly liberal candidates to run against each other in a runoff seems like a stretch.**

**SW:** I don't know how they expected it to end up.

**BP: The president avails himself of mail-in voting, but he also suggests that there's something inherently fraudulent about it. In fact, he called it "mail-in cheating" recently. Is there any reason to think that mail-in voting is more susceptible to fraud than any other kind of voting?**

**SW:** Not that we've seen, especially if you understand the way that we count the ballots that come in [through mail-in processes]. If we just said, "OK, throw your ballot in the box," that's one thing. But the fact is that we have created this system where there are safeguards. There are envelopes that have certain codes and match your name. You have to verify the signature on it.

Now, of course, we get criticized for that because of the fact we want to verify every signature. We want to make sure that that ballot is your ballot and not somebody across the street, that people aren't just picking up envelopes as they go through the neighborhood.

We do it to verify the signatures, to make sure that that ballot that's being counted is actually your ballot and your signature is valid. We make sure that before we even put it in a position to be counted, it's actually certified.

People didn't think it was a bad system when those who had resources used it. Then it was the best thing since sliced bread. And poor people didn't trust it. They didn't think the system really worked for them.

I don't know if the president ever walked into a polling place to vote.

**BP: I've never seen him do it.**

**SW:** He could have had them put in a polling place in front of the White House, and he could have walked in, but he chose not to because he believed in the system himself.

**BP: It strikes me that you're really caught between a rock and a hard place. If you take the time to do the verification that you're describing, people complain that the slow count is evidence of fraud. But if you don't take the time**



**to do it, they complain that you're not being careful with the ballots, and that's evidence of fraud. There's just no winning that argument.**

**SW:** There's no winning it.

**BP: I wonder whether you see it as your goal as Secretary of State to make the vote as available to as many people as possible. What do you think of that as an objective, and also, is that at all at odds with election security? In other words, the things that you do to make it easy to vote, do those same things make elections more vulnerable?**

**SW:** You know, I think all of us have this idea, this vision, that every Californian, every American should have as a part of their DNA the desire to vote, that who they are is determined by voting. People should have an interest in voting. ...

I know it in my life because my parents never got a chance to vote in Arkansas. When my parents came to California, this was it. And they voted in every election there was, and they demanded that we do also.

So it's hard to even imagine people not wanting to vote, because I've seen people around the world who could not vote. ... We have a tendency to go in and out of our thinking with regards to voting. That's unfortunate because we have taken it so for granted.

***"I THINK PEOPLE ARE LOSING INTEREST IN LISTENING TO THE PRESIDENT WITH REGARD TO THE INFORMATION HE PRESENTS."***

We just assume good things will happen, you know, on its own without us having anything to say about it. And I was reading some articles recently, of course, what is happening now with the Voting Rights Act and so forth, and so on.

And I hate the fact that I'm constantly beating up on folks, dragging young people out, making them come vote. I'm hoping that they will see what they need to see, without me having to tell them. That's the fear: that we have become so convenient and so liberal in our thinking that we don't really see the sense of urgency. It is quite a challenge.

What's happening now is exactly what can happen when you don't take the vote seriously and you don't participate on a regular basis, because it is your responsibility to do so.

**BP: It must be really hard to say to people, "Your vote matters," when the president of the United States is out there saying, "Your vote won't count."**

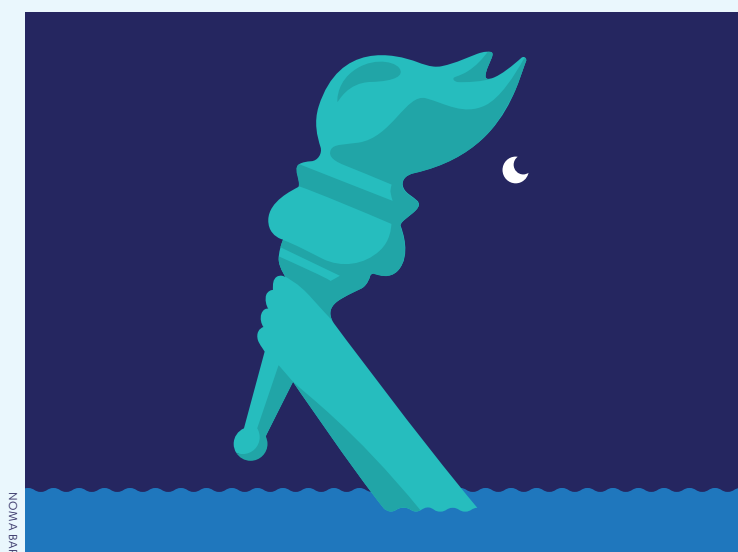
**SW:** That's the weird thing. You're the president. You have resources available to you that when you retire, leave this place, you'll be set for life. You have unlimited opportunity ... and yet you're the person who's saying, "This is crap. Don't trust the system that elected me." ...

To me, it's heartbreaking. I've spent so much time writing legislation, fighting battles, trying to create opportunities for people, knowing how important education is with my life and everybody else's life, and trying to make sure that everybody gets something that makes a difference and that changes the narrative for them and moves them forward. And then they have this person who just dumps it. ...

I wake up wondering, what world do I live in? Is it real, or what's happening? But we've got big things and issues. And I'm hoping and praying that people see that. ▀

## CLOSING NOTE

## TOUGH TIMES FOR DEMOCRACY



**THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE OF *BLUEPRINT* DO NOT PAINT A ROSY** picture of the state of democracy in the United States or around the world.

The Berggruen Governance Index reports that some democracies are suffering from “institutional drift and complacency.” Leading American lawyers and jurists see rising threats to the rule of law in this country. School teachers and principals warn of growing tensions among students as polarization worms its way into classrooms. The approaching American midterm elections offer opportunities for mischief and misunderstanding. Many Americans are on edge.

Today, democracy confronts deliberately sown doubts about election security, malevolent attempts to manipulate public opinion and concentrated efforts to thwart voting by less affluent and secure members of this society. The United States Supreme Court has discarded large chunks of the Voting Rights Act meant to protect the participation of minority voters. The president of the United States has suggested, without any basis, that large numbers

of undocumented immigrants cast ballots in California and elsewhere. That’s false, of course, but it erodes public confidence in the very system that elected him and the rest of our representatives.

For democracy, these are difficult times.

But democracy is not just fragile. It’s also resilient. American democracy did not fold when rioters attacked the United States Capitol in a violent attempt to halt the certification of the 2020 presidential election. It buckled when the American South seceded and launched the Civil War, but it recovered in the long aftermath of America’s bloodiest conflict.

And it survives today. It does so because those most determined to save it refuse to allow others to take it from them. Those same lawyers and jurists whom UCLA professor Richard Hasen surveyed as part of the Safeguarding Democracy Project are committed to preserving the rule of law even as others try to whittle it away. The authors of the international index don’t just chronicle threats to democracy; they also supply guidance for defending it. And the teachers who worry about polarization’s effects on their students go to work every day and try to impart values of tolerance and humanity that transcend the evening news or the day’s trending social media post.

That may be most reassuringly at work at the most local levels of government. When it comes to revamping Los Angeles County government, for instance, the arguments are about how best to create institutional checks and balances, how much authority to give a countywide elected officer or how to refashion the Board of Supervisors into a more purely legislative body. Those may not have the riveting quality of national “threats to democracy,” but they engage democracy where it matters — elections, responsibility, delivery of service to constituents who need it.

We opened this issue with Churchill’s famous assessment of democracy as the worst system of government except for all the others. We close it with Churchill’s reminder that democracy’s strength and its resilience grow from the conviction that “the people should rule.”

As long as they do, there is hope for democracy, whether in Prague or Washington or Los Angeles.

— **Jim Newton**



A PUBLICATION OF  
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## **SPECIAL THANKS**

Special thanks to Lisa Horowitz, the chief copy editor for *Blueprint*, whose sharp eye makes this magazine what it is. — **Jim Newton**

DO YOU HAVE  
SOMETHING TO SAY?

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