

GUEST ESSAY

Our Democracy Is at Stake. Stop Waiting for a Savior.

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 Listen · 5:44 minBy **Skye Perryman**

Ms. Perryman is the president of Democracy Forward.

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American democracy has been deteriorating with alarming velocity since President Trump's return to the White House. Every day, it seems, there's a new Watergate-level outrage. Nearly seven in 10 Americans are dissatisfied with how our democracy is working.

All too often, those who hold or have held positions of power still fail to acknowledge that long before the present crisis, our system wasn't delivering meaningful opportunity and representation for all Americans. And too many of our leaders who yearn for now-discarded norms carry on without acknowledging that no single institution, on its own, can prevent democratic backsliding.

Many of the excesses of the Trump administration have been successfully challenged through our judicial system. My organization and others have leveraged the power of the courts to block destructive initiatives, from Mr. Trump's proposed \$1.8 billion "anti-weaponization" slush fund to threats against the First Amendment to draconian — racist, in some cases — immigration policies. Our legal system has at times buckled, but it hasn't broken, so it can be tempting to think that the long list of judicial rulings secured against the administration, combined with a midterm election wave, will get us past the crisis. It's understandable to anticipate — to hope — that coming out of the midterms and heading into the next presidential election cycle, a savior, something or someone, will emerge to usher in a return to democratic norms and show would-be autocrats the door.

Here's the problem: Waiting for a savior has led many of us not to exercise the greatest power we have: our own.

Using the courts to rein in Mr. Trump's authoritarian leanings remains essential, but it isn't sufficient. If the midterms result in the shift of power many expect, it won't be as easy for the president to trample the Constitution or run roughshod over Congress. But Americans should be clear that there is no cavalry coming. We don't have the luxury of fantasizing that we are just one legal victory or perfectly poll-tested message away from turning the nation around. Such thinking unintentionally obscures the urgent need for all of us, especially those in relative positions of comfort, to roll up our sleeves, walk out our front doors and make ourselves part of the answer to this crisis.

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Many of us confuse consuming political news, engaging on social media and participating in group chats with doing the things that we, as individuals, can do to help change our country's trajectory. Instead of doomscrolling, we can organize our neighbors, work at local polling places or join community groups. We must not be satisfied with watching the decline of American democracy from our phones.

The philosopher Richard Rorty observed that left-leaning reform movements in the earlier part of the 20th century emphasized the agency that individuals have to create change. He explained that the social movements that led to checks on corporate power, workers' rights, women's rights and civil rights were powered by ordinary Americans who took direct action to bring about meaningful change.

By contrast, in later reform movements Dr. Rorty perceived a trend of spectatorship, in which progressives in elite and academic circles were often more interested in being observers who critiqued American society rather than matching those critiques with action. Nearly 30 years ago, he warned that if those who sought progress failed to push institutions to deliver for the working and middle classes, Americans would embrace a populist savior-strongman who would gain power, only to eviscerate our democracy.

In our retelling of American history, we too often mythologize our institutions and political leaders as if they were the ones that brought about social change and forced our nation to make way for all of us. We sometimes think of justice being "handed down" by the Supreme Court in landmark decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*. Or that a virtue-minded, bipartisan Congress willed the Voting Rights Act into being, while glossing over the primary, underlying agent of change: the American people.

Nothing is handed down by political leaders without the people demanding it. We must do so again.

In Minnesota, earlier this year, it was ordinary people who took to the streets in freezing weather to try to protect their neighbors by resisting the violent overreach of immigration enforcement agents. Beginning last year, we saw No Kings protests that were among the largest peaceful mass mobilizations in our history. We've seen everyone from ministers to educators to clerical workers to stay-at-home parents take to the streets in

defense of democracy. After the Supreme Court weakened a crucial component of the Voting Rights Act, people from across the nation went to Selma and Montgomery, Ala., marching an old march in a new time. Religious organizations from across the nation took the administration to court to ensure that communities can worship without fear of intimidating ICE tactics. When an administration policy threatened health care access for millions, local city officials, doctors and small businesses sued to try to protect access and keep premiums from going up. As Mr. Trump has pushed for partisan gerrymanders and a voter-suppression law like the SAVE America Act, we've seen strong voter turnout in races across the country.

We can learn from our fellow Americans who are meeting the moment. Instead of waiting for a knight-in-shining-armor political candidate, hoping he or she will do the hard work for us — or, worse, disengaging when a candidate or political movement disappoints us — we must continue to look to ourselves. Our democracy is in danger, but we can save it. We are the only ones who ever have.

Skye Perryman is the author of "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times: How to Reclaim Your Power, Fight for Freedom and Reimagine Democracy."

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