



Democracy Matters: Defining Our Shared Social Contract

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

This essay argues that American liberal democracy depends on renewing a shared social contract. Amid declining trust, polarization, contested truth claims, and openness to illiberal leadership, it identifies six standards for democratic life: citizen authority, checks on authority, individual liberty, tolerance, truthfulness, and institutional forbearance. Acknowledging America's history of exclusion, rights violations, corruption, and misinformation, it calls for democratic renewal rather than abandonment through civic education, dialogue, and reform across ideological difference in public life.

What constitutes the social contract of our liberal democracy? This was a question posed by the framers of the US Constitution when they were first debating the design of government, and it is a question worth posing again. Constructive dialogue among fellow citizens with starkly different ideological views around America's "first principles" is needed to reinvigorate the core democratic values and standards that bind us together as a people, as a nation, and as a democratic republic.

The Social Contract

[Archaeological records](#) across every continent reveal evidence of institutionalized forms of shared authority and governance free of domination by any particular classes of individuals. Voting devices, assembly spaces, communal meeting structures, and the deliberate minimization of elite symbols across all inhabited corners of the world dating back as far as 5000 BC have been found.

[Archeological records](#) also reveal instances of popular resistance to established elite authority through records of dissent, protest, and sometimes rebellion. Indeed, these records strongly suggest that informal social contracts have existed between people living in close proximity to one another over very long periods of time. And as a result, proto-democratic institutions have risen and fallen and with it, so have the social contracts that gave them power, meaning, and legitimacy. It was, after all, Baron de Montesquieu who, in 1748, aptly stated in the [Spirit of Laws](#) that, "The deterioration of a government begins almost always by the decay of its principles."

In this year of 2026 in the United States, marking the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, there is reason to believe that at least some aspects of the social contract are being stressed. [Polled](#) just a week prior to the 2024 US presidential election, 51% of all respondents felt that the America political system needed "major repairs," and another 7% felt that the system needed to be completely "torn down." While there is reason to believe that our mutual tolerance for each other is eroding. That same [poll](#) found between 11% and 16% of respondents associated with each of the two major parties saw the voters for the opposing candidate as an "enemy." [Trust in elections and public health institutions](#) suffer from competing claims relating to truth and opinion. While a recent poll conducted by [Americas Barometer](#) in 2025 found that between 25% and 53% of respondents across the two political parties expressing a willingness to "have a strong leader in government who is capable of bending rules to get things done."

The present challenge leads us to ask a question posed by political philosopher [Craig Carr](#), namely, “... is it possible for human beings holding disparate, conflicting, and perhaps hostile beliefs and viewpoints to live together peacefully within a common polity?” When a significant portion of voters see their political system needing major repairs or to be completely torn down, a portion of voters see their fellow citizens as an enemy, and a significant portion of voters are willing to see their government leaders break the rules in order to “get things done,” there is good reason to believe that there is a lack of clarity and consensus regarding Americans’ social contract with each other and their government.

Social contract theory has its basis in the concept of sovereignty and the central premise that a democratic government requires the consent of the governed to maintain its legitimacy. The inspirations for the social contract of modern democracies drew on a set of ideals first presented and applied in [ancient Greece](#), practiced across the confederations and long house [traditions of Native Americans](#), and debated among political philosophers of [the Enlightenment](#). Consideration of a collective will under the civic power of ordinary people can be found in an early theory of sovereignty assumed in [Plato’s approach](#) to the relationship between the governed and their government. The governed were to have a stake in their government and in order to do so, they needed to be considered collectively as a political community or “the polity.”

The “big three” of [Enlightenment social contract theory](#): Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau each took a different angle to the social contract. Hobbes saw the need for a strong state, a “leviathan,” to counteract the “small and brutish” nature of people. Locke possessed a more tempered view that individuals were members of a larger society because of the natural law that gives them the right to consent to the actions of their representatives and governments. Rousseau viewed that these rights included an inherent authority of ordinary people to shape social and political norms that manifest into a form of collective will.

The resulting social contract of modern democratic societies may be understood as democracy’s rules or “operating system” that are shaped by explicit and implicit *legal, social, and political* standards and norms. The legal prescriptions of the social contract are evidenced in constitutions that help to define a society’s [preferred set of values](#). These values shape the structure of authority, specifically who (in democracies: citizens) is understood as ultimately possessing that authority, and how the authority they delegate to the state is to be welded and constrained. These preferred values also include assertions about the rights of people, and the role of the state in relation to extending and protecting those rights.

The social and political norms of the social contract often go unwritten but are sustained and evolved across generations. Norms relating to mutual tolerance and acceptance of “value pluralism,” a form of forbearance given to democratic institutions, and adherences to standards of reason, honesty, and evidence-based decision-making also serve as critical features of the social contract of democracies.

Based on the good graces of our forbearers, these norms have persisted over time to become precedence. For instance, George Washington’s voluntary abdication of the presidency after his term ended set the precedence for the peaceful transitions of power for liberal democracies. We find precedence set in the great orations of [Fredrick Douglass](#), [Sojourner Truth](#), and [Abraham](#)

[Lincoln](#), each wedding the values of liberal democracy to concepts of justice, human dignity, and the reiteration that the American government was to be of the people, for the people, and by the people. The social norms of the contract appear in the tolerance we show to others with different opinions, values, identities, and beliefs when we engage in interpersonal dialogue over politically contested issues is another example. The expectation that our political leaders draw on sound reasoning and evidence to make decisions on our behalf is yet another. The recognition that our democratic institutions are fallible, but sacred, and need to both be constantly defended and reformed in order to “form a more perfect union” is still another.

The gaps between the ideals of the social contract, and the sometimes harsh realities of the failures to abide by some of the basic ideals of democracy can lead to the belief that the social contract itself, and the rules of democracy inherent to it, are either flawed or [woefully applied and enforced](#). The persistence of such gaps can lead to [democratic backsliding](#), particularly when there are political forces that try to exploit these gaps in order to consolidate power. Democratic societies have, indeed, [violated the ideals of equality, liberty, and individual rights](#). Corruption and organized lying have been capable of running rampant. The public sphere has been degraded by vitriol and allusions to threats and acts of violence.

The social contract itself is capable of being ruptured. Although appeals to patriotism and constitutional laws and values are readily claimed, without even deeper appeals to civic renewal, the interpretation and reinterpretation of the social contract will be left to the courts, legislatures, political parties, and political leaders to frame, claim, and revise it. While ordinary citizens are only be left to take sides.

An alternative vision is being suggested here. To defend the social contract of liberal democracy we need to affirm some of the basic foundations of the contract and create spaces for their active consideration.

Democracy’s Standards

Drawing from a set of “first principle” ideals that have long been shared through philosophical treatises, written constitutions, and historical precedence, we offer here a set of democratic standards. While the standards are simply stated, they pose complicated challenges for implementation in real life. And they will ultimately need to be understood not as isolated ideals existing in isolation, but in relation to one another.

Citizen Authority: Power to the People

Citizens have authorizing and monitoring power over elected officials and democratic institutions.

One of the key advances in Enlightenment thought was the idea that citizens must offer their consent to be governed for a government, particularly a democratic government, to be legitimate. Citizen authority is expressed during election cycles, culminating in the election of representatives who are to carry forward the interests of their constituents. Elections essentially serve as citizen moratoriums on the performance of their representatives and the policies they support or block. Almost all democracies, and certainly all contemporary ones, have been

democratic *republics* in which citizens delegate a certain measure of their authority to elected representatives.

Direct democracy at any scale has proven to be a challenge for any number of practical reasons, including the most logical, namely that no citizen has enough hours in the day or the requisite body of knowledge to make all of the decisions needed to foster the common good. Delegation of authority to elected representatives is needed.

However, all democratic republics still need for citizens to possess the means of directly expressing their voices and flexing their authority. A government “by the people” presumes a deeper level of engagement. Citizens of democracies can wield “soft power” through the expressions of their opinions. Elected representatives and those hired to run governments need to be sensitive to citizens’ needs and predilections and evolve many ways of processing and responding to citizen feedback including public hearings, public comment periods, organized, peaceful protest, customer feedback, and the like, even when these practices can be [perfunctory](#) or episodic in nature.

The ideal of citizen authority in a liberal democracy calls for people to ideally play active roles in the coproduction and cocreation of public goods and public works. In this manner, citizenship is understood as a [civic virtue](#). [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) first recognized Americans propensity to contribute to associational life, to join and actively contribute to the social progress of their communities. A [strong democracy](#) is bolstered by citizen engagement through [strong civil society and civic associations](#). Democracy is weakened when citizens are uninformed or misinformed, apathetic or hyper partisan to the point of polarization.

Checks on Authority: Power Corrupts

Political power is vigorously checked and balanced.

It doesn’t take too much creative thought to surface a mental model of a prototypical bully who willfully exerts power and influence over the school yard. They may have gotten a taste for power after having one of their brutish actions praised or at least endorsed through active or passive consent of others.

The corrupting nature of power in social settings has led many a philosopher to consider the true nature of human beings. Are we, as [Thomas Hobbes](#) asserted in 1651, nothing but “brutes” looking to garner as much power as possible? Or are we, as [John Locke](#) argued, guided by a natural law that imbues us with an entitlement to equal treatment and equal outcomes? In both cases, there is a need for governments to serve as the arbiter of disputes and to ensure that the power of individuals are moderated by laws that prohibit certain actions that can cause harms to others. Democratic institutions exist, in part, to moderate the distribution and use of power, whether it is welded by individuals, political parties, or organizations.

Democratic institutions and the elected representatives who run them must, in turn, have their powers checked. One of the real ingenious devices devised for democracies was the concept of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances.” The early architects of this idea included the French political philosopher Montesquieu and one of the framers of the US Constitution, James

Madison. If the people, *all* of the people, are to have any power themselves, political institutions must exist within an ecosystem of other democratic institutions: including the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. [Madison's genius](#) was to develop a formal, constitutionally binding mechanism for having each branch provide a check on the other. The thinking: to not allow for any one branch of government to centralize power. And likewise, the federalist system of the United States, with the existing power-sharing arrangements between the federal government and the states was also put in place to ensure that power was also geographically distributed. This combination of separation of powers and federalist governance systems has been enduring.

What happens though, when one political actor, a branch of government or a political party tries to thwart or override checks and balances? When, if ever, is the concentration of power ever justified?

Individual Liberty: Doing Right for Rights

Individuals are endowed with rights protected by law.

The notion that individuals are essentially born with certain “inalienable rights” is a relatively recent feature of human collective consciousness. While Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were some of the first to articulate the importance of individual people thinking for themselves, the full scale integration of individual rights as a protected feature of governments really only saw its first manifestation in the early United States whose founding democratic standard established that “all men are created equal.” Tragically, it took some 89 years in US for the 13th Amendment granting slaves their freedom, another 55 years for women having the right to vote, and still another 45 years before voting privileges became a civil right. Despite these significant and tragic lags and setbacks, such as Jim Crow in the US, the arc of the moral universe as [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) famously asserted, bends towards justice. This justice entails that liberal democracies progress by extending and protecting rights of more and more people.

Our individual rights exist within a society comprised of a “[value pluralism](#)” among the people. Instead of one pathway to happiness, democratic societies must allow for many different pathways, each unique in their own ways. Democracies that stay true to their protection of individual rights will need to maintain ways of living together amidst this pluralism, allowing for the free expression of rights in a manner that allows for what Hobbes’ defined as a “peaceful co-existence.” Value pluralism calls for compromise.

What happens, though, when democracies start to retract rights and reassert certain types of social hierarchies? Policy goals that include the pursuit of equity, equality, or inclusion are labeled illegal and anti-democratic in clear violation of the nation’s founding principles.

Tolerance: To Tolerate or Not to Tolerate, *That is the Question.*

Tolerance of differences in values, opinions, and lifestyles is widely practiced.

Democratic societies are conditioned on a perpetual state of value pluralism. At its very basic level lies a willingness to tolerate the beliefs, actions, and identities of others.

Tolerance as a baseline norm leaves no one completely satisfied. Tolerance is a compromise. It is predicated on the premise that “we can agree to disagree,” and still allow for some measure of peaceful co-existence.

To tolerate others is to allow them to exercise their own rights with the expectation that they in turn will do so for you. [Tolerance is a form of civic virtue](#). Tolerance can be understood as a political golden rule: Treat others like you want to be treated. This does not entail that you have to like them, or even, deep down respect them. Your actions and words may betray more deep-seated sentiments, but restraint for the sake of accomplishing things together, in voice and deed, create the conditions for peaceful co-existence.

The [line between tolerance and intolerance](#) is fuzzy. Under calls for the right to free speech, citizens are free to express intolerance toward others, and towards the institutions that govern over them. For there are legitimate times, places, and contexts when it is right for the betterment of both individuals and democracy to be intolerant. At times, [being intolerant of actions that violate democratic standards is necessary](#). For instance, being intolerant of efforts to consolidate or abuse powers, violate individual rights, and resort to organized lying to score political points.

It is, however, critical to remember that democracies are, by their very nature, composed of value pluralism, and with it the default of well-functioning and healthy democracies to simply let people live their lives as they see fit. And to tolerate and protect their rights to do so. And they, in turn, will do the same for you.

Truthfulness: Pursuing the Truth, at all Costs?

Decisions and practices undertaken on behalf of the public interest are honestly informed by reason, appeals to truth claims, and evidence-based decision-making whenever possible.

One of the fundamental ways that humans parse truth claims from falsehoods is through the establishment of methods for collecting, analyzing, and assessing the credibility of evidence. There is, essentially, a science to it. Science as an institution and democracy as a political system have essentially co-evolved together. The consistent appeals of [Enlightenment philosophers](#) to “reason” were fueled by the frameworks for making sense of the universe found in the theories of Descartes and Newton.

Well-functioning democracies draw on [standards of evidence](#) to make claims and provide sound reasons to citizens, and to convince them that the benefits of a given public good or service is worth the cost. Many of our greatest advances as a species have resulted from active experimentation, trial and error, reporting, testing, disproving, and reaffirming bodies of evidence.

We are likely taught as children the value of honesty and the pursuit of shared truths. We find habitual lying as a social pathology. When reasoning, science, and facts are rendered inert, devoid of any authority and understood as merely opinion, we are left living in a world with no room to trust what we are seeing, reading, or hearing. When this sentiment reaches such a scale

as to have political leaders, parties, and pundits willing to fabricate falsehoods and exploit half-truths to achieve their aims, they are giving license to anyone else to do the same.

What happens when [political leaders either fail to give reasons](#), or subvert the very basis of reason itself? Truth claims get conflated with opinion. Science is rejected outright, or science's "inconvenient truths" are censored or shunted aside. The antidote for such ills lies in calls by citizens for political leaders to tell the truth, to make evidence transparent, and to not ignore evidence because it is inconvenient or undermines their specific political objectives.

Institutional Forbearance: Valuing Stability and Reform in Moderation

The willful restraint from use of coercive actions to undermine the stability and legitimacy of democratic institutions and democratic accountability standards is widely practiced.

No civilization can function without some measure of stability that public administration can bring. All governments exist to serve specific functions that markets and civil society cannot take up themselves. The work of governments, particularly democratic ones, are shaped by an often ambiguous set of policy goals that must be pursued simultaneously to provide for a society's critical infrastructure and well-being.

In democracies, networks of government, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations provide us with many of our basic needs and wants, and they require the use of public funds to get things done on behalf of us. This is simply how civilizations function. We do not have enough hours in the day, enough knowledge or resources to provide everything we need to live a modern life. It truly takes a village, or rather [networks of institutions](#), organizations, and individuals to "keep the lights on," and so much more.

What happens when these basic systems start to fail? Individuals suffer. Infrastructures crumble. Markets fail. And the stability that we have come to take for granted is disrupted.

Stable western democracies have been remarkably effective at providing and regulating aspects of society that require government involvement and action. The maintenance and stability of these systems calls for some measure of tolerance in its own right in the form of restraint. This restraint extends to any policy actor from using their coercive powers to erode other democratic accountability standards.

Reforming democratic systems should always be carried out within the context of some common understanding of the social contract. Democratically anchored reforms should be undertaken to open the gap between democratic ideals and those times when those ideals go unrealized. Reforms should be aimed at overcoming this gap, rather than aimed at widening the gaps between democratic ideals and reality. Illiberal and anti-democratic sentiment and actions can drive reforms to erode the capacity of democratic institutions to serve and defend the people.

Reforms should be carried out with an eye on the bigger goal: the advancement and stability of a healthy democratic society. This was the mantra of one of the founders of modern conservatism: [Edmund Burke](#). Preserving democratic institutions, like the preservation of the

family and religious institutions, is essential for the stability of human civilizations. And so democratic societies must be on alert for those who seek to abuse their powers to strip democratic institutions of their resources, rendering them unable to deliver critical public goods and services or being captured by authoritarian interests. Institutional forbearance, therefore, is conserving and a conservative force of democracies.

Democracy Matters: Can We Agree?

Are these standards acceptable to Americans across all political ideologies? Are they a source of common heritage and a common belief system that is both remarkably stable and resilient? Or are they consciously being reconsidered, even questioned?

I would argue that the asking of such questions needs to become an effort of “public work.” The settings for such public works can be any spaces intentionally created to foster dialogue and deliberation. Such conversations would need to be facilitated with intent and patience, and fueled by the willingness of participants from diverse viewpoints to sit together and reason together. To accomplish this we must reinvigorate our mutual understanding and collective agreement about our shared social contract.

The standards offered here are posed merely as a starting point for such dialogue. To bring the full scope and scale of “Democracy Matters” dialogues to life they should be integrated with a civic education curriculum that examines these and other ideals through the lens of America’s complicated 250 year history. This history should reflect a commitment to value pluralism, and give credence to many viewpoints and perspectives, including views from both the political left and right. While reaching consensus can be set as the ideal, the act of convening together and leaving with some degree of civic learning about the values and ideals that bind us as a people may likely have to suffice. Democracy will matter when there is a shared understanding of its core values, ideals, and standards. That shared understanding begins with an ideal: that there exists a social contract binding our fragile democracy together.

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