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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

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Volume 47  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 4

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2020

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### Recommended Citation

Jones, Loring P. and Engstrom, David (2020) "Illiberalism: A Primer and Call to Action for Social Workers," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol47/iss3/4>

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# Illiberalism: A Primer and Call to Action for Social Workers

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*Liberal democracies had been ascendant in the post-World War II era. President Trump is part of a wave of nationalist, anti-immigrant politicians with autocratic tendencies who are challenging liberal democracy. The term given to the governing philosophy of these leaders is illiberalism. This paper is meant to be a primer on illiberalism for social workers, describing this ideology and the threat illiberalism poses for democracy, our social welfare system, and the interests of social work clients. We conclude with a discussion on what social workers can do to defend democracy in light of the historic mission to advance social justice.*

*Keywords: Illiberalism, social policy, advocacy, President Trump*

## Purpose

An unexpected turn of events that is occurring in previously democratic countries is the rise of leaders who are willing to flout the norms of democracy. President Donald J. Trump fits within—and exemplifies—this trend. He is part of a wave of nationalist anti-immigrant politicians with autocratic tendencies who are coming to power throughout the world. The term for their governing philosophy is *illiberalism*. The ascendancy of Donald Trump and his ilk represents a serious threat to our democracy, as the policies he brings with him endanger civil

and human rights, the environment, economic justice, and our fragile social welfare system. As such, he represents a danger to the interests of social work's clients (Lens, 2018). This paper is meant to be a primer on illiberalism for social workers, describing the threats this ideology poses to democracy, and suggesting what we as social workers and citizens can do about it.

## Definitions

As defined in the in the United States, liberalism is frequently just another way of saying a person is a Democrat. However, it has another definition as a philosophy that developed during the Age of Enlightenment (1685–1815), which holds that societies are built on individual rights, the rule of law, the sovereignty of the people as exercised in free and fair elections, and rationality in decision making (Rawls, 1971; Zackaria, 1997). This conception of democracy is widely shared throughout the world and can accommodate differing political points of view from both the right and left, such as Scandinavia's Social Democrats, and—until recently—the U.S. Republican Party.

Illiberalism was a term first used by Zackaria (1997) to describe hybrid political regimes that were somewhere in between a liberal democracy and an authoritarian state, but illiberal states lean towards authoritarianism. Illiberals are populists, but can be differentiated from what is usually understood as populism. Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are populists. Populists whether illiberal or traditional, both champion the “common man” against elites that they view as corrupt and exploitive of “the people.” Both populists and illiberals come to power through democratic elections, but they diverge after taking power. In governing, traditional populists work through existing democratic intuitions after they come to power (Kurlantzick, 2018). In contrast, once in power illiberal populists display a willingness to subvert democratic institutions in favor of a more authoritarian form of governance. What all illiberal politicians have in common are a willingness to attack individual rights, the rule of law, the concept of a multicultural society, and a penchant for suppressing opposing political opinions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018).

Mudde (2017) describes illiberalism as “majoritarian extremism,” where governing is viewed not as a compromise

among competing interests meant to serve the needs of all groups, but as a zero-sum contest between the *will of the people* as expressed by the leader, and anyone who might oppose that leader. In practice, rather than returning power to the people, illiberal leaders consolidate power for themselves and their supporters. Corruption accompanies illiberalism. Illiberal leaders cultivate cults of personality through which they claim a special relationship to the people. It is this relationship, rather than a constitution, that is the basis of their claim to power (Weyland & Madrid, 2019). Current examples of illiberals include Vladimir Putin (Russia), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Recep Erdogan (Turkey), Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines), Matteo Salvini (Italy), and the latest entry, Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil).

## What Brought About Illiberalism?

### *Conditions under Which Liberal Democracies Flourish*

It is not guaranteed that the established democracies in the world—including the United States—will remain so. Liberal democracies flourish under four conditions that may be considered ideal types, all of which are under threat. First, economic growth and its benefits are widely shared in society, and this prosperity assures a person's economic status in the present and social mobility for that person's children. Second, political parties agree to conform to norms of fair play, and do not use the institutional powers available to them when in power to oppress the opposition (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Third, if a society is not ethnically and racially homogenous, it must be committed to combating racism and xenophobia, and to including marginal groups. Lastly, the media and political parties are able to block the rise of fringe antidemocratic political groups into the mainstream (Mounk, 2018).

### *Failure of Institutions and Dissatisfaction with Government*

Illiberalism becomes attractive to a portion of the population when institutions are not seen as responsive to people's needs and are instead viewed as serving unseen interests, be they state bureaucracies, economic or cultural elites, globalism, or perceived villains or scapegoats such as migrants or racial

and religious minorities. Rule by a strong leader to subdue these behind-the-scenes powers is viewed as a way to return power to the people. The illiberal leader is viewed as someone who will restore the “good old days”—which may never have existed—when government worked well. The people who vote for illiberals may feel that this form of government is more democratic than liberal democracy, because they see themselves as being empowered against elites (Mounk & Foa, 2016).

Ample evidence exists to document this dissatisfaction with democracy in the United States. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, only 38% of Americans were satisfied with “our system of democracy and how well it works,” which was much lower than in a 2008 poll which showed that 53% of respondents were satisfied with our form of government (Duggan, 2018). Foa, Mounk, and Inglehart (2016) noted that in the past, dissatisfaction with the government usually referred to the current administration. This dissatisfaction did not translate into the public wanting to replace the system. Citizens were content to live in a system where they could protest and vote the current office holders out. Just the opposite is occurring today: the dissatisfaction is with democracy itself as practiced. The danger is great when the public supports a political party that is willing to address that dissatisfaction by nondemocratic means.

### *Economic Change*

Changes in global political and economic life are working against democracy. Neoliberalism and its commitment to globalism and free markets replaced the Keynesian economic paradigm that had once governed Western democracies’ economic and social policies. The Keynesian paradigm envisioned prosperous economies where the benefits of prosperity were spread out across the populace. Under this paradigm, government regulated markets and actively taxed the wealthy at high rates. The neoliberals wanted to end Keynesian state interventions in the economy and replace them with a more efficiently functioning free market. Whether or not a free-market economy has ever worked well within a liberal democracy is in doubt (Polanyi, 1944). Neoliberalism created and exacerbated economic inequality, concentrated wealth and power in the hands of economic elites, and saw living standards for the middle and working classes decline (Cohen, 2018). The resulting

inequality has bred resentment among those left behind, making them more likely to heed illiberal politicians and their promises. Despite having run a campaign that catered to working class economic grievances, President Trump's governing actions, including his tax cuts, have exacerbated wealth differences in America. The inequality also undermines the legitimacy of the governing system in the perceptions of many citizens who wonder how democracy can exist alongside such disparities of wealth and power (Foa & Mounk, 2017).

### *Immigration*

The most recent wave of immigration from points south on the globe to Europe, Australia, and the United States has prompted anxiety among many native-born people, which has led them to view multiculturalism and racial and religious diversity as a threat to their position in society. In Europe, from Poland to Sweden, illiberal political parties that embrace anti-immigrant policies have been gaining strength. Australia's ruling liberal party has sent asylum seekers who wish to enter Australia by sea to distant detention centers on Nauru and on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, where they are held under deplorable conditions (Hollingsworth & Watson, 2019). In the United Kingdom, the Brexit vote was driven in large part by anxiety over immigration (Broder, 2019). Donald Trump's declaration of his candidacy for the U.S. presidency fed on this anti-immigrant sentiment when he launched a racist attack on Mexican immigrants in which he labeled them drug dealers, criminals, and rapists (Lopez, 2019). Under President Trump, immigrants are viewed as "the other," a dangerous class to be feared, who threaten our way of life and the economic well-being of the country (Appelbaum, 2019; Jones & Kiley, 2016). President Trump's anti-immigrant message has resonated with evangelicals who see immigrants threatening the hegemony of Christianity in the United States (Whitehead et al., 2018).

### *Racism*

The current crisis in American democracy is a result not only of our deep polarization over partisan politics, but also of our present culture wars. The crisis has deep roots in the

American struggle with the country's original sin of racism and slavery and is aggravated by the social changes brought about by an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. Some Americans have a desire to halt the demographic flux occurring around them. This group has been prone to accept illiberal arguments where tolerance of differences among people go by the wayside, thus challenging our democratic norms (Badger & Cohn, 2019; Horowitz, 2019; Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016).

It is hard to ignore the role that race played in the rise of President Trump. His first foray into public discussions of race was to pay for an advertisement in New York City's major newspapers advocating the death penalty for the Central Park Five, a group of young Black males falsely accused of raping a White female jogger in the late 1980s. Even after their innocence was established, Donald Trump continued to insist on their guilt. His ascent in the ranks of Republican Party presidential contenders began with his championing of the "Birther" movement in 2011. The Birther movement, with its undercurrent of racism, questioned the legitimacy of Barack Obama, the forty-fourth president to hold that office, based on the false contention that he was not born in the United States. This belief found widespread support among Republicans: in mid-2016, an NBC News survey of more than 1,700 registered voters reported that 72% of Republicans had doubts about whether President Obama was born in America (Clinton & Roush, 2016). Those subscribing to this belief viewed Obama as an "other" who did not belong in America, let alone qualify to be its president.

Many commentators suggest that the reason working-class voters deserted the Democrats, their traditional party, was because the Democrats ignored their deteriorating economic circumstances brought about by neoliberal policies. Challenging that class-based explanation, Coates (2017) asserts that President Trump's election could not be a working-class phenomenon, because both African-American and Hispanic working-class voters voted overwhelmingly Democratic in 2016. Only the White working class gave a majority of their votes to President Trump. Something other than economic distress accounted for Donald Trump's victory. The election of President Trump can be viewed as a backlash against demographic change represented by the election of an African-American president (Badger & Cohn, 2019; Coates, 2017).

Coates extended his analysis of race and politics by observing that in the 2012 Democratic presidential primary in West Virginia—a reliably red and pro-President Trump state, where 95% of voters were White—41% of voters cast their ballots for a White felon who was serving time for extortion in Texas. Coates asked readers to consider whether an incarcerated African-American felon could do as well against a White candidate. Coates’s interpretation was that voters would have preferred *any* candidate, whatever that person’s flaws, to an African-American candidate.

### *Status Loss*

Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, and Baytaneh (2017) studied the rise of illiberal politics in the United States, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that illiberalism has its roots in changing demographics whereby a group perceives that its status is falling relative to other rising groups. The group losing status clings to issues of identity and defines emerging groups as threats and scapegoats who are responsible for their lost status. The result is an “us versus them” mentality in the threatened group, which seeks a champion who promises to restore their previous status.

### *New Communication Technologies*

An additional factor in the rise of illiberalism is the development of new communications technologies, such as the Internet, conservative talk radio, and cable TV networks. All of these technologies give previously fringe illiberal viewpoints access to the mainstream. In the United States, the rise of the right-wing media coincided with the abolition of the “Fairness doctrine” during George H.W. Bush’s presidency. This doctrine had required that all media outlets give time for rebuttals by opposing ideological points of view. The ending of the doctrine meant that any particular ideology, along with supportive claims of dubious veracity, could be presented unchallenged by a particular media platform (Anderson, 2017). The modern right-wing political reincarnation began in the 1980s with the advent of Rush Limbaugh and talk radio, followed by the rise of similar ideologues in the right-wing media. Rupert Murdoch brought Fox News, an extension of talk radio, to television, where it



presented an increasingly conservative political-social-cultural reality in high dosages to a national audience in a manner that had not been done before. Thus, the far right was able to stoke the discontent among those who felt threatened by economic and demographic change (Anderson, 2017; Dionne et al., 2017). Fox News also gave President Trump something every autocrat wants, and what no other American president has had: “a servile propaganda” organ at his disposal. Fox can be counted on to supply a pro-President Trump narrative to counter whatever scandal or controversy he faces (Mayer, 2019).

The press is not, as President Trump has called it, “the enemy of the people,” but rather the protector of our constitution. We need to search for and support evidence-based journalism. Justice Clarence Thomas, the most conservative Supreme Court justice, has called for reviewing libel laws for the purpose of making it easier for aggrieved parties to sue the press—something the President has said he would like to see happen. Such a change in libel laws would make it harder for the press to fulfill its role as a watchdog of government (Liptak, 2019).

Beyond television and radio, social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook made it possible for Trump and others to reach millions without the filter of the media. He has shown an astonishing willingness to embrace fringe ideas, retweeting racist memes and alt-right conspiracy theories. The peer-to-peer nature of Internet communication limits the ability of gatekeepers such as the media to filter out extremist ideas or narratives that have no basis in reality. The Moynihan dictum “that you are entitled to your opinions, but not your facts” has no place in the new social media environment. The reality of American politics and life is that in this new digital environment, people can easily find material that confirms their preconceived notions—regardless of facts, evidence, or logic—and share this material with like-minded people as a way of showing that they are loyal members of the same tribe in good standing. Large echo chambers for the like-minded enable fringe ideas to spread rapidly. Political discussion across partisan lines has diminished, and with this reduction has come increased polarization (Shattuck, 2016).

## Warning Signs of the Coming of Illiberalism

### *Norms and Forbearance*

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) note that democracies need two basic norms to operate, which they call the “guardrails of democracy.” The first is that political parties must all grant the others’ legitimacy, and accept the results of elections. An example of a violation of this norm can be found in Turkey. The Turkish municipal elections in 2019 resulted in victories for the opposition to the illiberal party of Recep Erdogan in the major cities. This election was seen by international observers as legitimate. Erdogan’s party demanded a recount. After losing that recount, the Erdogan party appealed to the Turkish courts to annul the results and authorize a redo of the election, which they did. Erdogan again lost this election (Somer, 2019). Another example of the breaking of this norm, from closer to home, is Trump’s assertions that he would not accept the outcome of an election that did not go his way. He insisted that if he lost the 2016 election, it would have been because of fraud (Healy & Martin, 2016). This threatened non-acceptance of an election outcome was the first by a U.S. candidate for president and was an attack on the very foundation of democracy.

The second norm is forbearance, whereby political parties agree to conduct themselves by a set of rules, and winners restrain themselves from utilizing their full institutional power to gain partisan advantage. Forbearance demands that political leaders refrain from using constitutional powers available to them in ways that undermine or circumvent the checks and balances under which our government operates. Such powers can be utilized to weaken the opposition, other branches of government, and watchdogs for good government, such as the press. In the United States, violations of the norm of forbearance include gerrymandering, the refusal of the Republican-majority Senate to consider Obama’s Supreme Court nominee, the collapse of “regular order” in the Senate, presidential threats to withhold federal funds from states viewed as bastions of the opposition, and the President’s use of national emergency powers to do an end-run around Congress, as he did with the border

wall. Accompanying all of these actions is the disappearance of respect and comity among politicians of different political persuasions as polarization increases (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). After the 2018 midterm elections, Republican legislators in two states (Wisconsin and Michigan) followed the example of a third (North Carolina): In these states, after losing an election, Republican incumbents passed legislation meant to limit the power of the incoming Democratic administrations, and reserve as much power as they could for themselves (Hohmann, 2018).

### *Denigrating Government Institutions*

President Trump has been engaged in almost continuous conflict with U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies. He has condemned the courts when they disagreed with him. Judges who do not agree with him are labeled “Obama judges,” using their supposed political affiliations to call into question the validity of their rulings. He cast doubt on the impartiality of a judge born in Indiana on the basis of that judge’s Hispanic ethnicity. He has challenged the credibility of the Federal Reserve System as well as the electoral system. President Trump dismissed the views of all U.S. intelligence agencies on his appraisal of the threats posed by Iran and North Korea, as well as Russian interference in our elections. President Trump’s accusations, criticisms, and denigrations were picked up by the right-wing media, and their reporting reinforced his supporters’ belief in a conspiracy by the “deep state” (the federal bureaucracy) against the President (Landler, 2019). The term *deep state* seems to have been imported into the United States from Turkey, where it was used by President Erdogan to justify crackdowns on his perceived opponents within the Turkish governmental bureaucracy. The first use of the term in the United States, according to National Public Radio, was by Breitbart News, which used the term in 2016 to refer to a cabal of unelected bureaucrats with Democratic sympathies, who would seek to undermine the policies of any Republican administration. The term was quickly adopted by the right-wing media (Nunberg, 2018). A U.S. example of the consequences of this belief is the Republican-led House Intelligence Committee’s attempt, with the help of conservative media, to discredit the Special Counsel’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election by constructing

an imaginary plot in which the Justice Department and the FBI were conspiring against Trump to end his Presidency (Frum, 2018). Both the intent and effects of these attacks are circular. The alleged conspiracies generate more dissatisfaction with the government among the President's supporters, who become even more tolerant of the Administration's abuse of power as necessary for accomplishing Trump's objectives.

### *Condoning Violence*

One mark of an antidemocratic leader is a willingness to condone violence (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). President Trump has encouraged violence to advance his political agenda. In a March 2019 interview with Breitbart, President Trump asserted that his supporters in the military, police, and civilian groups (such as "Bikers for Trump") would be willing to use violence on his behalf against opponents (Chait, 2019). The President urged his supporters to use violence against demonstrators at his campaign rallies, and offered to pay any legal expenses that supporters might incur if they followed his suggestions (Tiefenthaler, 2016). He refused to unambiguously condemn violence by the neo-Nazi marchers in Charlottesville. The President's remarks normalize "Brown Shirt" behavior, and both further erode political discourse and encourage violence, as evidenced by a rise in the number of extremist-related murders in the past four years. The proportion of that violence coming from the extreme right, including White supremacists, has increased since President Trump was elected. An Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Report (2018) observed the largest one-year increase (57%) in anti-Semitic incidents (harassment, vandalism, physical assaults) since they have been tracking these incidents, occurred during in the first year of the Trump administration. The FBI reported hate crimes against all groups were up 17% during the same period (Uniform Crime Reporting Program, 2018). A time series analysis of this FBI database from 1992–2017 found this increase to be statistically significant, with the greatest increases found in counties that voted for President Trump (Edwards & Rushin, 2019). The ADL linked this increase to the President's rhetoric and a seeming tolerance by the Administration of far right groups such as the Alt-right (Anti-Defamation League, 2018).

The perpetrator of the Christchurch (New Zealand) massacre cited President Trump as one of his inspirations (Durkin, 2019). Trump praised President Duterte of the Philippines, saying he was doing an “unbelievable job on the drug problem,” at a time when Duterte was employing death squads for extrajudicial executions of drug offenders (Zilber, 2017). The President openly admires authoritarian leaders, and autocrats return the admiration (Hart, 2016). Putin (Russia), Maduro (Venezuela), and Al-Assad (Syria) have all adopted Trump’s characterization of “fake news” for news reports that put them in an unfavorable light (Erlanger, 2017; Pigman, 2018). President Trump welcomed into the Oval Office Viktor Orbán, the poster child for European illiberal democracy. Orbán was praised effusively by the President as doing a “tremendous job...and respected all over Europe,” in stark contrast to Western European leaders who regard him as a threat to European unity and democracy (Baker, 2019).

#### *Facts and “Alternative Facts”*

Democracy depends on a culture that respects the truth. Davies (2019) asserts that illiberal leaders encourage their followers, through fear, to substitute emotions and vague beliefs for facts. Stanley (2018), a Yale University philosophy professor, has studied the way authoritarian regimes use propaganda. He notes that authoritarian leaders seek to create their own reality based on lies, and attempt to restrict access to countervailing views, represented by an independent press, as a means of remaining in control. *The Washington Post* has been fact-checking Trump’s statements since he assumed the presidency and reported that he has made, on average, 16 false claims a day since being elected (Kessler et al., 2019). Many of the Trump claims are meant to make the public doubt the reports of a free and independent press. The President has attacked the press as “enemies of the people,” characterizing all their reports and investigations as “fake news.” President Trump has disregarded norms meant to assure the freedom of the press. He has attempted to exclude reporters and entire news media outlets from press conferences, and he has stated a wish to change libel laws to make it easier to muzzle press outlets he views as hostile (Mayer, 2019).

*Subverting Democracy through the Election Process*

Paul Weyrich, one of the charter members of the conservative Heritage Foundation, was quoted in a speech to Christian evangelicals as saying, “I don’t want everyone to vote. Our voting leverage goes up in elections, quite candidly, as the voting populace goes down” (Jackson, 2020, para. 1). Weyrich became instrumental in helping to write state legislation that restricted potential non-Republican voters’ ability to vote (Anderson, 2018). Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell appears to concur with Weyrich. In response to the House Democrats’ proposed electoral reform bill, which included various items that sought to remove barriers to voting (For the People Act, H.R. 1), McConnell said “he did not wish to do anything that would make it easier for Democrats to win elections” (Benen, 2019, paras. 4–11). The Senate never took up the bill.

The 2016 presidential election was the first in five decades to be held without the full protection of the Voting Rights Act. The Supreme Court weakened key portions of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, with Chief Justice Roberts claiming that the country had changed much since the act was passed in 1965, such that protection against voter discrimination was no longer needed in the states addressed by the Act. Justice Ginsburg, in a dissent, noted that the number of election complaints about civil rights violations was actually increasing, suggesting that it was not time to reduce federal oversight of elections (Kendi, 2018). The Republicans used the opportunity presented by the Court to reshape the rules of the game so that, in the words of Donald Trump, the game is rigged. Voter suppression efforts are evident in the passage of voter identification laws, voter roll purges, closure of voting venues that served minority neighborhoods, reductions in early voting, maintenance of felon disenfranchisement, and the like. These restrictions were meant to do what poll taxes and literacy tests once did: deny minorities the right and/or ability to vote (Anderson, 2018).

The Republicans did this under the cover of preventing voter fraud. Electoral fraud has been a constant theme of President Trump. He claimed—utterly without evidence—that his loss of the popular vote in 2016 could be attributed to 5 million undocumented immigrants voting for Clinton. President Trump also

claimed voter fraud in the 2018 midterm elections when it appeared that the Democrats might win Senate and gubernatorial races in Florida (Martinez, 2018; Parks et al., 2018). No evidence has ever been offered to support these claims of rigged elections. On the contrary, the data and the evidence that is available suggest that election fraud (e.g., non-eligible voting) is rare to non-existent. An investigation of more than 1 billion ballots cast in the United States over a 14-year period, conducted at the Loyola University Law School, found just 31 cases of voter fraud through impersonation (Levitt, 2014). The fraud claims are meant not only to undermine faith in the electoral system, but also to justify Republican efforts—which predate Trump—to make it harder for the opposition to exercise their voting rights. Trump appointed a commission to investigate voter fraud headed by Vice President Mike Pence and Kansas Attorney General Charles Kobach. Both men are known for championing voter suppression in the name of fighting fraud. In his home state, Kobach used a data-matching program to catch persons registered in more than one jurisdiction. Minority voters were disproportionately purged. An independent team of investigators found a 99% error rate in the program. Kobach also championed a Kansas law that required proof of American citizenship prior to registering to vote. Results were used to purge the voting rolls (Stewart, 2018). This law was struck down in federal court when he was unable to demonstrate that significant numbers of non-citizens were voting in Kansas' elections (Huseman, 2018). The commission was quietly disbanded after accomplishing nothing.

### *The Flawed Electoral Process*

The Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), housed at Harvard and the University of Sydney, surveyed several thousand electoral experts to assess the quality of election processes around the world. More than 3,200 experts were asked to rate the fairness of elections from 2012 to 2017 on a number of factors, such as electoral boundaries, voter registration procedures, and the effectiveness of campaign finance regulations. Based on their findings, the project rated the United States as 52nd among 153 states assessed, trailing all of the Western European democracies and such countries as Costa Rica, Benin, and Cape Verde. The EIP indicates that the most troubling aspect of U.S. elections is

the state-level partisan control over the election process, which leads to distortions as the party in power seeks to advantage its position at the expense of opponents. As a result, the U.S. has a variation in voting procedures and rules among the states with the actual voting overseen by part-time volunteers. The way elections are run leads substantial portions of the population to believe the system is unfair and rigged (Norris, 2017). Gallup reported in 2017 that only 30% of Americans in 2017 expressed confidence in the integrity of American elections (Porter, 2017). These feelings are partially responsible for the low turnout that is a characteristic of American elections.

### Republican Complicity in the Rise of Trump and Illiberalism

Donald Trump's surprise electoral college victory was made possible not only by White Americans' resentment at their economic status and the perceived threat from societal demographic changes, but also by the Republican Party's failure to block a man with authoritarian and racist tendencies from securing their nomination for president. Fear of the "base," opportunism, and a miscalculation that the nominee could be controlled by establishment figures resulted in the Republicans acquiescing to a man who is temperamentally, intellectually, and morally unfit to be president (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Having secured power, the Republican Party did not question the Trump Administration's and Trump family's self-dealing for their own enrichment, his turn away from traditional Republican dogma such as free trade, his cozying up to foreign autocratic dictators who before him were viewed as adversaries by Republicans, his often racist and reckless speech, and his frequent lies—because all of these advanced long-held conservative policies. Illiberalism will be tolerated by many Republicans if it comes with lower taxes on the wealthy, a gutting of the regulatory functions of government, and a conservative judiciary (Dionne et al., 2017).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) also provide an explanation for why Republicans stick with President Trump—fear of political irrelevance. The Republican post-2012 election analysis of their loss (also known as the "Autopsy") pointed to a need for the party to broaden its electoral base from primarily White Christian



aging males to one that would begin to approximate the diversity of America. Otherwise, the party faced permanent minority status (Franke-Ruta, 2013). Trumpism and illiberalism offer the party an alternative to adaptation that would allow White males to continue to maintain their status without change.

## How Does a Democracy End?

### *A Slow or Quick Death for Democracy?*

In the past, a democracy's death has taken the form of a military coup d'état (as in Spain and Chile), a declaration of martial law (Marcos in the Philippines), or the suspension of elections or a constitution (the end of the Weimer Republic). Luhrmann and Lindberg (2019) conducted extensive studies of illiberalism and concluded that illiberalism arrives in slow motion. Like the frog in a pot being brought slowly to boil, citizens might not recognize the danger until it is too late. The models of Erdogan in Turkey and Orbán in Hungary of how democracy can deteriorate are instructive. In these countries, newspapers still publish, but journalists are under continued threat and harassment, which can lead to self-censorship. Dissent occurs, but dissenters often find themselves in trumped up legal troubles. Elections take place, but they are neither free nor fair. Only the veneer of democracy remains. People do not immediately realize what is happening and may continue to believe they are living in a democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

### *The Weimar Model of How Democracy Ends*

Christopher Browning (2018), a noted historian of German National Socialism, has written on the parallels between the political climate in the last days of the Weimar Republic (Germany's first genuine democracy) and the United States today. The traditional German right-wing parties mistrusted Hitler, but they entered into a coalition with the Nazis in order to contain the threat they felt from the political left. These parties thought that if they disagreed with Hitler's actions, they could always withdraw from the coalition. Under democratic rules, such a step would cause the Nazi-led government to collapse. The German President Hindenburg, an ally of the right, subsequently

appointed Hitler chancellor. A democratically-elected government handed over power to someone who was determined to subvert it. Hindenburg loathed Hitler, describing him as a “lunatic, but a manageable one” (cited in Browning, 2018). Hindenburg’s death shortly after Hitler’s ascension to power meant he never had a chance to manage Hitler. A crisis brought about by the Reichstag fire gave Hitler the excuse to declare a national emergency that soon brought about the end of Germany’s first experiment with democracy. Browning (2018) notes that a flaw in the Weimar constitution was the ease with which a national emergency could be declared, as this provision gave the government the authority to rule by decree without the need for legislative assent, opposition, or oversight. In Nazi Germany, the new chancellor used the emergency powers to arrest communist and other left-wing parliamentary opponents he deemed responsible for the Reichstag fire, which caused the balance of power of power in the legislature to swing decidedly to the right. The German Parliament, the Reichstag, then voted democracy out of existence.

The United States’ history of commitment to democracy is longer and deeper than that of the Weimar Republic, Turkey, and countries in Eastern Europe currently flirting with illiberalism, but there are parallels with today’s occurrences and their experiences may serve as warnings to America. Browning draws parallels to the behavior of the Republican Party, particularly by Mitch McConnell, in refusing to curb the worst instincts of the Trump presidency (Browning, 2018).

There are dangers inherent in the emergency powers given to the president under the National Emergency Act of 1976 (NEA). The use of emergency powers to stifle dissent is another standard armament in the toolkit of authoritarian leaders. Thirty “states of emergency” are in effect today. One emergency, proclaimed during the Korean War, was used as a basis to prosecute the Vietnam War (Goiten, 2019). One caution in regard to the NEA should be drawn from the fact that these emergency powers were used to intern Japanese citizens during World War II. Justice Robert Jackson, writing in dissent to the *Korematsu* decision that upheld the internment of these Americans, said emergency power “lies about like a loaded weapon, ready for the hand of any authority that can bring a plausible claim of urgent need” (*Korematsu v. United States*). The *Korematsu* decision

upheld the right of the executive branch to arrest and detain individuals, including American citizens, without the oversight of the courts (Goiten, 2019). Although the *Korematsu* decision has been criticized by the current Supreme Court, it has never been officially overturned (Bomboy, 2018).

President Trump's declaration of a dubious emergency under the NEA in order to spend money on his border wall—which Congress had expressly rejected—marked one of the lows in his administration's failure to exercise forbearance. Two foundational principles of our democracy, the separation of powers and congressional control of the power of the purse, have been ignored. Emergency power has never been used this way. Forbearance means that the executive branch does not use emergency powers in nonemergency situations to accomplish policy objectives that were rejected by the legislative branch (Savage, 2019). Congress has two choices. The first is to limit the presidential powers under the NEA, which would constrain the ability of future presidents to react to a real crisis; the second is to risk further abuse of the emergency power by the Trump Administration. The Republican Senate, despite some initial misgivings about the President's directive, acquiesced to President Trump's action.

### *Empirical Evidence on Whether the Threat Is Real*

Those who point out the coming and present dangers to democracy may be dismissed as acting hysterical, exaggerating the threat, or crying wolf. However, empirical evidence is available to support the assertion that democracy is in danger. Freedom House, a bipartisan think tank founded by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie to be a watchdog of democracy, releases yearly reports on the state of the world's democracies. Freedom House has developed a democracy index that measures the political rights and civil liberties enjoyed by individuals in the countries assessed. The U.S. scores on this index show these freedoms to be declining since the ascension of Trump to the presidency. One particular problem Freedom House noted was related to diminishment of the rule of law as applied to asylum seekers and refugees. In 2018, Freedom House, in conjunction with the George W. Bush Institute and the Penn Biden Center, conducted a nationally representative poll on the state of American democracy. Fifty-five percent of respondents said that U.S.

democracy was weak, and 68% thought the situation was worsening (Freedom House, 2019).

The World Values Survey (WVS), conducted by the European Research Institute, also raised concern about the state of American democracy. This longitudinal survey collected data 7 times in the past 4 decades in 47 countries. Each country's sample was composed of 1,200 randomly chosen respondents (World Values Survey, 2017). In 2014, the WVS found that 16% of Americans thought it would be a "good thing" for the military to take over the government. In 1995, only 6% of Americans agreed with that sentiment. Surprisingly, younger Americans were more in favor of military rule than older citizens. The same researchers found that 43% of older Americans thought military rule would be illegitimate under any circumstances. However, only 19% of millennials agreed with their older counterparts on the legitimacy of military rule (Inglehart, 2017).

Reporters Without Borders (RWB) has been publishing the World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) every year since 2002. The WPFI rates countries according to the amount of freedom accorded journalists. The index measures press independence, the countries' laws governing the operation of the media, pluralism, and how safe is it for journalists to go about their business. The index is translated into 20 different languages and is sent to journalists, media lawyers, academics, and researchers specializing in press issues in 180 countries. An overall score on the WPFI allows a comparison by rankings on how freely the press operates in a given country or region (Reporters Without Borders, 2019a). The 2019 RWB index showed the United States dropping from 45th on the WPFI to 48th among countries from the previous year. This 2019 ranking lowers the United States from a "satisfactory" environment for journalists to work in freely to one that is "problematic." The WPFI said that "never before have US journalists been subjected to so many death threats or turned so often to private security firms for protection." The lowered ranking is also the result of Trump's attacks on the press as "the enemy of the people," the use of the term "fake news" to describe unflattering press coverage, the attempts to restrict specific news organizations' access to the White House, and his threats to revoke broadcasting licenses of sources he regards as critical of him (Reporters Without Borders, 2019b).

## Aftermath

Where will this end? Will the nation be confronted with an international crisis, perhaps provoked by Trump, that is beyond his capacity to handle? Will he force a constitutional crisis through declaring a national emergency, or will he disregard a court order? Perhaps our constitution will work. Many of Trump's attempts to subvert our democracy have been limited by the courts, the press, bureaucracy, activists, and even occasionally by the Republican Congress and members of his own administration (based on the Mueller Report).

It is possible that our encounter with an illiberal president could provoke a progressive reaction. Much of the turmoil in America comes from the continuing struggle to make America actually conform to its ideals. The work ahead involves repairing the damage done. In other countries, the opposition to illiberals often turns to antidemocratic means such as military coups (Venezuela, Turkey, and Thailand), strategies that merely strengthen the hand of antidemocratic forces, and leave those countries in an even worse state.

While in power, illiberals can alter governing institutions. The effects of some of these changes will remain even after they leave. When President Trump finally leaves office, toxic residue will be left behind. Will the country continue to confront an ongoing crisis of government ineffectiveness, crippling and still-growing polarization, expanding inequality, and the accompanying loss of faith in democracy? A much more conservative judiciary that is willing to accede to creeping illiberalism is one example of lingering effects that will not change for years to come. Another example is Trump's attempt to change America's very notion of itself.

The U.S. sense of exceptionalism developed from a set of beliefs, rather than from geographic place and ethnic identity, as in most countries. In 1783, George Washington sent an open letter to recent immigrants from Ireland which stated "the bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions" (National Archives, 2018, para. 5). The United States established itself on principles of liberty and equality that would be shared with other people who choose to come to this country (Sullivan, 2019). America stays true to its historic values

when it strives to reach the ideal of America as a refuge where people from around the world can come together to build a society that is just and prosperous for all. Admittedly, America often falls short of these ideals, as the country has struggled with racism and inequality since its inception. Despite these shortcomings, the commitment and the hope “to form a more perfect union” underlie and color much of the dissatisfaction with the current president. Former Secretary of State Albright (2018) has called for us to make America great again, but with a different notion than President Trump’s meaning of greatness. Albright asserts that America is great when it is committed to human rights, and when the country stands in opposition to autocrats and totalitarians. Greatness also comes when we are leaders in the movement to save the earth’s environment, and are not contributing to environmental degradation (Albright, 2018).

## What Can Social Work Do to Defend Democracy?

How can the discipline of social work and social workers help defend democracy in the U.S.? There are actually several ways that social workers and the profession can make a difference in defending democracy, the first of which involves advocacy.

### *Advocacy for Human Rights and Democracy*

The mission of social work includes advocacy to advance social justice, empower the oppressed, promote social cohesion, and work to achieve human rights (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). This advocacy was always an intrinsic part of social work’s mission in the United States. Early social workers played important roles in advancing child welfare, juvenile justice, health care, amelioration of poverty, and integration of the immigrant population into American society (Stern & Axinn, 2012). These lessons of the past must be harnessed by social workers today to meet the current crisis.

An instructive lesson in how mobilization and advocacy could stop the march toward illiberalism occurred in the first week of the Trump presidency. Trump issued a ban on the entry to the United States of Muslims from seven different countries. This move was seen by many as the first step toward illiberalism. The quick and inept implementation of the ban created

chaos at many airports. The ACLU, volunteer lawyers, and civil society activist groups descended on airports to offer assistance to stranded travelers. In response to habeas corpus petitions filed by the ACLU, a federal district court judge issued an order that the Trump Administration cease and desist enforcement of the ban. These efforts delayed implementation of the ban by more than two years (Goldsmith, 2018).

Trump's White nationalist rhetoric has mobilized the far right, played a role in events such as the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and coincided with a surge in violence against religious and ethnic minorities. It is incumbent upon social workers to join in solidarity efforts to support targeted groups and to advocate for approaches that see diversity as an asset, not something to be feared.

### *Citizen Activism*

The survival of democracy demands active engagement by an informed electorate to keep politicians accountable. Citizen activism, as evidenced by women's marches, high school students organizing against gun violence in schools, demonstrators protesting Muslim bans or immigrant detentions, and crowded town halls to defend the Affordable Care Act, shows a desire to defend liberal democracy. Social workers should be quick to participate in these efforts, and identify friends and colleagues who could become parts of a coalition to resist illiberalism (Goldsmith, 2018).

### *Fact-Based Reality*

We must commit to a fact-based reality. Our students and children must be taught to distinguish truth, lies, disinformation, opinion, and belief. They need to be trained to think critically in order to counteract both blatant falsehoods and subtle misrepresentations. Citizens with these abilities will not sway emotion-based believers on either end of the political spectrum, but they may create a reality-based community that is more vibrant and responsive in resisting falsehoods (Anderson, 2017). In both public and private forums, we should call out false information. This may not change the mind or words of the speaker, but those listening might be influenced. Social workers can

take a role in gathering and disseminating accurate information to counter untruths. Social work advocacy has been most successful when the profession uses data derived from research to illuminate societal problems (Reish & Jani, 2012). Indeed, the profession's emphasis on evidence-based practice provides a strong foundation for advocacy, as it allows the discourse to move from being anchored by opinion to being tied to scientifically derived evidence. Blogs, op-eds, and social media are all vehicles that can be used for advocacy.

### *The Right to Vote*

Self-determination, a core social work value, is inherent in the act of voting. Voting is the main mechanism whereby we determine the public policies that frame our lives. The right of all Americans to vote must be maintained. Stiff resistance must be exerted against voter suppression efforts. As social workers, we can take part in voter registration drives to assure that suffrage remains as wide as possible. Too many eligible Americans are not registered to vote. The people most affected by efforts to make voting more difficult are part of social work's constituency: people who are poor, non-White, young, and elderly (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997; Johnson & Feldman, 2020). Beyond having the *right* to vote, the defense of democracy requires *actual* voting. In the United States, both voting and political party affiliation have been in decline since the 1960s (Foa et al., 2016). This disengagement does not bode well for democracy. Removing barriers to voting, and mobilizing voters on election day—not only at the federal level, but also at the state and local levels—is crucial for maintaining democracy. Additionally, social workers can partner with organizations that facilitate people's transportation to the polls, thereby allowing the often-disenfranchised to have their votes influence elections.

### *Refugees and Immigrants*

Social work must continue its historic commitment to refugees and immigrants, now some of the most demonized people on the planet, who are being used as a foil by illiberals such as President Trump to undermine democracy. The United States has had a remarkable history of incorporating immigrants into



its social and institutional fabric. Social workers should tap into that success story to counter the narrative that immigrants are weakening or destroying America. The often-repeated fiction of immigrants threatening the country—said of Germans, Irish, Catholic, Japanese, and Chinese immigrants, to name a few—has been proven over the arc of history not only to be wrong, but also to represent a stain on our legacy. The current “othering” of Central Americans, Muslims, and refugees mirrors that nativist tradition. The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) has challenged the violation of human rights and migrant deaths on the US/Mexico border (IFSW, 2019), and human rights organizations have documented deplorable conditions in immigrant detention centers (Austin-Hillery & Long, 2019; ACLU, 2020; Amnesty International, 2018). Social workers can counter nativism by highlighting fact-based immigration analysis and working with immigrant committees to mitigate the effects of ICE raids and family separation.

### *Reducing Polarization*

As has been done in California, the responsibility for the drawing of electoral districts must be taken out of partisan hands and given to independent bodies; this action alone would greatly increase democratic integrity. Ending gerrymandering might reduce polarization because candidates would have to think about appealing to constituents who hold broader ideologies.

Tomasky (2019) has suggested an interesting initial step toward reducing polarization. He recommends that red states and blue states develop student exchange programs that would give rural and urban high school students a chance to get to know one another and learn about each other’s point of view. This understanding might lead to a less politically polarized citizenry.

### *Embracing Changing Economic Conditions*

Social work education curriculums must continue to address the inequalities created by the economic system. Schools of social work must strengthen the macro-level content being offered so that practitioners are informed and ready to address the shortcomings of an economic system that allows for the concentration of wealth in so few people, and threatens the

economic well-being of so many others, including most of the profession's clients. Social policies that address income inequality and enable lower and middle income workers' salaries to grow would take much of the wind out of the illiberal argument that thrives on economic grievances which target immigrant workers. Economic conditions are not a zero sum economic game, as Trump would have people believe.

## Concluding Comment

This paper may seem to blame Republicans and the Republican Party for the rise of illiberalism in the United States. In fact, neither party is entirely blameless for the current deterioration of U.S. democracy. Recently, the Democratic-controlled New Jersey State Senate proposed an amendment to that state's constitution to enshrine gerrymandering that would have guaranteed perpetual legislative control for the Democrats (Corasaniti, 2018). A backlash across the state stymied the effort. *The New York Times* reported that some Democrats used Internet deception schemes similar to what the Russians used in the 2016 presidential election to aid the Democratic senatorial candidate in Alabama (Whitcomb, 2019). Many on the left have expressed a willingness to limit free speech in the name of political correctness. However, there is a definite imbalance in the political parties' willingness to break democratic norms in order to gain and maintain power, as outlined in this paper (Mann & Ornstein, 2012). Democracies rely on vigorous competition between political opponents who are committed to a fact-based contest over policy, playing by rules that ensure the fairness a democracy needs, and respecting the governing institutions which are essential to a healthy democracy.

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