

To fix American democracy, the left should commit to these four steps | Arlie Hochschild

Ever since Donald Trump captured the imagination of enough American voters to win, liberals I've spoken with have felt in a quandary. Trump seems to be kicking at the foundation of democracy itself, and the Democratic party has yet to reinvent itself into a powerful, coherent alternative.

Some progressives have become highly anxious or depressed, and quit reading the newspapers in an effort to escape such feelings. Others have plunged into work with coalition-oriented groups – such as Indivisible or MoveOn.Org – or have joined single-issue groups such as Black Lives Matter.

What should progressives do? I would propose engaging in one of four pillars of activism. The same person doesn't have to engage all four, but all four need to be coordinated with each other to form one coherent loyal opposition.

The purpose of the first pillar is to affirm in every possible way our precious and fragile system of democracy: its checks and balances, its independent judiciary, its free press.

The second is to recognize that if the Democratic party is to pose a magnetically attractive alternative to Donald Trump, it must address the grievances, the life experiences, the sense of losing ground, of people like those I met and describe in my book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. Millions of Trump voters saw the [Democrats](#) as beholden to corporate interests as the Republicans, and I believe they are right.

Third, we need to get out the vote.

Fourth, those of us in liberal enclaves need to reach out to people who grew up in geographic regions, classes, or religious groups very different from our own. However much we disagree with them, it is important to know them and foolish to thoughtlessly disparage them.

The time I spent in Louisiana researching my book made me acutely aware of the way comedians, films and television shows ridicule the figure of the Southern redneck. I feel as uncomfortable about signs of this class prejudice now as I do about those of racism.

Democrats might be surprised to discover that they are more isolated in their own political bubbles than Republicans are in theirs. According to a 2017 Pew poll, nearly half—47%—of Clinton supporters had no close friends who were Trump supporters, while only 31% of Trump supporters had no close friends who backed Clinton.

A few liberal pundits such as Frank Rich have come out squarely opposed to talk across partisan lines, favoring enclave politics over coalitional politics. To avoid ending up in a “softened state of unilateral disarmament,” Rich advises, “hold on to the anger.” In my view, Rich confuses a search for potential alliances with surrender, and misidentifies empathy with weakness.

An estimated six million voters who opted for Barack Obama in 2012 switched to Donald Trump in 2016. Wouldn't it be interesting to talk with them? According to a Fox News poll, a quarter of Trump voters held a positive view of Bernie Sanders, and from 6 to 12% of those who voted for Sanders in the Democratic primary, later voted for President Trump.

Some minds are open, and even in those that at first seem firmly shut, I discovered potential crossover topics – getting money out of politics, for

example, or rebuilding our infrastructure, reducing nonviolent prison populations, limiting violent video games for children, expanding renewable energy, compromising on town square statues and avoiding nuclear war.

More than 70 grassroots groups interested in across-the-divide talk have risen across the country and I've personally participated in one of them, [Living Room Conversations](#). On the website of an umbrella group called the [Bridge Alliance](#), one can find other cross-partisan groups with names such as Common Good, Better Angels, American Public Square, and AllSides.

As of October 2017, the Bridge Alliance had three million supporters. As activists, we can stick to pillars 1-3 and do good work without talking with those who disagree with us, but I think whatever we're doing, we need to realize that someone should be out there working on pillar 4 if we're going to weave enough coalitions and reduce enough animosity to hold the country together.

In the past, we had ways of mixing up Americans who differ by class, race, and region – lines along which we now often vote. More than four decades back, the compulsory draft offered that mix for men, and labor unions provided that for many workers, while public schools offered it to many children. Today we need to create new ways to bridge our differences.

A national service program could place young Americans of every race, region, and religion in a yearlong service project somewhere far from home. We could also set up a nationwide high school domestic exchange program – high school seniors from the South could spend a month with families of students in the North, and the North could, in this way, go South.

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Coasts could go inland, the inland head to the coasts. Students could prepare for this by learning active listening and epistemology – how we know what we know – as well as history and civics. Students could lay solar panels on school roofs, build parks, plant gardens.

Maybe I'm just dreaming. But in this dream, as students wash dishes, hammer nails, and plant seeds, they take on the questions that so bitterly divide us. Are we drifting away from democracy? Who do we imagine to be cutting in line ahead of us? How do we fairly distribute a chance at the American Dream? How can we build care for others into the very concept of it?

Of course, by itself, the simple act of crossing the partisan divide will not resolve our crisis. But it could help us begin to slowly rebuild a nation in which no American – right or left – need ever feel like a stranger in our own land.

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