



Magazine

Fix this democracy — now

38 ideas for repairing our badly broken civic life

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In his study of 19th-century American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville explained his mission this way: “I undertook to see, not differently, but further than the parties; and while they are occupied with the next day, I wanted to ponder the future.” Nearly two centuries later, all of us — Republican, Democrat, Trump supporter, Trump critic — should be able to agree that some future-pondering about the state of our democracy is in order.

In so many ways, the underlying conditions of U.S. democracy need repair. Among American citizens, ideological and philosophical divisions seem insurmountably sharp; among their representatives in Washington, compromise appears impossible. Whatever side you were on in last year's election, it's clear that the campaign brought these problems dramatically to the surface of our national life; it's also clear that these challenges would have been with us, in equal measure, no matter who won.

And so, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the election, we asked dozens of writers and artists to look beyond the day-to-day upheavals of the news cycle and propose one idea that could help fix the long-term problems bedeviling American democracy. The result: 38 conservative, liberal, practical, creative, broad, specific, technocratic, provocative solutions for an unsettled country. — *Richard Just*

Illustration by Michael Bierut; animation by [Kolin Pope](#)

REDEFINE THE FLAG

BY ARLIE RUSSELL HOCHSCHILD

Hochschild is the author of "[Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right.](#)"

How do we cross the empathy wall now dividing Trump fan from foe? When we interact with Americans we don't agree with, how do we actually talk to them? Do we just say, "This is what I believe"? No. Instead, we must learn to symbol stretch. During the five years I researched tea party and Trump voters in southern Louisiana, I followed a master of the symbol stretch: Russel Honoré, a retired three-star general and the legendary commander of the military joint task force that rescued Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans.

Honoré was struck, during his rescue work, by Louisiana’s horrendous pollution. He retired from the Army, became an environmental activist and — facing the challenge of talking about regulating polluters to conservative Republicans who opposed doing so — discovered a way of opening their minds. One day in Lake Charles, I watched him speak to a group of conservative businessmen who think of themselves as lovers of freedom — freedom to start their own business, to get rich, to avoid government regulation. “This morning, I looked out at Lake Charles,” the general began, “and saw a man in a boat. He had his fishing line out and he had his bucket ready. But that man is *not free to pull up an uncontaminated fish.*” I could see the audience nodding. The general had stretched the idea of freedom.

In the same spirit, we need to stretch the idea of patriotism. As I drove around Louisiana, I saw American flags posted on mailboxes, fluttering from truck beds and hanging from back porches. For most Trump fans I came to know, the flag symbolized a willingness to sacrifice — even die — for their country. It did not symbolize an independent judiciary or a free press as part of the system of checks and balances that undergirds democracy. Maybe it’s time to stretch the meaning of the American flag, from emblem of sacrifice to symbol of that for which we would sacrifice: a system that allows no person, even a president, to put himself above the law.

REQUIRE EVERYONE TO VOTE

BY NANCY ISENBERG AND ANDREW BURSTEIN

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