

UCLA School of Law
Collective for Racial & Disability Justice

A TURNING POINT IS NOT A GUARANTEE

What Democratic Resistance & Disability Justice Teach Us About the Work Ahead

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OVERVIEW

On November 3, voters delivered a historic election. Democrats won control of the House and Senate, ending unified Republican control of Congress. For people concerned about civil rights, the concentration of executive power, and threats to democratic institutions, the result creates an opening for oversight, accountability, and legislative action. It also raises a question that received far less attention during the campaigns: *What happens now?*

Before an election, the immediate objective is relatively clear. People organize, share information, challenge barriers to participation, and help voters exercise their rights. The period after an election is less straightforward. Political power shifts, but institutions do not reset. Laws already enacted remain in force. Federal agencies continue issuing rules and administering programs. Courts, state governments, employers, and other institutions retain authority over decisions affecting everyday life. The political movements that supported an administration's policies do not disappear because their candidates lose races.

This uncertainty is especially important in the United States today. The newly elected Congress will not convene until January 2027, and President Trump remains in office. The election changed who will exercise congressional power, not who directs the executive branch. The dynamic will shape what can be investigated, constrained, funded, legislated, or reversed—and how quickly.

There is also a deeper question at hand. If democratic recovery means returning institutions to how they functioned before the current crisis, whose democracy are we restoring? American history provides ample evidence that institutions can operate according to established procedures while denying people equal protection, autonomy, and political voice. For racialized and disabled communities, this is not an abstract concern. It is part of the history of voting rights, labor, education, healthcare, institutionalization, and civil rights enforcement.

The challenge after the 2026 midterms is to defend democratic safeguards while transforming the racialized and ableist conditions that have limited who can benefit from them. That requires an understanding of how authoritarian power persists, how democratic gains have been won and lost, and how organized communities can turn an electoral opening into lasting change.

AN ELECTION IS AN OPENING, NOT A RECOVERY

Scholars use the term *democratic backsliding* to describe the gradual weakening of the institutions and practices through which governments are held accountable. Contemporary erosion of democratic principles often occurs through legally framed administrative decisions, expanded executive authority, the weakening of oversight, constraints on civil society, and changes to the enforcement of rights. These developments may be difficult to recognize as a single crisis because they accumulate over time. Comparative research on autocratization shows why elections, while indispensable, are an incomplete measure of a democracy's health.

The concept of competitive authoritarianism helps to explain this tension. Therein elections remain meaningful, but incumbents use state power or institutional advantages to tilt the political playing field. In a September 2026 analysis, political scientists Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Daniel Ziblatt characterized the United States under Trump's second presidency as a form of soft competitive authoritarianism. Their analysis emphasized the coexistence of competitive elections with abuses of public authority, and identifies decentralized election administration and other sources of institutional and civic resistance as important constraints. They warned that an opposition victory would leave the prospects for democratic recovery uncertain.

That warning has now become particularly relevant. The incoming Congress can investigate executive actions, demand information, oversee agencies, make appropriations decisions, and propose legislation. While those powers are considerable, congressional oversight cannot automatically reverse every agency decision. Moreover, new laws remain subject to constitutional procedures, including the possibility of a presidential veto. State and local governments will continue to administer essential programs, sometimes with room to make their own choices and sometimes under federal mandates. Meanwhile, actions taken during the months between the election and the next congressional session can shape what options the new Congress inherits.

Research suggests that the challenge extends beyond the constitutional division of powers. A recent study of 25 countries that experienced substantial democratic backsliding found that only four had recovered their previous level of democratic quality, and only one recovery had endured at least five years. This finding challenges the assumption that winning an election alone can set a country on a path back to democracy.

It is important not to mistake institutional continuity for democratic neutrality. Government agencies can remain open while their capacity to enforce rights is reduced. Courts may continue operating while access to remedies becomes more difficult. Elections can be conducted and certified while barriers to participation persist. Those who benefit from a weakened system may continue exercising influence through networks of political, economic, and civic power even after an electoral defeat. History shows why the distinction between changing officeholders and changing the conditions under which power operates is essential.

> ***It is important not to mistake institutional continuity for democratic neutrality.***



HISTORY WARNS AGAINST EASY STORIES OF PROGRESS

American history is often told as a sequence of expansions in freedom: emancipation, Reconstruction, progressive reform, civil rights legislation, disability rights, and greater recognition of equal citizenship. While these victories certainly deserve recognition, a history organized around celebrated milestones can obscure the struggles required to defend those gains, the people left outside them, and the harms embedded in reforms widely praised as advances.

Reconstruction reveals what happens when rights lose the institutions and political will needed to protect them. The Civil War was followed by constitutional amendments and federal laws establishing a new legal foundation for Black citizenship and political participation. Black communities organized, voted, built institutions, and exercised public leadership. These were profound democratic achievements. Their rollback was not inevitable. White supremacist violence, political intimidation, manipulated elections, adverse judicial decisions, and retreating federal enforcement dismantled those gains. As the U.S. House Office of the Historian documents, the erosion of Reconstruction depended on organized resistance to multiracial democracy and the failure of institutions to uphold rights established in law.

Reconstruction demonstrates that a legal victory can be real and still be vulnerable. Rights written into the Constitution require administrative capacity, public accountability, political commitment, and the organized ability of communities to demand enforcement. It also cautions against interpreting backlash as evidence that the original expansion of democracy went too far. Powerful opposition can emerge precisely because formerly excluded communities have gained meaningful political influence.

The Progressive Era offers a different warning. Reform can expand public protection while deepening exclusion. Popular comparisons between the present and the Gilded Age often evoke concentrated wealth and the reforms that followed it. Progressive reformers challenged powerful industries, sought to improve



Tom Olin

working conditions, and expanded the idea of public responsibility for social welfare. Those changes were significant. However, the same era also legitimized racial hierarchy, compulsory institutionalization, immigration restrictions, and eugenics. Ideas about intelligence, productivity, bodily fitness, and social worth determined whose lives would be protected and whose autonomy could be curtailed in the name of public improvement.

Indiana enacted the nation's first compulsory eugenic sterilization law in 1907. California enacted a sterilization law in 1909 that disproportionately targeted Latino patients, with particularly pronounced disparities affecting Latina women and girls. Historian Paul Lawrie's work on race, labor, and disability in the Progressive Era shows how the classification of bodies as fit or unfit for work helped reproduce racialized hierarchies within institutions claiming scientific authority. The danger was not a lack of reform. It was reform built around assumptions that some people were less capable, less deserving, or less entitled to direct their own lives. History challenges the idea that rebuilding public institutions necessarily makes them more just.

The history of fascism adds a critical dimension. In *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert Paxton examines how fascist movements were enabled by relationships with established political actors rather than by mass support alone. Sheri Berman's research on Weimar Germany likewise complicates the assumption that an active civil society always protects democracy. Associational networks can strengthen antidemocratic mobilization under certain conditions. In short, antidemocratic projects can survive through established institutions, political alliances, organizations, and social relationships. Losing an election does not dissolve those networks.

History also offers examples of communities overcoming institutional resistance. The civil rights and disability rights movements demonstrate that organizing often remains necessary after a legal victory. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 emerged from sustained organizing, legal challenges, community leadership, and pressure on public institutions. Their passage did not end the struggle over implementation or enforcement. Disability rights history provides a particularly revealing illustration of this problem.

Legal victories still require organized pressure to become enforceable protections. The 1977 Section 504 protests offer a good example. Four years after Congress prohibited disability discrimination in federally funded programs, implementing regulations remained unsigned. Disability activists organized sustained protests, including a nearly month-long occupation in San Francisco supported by the Black Panther Party and involving Black disabled organizer Brad Lomax. As Sami Schalk documents in *Black Disability Politics*, that collaboration reflected a deeper history of Black disability organizing and cross-movement solidarity. Organizers identified a specific governmental responsibility, built a coalition capable of sustaining pressure, and compelled the federal government to act.

> ***Reconstruction demonstrates that a legal victory can be real and still be vulnerable. Rights written into the Constitution require administrative capacity, public accountability, political commitment, and the organized ability of communities to demand enforcement.***

These histories reveal different dimensions of the same challenge. Reconstruction demonstrates the vulnerability of democratic gains to organized backlash and weakened enforcement. The Progressive Era exposes how reforms can reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to overcome. European fascism demonstrates how established institutions and civic networks can enable authoritarian power. Civil rights organizing shows how sustained collective action can compel institutions to act.

The lesson is not that democratic progress is illusory or reform is futile. It is that neither is inevitable. The challenge after an electoral victory is to defend existing protections, confront exclusion embedded within institutions, and sustain the organized power necessary to make rights effective. This historical perspective is essential to understanding why democratic recovery requires more than replacing those who hold office.

LESSONS FROM ABROAD



The United States is not alone in facing uncertainty after an electoral breakthrough. Comparative research on democratic recovery highlights the importance of resilient civic organizations, broad coalitions, institutional accountability, and the difficulty of reversing changes made by governments that weakened democratic safeguards. Recent events in Poland, Brazil, and Hungary offer insight into these challenges. They also reveal how political alliances across national borders can influence struggles over democratic governance.

Poland illustrates how institutional arrangements can outlast the government that created them. After an opposition coalition defeated the Law and Justice (PiS) party in 2023, Prime Minister Donald Tusk's government sought to reverse changes affecting judicial independence and other democratic safeguards. Those efforts encountered resistance from institutions and officials aligned with the previous government. In 2025, PiS-backed Karol Nawrocki won the presidency with public support from the Trump administration. In February 2026, he vetoed legislation intended to reform judicial appointments. Poland demonstrates how electoral change can produce a divided government in which officials retaining institutional authority can obstruct reforms. It also exposes an underlying dilemma: how does one correct institutional abuses while respecting the legal safeguards and procedures democratic recovery seeks to protect.

Brazil offers particularly direct parallels with the United States. After Jair Bolsonaro lost the 2022 presidential election, his supporters attacked Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace on January 8, 2023. The assault closely resembled the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol. As

Dean Jackson and João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos explain, while the objective differed, both attacks followed campaigns promoting false election-fraud claims and relied on digital networks to mobilize supporters.

The countries subsequently took different approaches to accountability. Brazilian courts investigated efforts to overturn the election, culminating in Jair Bolsonaro's 2025 conviction for attempting a coup. In the United States, President Trump pardoned or commuted sentences for offenses connected to January 6 after returning to office. These developments reflect different constitutional and institutional circumstances, as well as continuing disputes over judicial authority, due process, and democratic accountability.

Brazil's October 2026 presidential election further illustrates why these struggles do not end with one electoral defeat. President Lula won reelection against Bolsonaro's son, Flávio Bolsonaro, who rejected the results and subsequently fled to the United States while facing criminal investigations in Brazil. The Trump administration permitted his entry, and Trump publicly questioned the election's legitimacy despite its recognition by international observers. As a Congressional Research Service report documents, the administration's relationships with the Bolsonaro family have generated concerns about foreign political interference and the use of diplomatic and economic pressure. Brazil illustrates how the struggle over electoral legitimacy can continue across successive elections, with international political relationships providing additional avenues for influence.

Hungary demonstrates the possibilities and difficulties of reversing deeply entrenched institutional changes. Viktor Orbán spent 16 years reshaping the country's judiciary, media, electoral system, and other institutions. His governing approach became influential among American conservatives, while his administration cultivated political networks extending across Europe and the United States. Trump publicly supported Orbán's April 2026 reelection campaign, and Vice President JD Vance traveled to Budapest to campaign alongside him. Despite that support, Orbán lost to Péter Magyar's Tisza party, which secured a parliamentary supermajority.

The new Hungarian government has since pursued extensive institutional reforms, including measures addressing corruption, judicial independence, and public media. In a September 2026 assessment, political scientist Thomas Carothers documents significant progress while identifying concerns about the speed of certain changes and the adequacy of public consultation. Hungary illustrates the opportunities created by a substantial electoral mandate, alongside the importance of ensuring that institutional reform strengthens democratic safeguards rather than reproducing concentrated authority.

These examples differ sharply from the U.S. midterms: each involved a change of governing leadership, whereas the presidency and executive agencies remain under Trump's direction. They are useful for identifying dilemmas, not for predicting events here. They also illustrate a tension within democratic recovery itself. Political leaders may seek rapid institutional change, while democratic legitimacy depends on lawful procedures, transparency, public participation, and accountability that extends to their own allies. Durable recovery cannot be measured by the removal of one set of leaders alone.

These countries' experiences reveal shared challenges: the persistence of institutional arrangements after political defeat, the role of domestic and international political networks, and the difficulty of translating electoral victories into durable democratic protections. They also reinforce a lesson from American history: democratic recovery depends on how power is exercised and constrained, whether rights can be enforced, and who gains a meaningful role in shaping the institutions that emerge.





WHOSE DEMOCRACY ARE WE DEFENDING?

Studies of democratic backsliding typically assess competitive elections, judicial independence, institutional checks, executive accountability, and civil liberties. Despite these essential standards, a democracy can meet formal tests while some people remain excluded from participation, unprotected against discrimination, or deprived of the resources needed to exercise their rights. The historical record makes this especially difficult to ignore. Restoring familiar institutional arrangements may restore safeguards that marginalized communities need while preserving older forms of inequality embedded within those same systems.

Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit) provides a way to examine that contradiction. DisCrit explores how racism and ableism operate together, often through categories, policies, and administrative practices presented as neutral. It directs attention to whose knowledge is recognized, how institutions classify people, which forms of dependence and autonomy are valued, and how resources and authority are distributed. Applied to democratic recovery, DisCrit asks more of institutions than returning to the status quo. It asks whether people historically excluded from power can exercise rights, shape decisions, and obtain meaningful remedies.

Voting offers a direct example. A competitive election may be fairly counted and lawfully certified while disabled voters still encounter inaccessible procedures, restrictions associated with institutionalization or legal decision-making, or barriers involving transportation and accessible information. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission's 2025 report on voters with disabilities documents improvements in access alongside persistent obstacles. Those barriers intersect with racial discrimination, language access, poverty, and the ability to obtain assistance. Democratic participation must therefore be understood through the experiences of people trying to exercise their



rights, not solely through the formal integrity of election administration.

Civil rights enforcement presents a related problem. A law may remain on the books while staffing, investigative authority, data collection, or access to remedies weakens. A 2026 Human Rights Watch investigation describes losses in federal enforcement capacity across agencies responsible for protecting rights in areas including education, housing, employment, and policing. The effects are not evenly distributed. People who already face barriers to legal representation, accessible complaint processes, or institutional credibility may be least able to absorb the loss of enforcement mechanisms.

The Department of Labor's August 2026 changes to Section 503 regulations removed specified disability self-identification, data collection, and utilization-analysis requirements for federal contractors, while leaving the statute's underlying nondiscrimination and affirmative-action obligations in place. The department argued that the removed requirements created legal and administrative problems. In response, advocates raised concerns about how discrimination monitoring, compliance, disparities, and effectiveness will be assessed without those mechanisms. The larger point is that administrative rules shape the visibility and enforceability of rights long before a court decides a case.

With regards to healthcare and economic security, in 2026 the Medicaid termination rule was issued. States must begin applying new monthly activity requirements to certain adults by January 1, 2027. These are commonly described as work requirements, which operate as job penalties that create risks through inaccessible reporting systems, documentation demands, and difficulties establishing eligibility for exemptions. Research on administrative burden helps explain how seemingly routine procedures obstruct access to public programs. Losing coverage can threaten healthcare, community-based services, employment, housing, and the capacity to participate in civic life. States have implementation responsibilities and some administrative choices, but they cannot erase federal statutory mandates on their own.

Civil rights is more than a question of formal recognition. Data systems determine which disparities government can see. Agency practices determine which complaints receive an investigation. Program rules determine whether people can retain the

services that make community life possible. Policies about work, care, disability, and dependence can reproduce assumptions about whose contributions count and who is considered deserving of support. The links to Reconstruction and the Progressive Era are not rhetorical. Legal rights and administrative arrangements can diverge, and allegedly neutral criteria can distribute protection unequally.

DisCrit also turns a critical lens on movements organized to defend democracy. We have seen coalitions advocate for inclusive institutions while also holding inaccessible meetings, relying on uncompensated community expertise, or assuming participants can afford transportation, childcare, personal assistance, time away from work, or the risk of lost benefits. Invitations to participate do not create equal influence when people face different costs in joining. Durable democratic organizing must make accessibility, material support, and community authority part of its design. The standard for democratic recovery, then, cannot be limited to whether institutions function again. It must include whether they protect people who have been excluded, and whether those people gain power to change how the institutions operate.

Jeff Markowitz



AFTER THE VOTE, RESISTANCE REQUIRES ORGANIZATION

The election changed the immediate political terrain. It did not resolve the need for democratic resistance. During a campaign, participants unite around the objective of winning an election or protecting the vote. Afterward, the priorities multiply. The work now encompasses monitoring agencies, protecting people from immediate harm, supporting legal accountability, influencing implementation, maintaining civic participation, and pursuing longer-term reforms. Strategies that were effective in getting people to the polls are unlikely to accomplish these different tasks.

Research on civil resistance offers helpful guidance. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan found that nonviolent campaigns historically achieved their stated objectives more often than violent campaigns, in part because they enabled wider participation and more varied forms of pressure. More recent scholarship asks how movements can adapt as authoritarian governments learn to counter them. In an October 2026 analysis, Breza Race Maksimovic and Jamila Raqib caution against equating resistance with visible street protest alone. They encourage the strategic use of noncooperation, organizational learning, and forms of leverage that extend beyond a single public demonstration.

Research on the U.S. civil rights movement offers a complementary lesson. Political scientist Omar Wasow's study of Black-led protests during the 1960s found that tactics helped shape what national media and political elites discussed, influencing which public concerns received attention. Visibility can be valuable, but public attention is a means toward institutional change. Its usefulness depends on the objectives and strategies of those organizing.


Tony Webster

The distinction between mobilizing and organizing is especially important here. Mobilization can bring many people together quickly around a particular event. Organization develops relationships, leadership, trust, and the capacity to keep working after that event ends. In *How Organizations Develop Activists*, Hahrie Han shows how civic associations cultivate sustained participation and leadership. In *Twitter and Tear Gas*, Zeynep Tufekci describes how digitally networked movements can mobilize large numbers while lacking the internal structures needed for negotiation and enduring influence. The lesson is not to abandon demonstrations or digital tools. It is to connect them to institutions, relationships, and campaigns able to pursue specific goals over time.

Broad coalitions are essential to defending democracy, particularly when institutions are under threat. Research on democratic backsliding shows that how political opponents respond to abuses of power can influence whether democratic erosion continues. At the same time, political polarization shows how partisan loyalty can lead people to overlook undemocratic behavior by leaders they support. Effective coalitions often bring together people who disagree on many policy issues but share commitments to fair elections, equal political rights, independent institutions, and limits on government power. Those commitments must apply consistently, including when members of one's own party or coalition violate them.

Breadth, however, cannot be achieved by making the rights of marginalized communities negotiable. An agreement to defend democratic rules is hollow if some people are denied the ability to use them. The challenge is to build alliances capable of resisting abuses while preserving space for deeper debates about how institutions should change.

None of this suggests that community organizations must take on every political problem. Capacity is limited, resources in short supply, and constant crisis response can exhaust the spoons of people doing the work. Effective strategy requires division of labor, coordination, and realistic priorities. Researchers can strengthen the evidence base, lawyers can identify remedies, organizers can build sustained constituencies, service providers can recognize harms as they emerge, and affected communities must have authority to define needs and judge proposed responses. The strongest collaborations begin by asking what people can use, rather than asking them to participate in another process with no clear benefit.

Chona Kasinger for Disabled And Here



THE WORK AHEAD

The 2026 midterms created an opening, but what happens next is far from certain. The policies threatening people's rights, livelihoods, and independence remain in place, and the institutions responsible for protecting them are still under pressure. History warns us what can happen when democratic gains are left undefended. It also shows what organized communities can accomplish when they refuse to accept the limits of existing institutions. The challenge now is to turn an electoral victory into lasting protections and meaningful change. For organizations working at the intersections of race and disability, that work requires three interconnected commitments: anticipate emerging threats and opportunities, respond with evidence and resources communities can use, and build the collective power and more just institutions needed for lasting change.

No single organization can monitor every threat, respond to every policy change, or build every alternative. The challenge is to connect the work already underway, identify responsibilities that remain unmet, and ensure that organizations with different forms of expertise can make meaningful contributions without duplicating one another's efforts. That means making existing research more accessible, helping communities recognize opportunities to intervene, connecting legal protections with practical remedies, and building policy alternatives grounded in both research and lived experience. The measure of collaboration should not be how many organizations sign onto a shared statement, but whether the work equips communities to exercise greater power and achieve meaningful change.

Anticipate: Track Risks & Openings

The months between the midterms and the convening of the new Congress demand careful attention. Election certification, government funding decisions, agency rulemaking, court proceedings, and the implementation of previously enacted laws will continue. Later, the new congressional majority may create additional openings for oversight and policy

THREE INTERCONNECTED STRATEGIES FOR JUSTICE



ANTICIPATE

Track Risks & Openings

- Monitor policy changes
- Identify emerging challenges and consequential decisions
- Locate opportunities for intervention

AWARENESS & PREPARATION



RESPOND

Turn Evidence Into Accountability

- Translate research into actionable resources that support community-led advocacy
- Mobilize policy expertise and community knowledge to demand meaningful action

EVIDENCE & ACTION



BUILD

Make Rights & Relationships Last

- Strengthen community and collective power
- Create pathways for meaningful shared leadership
- Cultivate systems of care that sustain long-term change

SOLIDARITY & TRANSFORMATION

change. Some threats will be highly visible. Others will appear as technical revisions to eligibility criteria, reporting requirements, administrative procedures, or enforcement priorities.

An effective early-warning approach does not treat every disagreement as evidence of authoritarianism. It distinguishes confirmed developments from speculation, identifies the institutions with authority to act, and assesses how proposed changes would affect people differently across race, disability, gender, income, and other dimensions of lived experience. It also tracks opportunities such as public comment periods, oversight hearings, state implementation decisions, litigation developments, and chances to preserve or strengthen protections.

Organizations already monitoring federal and state policy developments are particularly well positioned to help communities anticipate what comes next. The challenge is not simply to track more activity, but to make existing information more useful: identifying consequential deadlines, clarifying where decisions remain open, explaining who may be affected, and connecting emerging risks with opportunities for preparation or intervention. Sharing this information through accessible, existing networks can help organizations act without requiring every group to build its own monitoring infrastructure.

Respond: Turn Evidence Into Accountability

Identifying a threat is useful only if people can act on that knowledge. The response should begin with identifying: What needs to change, who has the authority to change it, and what would an effective remedy look like? Different problems call for different strategies for action.

Research organizations can support these efforts by producing accessible explanations of rules and decisions, documenting disparities, developing plain-language legal and policy resources, preparing testimony or oversight questions, identifying opportunities for public comment, and supplying evidence for community-led advocacy. However, these contributions should begin with an understanding of what frontline organizations and communities are already doing, where existing resources fall short, and what would strengthen their efforts. Publishing another report is not an adequate response if the people who need it cannot use it or if it fails to clarify what needs to change. At CRDJ, we aim to put our research and legal-policy expertise to work in ways that meet concrete needs, offering substantive information, resources, and tools rather than asking communities to participate in another process without a clear benefit. We welcome opportunities to support work already underway through research, policy analysis, and practical resources. Organizations and community organizers with specific needs or questions can reach us at crdj@law.ucla.edu.

Unfortunately, evidence also has limits. Research can document harm and clarify choices, but it does not compel an institution to act. That is why knowledge mobilization must be connected to relationships, shared priorities, and organized public accountability. Effective partnerships begin with what communities and practitioners already need, acknowledge their expertise, and avoid extracting stories or participation without offering resources in return. Responsiveness means adapting when a tactic fails, rather than assuming that more outreach or greater volume will solve the problem.

Build: Make Rights & Relationships Last

Immediate protection cannot be postponed until institutions are transformed. People need access to healthcare, housing, education, employment, assistance, and enforceable rights now. Our country's history shows the limits of relying upon the status quo ante as the final goal. Many of the practices that produced racialized and ableist harm were present long before the current administration. Rebuilding an agency, policy, or program without examining its standards, data practices, or treatment of people affected by its decisions may restore capacity while leaving those exclusions intact.

Abolitionist perspectives help clarify what longer-term transformation can mean. In *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore examines the structures that produce carceral power and the political and economic conditions necessary to move beyond it. Abolitionist traditions emphasize building forms of care, security, accountability, and collective life that reduce reliance on coercion and deprivation. Within racial and disability justice work, that orientation can guide efforts to strengthen community-based services, reduce punitive conditions attached to essential support, expand genuine autonomy, and place affected communities in decision-making roles. Defending existing protections and creating alternatives can happen together.

Building also requires organizations capable of sustaining the people and relationships that make collective action possible. In *Let This Radicalize You*, Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba emphasize reciprocal care, interdependence, and collective responsibility as essential to sustaining movements through prolonged struggles. Putting these principles into practice



requires accessible participation, stable relationships, trusted information, leadership development, and the resources people need to remain involved. It also means moving beyond inviting marginalized communities into structures designed without them. Instead, ensuring they have meaningful authority to shape decisions and priorities. Responsibilities must be shared so that movements do not depend on uncompensated labor, exhaustion, or the same people responding to every crisis. This work may be less visible than electoral victories or mass demonstrations, but it is what allows collective action to endure. The way we organize should reflect the more just and interdependent world we are working to build.

The result should be a movement ecosystem better prepared to protect people from immediate harm and pursue change beyond the next election cycle. That does not require every organization to pursue the same agenda. It requires a shared commitment to democratic participation, coordination across different forms of expertise, and accountability to the people whose lives are affected by institutional decisions.



A TURNING POINT IS SOMETHING WE BUILD

The 2026 midterms demonstrated that political power can change hands under conditions of democratic strain. The incoming Congress will have opportunities to examine federal actions and press for accountability even though the election cannot erase policies already underway, repair weakened enforcement systems, or dissolve the organizations and alliances that supported democratic erosion. History helps make the work ahead clearer. Reconstruction shows that rights can be hollowed out when enforcement collapses and organized backlash succeeds. The Progressive Era shows why celebrated reform deserves scrutiny when its benefits and burdens are distributed through racialized and ableist assumptions. The history of fascism demonstrates how established institutions and civic networks can enable antidemocratic power. The continued fight to enforce Section 504 shows that sustained cross-movement organizing can compel government to make rights effective.

International comparisons add a warning against expecting institutional recovery to follow automatically from electoral victory. The scholarship on resistance shows why durable organizations, broad coalitions, strategic action, and meaningful accountability are essential. But we must ask ourselves who can participate in these spaces, who is missing, whose knowledge shapes decisions, and whether people have the protections and resources required to exercise power.

The work ahead is both protective and transformative. We need institutions capable of constraining abuses and enforcing existing rights. We also need communities with the authority, resources, and relationships to change institutions that have long denied them equal protection and self-determination. These projects must reinforce each other when democratic defense is grounded in racial and disability justice.

November 3 created an opening. Whether it becomes a turning point depends on what we defend, what we change, and what we build together.

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