

Opinion America is in a ‘Great Pulling Apart.’ Can we pull together?



By [Danielle Allen](#)

Contributing columnist | [+ Follow](#)

January 31, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST

Our nation is in desperate need of democracy renovation. We need to bring this old house we all share up to date and fit for purpose in the 21st century.

To some extent, our challenges are simply that our family is bigger now. Systems are straining under the scale and complexity of our family's needs.

But there's also the fact that our house wasn't originally built for everyone. Some took light-filled rooms with beautiful views. Others were consigned to basements. We've got to renovate so that there are good rooms for all — so that power is broadly shared.

Finally, there's the challenge that social media has blasted one of the original pillars of our Constitution out from under us. Geographic dispersal of the citizenry was supposed to mean that people had to go through elected representatives to get their views into the public sphere. This was supposed to slow the spread of dangerous factions and extreme views. In the design of our Constitution, geographic dispersal was essential to making representation work. But the internet — and social media especially — has shrunk the nation down to one crowded neighborhood. In a country made so “small,” we need to reimagine the very institutions of representative government.

So, let's do that now, together.

All of us could look around and name forms of the deterioration that afflict our house. We experience the stresses from these pain points via polarization, divisiveness, toxicity, misinformation, distrust of each other and our political institutions, and government dysfunction. These are the symptoms we report. The root causes are those named above.

There's plenty to be said about what we can do to tackle all these problems. First, I want to share why I care.

Bonds of love

When I was born in 1971, I inherited an original love of democracy from my family. My great-grandparents on my mom's side fought for women's right to vote and my great-grandmother was president of the League of Women Voters in Michigan in the 1930s. On my dad's side, my grandfather helped found one of the first NAACP chapters in northern Florida in the 1940s, an exceptionally dangerous undertaking. We were a family that fought impossible fights and won.

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As I grew up, civic engagement was all around me. My father had 11 brothers and sisters. Six family members, including my dad, migrated to California in the late 1950s and early '60s, fleeing the Jim Crow South and seeking new opportunities and true freedoms. I grew up in a huge network of aunts, uncles and cousins, where participation was the rule. And they engaged across the political spectrum. In one glorious year in my youth, my aunt was on the ballot for Congress in the San Francisco Bay Area for the Peace and Freedom Party while my dad was running for the U.S. Senate from Southern California as a Reagan Republican.

Family gatherings were amazing forums for debate. My dad and aunt would go at it. He tall and skinny, bald, with a wreath of pipe-smoke curling around his head; she gay, built like a Mack truck, and with an incredible belly laugh. They agreed on *what* they were after: empowerment for themselves, their families and their communities. But they disagreed mightily on how to get there. My dad argued for market freedoms and civic virtues; my aunt for public-sector investment across society and experiments in living.

But they never broke the bonds of love. They debated the ideas, but they never fought the people. It was always clear that they would be there for one another, come what may. And both were empowered. They shaped their own fates and contributed to shaping the fates of their communities. That empowerment visibly nourished them. I could see it in their bearing, their energy and their success. This is where I learned my ideal of what democracy is, and why it matters.

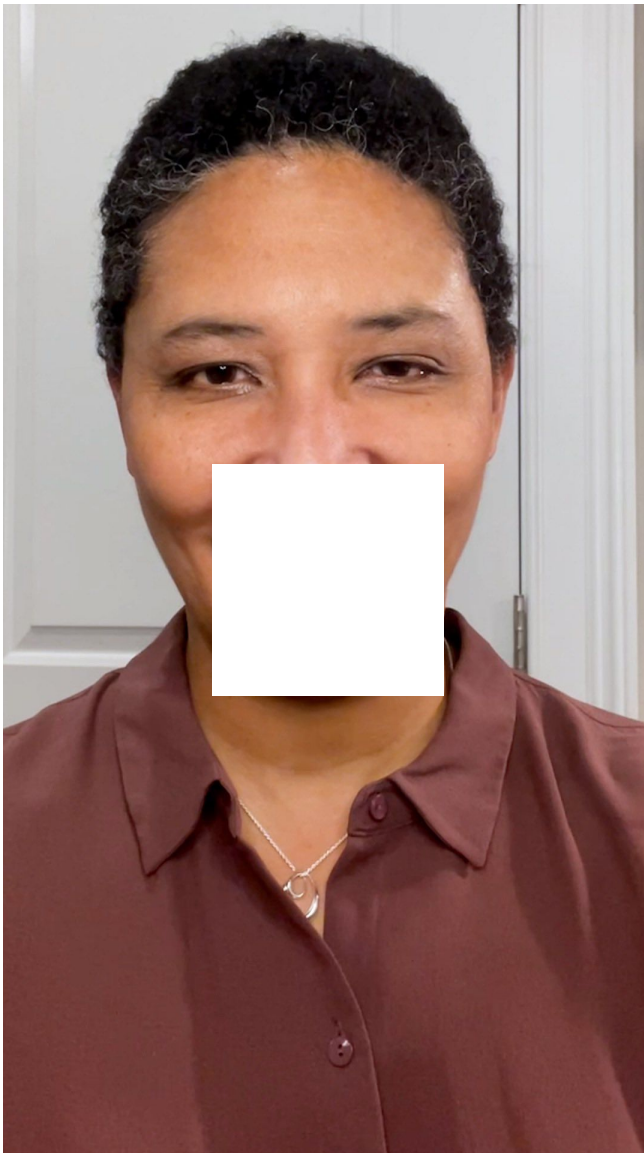
Then our democracy became personal to me — for both its value and its failures.

This occurred as I watched my own generation come into adulthood. My parents' generation moved up, from working class or lower-middle class to solidly middle class. Such has not been the case with my generation.



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In 2017, Post columnist Danielle Allen had the opportunity to co-chair a national commission mounted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

The academy is older than the country. It was founded by the same people who drove the Revolution — John Hancock and John Adams, among others. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were members.

Its charge then was to supply the new country with the knowledge resources it would need for success. “The commission I was invited to chair was aimed at answering the same questions I was asking, so I leaped at the chance,” she writes. In 2020, they released “Our Common Purpose” — a report on reinventing U.S. democracy for the 21st century.

“That’s how I got here. Many others are here with me — with us — and with their own American origin stories. We have much to talk about.”

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Over the half century of my lifetime, our nation has experienced a “Great Pulling Apart”, as I call it. My lifetime has coincided with the huge rise of income and wealth inequality in the country, with the rise of mass incarceration, and with the stunning rise of polarization. The life of my family, too, has been marked by the Great Pulling Apart. Some of us have reached new heights on elevators of opportunity; I hold a tenured professorship at Harvard; my brother is a corporate executive; cousins have found success as doctors or accountants.

But I also have dead cousins — from substance-use disorder and homicide. And cousins whose lives have been painfully impacted by incarceration, homelessness, mental illness and struggles to access health care. What the country has experienced, so too has my family.

Red alert on our democracy

Personally, the worst moment for me was in 2009 when I lost [my youngest cousin, Michael](#), to homicide — after his long incarceration from a first arrest in 1995 for an attempted carjacking. His death was devastating. I began a journey to change the dynamics that led to it.

I dug into justice reform work. That taught me that even where there was bipartisan agreement about things we should change, we could rarely get changes through. The Great Pulling Apart, it turns out, has left us in a place where we can no longer govern ourselves so as to steer toward solutions to some of our worst problems.

My red alert on democracy came in 2013. That year the American people gave Congress an approval rating [of 9 percent](#). This was very bad. Congress was supposed to be the people’s house. It was supposed to be the instrument through which we the people give voice to the directions we would like our society to pursue. For so few of us to approve of our own voice is a profound indictment of the health of our governance mechanisms.

In the years since, many people have experienced their own red alerts about the health of our democracy, but mine came at that moment.

Democracy, then, is the work before us. But seeing that is just the first step. I was desperate to answer the question of what innovations in governance would position us to address the Great Pulling Apart and to steer toward a “Great Pulling Together.” I wanted to know what renovations to democracy might help us govern more effectively to solve our shared problems.

How to renovate American democracy

[Contributing columnist Danielle Allen](#), a political theorist at Harvard University, is calling for a democracy renovation. She says it’s time to update the old house we all share to 21st-century standards. Her new series explains how to do it.



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This year, I am dedicating my Washington Post column to this project of democracy renovation. In the essays that will follow, I will share what appears to be the most important democracy renovations for tackling the Great Pulling Apart. I will draw on the 31 recommendations from the “Our Common Purpose” report, but also go beyond to outline what I believe is the path to securing for ourselves a capacity to govern inclusively and effectively in a fashion fit for the 21st century.

My overarching goal is a Great Pulling Together that gives us the civic strength needed to tackle the challenges that stem from the remarkable scaling up and complexifying of our society. Those challenges include stalled mobility and dysfunctional immigration policies; the climate crisis; social alienation, disempowerment and violence. These are our most difficult problems. We need governance up to the job of tackling them.

That requires democracy renovation.

I still believe that constitutional democracy offers the world’s best hope for human flourishing, and that’s why I do this work. I invite you to join me in it.