
Democracy & Education

Reconstructing Democracy in Polarized Times

Thinking through/with the CRT Conflicts

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Abstract

In this essay, we consider how reconstructing our ideas about the nature of democracy, and its relationship to education, can help us respond to contemporary challenges. We focus specifically on the ongoing fights about critical race theory (CRT), providing an overview of the CRT controversy—we argue that its cultivation for political reasons has often lessened the possibility of democratic discussions of race, racism, and ongoing white supremacy. Next, we consider how debates around CRT can help us to rethink how we “do” democracy and how to use education to help cultivate democratic habits and values. Finally, we describe three possibilities for responding to the CRT debates in ways that focus on pragmatic inquiry and that enable better thinking about the democratic purposes of schools to work to change racial habits/values and renew civic education and to increase the health of our democracy.

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THE PAST SEVERAL years have been an unprecedented time in the US and around the world. We have experienced and continue to experience a health pandemic that has taken the lives of well over one million US citizens. It has disrupted schooling, social engagement, and the economy. The pandemic has also shined a spotlight on deeply embedded racial, economic, and social disparities. We are also witnessing extreme political polarization and a resurgence of far-right extremism, marked by voter suppression, xenophobia, overt acts of racial discrimination, and a rollback of the rights of women and minorities. Moreover, the promise of a racial reckoning in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020, and evident in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, boycotts, and movements that occurred throughout that year, seems to have stalled at best and, at worst, led to

predictable backlash. Where 2020 brought powerful examples of racial progress (e.g., toppling of Confederate statues, renewed attention to diversity initiatives in colleges/businesses, and books about race and whiteness consistently on bestseller lists) (Norris, 2020), the hope of a true racial reckoning is fading. We

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are at a crossroads, forced to think about the kind of society we want to live in.

We argue that revitalizing the ideas and the practices of democracy is an important step to imagining and actualizing a different, more hopeful world. Our goal in this essay is to show that contemporary challenges around how we teach about diversity and race in schools can help us to rethink and reconstruct our understanding and practices of democracy, which in turn, could help us to better respond to the antidemocratic nature of some of these challenges. We focus on one specific phenomenon that possesses dimensions of populist conservative retrenchment and white rage, namely, the fights about critical race theory (CRT) occurring at school board meetings (and in popular media) throughout the country (Kaplan & Owings, 2021; Pollack et al., 2022; Sawchuk, 2021a). We do not argue that all opposition to CRT is necessarily racist or motivated solely by a desire to push back on recent anti-racist activity. Indeed, there is at least some anecdotal evidence that the ways in which CRT-related ideas are addressed in schools can be problematic: “essentializing students on the basis of race,” shaming and blaming white students for systemic problems, and presenting CRT as “a single racist orthodoxy that brooks no dissent” (Young, 2022). That said, we focus specifically on the parts of the anti-CRT movement that seek to exploit racial anxiety for political gain often at the expense of the well-being of our democracy. We show that the outcry against CRT is largely manufactured in bad faith by a few partisan actors intentionally presenting a reductive caricature of anti-racism efforts labeled as CRT for politically motivated purposes. In doing so, they have painted CRT as a catch-all phrase for any talk about race/racism in schools, “a fear inducing symbolic foil” designed to push citizens toward conservative viewpoints about race that center individualism and meritocracy and “delegitimize historically accurate presentations of race and racism in American history” (López et al., 2021, p. 3).

Goldberg (2021) argued that “CRT functions for the right today primarily as an empty signifier, a catch-all specter lumping together . . . any suggestion that racial inequities in the United States are anything but fair outcomes, the result of choices made by equally positioned individuals in a free society” (para. 6). As two normative philosophers of education who regularly write about democracy, we maintain that better democratic thinking offers a powerful path forward in disrupting the empty, yet fear-inducing, rhetoric around CRT. It can also help us to think about how we ought to teach about histories of oppression in this country in a polarized climate where there are legitimate ideological disagreements about this. Very briefly stated, we make the case that what is going on with today’s CRT conflicts, and by extension, book banning and other concerted right-wing attacks on minority and LGBTQIA+ rights, can help us to better see the contours of American democracy and ultimately has the potential to illuminate ways forward to strengthen it.

Our efforts in this essay build on the work of Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023), who wrote about the rise of populist struggles related to race over the past decade, arguing that pragmatist philosophy is a valuable “resource for this populist moment because it views democracy to be a contingent condition, requiring

revision and remaking” (p. 2). Both the racial reconciliation movements (e.g., BLM) and the anti-CRT movements are forms of populist expression that show our democracy is in crisis; yet for a pragmatist, these democratic crises “can be seen in an evolutionary light, as the exhibition of the necessary reinventing of democracy and her institutions by way of rejecting, critiquing, and re-norming social groups and our political institutions” (p. 3). However, the direction our revisioning of democracy will take is uncertain, especially as the anti-CRT populism seems to be pushing us away from a social justice-oriented view of democracy toward an authoritarian one. Knight-Abowitz and Sellers claimed that a pragmatist analysis points to “the great irony of the present circumstance,” which is that populist efforts are needed to foment activism for racial justice, but they also can thwart it as they “make the expressions of divergent views more strident, more emotional, and much more polarized in both the content of disparate views and in the performance of those views in public meetings, online forums, and media (social and mainstream)” (p. 8). That is, the current furor around race makes it difficult to inquire, reason, and deliberate across lines of difference. Yet this is exactly what a pragmatist approach to democracy requires. We maintain that there is not one right way to teach about race and racism, especially considering the importance of developmental appropriateness and context, and we acknowledge there are times when those who champion anti-racist approaches do so in ways that can stifle free speech. That said, as we discuss in this paper, we are particularly worried that the loudest voices in the populist anti-CRT efforts are disingenuous. Rather than seeking to contribute to open discussions about educational values and goals (and how to put them into practice), these efforts are designed to misrepresent CRT and silence important discussion. Simply put, banning topics, books, concepts, discussions, and engagement with challenging issues is anathema to a healthy, pluralistic democracy.

Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) focused on how a pragmatist vision of democracy is essential at the level of school governance. In this article, we broaden their analysis to show how unpacking populist expressions around race, especially in anti-CRT efforts, can help us rethink the idea of democracy itself. In this sense, we are providing some resources for doing exactly what Abowitz and Sellers called for, which is to “spur inquiry and deliberation” (p. 9) among (populist) democratic participants. We begin by discussing the debates around CRT, providing a brief overview of this academic theory and how it is prevalent in mainstream public and educational discourse. Second, we describe the strategic invention of controversy surrounding CRT and how it has been weaponized as a tool to prevent educators from discussing issues of race, racism, and ongoing white supremacy in schools. We show how this relatively obscure theory has been injected into mainstream public discourse in ways that mobilize fear and division, manifest most notably in heated debates at local school board meetings around the country. Here we show how this controversy was fomented by an antidemocratic actor with problematic aims, even as different perspectives on educational aims and pedagogy are democratically healthy.

In the third section, we argue that debates around CRT can help us to rethink how we “do” democracy and, relatedly, how we can use education to cultivate democratic habits and values. Here we start with Dewey’s pragmatist vision of democracy as ever a work in progress and take inspiration from Glaude’s (2007, 2016, 2020) rethinking of democracy in the context of persistent and ongoing racism and his insistence upon continued commitment to racial justice despite knowing that past efforts have only partially succeeded, at best. We build on Glaude’s call for revolution of value and the breaking of problematic racial habits to offer a richer, more aspirational, inclusive, and justice-oriented vision of democracy to guide educational decision-making.

In our final section, we describe some possibilities for responding to the CRT debates in ways that enable better thinking about the democratic purposes of schools and that can help us do the important work of changing racial habits and values. We offer three broad possibilities, one that we see as more long-term and foundational and two that are more immediate. First and foundationally, we need to reinvigorate discourse about the importance of inquiry and critical thinking in schools and more broadly around the value of liberal education. Second, we suggest a more strategic and immediate reframing (and in some cases, initiation) of conversations around educational goals and values, arguing that we should not get distracted by the largely rhetorical debates between CRT advocates and critics and instead work to create opportunities for inclusive discussions about educational goals and values, looking for spaces for shared inquiry and compromise. As part of creating these spaces, we show how anti-CRT laws can hamper teachers from fulfilling their educational responsibilities and how we can use some of the language of anti-CRT bills for progressive ends, particularly in identifying shared values. Third, we suggest that educational leaders can use bipartisan efforts to renew civic education to provide guidance for critical conversations and democratic educational decision-making. Each of these tools can help us to respond to the current polarizing debates around CRT in ways that help us to get better at living together in a plural, diverse, and inclusive society.

What Is CRT and How Is It Prevalent in Mainstream Public Discourse?

CRT is a philosophical orientation and an academic theory that, up until very recently, has primarily been discussed by scholars in higher education. Describing the CRT movement, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) characterized it as entailing “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power” (p. 3). Critical race theorists seek to empower people of color, disrupt racism and white supremacy, and re-create society in the interests of social justice. Emerging from legal scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the education sphere over 25 years ago. In their now classic essay, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” they provided a foundation for theorizing the relationships among race, property rights, and school inequity. They argued that racism is “endemic and deeply ingrained in American life” (p. 55); that civil rights laws have been

largely ineffective in transforming racial inequities; and that we need to challenge “claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy” in educational thinking, policy, and practice (p. 58). They offered CRT in education as a way to respond to limitations of traditional educational scholarship related to race, particularly multicultural education, which in practice has too often been additive, trivial, and insufficiently attentive to issues of power and justice.

A couple years later, Tate (1997) more systematically traced the history of CRT through the work of prominent legal scholars Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, offering five “defining elements” of CRT that are important to educational research, policy, and practice aimed at equity. He wrote that critical race theorists recognize the endemic and deeply entrenched nature of racism, cross epistemological and disciplinary boundaries, reinterpret civil rights law to highlight limitations, maintain that claims of meritocracy and colorblindness mask the self-interests of the powerful, and insist that the experiences and stories of people of color are critical in understanding and critiquing the law (pp. 234–235). The central idea of CRT is that “race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice” but is embedded in our social, legal, economic, political, and educational systems, structures, and policies (Sawchuk, 2021a, para. 4).

While there has been a great deal of scholarly work done on CRT over the last four decades, it wasn’t until very recently that CRT entered mainstream public discourse, most notably in the context of local school board debates regarding if and how we should teach about race and racism in schools. Following several movements for racial justice (e.g., the reaction to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the publication of *The 1619 Project* [*New York Times*, 2019], and movements across the country in 2020 for racial reconciliation in the wake of the murder of George Floyd), schools around the country increased their attention to teaching about the history of racism and its ongoing effects in society. Similarly, public and private organizations and corporations engaged in more training and workshops on such topics as privilege, whiteness, equity, diversity, and anti-racism. These efforts were not always done well, and in the worst examples, they amounted to claiming that there is only one right way to understand the history of race and racism in this country, namely, through the lens of persistent and deeply entrenched white supremacy. Moreover, ideas and teachings connected to CRT can be presented and perceived as a “closed system.” For instance, Redstone (2021) wrote that “questioning the extent of the role of systemic racism in shaping disparities between groups is itself considered evidence of racism, either overt or internalized” (para. 6).

The backlash against what seemed to be promising efforts to finally thoughtfully address our nation’s long history of racism were swift and widespread. For example, President Trump issued Executive Order 13985 (September 22, 2020), banning many forms of diversity training at the federal level and in any federally funded programs, suggesting that they were based upon race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating. That this executive order was created a scant four months after George Floyd’s murder likely

provides a clue about why Trump chose to push back against CRT at that moment. While not naming CRT directly, the language of this ban (which was rescinded by President Biden upon his taking office) soon started popping up all over the country in a coordinated effort to attack a caricatured and intentionally misrepresented version of CRT in schools.

Pollack et al. (2022) characterized efforts to ban CRT in public schools as a “conflict campaign,” which they described as national, state, and local attempts “to block or restrict proactive teaching and professional development related to race, racism, bias, and many aspects of diversity/equity/inclusion efforts in schools” while also working to advance conservative political power (p. 6). Analyzing this campaign in the 2020–2021 school year, they looked at over 10,000 media reports on topics related to CRT to public education, identifying local actions to limit, resist, and ban CRT in 894 school districts that, taken together, enroll 35% of all students in K–12 education in the country (p. 11). Local newspapers are now riddled with stories of contentious school board meetings and battles in school districts over bills to ban the teaching of certain topics, ideas, and books. These efforts to discredit CRT are strategic, even as some on-the-ground actors have legitimate concerns. As we show in the next section, they are the result of ongoing deliberate attempts to mobilize conservative activism to secure Republican votes in midterm elections, ultimately to push federal power to the right in what we argue are fundamentally antidemocratic ways.

Orchestrating a Controversy

From the perspective of some distance, it is not hard to see how the CRT conflicts can be understood as part of a concerted effort to halt progress made over the past decade to teach about the systemic and structural nature of oppression and to provide students with a more accurate account of the experiences of minoritized groups in the United States. While there are legitimate ideologically different perspectives on the history of race and oppression in this country, the more strident race-based attacks that appeal more to emotions than inquiry and evidence, like the current controversy surrounding CRT, have occurred regularly throughout history. These controversies are often exploited for political purposes by small groups of people who exert undue influence over the flow of information and make it more difficult for citizens to be able to have the knowledge needed to successfully participate in the democratic process. As we show in this section, when it comes to CRT, the most strident group of people work to manipulate public opinion for political gain rather than to invite discussion about what should be taught in schools, which would signal healthy democracy in action. Based on an analysis of a wide range of anti-CRT rallies, legislation, discourse, and school board challenges, López et al. (2021) argued that the current iteration of these debates has been used to achieve three goals:

to thwart efforts to provide an accurate and complete picture of American history; to prevent analysis and discussion of the role that race and racism have played in our history; and to blunt the momentum of efforts to increase democratic participation by members of marginalized groups. (p. 11)

Scholars illuminate how journalist and conservative activist Christopher Rufo, with the support of conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Manhattan Institute, invented a conflict over CRT in the summer of 2020 and then helped to flood media outlets with anti-CRT rhetoric. This once obscure academic theory soon was discussed seemingly everywhere; between March and June 2021, Fox News alone mentioned CRT more than 1,700 times after hardly mentioning it at all prior to that time period (Media Matters, 2021).

In targeting CRT, Rufo saw an opportunity to advance a conservative political agenda, particularly after his own work on a documentary for PBS about poverty in three US cities pushed him further to the political right. While working on that film, he became increasingly convinced that poverty was not something that could be solved by better policy; rather, it “was deeply embedded in ‘social, familial, even psychological’ dynamics”—that is, it was more of an individual, not systemic or structural problem (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para. 2). His politics continued to grow increasingly conservative after an unsuccessful bid for city council in 2018 and after hearing about the content of diversity workshops and training sessions going on in his home city of Seattle. Followers began sending him materials from these sessions, and he began researching some of the citations to source material, which gave him the fuel he needed to orchestrate an attack on what he reduced to a “distinct ideology—critical race theory—with radical roots” (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para. 5). He saw in CRT a “promising political weapon” to foment a conservative resurgence, claiming that “strung together, the phrase ‘critical race theory’ connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American” ideas (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para. 7). Twenty days after Rufo appeared on Fox News claiming that CRT had infiltrated every part of the federal government and posed an “existential threat to the United States” (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para. 8), and urging the president issue an executive order about it, Trump did so, effectively banning CRT-related diversity efforts. From there, a movement was born as Rufo successfully rebranded CRT to push white people to the right. Conway (2022) said, “Targeting CRT by mischaracterizing it, while simultaneously mythologizing the greatness of an American past, essentially draws a line in the sand using an ‘us versus them’ calculus to prime populist voters for the next cycle of elections” (p. 713).

On the local level, the debates around CRT are increasingly heated, especially at school board meetings where community members are in many ways loudly and aggressively tilting at windmills as there is little evidence that CRT is taught in schools at any level, or even understood by most educators, despite the fact that insights from CRT have made their way into many teacher education programs. As López et al. (2021) noted, “Taken at face value, the demand that CRT not be taught in schools is absurd, since it would be hard to find a K–12 school that teaches CRT to begin with” (p. 4). Yet that hasn’t stopped many average citizens from railing against it in a variety of contexts, thanks largely to the disingenuous efforts of Rufo to turn CRT into a polarizing, reductive, catch-all phrase that mobilizes white fear. Indeed, in a

tweet on March 15, 2021, Rufo celebrated his achievement in creating a controversy, engendering division, and manipulating public opinion related to CRT. He wrote:

We have successfully frozen their brand—“critical race theory”—into a public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category . . . The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory.” We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire race of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans. (López et al., 2021, p. 10)

What is most troubling about his comments is that they clearly show bad faith and an antipathy toward democratic decision-making.

The evidence that CRT is now toxic to many Americans is widespread. Moreover, while debates about how we ought to teach about the history of race and racism in this country could signal healthy democracy in action, there is little evidence that there are many genuine democratic dimensions to anti-CRT activism. Rather, it is part of a well-orchestrated effort, involving a “vast network of partisan players, media efforts, and institutional and financial backers” to reductively caricature CRT, conflate a wide range of different diversity efforts, and “block or restrict proactive teaching and professional development related to race, racism, bias, and many aspects of diversity/equity/inclusion efforts in schools” (Pollack et al., 2022, p. 6).

Controversies surrounding CRT are increasingly contentious, especially in politically competitive and racially diverse districts where there has been white flight over the past several decades (Abramsky, 2022). Sawchuk (2021b) described how the political landscape of school board elections also has changed, such that there is a trend toward the “nationalization” of local politics. This is due to a variety of factors, including “Americans’ increased attachment to parties’ policy positions over specific candidates; a shift away from print news; and weaker attachments to local communities” (para. 13). Moreover, a “sophisticated network” of conservative actors is working to “shape state legislation” and is providing seductively simplistic materials and accessible workshops and toolkits for local actors in their efforts to oppose CRT (e.g., Butcher & Burke, 2022; Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020; Copland, 2021; Woke Schooling, 2021). It is not surprising that school boards are one of the targets of anti-CRT political action committees as they are “among the easiest ways for fired-up people to engage in the democratic process” (Sawchuk, 2021b, para. 14).

There is no doubt that anti-CRT activism has divided communities. School board meetings have become increasingly hostile and sometimes violent affairs, especially as legitimate ideological differences are exploited by bad faith actors and social media profiteers creating forms of affective polarization that become very difficult to disrupt: “Affective polarization is not just a matter of seeing those with a different perspective as misguided. It is also viewing their judgments as irrational, ascribing sinister motives to them, or even casting them as threats to democracy itself” (Stroud & Masullo, 2020, p. 155). Affective polarization is

fueled both by antidemocratic individuals trying to secure political gain and by social media strategies that “engage in efforts to inspire emotion rather than cognitive responses, because powerful emotions, such as anger, inspire action, whether clicking to share an article or spewing outrage at an adversary” (Stroud & Masullo, 2020, p. 156). We see evidence of this affective polarization on display in local communities around the country, where efforts are underway to unseat progressive school board members; Ballotpedia tracked attempts to recall 207 board members in 2021 alone (Saul, 2021). The misinformation campaign around CRT is a major distraction to any efforts to actually “discuss the very real and pressing issues that are happening in schools” (Collins, 2022). Moreover, these tensions and laws that have been passed banning CRT and/or the teaching of potentially divisive content have made it difficult for teachers and administrators to know what is acceptable to teach, leading them to self-censor any critical lessons around race and racism. In such an affectively polarized context, history gets reduced to a zero-sum game, with “throng[s] of angry white parents at school board meetings” believing that “a history that documents Black American existence undermines and erases white history” (Holloway, 2021).

Simply banning content is bad for critical thinking and bad for democracy, yet most of the anti-CRT efforts are framed in the negative: instruction on what schools should not do as opposed to guidance on how to teach about the history of race in this country, and about controversial issues in general, Trump’s 1776 Project (President’s Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021) notwithstanding. In some ways, silencing any critical conversations around contentious issues is a goal of the anti-CRT movement. Were these efforts in support of engaging questions about how and what we should teach in schools in open and inclusive ways, then they could help improve our society: “Disagreement about important social and political matters is a source of making better decisions about how we live together in a democracy” (Stitzlein, 2022, p. 600). Often, this is not what is happening. Whittington (2021) captured the danger of anti-CRT bans succinctly. Banning texts and ideas in the classroom shields “students from confronting the historical reality of debates about race in America and, as a consequence, would impede their ability to understand the struggles that we have had and the progress we have made” (para. 10). This makes education worse for all students, as grappling with complexity and multiple viewpoints helps to develop the skills needed for thoughtful democratic citizenship. What we most need now is more and better democratic theorizing, not what ultimately amounts to speech codes (Foster et al., 2021), in order to help improve our democratic practices. This means we need to better teach the skills of inquiry and analysis, particularly how to assess and judge the quality of sources in the context of the majority of Americans saying it is “hard to identify false information—intentionally misleading and inaccurate stories portrayed as truth—on social media” (Santhanam, 2020). When faced with the challenge of “determining the trustworthiness of information, many are left to reacting to information emotionally” (Thoilliez, 2022, p. 492), which only further fuels affective polarization and antidemocratic populist extremism on both sides.

Doing Democracy in Light of CRT

We see the CRT controversy as a potentially powerful catalyst to help us rethink how we “do” democracy. To build this claim, we start with a sketch of a Dewey-inspired pragmatic conceptualization of democracy, prior to embarking on a thought experiment about what the CRT controversy says about how to productively reimagine democratic life. While there are certainly other viable ways to envision democracy, we start with this pragmatic understanding of democracy because it offers a way to acknowledge flaws in our historical and contemporary efforts to live democratically, provides hope that we can do better, and directs us in how to do so. Dewey, heavily influenced by Darwinian challenges to static conceptions of thought, argued that even our best ideas need to be reconstructed given changing circumstances. It is telling that he was referred to as both the philosopher of American democracy and the philosopher of “reconstruction.” After brief treatment of some of Dewey’s relevant thoughts on democracy, we consider how contemporary society’s continued struggles with race and racism ought to shape this reconstruction of American democracy. We then build on Glaude’s reimagining of Deweyan pragmatism given today’s problems to help shift conversations around CRT and democracy.

The obvious start for considering Dewey’s ideas about democracy is *Democracy and Education* and his classic description of the ideal democratic society: “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1916/2008, p. 93). In this way of living, individual freedoms are maximized while people also maintain responsibilities to fellow citizens and to shared public goods. Moreover, diversity is prized, and community members actively work to find common ground across lines of difference. As Dewey (1916/2008) noted, in an ideal democratic society, “there are many interests consciously communicated and shared; and there are varied and free points of contact with other modes of association” (p. 89). Democracy requires faith in our fellow citizens as well as ongoing work to create “a freer and more human experience in which all share and to which all contribute” (Dewey, 1939/2008, p. 230). At the same time, a Deweyan vision of democracy, premised on interconnectivity, experimentation, and fallibilism, requires that we center inquiry as a way to educate for democracy. Collaborative inquiry works to disrupt polarization, particularly “pushing us to consider the well-being of others, urging us to shed light on their struggles and attend to them in order to bring about greater flourishing for ourselves and others” (Stitzlein, 2024, p. 14).

A less obvious but particularly useful resource in reconstructing democracy is Dewey’s *A Common Faith* (1934/2008). In it, Dewey attempted a reconciliation of the epistemologically distinct worlds of science and religion. Noddings (2009) noted that “possibly most of us today believe this cannot be done; that is, the two worlds will remain unreconciled. But perhaps, without reconciling the two worlds, we can find causes and tasks that will induce common commitment for the benefit of human survival and well-being” (p. 12). It is through democracy that Dewey hoped that we could develop commitments beyond our self-interests.

Education is one key venue for teaching the habits, dispositions, and practices of democratic living.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey (1934/2008) directly addressed how his mix of faith in science and democracy could have moral direction/weight as well as offer resources for diminishing polarization and revitalizing democratic thinking. There is also strong continuity between what Glaude (2020, 2016, 2007) has called for and Dewey’s reconstructed vision of democracy. While Dewey’s ways of thinking, writing, and talking about race are not a sufficient theoretical base for contemporary social justice work (Hyttén & Stemhagen, 2021), we maintain that in his reconstruction of Dewey’s ideas about democracy, Glaude has powerfully illustrated their value beyond the context of their origin.

One way to see the connection between Glaude and Dewey’s ideas about reconstruction is to look at the conclusion to *A Common Faith*. Dewey (2008/1934) wrote:

Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of humanity. (pp. 57–58)

Here, Dewey combined two key ideas we can use for our project of rethinking democracy given the contemporary context of acrimony over how to contend with our society’s continued racism. The first is a redescription of what Dewey meant by reconstruction in philosophy, whereby it is the work of contemporary society members to make new sense of what came before, considering current circumstances. Second, he affirmed his hope that democratic life has potential to overcome the inequity, oppression, and division that has characterized our past. Were it not for the reconstructive element of his thought, it would be easy to dismiss Dewey’s faith in democracy as hopelessly naive. We see Glaude as keeping Dewey’s faith alive by using Dewey’s vision of, and faith in, democracy as a foundation for the important work of attempting to reconcile American democracy and its history of racism.

Glaude (2016) called attention to what he termed the “value gap,” the distance between the ideals and rhetoric about what democracy promises all citizens and the reality of how marginalized Americans, particularly Black Americans, have been and often continue to be thought of and treated in the US. Glaude (2020) argued that we must “reexamine the fundamental values and commitments that shape our self-understanding” as Americans, yet we must do so with open hearts and minds, using collaborative inquiry to identify where our practices fall short of our expressed values. He added that we need to

look back at those beginnings not to reaffirm our greatness or to double down on myths that secure our innocence, but to see where we went wrong and how we might reimagine or recreate ourselves in light of who we initially set out to be. (p. 194)

What Glaude (2016) showed in his reconstruction of democracy is that, historically, our democratic principles have been

clouded by a concurrent (albeit often implicit) commitment to white supremacy. While we often say we value equity, inclusion, and justice, our racial habits frequently run counter to those commitments. Our racial habits are developed through everyday living. They are formed in the context of social, political, economic, and educational systems that marginalize and devalue people of color and in a world where systemic racism is the norm. We need to understand how the devaluation of people of color has occurred in myriad institutional and structural ways over time, and fundamentally disrupt the white supremacist fantasy that “black social misery is the result of thousands of unrelated bad individual decisions by black people across the country” (p. 24).

Glaude saw a place for the tragic in Dewey’s evolution-inspired focus on contingency, despite the criticisms of Dewey’s deficits to address the tragic elements of Black life in the United States. Glaude described moral choices as particularly difficult in a world of contingency. The only way to contend with life’s uncertainties is by making choices alongside diverse others and engaging in practical action. Glaude recast uncertainty as a necessary precondition for human agency, instead of as simply an unfortunate reality of human life. Moving beyond the “quest for certainty” is one important way we realize our agency in acting on our world. More importantly, it also links us to our community and lays bare our responsibility as community members:

This connection to the future forms the primary basis for responsibility. For in the efforts to secure our world for our children and ourselves, we employ methods that generate foresight. We make moral and political prognoses with an eye towards securing and expanding for future generations the values we cherish. (Glaude, 2007, p. 22)

Glaude’s notion of responsibility is both future- and community-oriented. Stemhagen and Henney (2021) explicitly connected Glaude’s “responsibility” and Dewey’s conception of democracy: “The word ‘responsibility’ more precisely describes our commitment to associated living. It is an enactment of the sentiment, ‘I care about what happens to you and yours’” (p. 146). They went on to describe Glaude’s call for responsibility as “a timely update to this Deweyan conception of democracy. It is not just interaction among individuals and groups that matters but our obligation to one another” (p. 146).

In *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for our Time* (2020), Glaude (2020) used Baldwin’s thought to shed light on how today’s insidious views on race prevent us from being able to “achieve our country” (p. xxvii). The idea of beginning again refers to how there have been several inflection points in US history related to race—moments of potential reckoning. He saw this time, 2020’s racial reckoning in the wake of George Floyd’s murder as well as countless acts of police violence against Black people and the effect of years of Trumpism as coalescing into one such moment. Glaude argued that while naive hope isn’t the answer, neither is giving in to the understandable frustration and pessimism that comes with the knowledge of how past attempts at beginning again (e.g., Reconstruction and the civil rights eras) were incomplete at best. Instead, Glaude has called for

using this political moment to push for change even though the likely result isn’t social perfection. If we can face our past and each other, we can become better:

In the end, we cannot hide from each other . . . We have to run toward the trouble that makes us afraid of life. We have to choose life, Baldwin repeatedly said. Salvation is found there: in accepting the beauty and ugliness of who we are in our most vulnerable moments in communion with each other. There, in love, a profound mutuality develops and becomes the basis for genuine democratic community where we all can flourish, if we so choose. (pp. 213–214)

Glaude’s work on race and racism in the US offers a useful way to revise what democracy means and what it ought to be. Our initial claim that the current CRT controversy is an opportunity to reconstruct our democracy should be clear now, as are the ways that Glaude can help us to center important habits of democracy such as inquiry, good faith, reflexivity, commitment, and habitual rethinking. Glaude has also provided inspiration for continuing the work in spite of its difficulty and, often, its lack of immediate satisfaction. Building on a reconstructed view of democracy, we end by offering some strategies for beginning again that emerge from our engagements with the CRT conflicts. We see our work here as an on-the-ground effort at revaluing in the service of democratic revitalization.

Strategies for Better Democratic Thinking

In concluding, we briefly present some justifications of, and strategies for, centering a Dewey-and-Glaude-inspired pragmatist approach to democracy in schooling. We show how they can help us more productively respond to the CRT debate specifically and to other affectively polarizing issues that have and will come along. We offer three broad possibilities, one that we see as more long-term and ongoing, but also foundational, and two that are more immediate and can support the important work needed right now at the level of school and educational governance, leadership, and decision-making. Foundationally, we need to reinvigorate discourses around the importance of inquiry, critical thinking, and problem-solving in schools, as well as cultivate trust and a sense of shared fate among diverse groups of people. We connect these ideas to the broad value of liberal education. Second, and more immediately and strategically, we suggest renewed discussion and inquiry around educational goals and values, especially in relation to issues of diversity, justice, equity, power, and race. Here we need to identify different viewpoints and their consequences for democratic living. We can also draw from some of the anti-CRT bills themselves, showing their contradictions and reclaiming language in some of these bills to find points of potential compromise and spaces where more collaborative inquiry across lines of difference is needed. Third, we suggest that educational leaders and practitioners can use bipartisan and nonpartisan efforts to renew civic education to provide guidance for democratic educational decision-making. We see these examples of bipartisanship as ways to model inquiry and engagement across differences in an effort to improve social conditions. They can also help us to “propose better curriculums” that directly build on democratic habits and values

and that support existing civil rights laws (Foster et al., 2021, para. 15).

Centering Inquiry and Critical Thinking

In teaching about controversial, non-settled topics, educators have long maintained the importance of classroom discussion and/or deliberation. Yet too often these discussions are focused on students asserting reasons for why they believe what they believe or engaging in debates where the pros and cons of a position are discussed and then a “winner” is declared. However, as Stitzlein (2022) explained, “Emphasizing reason-giving and one’s personal stance may not focus enough on learning how to gather evidence to better initially understand the topic and to support the reasons one gives for one’s developing stance on it” (p. 601). Similarly, Kaupp and Drerup (2021) argued “that the focus on discussions sometimes tends to be interpreted as a ‘magic bullet’ to all different sorts of controversies, without sufficient inquiry into the details that make up the controversy” (p. 214). Rather than deliberation, what we need more of in schools and society is shared, structured, and systematic inquiry. This type of inquiry is especially important on sensitive topics, like those surrounding CRT, where people’s emotions can sometimes be easily manipulated or when it seems there is little space for compromise among positions that are increasingly presented as extremes.

Inquiry is central to a pragmatist vision of truth and democracy. Dewey’s stages of inquiry, roughly corresponding to the scientific method, are likely familiar to most readers: experience an indeterminate or unsettled situation, identify the nature of problems, hypothesize about possible solutions, think critically about the potential solutions and their broader consequences, and act on the most promising solutions. As new problems invariably arise, this process starts over. Dewey argued that this inquiry process is valuable for social, moral, and political problems, not just scientific ones. It is precisely this type of inquiry that could help us mitigate some of the polarization around CRT and its place in schools. What makes inquiry so valuable is that it is both content-rich and collaborative. Describing how inquiry is more than just a skill, Stitzlein (2022) wrote:

Historical and political knowledge is often required to make sense of indeterminate situations and propose solutions to move forward. Knowledge of what has happened in the past and historical consciousness . . . can help students make wiser judgments for the future. Skills of historical interpretation may be needed to distinguish facts from stories or myths . . . these include identifying legitimate sources, attributing the source to an author contextualized historically, understanding that author’s perspective, and corroborating the source to assess its reliability. (p. 605)

For pragmatists, important aspects of inquiry include the fact that it is systematic, transparent, self-correcting, and collaborative. It can also be learned; we can get better at inquiring with our peers, changing our minds when we find better evidence and developing intellectual humility, which involves “a willingness to recognize the limits of one’s own knowledge and appreciate others’ intellectual strengths” (Porter & Schumann, 2018, p. 140).

One of the best places to learn foundational habits of inquiry and, hence, democracy, is in humanities and liberal arts classes. Nussbaum’s (1998, 2016) work provides a good start for thinking about the liberal arts–democracy relationship. Nussbaum (2016) made a strong case for the importance of what students learn in the liberal arts, including how to think critically, experiment with ideas, work with others, navigate complexity, ask good questions, and make informed decisions. Nussbaum suggested a set of specific skills and sensibilities required for healthy democratic participation:

These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person. (p. 7)

The abilities to think critically and inquire collaboratively are clearly important for democratic citizenship. Nussbaum has described these capacities in a variety of ways, including the idea that critical thinking includes not just critique of others’ positions but the ability to be critical of oneself and one’s traditions. This set of skills is important for a variety of civic duties and right now it seems particularly important as a foundation for being able to find ways to meaningfully communicate across our massive political divides. Centering the importance of inquiry to democratic thriving, Stitzlein (2022) wrote that “we need educative spaces where we inquire into what divides us, why we are divided, and how we might respond to such division” (p. 596). Complementarily, Moses (2021) offered us principles for considering contentious topics in a polarized political climate: relationships, reciprocity, and reasonableness. While what counts as reasonable may be up for debate, “a reasonable view . . . is one that is fair and sensible, i.e., based on democratic ideals of justice, basic human rights and liberties, and widely agreed upon beliefs about what we know to be true both scientifically and ethically” (p. 371).

Nussbaum’s second skill/sensibility involves recognition that we are all a part of something bigger than ourselves and our immediate identity groups. That is, understanding that we are responsible to one another, a Deweyan sense of shared fate, is a precondition for racial revaluing and democratic living. Study in the liberal arts fosters this sense of responsibility to others. Critical thinking and responsibility are related, as “good, systematic thinking and discourse” requires that “educators prioritize caring about who we are (relationship), how we treat each other (reciprocity), and what we believe and say (reasonableness)” (Moses, 2021, p. 372).

The third skill/sensibility is basically empathy. Study in the liberal arts disciplines, especially when we learn to inquire together, cultivates recognition and even an emotional connection to the plight of others. It helps us to see that even people we may disagree with on some issues are part of our larger community; we can only thrive when others around us are thriving. This is because democracy is a connective way of life, one in which “we must not seek to destroy our enemies; instead, we must find ways, including that of some sense of love or respect, to bring them into the community with us” (Stroud, 2021).

Creating Space for Shared Inquiry About Educational Goals and Values

Building on the theme of inquiry, we need to do more of this in relation to thinking about the types of learning needed in the 21st century. One thing the debates around CRT in education have unearthed is the fact that people hold a wide range of views on the fundamental purposes of education, from the development of habits of inquiry, to job preparation, to training grounds for capitalist competition. There are disagreements about what content to teach and which habits we hope students as citizens in the making will develop as part of schooling. For most, beliefs about education are at the implicit level; we can best determine them by working backward from the educational visions and practices we support. Yet on at least a surface level, there is broad consensus that schooling should prepare all people for democratic living. In democratic societies, we don't silence dissent; rather, we call on people to inform themselves of the contours of debates so that they can make thoughtful, evidence-based decisions, rather than be seduced by emotionally compelling, and sometimes intentionally distorted, rhetoric. Better cultivation of the habits of critical thinking and inquiry can help us to more productively reframe debates around CRT, showing how they appeal to emotion and imagined threats more than logic and reason. Reframing involves uncovering why we hold the beliefs we do and where they come from and assessing if those beliefs are grounded in evidence and consistent with what we claim we value.

One striking aspect of the anti-CRT rhetoric is that there is scant evidence that CRT is taught in K–12 education or even significantly influences how we teach about race and racism in public education. This is even though teacher education students are increasingly exposed to critical forms of pedagogy and theory. At the same time, banning critical exploration of racism, as some of the proposed and enacted anti-CRT legislation does, effectively rules out engagement in any critical discussions around race. Uncertain about what they can talk about in classrooms without backlash, teachers have begun to “constrain their own lessons in response to fears that their teaching will be scrutinized by parents or administrators” (Kelly et al., 2022–2023, p. 20), meaning these bans are having a chilling effect in classrooms. It is hard to argue that this classroom-level silencing isn't precisely the goal of some of this legislation.

A central reason for renewed discussion about the purposes of education is so we avoid getting mired in trying to disprove the intentionally exaggerated and caricatured version of CRT presented by its critics (as well as challenging the more extremist and reductive views of some CRT advocates), and instead focus on the more central question of how we ought to teach about the ongoing legacy of racism and white supremacy in this country. Feingold (2022) argued that one powerful strategy for addressing this question is to use the language of regressive CRT laws to open up dialogue across perspectives and show the inconsistencies of these laws themselves. Drawing on examples of anti-CRT laws from around the country, he showed that “many bills—if we take seriously their actual text—call for *more* CRT in the classroom, not less” (p. 726). For instance, anti-CRT legislation often relies on

textual ambiguity and internal contradictions that, when uncovered, show that we need more efforts to illuminate the systemic and structural nature of racism in schools, not pedagogy that reduces racism to matters of personal prejudice. Feingold described teaching about corporate America by using statistics showing that bills prohibiting teaching certain concepts, such as implicit bias, structural racism, and the proposition (from a Wisconsin anti-CRT bill) that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex,” are fundamentally illogical (p. 748). If we start from the belief that no race or sex is inherently superior, virtually the only way to explain the fact that 92% of CEOs in this country are white and that white men hold 86% of all CEO positions when they are roughly 35% of the US population (p. 749) is to use tools from CRT, particularly related to normalized white supremacy and whiteness as a property interest that generates legal entitlements (Harris, 1993).

Carefully examining the CRT bills themselves may help us to find common beliefs across lines of difference. Similarly, critically analyzing the 1619 (*New York Times*, 2019) and 1776 (President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021) projects, typically presented as opposites, together can help us to uncover shared values, which could help mitigate affective polarization, thus allowing us to work to find better compromises across ideological differences. Another way to better engage in these debates about what we ought to teach in schools is to analyze state-level history and social studies standards, both to help better ensure they are met in practice and to revise them when needed. A deep dive into some of the existing state-level history and social studies standards shows that it is logically inconsistent to ban the types of thinking that are connected to CRT and that silencing critical discussions about race makes it nearly impossible for teachers to do their jobs as prescribed by the state. As Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) noted, social studies standards include “substantive content related to racial oppression (e.g., slavery, Reconstruction, the civil rights movement, etc.)” (p. 5). If we prohibit discussions around the history of race and racism in this country, teachers will not be able to meet these standards. Just as state-level standards can provide some guidance for a democratic response to anti-CRT efforts, at least in the states where they haven't been modified and stripped of attention to America's contentious racial history, so too can bipartisan and nonpartisan efforts revitalize civic education in the United States.

Bipartisan and Nonpartisan Civic Education Projects as a Model for Democratic Education

There are a variety of scholars, activists, and practitioners working in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner to reinvigorate civic education. These efforts can serve as a rich source of inspiration and, more concretely, as resources for how to talk about the importance of civics and how to work to center it in public schools. We focus on one compelling example, the “Educating for American Democracy” (EAD) report / road map (and pedagogy companion and stakeholder briefs), sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of Education (2021). Describing this report, Allen and Carrese (2021)

asserted that it provides a road map for teaching “history and civics that shifts from breadth to depth, focuses on inquiry, integrates history and civics, supports educators in dealing effectively with fundamental tensions, integrates a diversity of experiences and perspectives throughout, and cultivates civil disagreement and reflective patriotism” (p. 8). What is so powerful about the EAD (2021) road map is it both models and emphasizes the need for shared inquiry across ideological, philosophical, and demographic lines; it is the work of hundreds of diverse scholars and educators who describe their experience on the initiative as learning to “argue well together” (p. 8).

Considering the extreme polarization that currently exists in our society, the writers of the EAD road map claimed that “Americans of all ages need better skills with evidence and digital literacy, stronger civic virtues for deliberation and tolerance of divergent views, and deeper commitment to renewal and the rebuilding of civic capacity than would suffice a half a century ago” (EAD, 2021, p. 12). Rather than prescribing content knowledge that students must learn, they framed the report around a set of guiding questions that can help drive curricular reform. EAD and its supporting materials and road map include a clear and detailed plan for the reinvigoration of civics education in K–12 schools by providing civics training for our nation’s teachers and support and guidance for schools to be able to carry out this civics education. It offers seven content themes for a revitalized K–12 approach to civics that “explore what it means to participate in American constitutional democracy” (EAD, p. 14), including both challenges and achievements, as well as six core pedagogical principles and five design challenges in bringing revitalized civics education to fruition. These design challenges reflect the fact that “several valid, worthy, and well-articulated learning goals . . . exist in mutual tension” (EAD, p. 16). As such, they require that teachers facilitate and guide students in “experimentation and discussion” so that they too “wrestle with thorny questions of approach, coverage, and balance in ways that contribute simultaneously to their historical knowledge and civic skills” (EAD, p. 17). This report provides both detailed guidance on curricular reform and a strong rationale for why we ought to center inquiry-based civics in schools, especially in our current climate of fake news, misinformation, hyperpartisanship, weak civic associations, and social media as a primary source of news for most people. The framers of the report offer a hopeful path forward, built on the expectation that citizens will disagree, but can do so in civil and productive ways.

The central vision espoused in EAD is one of civics as collaborative inquiry, which is very much aligned with a pragmatist conception of democracy as an experiment in living together in ways that support individual freedom and growth as well as a disposition toward responsibility toward others and the larger communities of which one is a part. In addition, the EAD report is valuable because it offers a compelling model of people working together across lines of difference. Given the ideological diversity of the group, it is not surprising that there were difficulties and tensions in coming to agreement over the course of the year and half of working on the project. They were transparent about these tensions and how they navigated them, describing some of the

challenging choices they had to make in an appendix to the report. Modeling what they called for in the report, their “processes of deliberation, reflection, value clarification, compromise, and even coalition building . . . made use of the kinds of civic skills and civic virtue” (EAD, 2021, p. 23) for which they have advocated. Equally important, they described how this work resulted in “shared intellectual growth” across members of the team “rather than the watering down or heating up that some skeptics feared” (EAD, p. 23). That is, they showed how people from different political, philosophical, and ideological camps have found ways to come together, to trust and value one another, and to focus on inquiry and practical problem-solving to improve social conditions. These kinds of efforts are precisely what we need to counter disingenuous anti-CRT campaigns, while at the same time ensure that CRT is presented as a theory, not an absolute truth or the only way to understand race and power relations in the US. They also can go a long way toward disrupting the value gaps that Glaude (2020) wrote so passionately about.

It is only through working together across lines of difference, perhaps most especially in cases of extreme polarization, that we can develop the civic forms of friendship we need to productively work together toward common goods. It is in these spaces that we can learn to see our history differently and engage in the challenging, but necessarily collaborative, work of revaluing. Polarization is damaging to civic engagement, perhaps most especially so when disagreements about ideas lead us to start judging people with whom we disagree as less competent or as less worthy of respect as those with whom we agree. Polarization diminishes our capacity to work and reason together, as we find fewer and fewer spaces to listen to or work with people who hold different views than ours. Talisse (2019) argued that this polarization diminishes our democratic capacities, while Glaude (2020) reminded us that “when we imprison our fellows in categories that cut off their humanity from our own, we end up imprisoning ourselves” (p. 213). Learning from intentionally inclusive efforts at civic-educational reform gives us resources and a sense of hopefulness that we can improve the work of doing democracy together.

Conclusion

Our central claim in this essay is that the CRT debates represent an important opportunity for rethinking democracy and its relationship to education. Analyzing these debates, it is evident that they are not good examples of democratic activity; in fact, “if the current attacks on CRT were not so grotesque, distorted, and mischaracterized” (Conway, 2022, p. 714), then people talking about CRT could be a powerful sign that citizens are ready to begin democratic reconstruction in the light of our nation’s struggles with racism. The backlash evident in anti-CRT efforts is not a surprise; rather, it follows the predictable pattern of white rage whenever racial progress occurs (Anderson, 2016). Yet as we have argued, rethinking democracy and concurrently the role of schools in democratic society are important ways to speak back to contemporary challenges.

Building on pragmatist approaches to democracy, we have tried to show that our contemporary crises require us to rethink

how we understand democracy and enact it in practice. Building on both Dewey and Glaude, we show that a fundamental feature of democracy is that it must regularly be reconstructed in the light of contemporary challenges. The CRT conflicts are one such challenge that can help us to better see the contours of democracy and where we have gone astray in our civic efforts. In addition to better understanding the origin and nature of the anti-CRT campaign, better democratic thinking, alongside using the three strategies we discuss in our final section, can help to change racial habits and values. For example, through collaborative inquiry, we learn sympathetic imagination, problem-solving, and compassion; these are all qualities that can help us understand how problematic populism works, such as how it appeals to emotion and reductive rhetorical manipulation over reason. Working with others to identify how we should teach about histories of race in schools is proactive and community-building, rather than polarizing. Finally, bipartisan and nonpartisan reports show pragmatist democracy in action as they provide compelling examples that we can find common values/grounds even across lines of difference.

Ultimately, we hope we have helped readers understand the CRT conflicts and offered some productive ways of reconstructing and rethinking democracy and some spheres where this work can happen, not as a panacea but as ways we can more democratically respond to anti-CRT challenges—and the next “conflict campaign” that comes along. Cutting across all three of the strategies we discuss, and a concrete expression of the ideas presented earlier in this article, is the importance of civic-mindedness. Civic-mindedness entails evidence-based thinking, responsiveness to others, deliberation and listening, and inquiry across lines of difference. The anti-CRT debates add an urgency to our efforts to reconstruct democracy now and to rethink the fundamental purposes of education in the light of current challenges.

We recognize that in the face of extreme polarization and civic fracture, what we offer in this essay might not feel all that satisfying, but the simple truth is that there really are no shortcuts to the cultivation of democratic habits, sensibilities, and values. It is also true that there is no culmination of the democratic education project. As Dewey, and contemporary pragmatists, argued, we are always beginning again (Glaude, 2020). That we are living in a particularly polarizing and tumultuous time adds urgency to our efforts to reconstruct a democracy relevant for our time. This is ongoing and hard work; it cannot be reduced to soundbites, slogans, emotional appeals, or reactionary us-against-them thinking. What we offer in this essay are ways to go about this important and ongoing work of renewing democracy for our times.

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