

Nonviolent civil resistance and the 3½%

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The first protest that I can remember attending was in Kansas City in 2003 to show displeasure with President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq to secure purported Weapons of Mass Destruction. The events of the time were small affairs, as have been most of the protests, demonstrations and rallies I have participated in since, with the exception of a rally to end homelessness in Washington, D.C. in the mid-2000s that clogged the Metro subway system on a Saturday morning.

In the past few years, I have attended many more street protests than usual. From "Hands Off" to "No Kings!", these demonstrations have responded to concerns about authoritarian tendencies shown by the U.S. presidential administration. People attending these events express concerns about our political leaders taking actions that follow the pattern of [The Authoritarian Playbook](#) as defined by Protect Democracy. Some characteristics of authoritarianism that we are seeing play out in the United States include:

- *Quashing dissent.* As recently as the September 18, 2026 banning of three major news outlets from the White House, this president and administration have routinely used the tactic of restricting, threatening and demeaning the press.
- *Scapegoating vulnerable communities.* From the militant actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement against migrant communities to fearmongering towards transgender people and attacks on People of Color through the dismantling of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs, this administration has engaged in a multi-pronged approach to attack people for political gain.
- *Corrupting elections.* Since the attempt to block the certification of election results in late 2020, there have been attempts made to restrict voting access on state and national levels, and we have witnessed propaganda about election security and election fraud. More on this topic later.

These concerns, among others, have resulted in large numbers of people taking to the streets to express their displeasure and to take a stand to protect democracy. Included in these crowds are a significant number of first-time demonstrators who have heard the call to rally and decided that now is the time to act.

Gathering with a crowd of like-minded individuals for a protest for the first time can be an exciting experience. Encountering people from all walks of life who share our values

and learning about the organizations that exist to protect human rights is exhilarating. These experiences are a counterbalance to the gloom of the daily news and the doom of social media scrolling. Yet demonstrations are not just feel-good gatherings. They are a step toward building a movement.

In her writings, including *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021), Harvard professor and researcher Erica Chenoweth, PhD, discusses the importance of nonviolent protest to the growth of campaigns. In her research, Chenoweth, a leading authority on nonviolent movements, has found that most nonviolent civil resistance campaigns reach a critical mass when 3.5% of a country's population becomes engaged in resistance to authoritarianism, and all movements that are able to involve 10% of the country's population have been successful. (Chenoweth, p. 94)

While public protests are a good way to draw people into a movement and draw attention to a movement, it's important to recognize that demonstrations alone are usually not enough to bring about significant change. Chenoweth explains that while there is not a specific recipe for success, effective campaigns are ones that use a variety of tactics to impose pressure on a regime (Chenoweth, p. 87). Strikes, work stoppages, boycotts, coalition building, and organized efforts to shift the sympathies of the regime's supporters are all means that campaigns have used to obstruct authoritarianism.

As participation at mass demonstrations approaches 3.5% of the U.S. population (about 12 million people), additional nonviolent actions may be necessary to protect our democracy. Multiple organizations are raising the alarm as the midterm elections approach. Department of Justice efforts to [obtain voter registration data from states](#), the president's [executive order to restrict mail-in ballots](#) and concerns that [federal agents may be deployed at polling places](#) have led some organizations to prepare for election disruptions by examining possible scenarios and preparing to take action, if necessary.

Even if the November elections go smoothly, additional concern has been raised about the seating of members of Congress that will take place in January. In a recent [article for The New Republic](#), Judge Michael Luttig, a Republican, raised his concern about the potential for leaders from his own party to thwart the will of the people by refusing to seat Democrat representatives-elect in the House. While the potential sequence of events Luttig describes could once have been described as outlandish, following the January 6, 2021 assault of the Capitol, such a possibility can't be overlooked.

Though sometimes our democratic situation seems dire, Chenoweth illustrates her research with a multitude of examples from countries around the globe where nonviolent

civil resistance has resulted in real change. Key to all these campaigns is organization, coordination and leadership. One of the most inspiring stories is that of Otpor, a student-led movement in Serbia that helped organize the downfall of Slobodan Milošević. These efforts are chronicled in the documentary, [*Bringing Down a Dictator*](#), from the [*International Center on Nonviolent Conflict*](#).

For those of us committed to nonviolence and concerned about social justice and protecting democracy, it is incumbent upon us to continue showing up and to continue learning. Currently, that means participating in peaceful demonstrations, contacting our legislators and expressing our opinions through letters to the editor and social media. We must also pay attention to the leaders of our movements for guidance as we forge a path forwards.

Author's note: I recommend a complete reading of Dr. Chenoweth's book, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*, but for those who want a shorter introduction to her work, [this article](#) from the Harvard Kennedy School and its related links are one alternative.