

# The Sycamore Group

## White Paper #1

### **A Catalog of Threats to Democracy in America in 2026: The Grid**

*May 19, 2026*

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The Sycamore Group is an informal and independent group of retired university Researchers who reside in Monroe County, Indiana. Current active members are Michael H. Molenda, James A. Pershing, and Charles M. Reigeluth. Phillip L. Harris was a member until his death in March 2026.

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## Introduction

The grid displayed in this document represents part of a larger project, a systematic analysis of the threats to the democratic system of the United States in 2026. The findings of our analysis are spelled out in narrative form in another document, *White Paper #2. A Catalog of Threats of Democracy in America in 2026*, available online at [www.reigeluth.net/democracy-narrative](http://www.reigeluth.net/democracy-narrative).

To be more precise, we have attempted to identify the gaps between the operation of a stable and productive American government and its current functioning. Analyses such as this are often phrased as examinations of “threats to democracy.” We accept that terminology while acknowledging that the US is not technically a *democracy* according to its founders; it is a *republic* based on *representative democracy* principles. In that sense, the standard to which we are comparing the current US government is that *American Democratic Republic* that strives for economic growth that is widely distributed, encourages participation, and reflects the will of the majority while protecting basic individual rights of property, religion, speech, assembly, voting, citizenship, and due process.

One of the most commonly applied measuring sticks for the health of democratic governments is the set of indices developed by the Varieties of Democracy [V-Dem] Institute based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. We use some of the V-Dem “indices of democracy” as descriptive categories for assessing success on various dimensions of government, recognizing that these indices are neither necessary nor sufficient for measuring how well-functioning a government is. The indices, as we have adapted them, are a convenient way of organizing our analyses. We refer to these indices as “facets” of the government that are under threat, and they include the **electoral** facet, the **egalitarian** facet, the **civil liberties** facet, the **communal** facet, and the **existential** facet.

For each “facet,” we divide the threats into two types: threats of a **legal** nature, derived from the US constitution, Supreme Court decisions, and laws and regulations; and threats of a **societal** nature, derived from socio-economic forces and practices of political and other types of interest groups. Overall, the grid is intended to show the threats that were apparent in May 2026. Some of those threats are the legacy of decisions and acts made decades or centuries ago, including in the original US Constitution. Such historical factors still affect us today.

The chart on the next page explains the categories of threats listed in the grid. You can download the PDF of the chart [here](#). A PDF of this White Paper can be downloaded here, and the online version is available here.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Legal Threats</b> <i>The Constitution, Court Cases, Laws and Regulations</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Societal Threats</b> <i>Socioeconomic &amp; Political Forces Cultural Values &amp; Beliefs</i></p>
<b>1. Electoral Facet</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Access to the ballot</li> <li>✓ Free and fair elections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Participation and civic engagement</li> <li>✓ Biases and political intrusions—domestic and foreign</li> </ul>
<b>2. Egalitarian Facet</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Equality in representation</li> <li>✓ Equal opportunities, equal access to resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Racial and gender discrimination</li> <li>✓ Income and wealth inequality</li> </ul>
<b>3. Civil Liberties Facet</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Rule of law enforced</li> <li>✓ Checks and balances upheld</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Dark money undermining independence of judiciary</li> <li>✓ Biases of law enforcement and military</li> </ul>
<b>4. Communal Facet</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Focused on the common good</li> <li>✓ Reasoned justification for decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Power of special interests</li> <li>✓ Individual desires above interests of the group</li> </ul>
<b>5. Existential Facet</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Maintaining the integrity of government</li> <li>✓ Assuring the foundations are sound</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Anti-democratic ideologies</li> <li>✓ Advocacy of violence</li> </ul>

This is a **work in progress**, as we continue to develop a better understanding of the threats to the American Democratic Republic. We welcome your input.

The **grid below** shows the threats that we have identified within each category. You can access it online at [www.reigeluth.net/democracy](http://www.reigeluth.net/democracy).

The threats are discussed at greater length in *White Paper #2*, referenced above. You can download a PDF of that paper [here](#) or access it online [here](#). Online, each threat is linked to the part of the narrative that describes it.

You can find a **bibliography** of our sources at the end of *White Paper #2*.

Finally, we gave a **presentation** on our work at Indiana University. You can access the PowerPoint [here](#).

# The Grid

## 1. Electoral Facet

- **Participation: voting and civic engagement.**
- **Free & fair (even-handed, not necessarily representative) elections.**

### A. Legal Threats

**'Baked into' the Constitution and subsequent laws, regulations, and court cases.**

1. The Constitution stipulates that national elections be controlled by the states.
2. The *Shelby County* decision by the Supreme Court allows states to erect barriers to voting.
3. The Supreme Court tolerates gerrymandering.
4. Partisan manipulation of election procedures at the state level.
5. Partisan manipulation of election procedures at the federal level.
6. Lack of uniformity in voting machine reliability.

### B. Societal Threats

**Socio-economic factors and practices of political and other types of interest groups.**

1. Disenfranchisement is a means of racist social control.
2. False claims are made of voting irregularities, undermining confidence in democracy.
3. Foreign adversaries interfere in U.S. elections.
4. Legal and societal voter suppression resulting in less representative government.
5. The decline in civic culture reduces civic engagement and participation in democracy.
6. Americans have abysmal civics knowledge, reducing civic participation, including voting.

## 2. Egalitarian Facet

- Equal representation.
- Equal access to power and distribution of resources.
- Equitable treatment regardless of sociodemographic characteristics.

### A. Legal Threats

**‘Baked into’ the Constitution and subsequent laws, regulations, and court cases.**

1. White males have a history of legal and financial advantages that persist.
2. The Electoral College subverts equal representation will by advantaging rural areas.
3. The original Constitution counted slaves as three-fifths of a person, creating a historical advantage for slave states that persists.
4. The “Great Compromise” agreements of the 19th century gave rural states an Electoral College advantage that persists.
5. The Senate filibuster often prevents the passage of popular legislation.
6. The administration of past racist federal policies created a persistent financial handicap for non-Whites.
7. National tax policies concentrate wealth and power, creating vastly unequal political influence.
8. The plurality vote tallying system can distort actual voter preferences.
9. The right to education was omitted from the Constitution, contributing to unequal educational opportunity.

### B. Societal Threats

**Socio-economic factors and practices of political and other types of interest groups.**

1. White male bias discrimination, implicit in society, has led to legal and social structures that marginalize women and minorities.
2. Income inequality is high and growing, increasing the frustration of the less privileged groups.
3. The wealthy have always held disproportionate power, and the inequality imbalance is growing.
4. Socially based misogyny and patriarchy create a social hierarchy that subordinates women to men.
5. “Othering” pushes women and racial and religious minorities into a subordinate class with reduced political influence.
6. Exploitation of wedge issues encourages voting against one’s own interests.
7. Crony Capitalism shifts wealth and power to the cronies of the President, heightening the gap between the connected few and the rest of society.
8. “Vulture capitalism” increases the gap between haves and have-nots.
9. Deindustrialization has reduced the economic and political power of the middle class.
10. Rural demographic “hollowing out” raises the fears of rural people, contributing to “White rural rage.”
11. A shortage of affordable housing creates hostility toward the government.

12. “Gilded giving”—dependence on billionaire philanthropists—increases the tax burden of poorer people, stoking populist resentment.
13. Sorting in the US education system increases the social distance between classes.

### **3. Civil Liberties Facet**

- **Rule of law enforced.**
- **Checks and balances upheld.**
- **Freedom and rights protected from government interference.**

#### **A. Legal Threats**

**‘Baked into’ the Constitution and subsequent laws, regulations, and court cases.**

1. The Alien Enemies Act of 1789 allows abuse of human rights and due process.
2. Emergency powers are highly susceptible to Presidential abuse.
3. Presidential abuse of war powers.
4. Recent presidential attacks on 14th Amendment civil rights—due process, equal protection, and birthright citizenship.
5. Presidential abuse of executive orders that disregard law, precedent, and democratic norms.
6. Presidential abuse of pardon power.
7. Abuse of prosecution power.
8. National police powers have been expanded, especially through the empowerment of ICE.
9. Militarization of police forces by Congress.
10. Some state legislatures are suppressing First Amendment rights.
11. Congressional concentration of power in committee chairs can subvert popular will.
12. Congressional stonewalling of judicial appointments.
13. The Constitution provides no accountability mechanism for the Supreme Court.
14. FCC repeal of the Fairness Doctrine has made broadcast media increasingly partisan.
15. Unequal justice of plea deals.

#### **B. Societal Threats**

**Socio-economic factors and practices of political and other types of interest groups.**

1. A secretive network of “dark money” advocacy groups has undermined the independence of the judiciary.
2. Implicit authoritarian bias of members of the military and law enforcement often lead to discrimination against marginalized groups.
3. Intruders, actively supported by the government, are gaining access to private data.
4. White supremacists commit vandalism and arson against Black churches to exert social control.
5. “Lawfare,” the use of lawsuits to harass political opponents, uses the justice system as a weapon.

## 4. Communal Facet

- **Government decisions made with deliberation that are in the best interests of the people.**
- **Collective interests vs. special interests.**

### A. Legal Threats

**‘Baked into’ the Constitution and subsequent laws, regulations, and court cases.**

1. State preemptive abuse results in rules that supersede those of lower authorities, frustrating the will of local citizens.
2. The Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision equates money with speech, allowing the rich to exert unchecked influence over elections and legislation.
3. The Supreme Court’s *McDonnell* decision conflated the line between “gifts” to political leaders and bribery.
4. Industry-Congress co-dependency leads to decisions based on special interests rather than common good.
5. Authoritarian politicians’ attacks on universities undermine a liberalizing influence in society.
6. The Constitution favors the status quo making amendments difficult privileging established interests over today’s needs.

### B. Societal Threats

**Socio-economic factors and practices of political and other types of interest groups.**

1. Decline of the “free press” dilutes an informed electorate, favoring special interests.
2. Corporate bias of mass media.
3. Social media platforms sow disharmony and misinformation.
4. Neutral “public information” is disguised propaganda.
5. Prejudicial rhetoric provokes conflict.
6. Misuse of artificial intelligence (AI).
7. Malicious foreign autocrats use “dark money” to influence elections.
8. “Low information” voters –if they do vote—tend to support demagogues.
9. Shortcomings of democracy supporters.

## 5. Existential Facet

- Integrity is upheld in governmental decision-making.
- Foundations of government itself are intact.

### A. Legal Threats

**‘Baked into’ the Constitution and subsequent laws, regulations, and court cases.**

1. The implementation of the “unitary executive theory” grants the President absolute and sole authority over the entire executive branch.
2. “Originalism” as implemented purports that the meaning of a constitutional provision is fixed when it is adopted, preventing interpretations suitable to modern conditions.
3. The Insurrection Act of 1807 authorizes the employment of US military forces inside the US in cases of insurrection or civil disorder.
4. When Courts alter the Constitution through “judicial review” it becomes “judicial activism.”
5. The Supreme Court’s *Trump v. USA* decision granted broad Presidential immunity, providing the President unchecked power.
6. The Supreme Court’s *Loper Bright* decision switches interpretation of federal regulations from agency experts to the courts resulting in irregular revision of regulations.
7. Government gridlock due to structural factors such as divided government and Senate filibuster.
8. Deregulation of firearms poses mortal threats to law enforcement and peaceful civic order.
9. Presidential misuse of the military interventions increases hostility toward government by veterans and members of less privileged classes.
10. Congress’s suspension of the military draft ended an institution that previously mingled people of all backgrounds, thereby making social divisions wider and compromises more difficult.
11. Advocacy for a new, slanted Constitutional Convention.

### B. Societal Threats

**Socio-economic factors and practices of political and other types of interest groups.**

1. Authoritarians embrace the Republican party and endorse the “authoritarian playbook” for conversion of a democracy to autocracy.
2. Anti-democracy political ideologies supported by the ultra-wealthy directly attack pluralism, and American Exceptionalism impels Americans to disregard better models of democracy.
3. Anti-Democratic religious organizations stoke fear, division, and violence in the name of religion.
4. Demographic fears: White minority status is becoming more imminent, provoking “rural White rage” against current minorities, which is exacerbated by “rural flight” to urban areas.
5. Demagogues promote sectarianism—e.g. “culture wars” and “wedge issues” as a substitute for political debate impeding political compromise, fostering gridlock, and promoting extremism.
6. Americans historically have displayed a general anti-government bias. American institutions face an unprecedented decline in approval, reducing faith in democracy.

7. New social media environment undermines social integrity by making the dissemination of dis- and misinformation faster and cheaper. Immersion in virtual relationships rather than face-to-face relationships leads to loss of a common basis for debate. Entertainment dominates our media consumption and diverts public attention from real-world issues.
8. Organized militant extremist groups and “lone wolfs” threaten violence and promote the appeal of “law and order” demagogues. The large and growing American militia movement is a constant threat of violence against opponents, posing a threat to democratic political processes.
9. Malicious foreign autocrats and their domestic accomplices interfere with US elections and use “dark money” to purchase influence with government officials.
10. Right-wing conservatives attack public education to promote privatization which reduces the historical role of public schools as a social leveler and fosters societal divisions.
11. Public opinion is shaped by lived experience, not objective data. Voting against one’s own interests is promoted deceptively.