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Building Bridges for Social Change

Confronting the Rise of Authoritarian Leadership Now

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Why is authoritarian leadership rising? Especially in developed countries with long democratic traditions. As we understand why this trend is growing, we learn what we can do to revitalize democracy.

Thinking systemically explains not only the puzzling expansion of autocracy, but also its relationship to other disturbing trends. Increases in wealth inequality, identity-driven politics, and climate change all give rise to authoritarian impulses and reinforce one another as well. These dynamics can overwhelm and disempower people, which is also part of the authoritarian playbook.

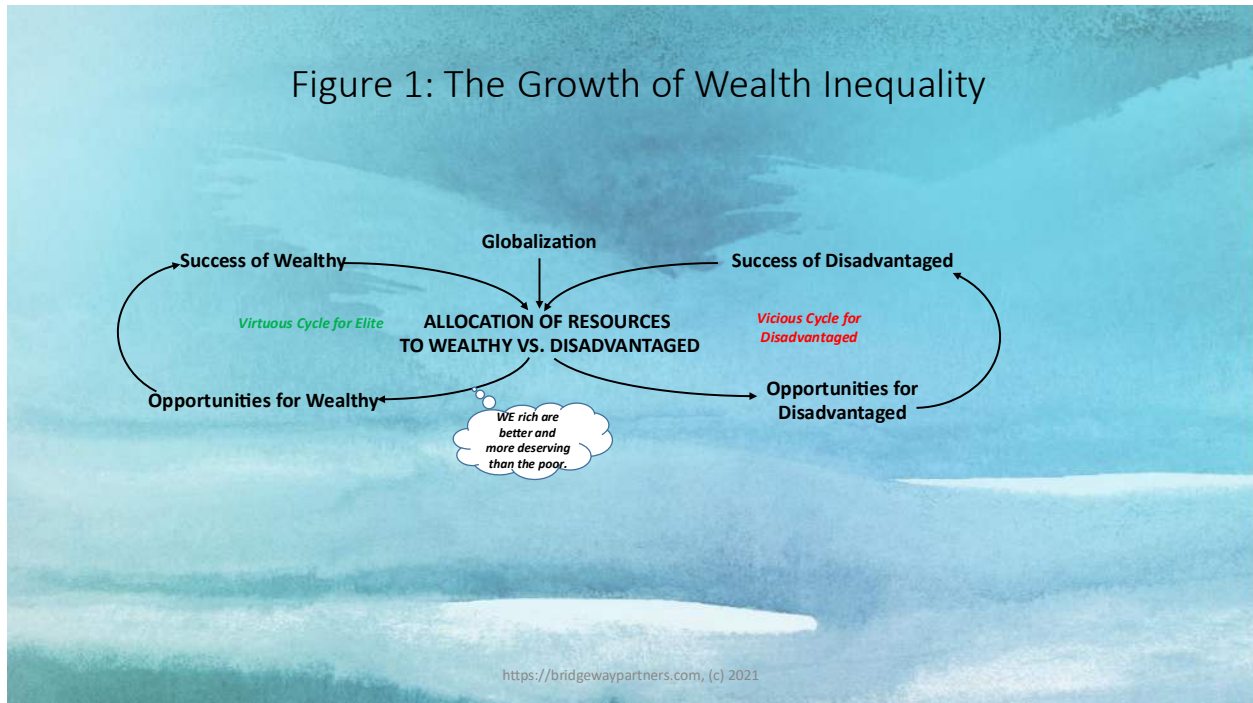
The best thing to do to alter these dynamics is to get at their root causes and identify where the leverage is for effective action. Here I offer a broad analysis that belies the full complexity of these connections to help you focus on doable actions you can take now to shift the overall dynamics.

The Growth of Wealth Inequality

At the root of all these trends is a dynamic that is very common in all societies, not just capitalist ones. It's called "Success to the Successful", i.e., the tendency over time for the rich to get richer, and the poor to get poorer. One of the drivers of this dynamic over the past four decades has been globalization. Globalization has enabled people at the top of the pyramid, not just in the US but also in other countries around the world, to benefit from a growing economic pie. However, that expanding pie is not being equally distributed. The elites in various countries around the world benefit enormously from globalization. However, people with fewer resources in developed nations are left scrambling to keep their heads above water as their jobs are exported to developing countries and their relative wages decline.

The elites benefit over time from a feedback relationship described on the left side of Figure 1 below. People who start off with more resources get more opportunities. By using these opportunities in part to distort information, reduce their own taxes, suppress voting, and wield political influence, they become even more successful. On the other side of the coin, people who start off with fewer resources are less able to generate new opportunities. They become less successful and are even less able to accumulate more resources. The disadvantaged are caught in a vicious cycle while the elites benefit from a virtuous cycle.

Figure 1: The Growth of Wealth Inequality



Many elites reinforce their virtuous cycle by assuming (as shown by the thought bubble on the diagram) that *we are better and more deserving than those who are disadvantaged*. People at the top often experience a sense of entitlement. At the same time, there are members of the elite who want to help the poor, but who fall into the trap of assuming they know what the poor need. Consequently, they give to the poor but do not empower them – a dynamic sometimes referred to as “toxic charity”.

Identity Politics and the Rise of Fear and Anger

One way in which the wealthy redirect attention away from class inequities and retain power is through identity politics. They set poor people against each other based on ethnicity or other identifiable differences. President Trump has used this strategy effectively to divide less-educated white people from Americans of color. Sixty years ago, President Lyndon Johnson, an extremely astute politician, was asked why poor white people, often Republicans, regularly voted against what seemed to be their economic self-interest. He responded, “*If you can convince the*

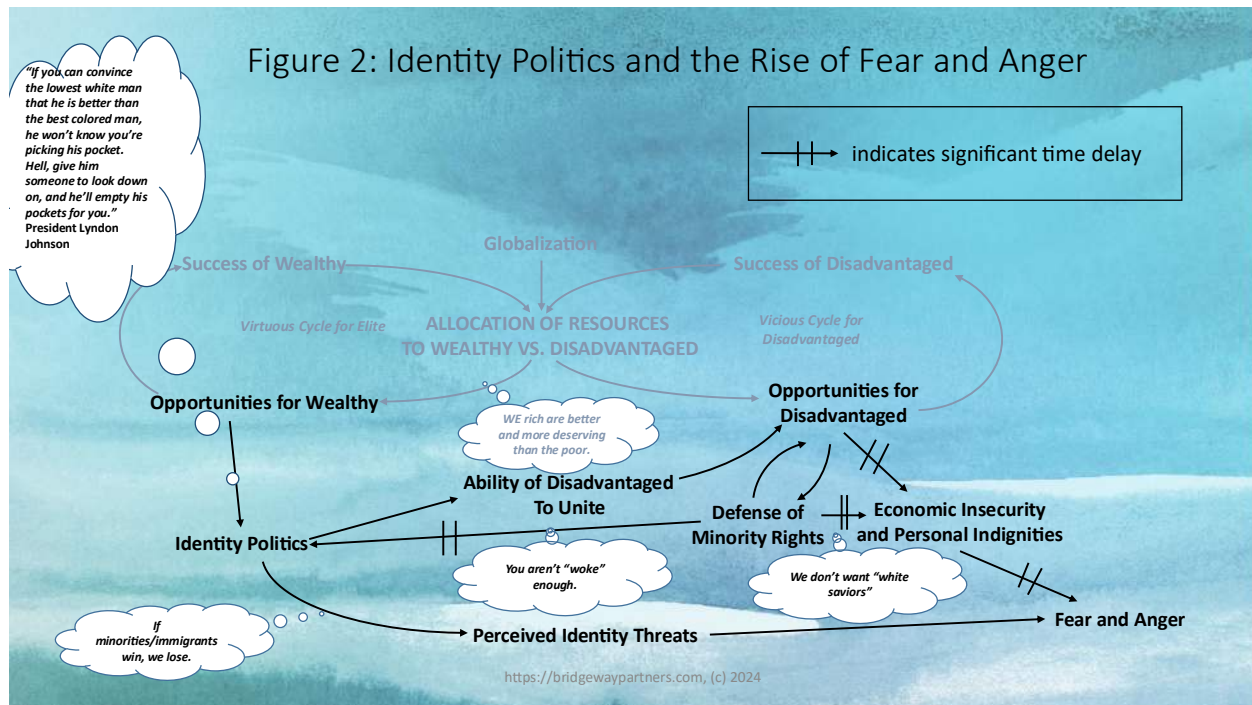
lowest white man that he is better than the best colored man (sic), he won't know you're picking his pocket. Hell, give them someone to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."

Trump has expanded identity politics to unite less-educated whites and Americans of color against immigrants. Democrats have unwittingly amplified the negative consequences of identity politics by defending minority rights at the expense of focusing on the economic pain and social dislocation felt by less-skilled people of all ethnicities. Progressives' support for minorities backfires when they separate "non-woke" people from "woke" ones. Well-meaning elites appear out-of-touch and condescending when they fail to effectively engage and empower the people they seek to help.

When disadvantaged people are divided, they are less able to organize to meet their economic needs. If the disadvantaged are unable to unite, their ability to strengthen their economic opportunities declines further. The wealthy increase their opportunities proportionally. We can see these dynamics in the success of union-busting campaigns and critiques of "the undeserving poor" that have resulted in weakening the social safety net for all Americans over the last 30-40 years.

People who are impacted by identity politics feel that their identity, their very right to exist, is threatened. As a result, they can become blind to the root causes of the very real economic insecurities and personal indignities they experience. They can conclude that all elites are bad when in fact some are more motivated by altruism than greed. They can blame their problems on people of color or immigrants even when those groups do not necessarily pose an economic danger. They cannot see that minorities tend to fill jobs that ethnic majorities do not want, and immigrant labor often creates new jobs for the dominant ethnic group.

Whatever people believe causes their problems, the combined consequences of identity threats, economic insecurity, and personal indignities are that they feel angry and afraid. These dynamics are shown in Figure 2 below.



The Impacts of Climate Change

Wealthy people whose economic self-interest is closely tied to fossil fuels are more likely to resist constructive climate action. They contest that “We still have plenty of oil”, and “It’s too expensive to convert to reliable new energy.” Failing to aggressively address climate change increases environmental instabilities such as floods, droughts, wildfires, and intensified storms. Moreover, these instabilities disproportionately hurt poor Americans in the short term. They also increase the vulnerability of poor people in nearby countries, especially in Central and South America, which further exacerbates migration pressures and the appeal of identity politics.

Figure 3: The Impacts of Climate Change

The diagram illustrates the complex interplay of climate change impacts, resource allocation, and social identity. It features a central flowchart with various nodes and connecting arrows, set against a background of a cloudy sky.

Central Concept: ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES TO WEALTHY VS. DISADVANTAGED

Key Nodes and Quotes:

- Success of Wealthy:** "If you can convince the lowest white man that he is better than the best colored man, he won't know you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him someone to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you." President Lyndon Johnson
- Success of Disadvantaged:** "Vicious Cycle for Disadvantaged"
- Opportunities for Wealthy:** "Energy conversion is too expensive"
- Opportunities for Disadvantaged:** "We don't want 'white saviors'"
- Resistance to Climate Action**
- Environmental Instability**
- Migration**
- Ability of Disadvantaged To Unite**
- Defense of Minority Rights**
- Economic Insecurity and Personal Indignities**
- Identity Politics**
- Perceived Identity Threats**
- Fear and Anger**

Flow and Connections:

- Globalization** leads to **Success of Wealthy** and **Success of Disadvantaged**.
- Success of Wealthy** leads to **Opportunities for Wealthy**.
- Success of Disadvantaged** leads to **Opportunities for Disadvantaged**.
- Opportunities for Wealthy** leads to **Resistance to Climate Action**.
- Resistance to Climate Action** leads to **Environmental Instability**.
- Environmental Instability** leads to **Opportunities for Disadvantaged**.
- Opportunities for Disadvantaged** leads to **Economic Insecurity and Personal Indignities**.
- Economic Insecurity and Personal Indignities** leads to **Fear and Anger**.
- Fear and Anger** leads to **Perceived Identity Threats**.
- Perceived Identity Threats** leads to **Identity Politics**.
- Identity Politics** leads to **Migration**.
- Migration** leads to **Ability of Disadvantaged To Unite**.
- Ability of Disadvantaged To Unite** leads to **Defense of Minority Rights**.
- Defense of Minority Rights** leads to **Opportunities for Disadvantaged**.
- Opportunities for Disadvantaged** leads to **Success of Disadvantaged**.
- Success of Disadvantaged** leads to **Success of Wealthy**.

Additional Elements:

- WE rich are better and more deserving than the poor.** (Thought bubble)
- You aren't "woke" enough.** (Thought bubble)
- If minorities/immigrants win, we lose.** (Thought bubble)

Source: <https://bridgewaypartners.com>, (c) 2024

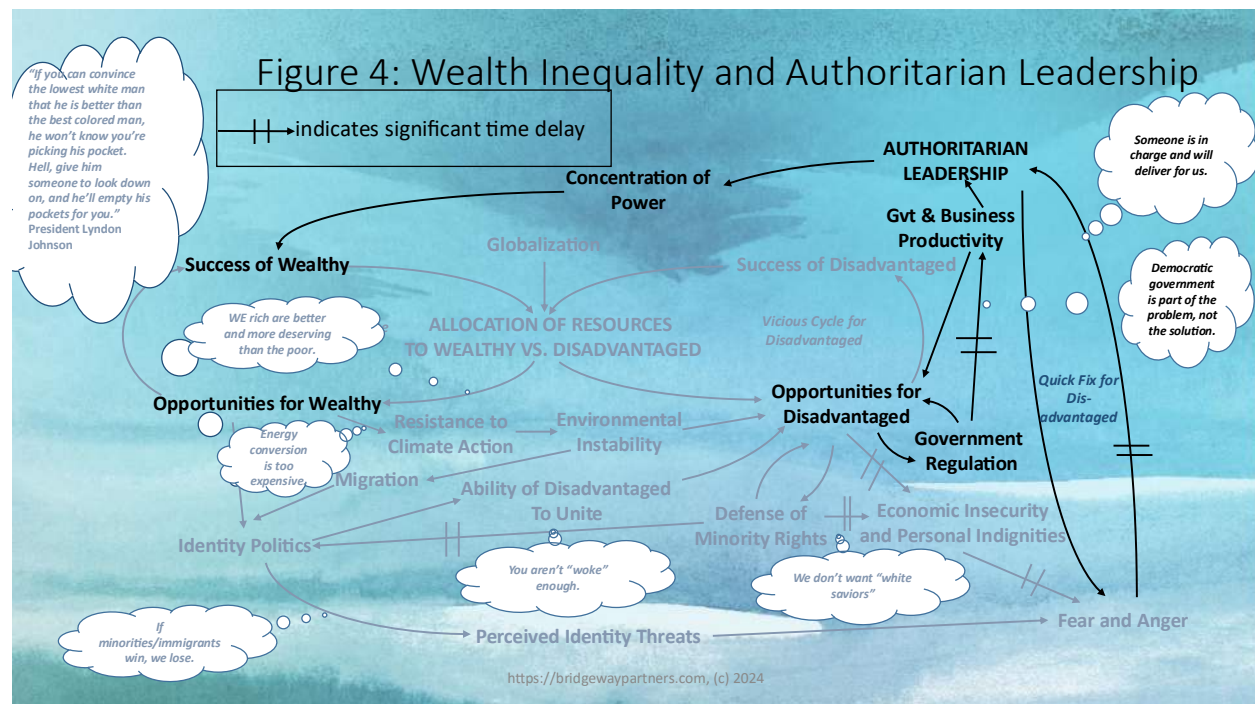
Authoritarian Leadership: A Fix That Backfires

Fear and anger feed the desire for authoritarian leadership. Disadvantaged people, particularly from the dominant ethnic population, come to trust that someone is in charge and will protect them. The words used by participants at a 2020 Trump Presidential rally were, “*He is our protector; he is our bodyguard*”, followed in 2024 by “*Trump’s your daddy.*” These are very powerful attributes to be granted by one set of adults to another adult. Authoritarian leadership works in the short term in that it enables disadvantaged people who experience identity threats, economic insecurity, and a loss of dignity to believe someone values and will deliver for them.

Another appeal of authoritarian leadership is that it seems more efficient than democracy. As Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson point out in their recently published book *Abundance*, democratic government can rely too heavily on regulation to protect disadvantaged groups. The resulting bureaucracy undermines both government and business productivity. One consequence is that the public and private sectors become even less capable of meeting people's basic needs, e.g., for affordable housing, clean energy, and healthcare. Government bureaucracy can be

especially costly to small businesses, which employ nearly six out of ten American workers. Conversely, authoritarian promises to cut through red tape by eliminating “the deep state” become increasingly attractive.

However, authoritarian leadership backfires on many of its supporters in the long run by further concentrating control in the hands of a wealthy few. Instead of helping those who are disadvantaged, it reinforces the power of economic elites at the expense of most everyone else. The dangers of wealth concentration throughout history are described most recently in Luke Kemp’s new book *Goliath’s Curse: The History and Future of Societal Collapse*. Those who are at greatest risk in the short-term include people with fewer skills and other assets, ethnic minorities, and small businesses who are among autocrats’ greatest supporters. See Figure 4 below.



What You Can Do

In summary, authoritarian leadership, wealth inequality, identity politics, and environmental instability are mutually reinforcing factors that are growing over time. They soon risk reaching a tipping point and accelerating more rapidly. The insidious nature of these dynamics is that people can feel powerless to change them. However, the belief itself can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The alternative is to recognize that 1) the gradual growth of these changes both belies their seriousness and lulls key people into taking a “wait and see” attitude, and 2) there are actions you can take now to make a difference. You might currently feel buffered from the short-term impacts of authoritarian behavior. However, political, economic, social, and environmental instabilities are likely to only increase and affect more of us over time. Taking action now can reduce even greater natural resource depletion, intensified polarization, increased economic pressure, and the loss of freedoms we take for granted. It is important to act urgently with the long-term in mind.

You can take meaningful action for the very reason that you are part of the system you need to change. Changing any complex system begins with changing yourself – your own intentions, thinking, and actions. With respect to your intentions, ask why acting now is important to you. Do you want to contribute to building a better world? Do you value fairness and justice? Are you inspired by nature? Do you want to leave a healthy planet for your children and grandchildren?

We often believe that others – most importantly political and business leaders – must be the first to change. Do you understand instead that change is a *both/and*, i.e., that it starts with you though it does not end there? Do you believe that your social, political, and economic behaviors help shape the larger system around you?

There are many individual and collective actions you can take to revitalize democracy (and influence the other trends). Individually, perhaps the most important thing you can do is to find other people to talk to and collaborate with. It makes sense to start with people who share your values and immediate interests. Then, build coalitions with others who value mutual respect and a commitment to democracy even though they might have different priorities. As you do this, recognize that you might need to let go of seeking moral purity because it can be self-defeating.

Next, extend yourself outward by building bridges with people whom you perceive as ‘the other’. The purpose of bridge-building is to reduce the ability of identity politics to divide us. Building bridges requires that we cultivate: humility about our own views of the world, genuine curiosity about others’ experiences, and respect for the forces that have led others to think and act as they do.

Building bridges across the political divide begins with becoming informed about how and why others see the world differently. You can subscribe to a newsletter that balances multiple perspectives on current events and helps distinguish trustworthy facts from misinformation, e.g., [Tangle News](#) or [AllSides.com](#). Reach out and listen respectfully to someone you personally know who has right-leaning views. Participate in and/or donate to an organization that facilitates bridging people across divides, such as [Living Room Conversations](#), [Braver Angels](#), [DEPLOY/US](#) (focused on multi-partisan climate action), or [More in Common](#) (focused on protecting democracy in 7 developed nations).

Another very practical way to build bridges is to go beyond such common forms of democratic participation as donating, letter-writing, and voting by engaging in democracy face-to-face. For example, attend your local city council meeting, and use the opportunity to listen for and speak to a systems view of the issues. Or lobby at your state house for legislation you believe in, especially as part of a group which helps prepare specific talking points and arrange informational briefings with representatives’ offices.

You can also work to revitalize democracy collectively. One way is to donate to pro-democracy organizations that focus on winning pivotal state races. These include: [States Project](#), [Movement Voter Project](#), and [Vote Forward](#). Another strategy is to strengthen pro-democratic online media, e.g., by contributing to [Focus for Democracy's Online Media Fund](#). If you can afford it, make donations that fund political lobbying because they can be more effective even though they are not tax-deductible.

You can also work strategically through local communities, coalitions, workplaces, and places of worship to support political, business, and social sector leaders who are committed to:

1. Uniting people across their economic interests independent of ethnicity
2. Redistributing resources, e.g., through promoting more progressive taxation
3. Increasing government's effectiveness by increasing its efficiency
4. Improving the private sector's ability to meet people's basic needs, e.g., through providing living-wage jobs, building affordable housing profitably, and creating sustainable products and services
5. Generating new resources and distributing them more equitably, e.g. through investments in emerging industries and the small businesses that support them
6. Supporting religious institutions to reinforce ethical precepts that include compassion, tolerance, and respect for others

Finally, recognize that the most sustainable actions are the ones you really *want* to do. So, align whatever actions you take with both your values and your gifts, i.e., what you love to do and do best. This might be marketing, writing, speaking, drawing, or performing to name a few. The results are that we will have not only a more equitable society, but also one that is more sustainable economically, socially, and politically.

Further Reading: To learn more about concrete strategies for revitalizing democracy, you can read:

- [10 Steps for Saving Democracy](#) – a brief monograph focused on *individual* ways of being and acting by political psychiatrist Karin Tamerius
- [From Dictatorship to Democracy](#) – a short book available online focused on *collective strategies*, not just tactics, for reclaiming democracy by an expert on non-violent action Gene Sharp

Note: This article is based on a presentation originally made by David Stroh at the 2020 International Leadership Association annual conference. It has been updated with new material presented to members of Indivisible in 2025, at the 2024 Next Practices Institute sponsored by Mobius Executive Leadership, and by Ezra Klein’s and Derek Thompson’s insights on the unintended consequences of government regulation in their 2025 book *Abundance*. The dynamics of wealth inequality are described in greater depth in David’s 2020 article in *The Foundation Review*, [“Overcoming the Systemic Challenges of Wealth Inequality in the U.S.”](#) Readers are also encouraged to read his 2020 blog post [“How Wealth Inequality Compounds Racism”](#) for further perspective.