

VOLUME 9

D-HUB

LEADERSHIP



ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN

TOOLKIT

Greatest hits to defend
and renew democracies

D-HUB

VOLUME 9

LEADERSHIP

CURATION OF PLAYS: Ricken Patel, Nika Kovač, Agustín Frizzera
and Umanzor López-Baltodano

EDITION: Agustín Frizzera and Umanzor López-Baltodano

DESIGN AND COVER: Kalany Ballardin | Foresti Design Studio

ADDITIONAL REVIEW: Federica Vinci

**D-HUB THANKS THE MEMBERS OF ITS COMMUNITY FOR THEIR FEEDBACK
AND COMMENTS, WHICH HELPED IMPROVE THIS VOLUME.**

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Twenty-first-century authoritarian leaders follow a clear playbook. It's not a formula or a recipe but a dynamic set of strategies and tactics deployed across different contexts.

In response, we've started to crack open their playbook and crafted something of our own: an ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT. Developed with insight from hundreds of frontline democracy defenders, scholars, and strategists, this 10-volume series is packed with the most effective plays to counter elected authoritarianism and safeguard our democracies.

This Toolkit is not a silver bullet. It's a catalyst designed to ignite your vision and creativity as you confront the challenges ahead. Its plays are archetypal but open to innovation and adaptation to the local context of those who use them.

We hope you use it and share it. Maybe the next big play, we'll learn from you.

Ricken Patel

CO-CHAIR, D-HUB

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(United States) - Francia Márquez (Colombia) - Pita
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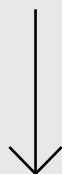
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INTRODUCTION



WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP CAN DEFEND DEMOCRACY?

by Nika Kovač

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, D-HUB

Authoritarians build politics around the narrative of the strong leader: one person who sees clearly, embodies the people, defeats the enemy, and solves what institutions supposedly cannot. This is not only a myth, but a political story about how society works, which can become quite seductive during times of crisis. People are tired, angry, and disappointed. They want someone who really sees them and takes responsibility.

Democracy defenders cannot answer this call with scripted leadership. People need to feel that democracy is alive beyond institutions and procedures, especially in the way leaders listen, decide, confront mistakes, and show up under pressure.

This volume of the **ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN TOOLKIT** focuses on Leadership. It explores practices that help leaders build trust, offer bold direction, face hard issues while not accepting authoritarian frames, turn energy into action, and stay whole under pressure.

Leadership is not about becoming a savior. It is about showing that power can be exercised differently: with courage, accountability, humility, and care. Democratic

leadership is not one person standing above the collective. It is one role inside a wider ecosystem of organizers, teams, communities, institutions, and future leaders.

The best leaders do not ask people to admire them from a distance. They help people recognize their own power, admit mistakes, share responsibility, and build leadership that can reproduce itself: people ready to step forward and carry on the mission.

In the following pages, you will find plays drawn from difficult contexts: showing up with coherence, dreaming beyond the status quo, facing the elephant in the room, and turning strategy into action.

Leadership is human work. It takes stamina, care, discipline, self-awareness, and the willingness to be corrected. It cannot become another personality cult. It must build lasting hope and trust.

Treat these plays as starting points. Adapt them to your context. Leadership is built every day, under pressure, with others, and in service of something larger than ourselves.

With love,
Nika

HOW THIS PUBLICATION WORKS

Democracy defenders are busy and practical people. That is why we designed this publication to be concise and engaging.

This volume includes **ONE GRAND STRATEGY** and **SIX PLAYS**.

GRAND STRATEGY

A Grand Strategy is a guiding framework that aligns all actions and tactics with the long-term goals of safeguarding democracy. The foundation of the grand strategy provides coherence and effectiveness to individual plays.

PLAY

An action that can be adapted to different moments and contexts. It may be a strategy, tactic, or tool. The key criteria for its inclusion are its deployment, effectiveness, and relevance in the fight for democracy.

FOR EACH, YOU WILL FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION



THE PLAY

Describes the strategy, tactic or move



WHY IT WORKS

Explains the core reasons the tactic is effective and impactful



HOW IT WORKS

A more detailed depiction of the play, with basic steps of implementation



TIPS

Recommendations and aspects to avoid



WHO'S DONE IT WELL

Examples of how the play has been deployed in real life



LEARN MORE

Links to resources

The concluding section, **"WE CAN HELP YOU,"** provides contact details for those needing help confronting elected authoritarian politics.

FEATURED GRAND STRATEGY

HUMAN POLITICS

**MAKE DEMOCRACY WORK,
FEEL CLOSE, AND BELONG
TO PEOPLE**

Democracy will survive if people feel it belongs to them, and if they can see it working in their lives.

When politics feels distant, scripted, extractive, or even useless, elected authoritarianism starts to feel concrete. Authoritarians know this. They offer certainty through a single figure, simple enemies, and the promise that one person alone can fix everything. This is not just a leadership style. It is a political story: power concentrated at the top, loyalty demanded below, and people turned into followers.

Democratic leadership must therefore offer a different story. Not a return to an idealized past, not a sole focus on institutions, and not a softer version of strongman politics. Human Politics is about building democracy for this century: a politics that works for the people, serves the common good, and makes ordinary people feel seen, understood, respected, and powerful in shaping their future.

Human Politics begins with a simple truth: citizens are not problems to be managed, votes to be extracted, data points to be targeted, or audiences to be performed for. They are human beings carrying fears, hopes, loyalties, contradictions, memories, identities, and everyday pressures. But listening is not enough. The point is to understand what is broken, explain why and how it was broken, and build the power to change it.

This means connecting human experience to political substance. Rent, wages, safety, care, corruption, discrimination, public services, dignity, freedom, and belonging are the places where people decide whether democracy matters. Human Politics asks leaders to show, in real and tangible ways, how democratic power can improve people's lives and expand their freedom.

Human Politics begins with respect. It means listening, persuading, and sometimes disagreeing honestly while recognizing that people can be wrong, afraid, angry, misled, or hurt and still be worthy of democratic engagement. Respecting people in this way does not require chasing every opinion or abandoning core values.

That is especially important in a context designed to provoke, polarize, and exhaust. Disinformation, digital violence, AI, propaganda, and polarization do not only attack facts. They attack judgment. This new politics requires leaders who can refuse provocation, escape their own bubbles, and respond with wisdom rather than impulse.

And also, human leaders speak like human beings. They do not hide behind robotic talking points, institutional jargon, or language edited by fear. We must make values visible not only

in speeches, but in decisions, policies, priorities, relationships, and the way leaders handle pressure. Human leaders admit mistakes, correct course, and show that democratic leadership is not about pretending to be perfect, but about learning and seriously trying.

Moreover, Human Politics is never the work of one heroic individual. Politics is a team sport. Every visible leader stands within a wider collective: organizers, strategists, volunteers, communicators, community leaders, fundraisers, researchers, and people doing the invisible work that makes public leadership possible. The strongest leaders do not make themselves indispensable. They build work that others can own and carry on.

Let's be clear: This is hard politics. It requires courage to face conflict without cruelty, name power without dehumanizing people, offer bold change without fantasy, and stay disciplined when opponents try to exhaust, provoke, or intimidate you. It asks leaders and organizations to act from a deeper source than applause, fear, or career incentives.

Ultimately, Human Politics is the kind of politics people deserve: democratic power rooted in human dignity, organized for the common good, and strong enough to build a future that does not depend on one person alone. That is also what makes it capable of defeating authoritarianism.



1

SHOW UP REAL

Consistency, coherence, and
authenticity in everyday leadership

THE PLAY

Democratic leadership begins with trust. And trust is built when people see coherence: between what you say and what you do, between the values you defend and the policies you fight for, between your public message and the way you make decisions, treat people, handle mistakes, and show up when pressure builds up.

Showing up real means letting people see enough of the human being behind the role to understand why you fight, then proving through your actions that your values are not a costume. It does not require exposing your whole life, performing intimacy, or turning every private moment into political content.

People are tired of leaders who feel distant, scripted, untouchable, or managed by consultants. They are also able to detect fake relatability. A casual video or emotional post will not build trust if the rest of your leadership feels inconsistent or disconnected from people's lives.

Authoritarians often exploit the hunger for closeness through staged intimacy. Democracy defenders should not copy that performance. Something stronger should be offered. A leader who speaks with honesty, acts with consistency, admits mistakes, treats people with respect, and keeps showing up over time becomes believable.

Also remember that authenticity is not a communication trick. If you speak about dignity, people should see dignity in the politics and policies you support and in how you treat those around you. If you speak about democracy, people should see openness, accountability, and a willingness to listen and to be proven wrong when needed.

Showing up real is the discipline of making your values visible in words, actions, relationships, policies, habits, and decisions. That is how people stop seeing the democratic leader as a distant figure and start recognizing you as someone they can trust.



WHY IT WORKS

- **THE GAP IS CLOSED.** An honest and coherent human presence rebuilds the emotional bridge between leaders and the communities they seek to serve.
- **VALUES ARE TURNED INTO PROOFS.** When people see the same values in your speeches, decisions, policies, relationships, and everyday behavior, your message becomes more credible.
- **TRUST BECOMES CUMULATIVE.** One authentic moment can move people, but consistency over time makes them believe you. Trust grows when people see you show up again and again, through mistakes, victories, pressure, and ordinary days.
- **CYNICISM IS DISARMED.** In a world saturated with spin, people look for coherence. When your words and actions align, attacks become harder to land because people already have a sense of who you are.



HOW IT WORKS

1

MAKE YOUR EXPERIENCE A BRIDGE

Your life can help people understand why you fight, but only when the story connects to something larger than you. Use personal experience to shed light on shared struggles: caregiving, migration, exclusion, dignity, work, fear, hope, or the feeling of being ignored by those in power.

And yet, authenticity does not always require personal exposure. In some contexts, showing too much of yourself can create risks or simply shift attention away from the real work. You can also build trust by showing that you have listened deeply, understood what people are living, and chosen to act on it.

2

MAKE YOUR VALUES POLITICAL

Authenticity is more than tone, biography, and emotional openness. It should show up in what you fight for and how you make use of power. Ask yourself: *What policies, campaigns, decisions, or priorities prove the values I claim? If I speak about democracy, where is it visible in how I decide? If I speak about justice, what am I willing to confront, correct, or change?*

People do not expect leaders to be perfect. They expect them to try, learn, take responsibility, and show that their values shape their political choices, not only their speeches.

3 **BRING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE CLOSER TOGETHER**

People notice how leaders behave personally when the speech is over: how they treat others, receive criticism, handle disagreement, share credit, and respond under pressure. This is not about creating a second performance for private spaces. It is about reducing the gap between the values you project publicly and the culture you create around you. If the public message is participation, the internal culture cannot be based on fear. If the public message is democracy, disagreement cannot be punished. The gap between public values and private behavior is one of the fastest ways to destroy trust.

4 **USE EMOTION WITH PURPOSE**

We don't need leaders made of stone. A new democracy needs leaders who can feel the stakes without losing direction. Anger, grief, fear, hope, and joy can all create connection, but only when grounded in purpose. Emotion should help people understand what is at stake, who is affected, why action matters, and where hope or responsibility can be found. Show grief when people are hurting. Show anger when injustice demands it. Show hope when people need courage. However, do not perform intimacy or turn every wound into the center of the story. The goal is to help people move from feeling to action.

5 **BUILD RITUALS OF PRESENCE**

Credibility grows through repeated contact. Show up consistently, not just during crises, campaigns, or media moments. Build relationships people can count on, long before you need votes, signatures, donations, turnout, or attention. People can tell when your presence is merely instrumental. Create habits people can count on: regular community visits, weekly updates, open conversations, transparent reflections after

mistakes, recurring listening spaces, or repeated presence in places that are usually ignored. Rituals matter because they turn presence into proof. When people know you will keep returning, listening, explaining, and showing up, they begin to trust not just what you say, but who you are.

6

**MAKE KINDNESS AND JOY
PART OF YOUR SIGNATURE**

Leaders set the emotional weather around them. If urgency, fear, anger, or exhaustion is all that is transmitted, people will eventually mirror that pressure. They may work hard for a while, but they will not want to stay. Kindness, humor, and joy are not soft extras. These help people breathe, connect, and keep going. Celebrate small wins. Thank people specifically. Make space for laughter. Protect moments of warmth even in hard campaigns. Joy is how people experience, in the present, a glimpse of the future they are fighting for. Politics that feels human is easier to sustain.



TIPS

A AUTHENTICITY DOESN'T MEAN UNFILTERED

Being real doesn't mean saying everything you feel the moment you feel it. Oversharing can come across as self-centered, while emotional outbursts or impulsive reactions often break trust instead of building it. Authenticity requires intention. The point is to share what's true and useful to the cause, there is no need to expose everything. Before speaking, ask yourself: *Does this emotion serve the cause?* Ground personal expression in purpose. Shape stories with intention, not impulse. Craft them to build trust, clarify your values, and move people. Emotions are powerful tools, but only when used with care and clarity.

Being intentional also means knowing what not to share. Decide what is public, what belongs only to trusted people, and what should remain private. Boundaries protect your family, your mental health, and your ability to lead.

B DON'T MAKE YOURSELF THE WHOLE STORY

Personal presence can also become a trap. If every message, emotion, and victory revolves around the leader, the movement might become too dependent on one person. And political victories require a collective effort.

Use your story to open the door and then widen the frame. Bring others in. Share the microphone. Let communities, volunteers, families, workers, organizers, and allies tell the story in their own words. The strongest democratic leaders do not make people admire them from a distance; they help people recognize their own power. Showing up real should deepen collective trust, not build a personality cult.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



JACINDA ARDERN

Showing up human under pressure

NEW ZEALAND

Jacinda Ardern's leadership stood out not because she tried to look perfect, but because she made humanity visible under pressure. As New Zealand's prime minister, she led through moments that tested the country's emotional and political fabric: the Christchurch mosque attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and years of intense polarization and scrutiny. In each moment, her authority came from coherence between what she said, how she acted, and the values she asked the country to live by. It was never about distance or hardness in her ways.

After the Christchurch attacks in 2019, Ardern showed grief without making herself the center of the story. She stood with Muslim communities, wore a hijab in solidarity, and spoke with clarity about belonging: "They are us." Her empathy was not performance detached from action. Her government moved quickly to restrict military-style semi-automatic weapons, turning public mourning into political responsibility.

During the pandemic, Ardern again chose a style that felt direct, calm, and human. Her “team of five million” framing invited New Zealanders to see public health not as obedience to a distant state, but as shared care for one another. Through regular updates, accessible language, and a tone that mixed seriousness with warmth, she made crisis leadership feel close without becoming chaotic or self-centered.

Ardern’s example shows that showing up real is about making values visible when people are afraid, grieving, or unsure what comes next. Kindness became credible because it was paired with decisions. Empathy became powerful because it was disciplined. And leadership felt human because people could see the same ethic in her words, presence, and actions.

“You can be strong, and you can be kind.”



NICUȘOR DAN

The power of being himself

ROMANIA

Romania’s 2025 presidential election took place after the annulment of the 2024 vote amid allegations of Russian interference. In the first round of the rerun election, far-right nationalist George Simion came first with around 40% of the vote, while Nicușor Dan, the pro-European mayor of Bucharest, trailed far behind in second place with around 21%. The runoff became a high-stakes contest over Romania’s democratic and geopolitical direction, with authorities again warning of foreign-backed disinformation and Russian interference during the campaign.

Nicușor Dan never tried to perform the role of a conventional strongman politician. A mathematician turned civic activist, he built his public life through patient, often unglamorous work: lawsuits, urban planning fights, anti-corruption campaigns, and efforts to protect Bucharest's architectural heritage and green spaces. Before becoming Romania's president, he had already made himself known as the founder of the Save Bucharest Association and later as the capital's mayor, a leader more associated with method, persistence, and civic rigor than political theater.

That coherence became his strength. In a political climate shaped by anger, distrust, and nationalist spectacle, Dan did not try to outshout his opponents. His style was calm, technical, and sometimes awkward, but it matched the public record he had built over the years. He spoke like someone who solved problems step by step because that was how he had entered public life: not through a party machine, but through civic battles over legality, transparency, and the right of citizens to shape their city.

By the time he reached the runoff, voters knew what they were getting, and what they were not. Against Simion's hard-right nationalism and anti-establishment fury, Dan offered a different kind of leadership: restrained, and rooted in competence rather than domination. His victory, with 53.6% of the vote, showed that authenticity does not always look like warmth, informality, or charisma. Sometimes it looks like refusing to become someone else.

"Elections are not about politicians, they are about communities."



ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

Turning biography into political clarity

UNITED STATES

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's rise in 2018 was striking not only because she defeated Joe Crowley, a ten-term incumbent and one of the most powerful Democrats in Congress. It was striking because she built a campaign in which biography, language, organizing, and policies pointed in the same direction.

A former bartender and organizer from the Bronx and Queens, AOC spoke about rent pressure, family bills, healthcare insecurity, student debt, low wages, and the feeling that working people were being locked out of power. These were not just personal references. They were connected to a political argument: that people closest to everyday economic pressure should have a voice in shaping public decisions.

Her authenticity came from alignment. The way she spoke, the issues she prioritized, the campaign she ran, and the communities she organized with, all reinforced the same message. When she talked about healthcare,

housing, wages, or debt, it did not sound detached from lived experience or local struggle. It sounded connected to the world her campaign was trying to represent.

After entering Congress, Ocasio-Cortez continued using accessible formats to close the gap between national politics and everyday life: Instagram Lives, kitchen-table reflections, sharp explainers, and direct responses to attacks. At their best, those spaces were not only about relatability. They were used to explain power: how legislation works, who benefits from inequality, why movements matter, and how ordinary people can act.

Her strongest moments turned “I” into “We.” She shared personal truths and tied them to collective struggle and public choices. That is what made vulnerability politically useful rather than merely performative. She did not ask people only to identify with her. She invited them to see themselves in a wider fight over who politics is for.

“You don’t have to be perfect, but you do have to be 100% committed.”



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Stories of Hope." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Special Volume. 



D-Hub. 2024. "A Surprise Comeback!" *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Volume 4.



D-Hub. 2025. "The Power of Democratic Leadership." *AATK Podcast Series*

OTHER RESOURCES



Ardern, Jacinda. 2025. "A Different Kind of Power."



Lears, Rachel. 2019. "Knock Down the House." *Netflix*



Patel, Ricken. 2025. "Democratic Populism and Human Politics."



2

**DREAM BIG.
ACT BIGGER.**

Be bold in both proposals
and actions

THE PLAY

People join democratic fights for many reasons other than preventing disaster. They join when they can see a future worth building.

In moments of exhaustion, fear, inequality, and distrust, democratic leaders must do more than defend what exists. They must explain what is broken, why it is broken, who benefits from keeping it that way, and what kind of society could replace it. Democracy gives people the power to repair, renew, and transform institutions so they serve the common good—not merely to preserve them.

Dreaming big is essential, but it does not mean creating fantasies or chasing slogans. It means refusing to treat today's pain as permanent. When rent is impossible, healthcare is inaccessible, wages do not cover life, corruption feels untouchable, or communities feel abandoned, leadership means saying clearly: it does not have to be this way, and we know how to make it better.

Bold democratic leadership connects vision to structure. It does not only name the problem; it explains the forces, rules, interests, and decisions that produced it. It does not only describe the future; it makes that future real enough for people to feel it in their daily lives: lower costs, safer streets, cleaner air, better care for your family, more time, more dignity, and more freedom.

While others use boldness to shock, divide, and dominate attention, new democracy defenders use a different kind of boldness: rooted in people's needs, guided by democratic values, serious about power, and ready to act.

Give people a vision bold enough to move them, and concrete actions that make them believe change has already begun.



WHY IT WORKS

- **AGENDA-SETTING POWER.** Authoritarians dominate when they set the narrative. Bold proposals reclaim that space and force them to respond on your terms.
- **THE STATUS QUO TRAP IS BROKEN.** Big ideas show that democracy is not the defense of what has failed citizens, it is the path to change it.
- **WHY THINGS ARE BROKEN GETS TO BE EXPLAINED.** When leaders connect everyday pain to the rules, interests, and choices that produced it, people stop seeing injustice as inevitable.
- **NEW IDEAS CAN RENEW HOPE.** People are more likely to believe in change when they can picture what would be different in their daily lives: costs, care, safety, dignity, freedom, time, or voice.
- **ENERGY IS ATTRACTIVE.** Bold ideas give volunteers, allies, artists, influencers, experts, and communities something to carry, repeat, and make their own.



HOW IT WORKS

1

START FROM REAL PAIN AND REAL KNOWLEDGE

Do not begin in a policy room. Begin where people feel the problem. Listen at doors, in clinics, on buses, in workplaces, in rural communities, in WhatsApp groups, on social media, and around kitchen tables. Ask: What is hurting people? What feels rigged? What are they tired of tolerating?

The bolder the idea, the deeper its roots must be. Do not chase novelty; chase need. People are not waiting for clever slogans or technical tweaks. They need to feel seen and to know that someone is ready to fight for what is hurting them.

Connect that lived experience with people who have studied, organized, governed, litigated, or worked on the issue for years. The strongest ideas are rooted in real life and sharpened by serious knowledge.

2

MAKE POWER VISIBLE

Before naming the solution, explain why the problem exists. Who benefits from the status quo? Which interests, laws, monopolies, corrupt networks, political actors, or institutional habits keep the problem in place? Do not blame “the system” in the abstract. Be specific enough that people can see the choices, incentives, and power relations behind their daily pain.

This is what turns frustration into political understanding. When people see only the problem, they may feel anger, shame, or resignation. When they understand what produces the problem, the fight becomes clearer. They see that change is not blocked by fate, laziness, or individual failure. It is blocked by decisions, interests, and structures that can be challenged.

Making power visible helps people understand why change has stalled, what stands in its way, and what must be moved to make it possible. It does not require dehumanizing opponents.

3 **NAME THE FUTURE, NOT JUST THE PROBLEM**

Democratic leaders often become excellent at describing what is wrong. Although this matters, diagnosis alone does not mobilize. People also need a picture of what life could look like if things changed.

Asking people to defend institutions in the abstract is never a good idea. Instead, show how democratic power can make those institutions useful in daily life: a city that lowers rents, a court that protects rights, a parliament that expands care, a school system that gives children dignity, a public service that actually works, or an election that removes corrupt leaders.

The point is not to protect the status quo. The point is to make democracy work again. Name the future in concrete terms. What would be different in people's lives? A vision becomes stronger when people can feel it.

4 **MAKE IT BIG, SIMPLE, AND SPECIFIC**

If the problem is structural, the solution must be bold enough to match. Do not just patch symptoms; go to the root. Say it simply. Talk about the cake, not the recipe. People need to know what will change in their lives, not every technical step behind it.

A bold idea should pass the kitchen-table test: can someone explain it to a friend in one sentence? Use clear, visual language people can repeat: “End the waiting list.” “Freeze the rent.” “Free public transport.” “Protect every vote.”

Technical barriers matter, but they should shape the path, not shrink the ambition before the fight begins. You do not need every detail in the slogan, but you do need the serious policy work underneath. Courage and clarity persuade, and preparation makes them durable.

5 LET THE IDEA TRAVEL THROUGH PEOPLE

A bold proposal becomes powerful when others can carry it without needing your full speech. Give the idea a form people can repeat: a slogan, image, symbol, story, comparison, action, ritual, or simple explanation.

Use formats that move: short videos, posters, fake billboards, murals, memes, songs, door-to-door scripts, public challenges, community assemblies, street actions, or visual stunts. And remember: the point is not attention for its own sake. The point is making the future visible.

If the idea captures the imagination, it spreads. If people can repeat it in their own words, it grows. If they can make it their own, it becomes a movement.

6 ACT LIKE THE FUTURE HAS ALREADY BEGUN

Bold leadership needs visible proof. Do something that makes the proposal tangible at the moment. Launch a pilot. Present a model law. Build a public prototype. Organize a citizens’ assembly. Create a community service experiment. Show and take the first steps.

The goal is to help people feel: this is not just a dream or an idea, it has already started. Action makes ambition credible. It shows seriousness, invites participation, and gives people something to join.

This matters especially when citizens have been disappointed many times before. Promises alone may not move them. Visible action can. The bigger the vision, the more important it is to show the first move.

7 **HOLD THE LINE AND SHARPEN THE PATH**

When backlash comes, do not panic and shrink the vision at the first sign of ridicule. Powerful interests often call bold ideas naïve, dangerous, impossible, or irresponsible because those ideas threaten existing power relations.

Holding the line does not mean refusing to learn. Listen carefully. Some attacks are bad faith. And some criticism reveals confusion, fear, or implementation gaps. Clarify what needs clarifying. Adjust what needs adjusting. Strengthen the path and do not abandon the ambition just because it makes comfortable people uncomfortable.



TIPS

A **BOLD, NOT FANTASY**

A powerful proposal should stretch the imagination, not break trust. Boldness fails when it feels detached from people's lives, political conditions, or basic credibility. Be daring, but stay rooted.

Anchor the idea in real struggles. Use examples, comparisons, pilots, policies, or experiences that prove change is possible. You do not need every technical detail in the slogan, but you do need to show that the idea is serious.

The goal is not to sound radical for the sake of it. The goal is to make necessary change feel real, urgent, and achievable.

B

DON'T OVER-EXPLAIN IT

Make sure people really understand what the proposal means for their own lives, before burying them in diagrams. The public message should be simple, visual, and repeatable. Lead with the promise: what changes, for whom, and why it matters.

Yet, simplicity is not an excuse for emptiness. Have the policy work, numbers, allies, implementation steps, and answers ready for those who ask, and for the moment you win. Courage and clarity persuade, but preparation makes your proposals durable.

Say the big thing simply. Then be ready to show how it can be done.

C

DON'T CONFUSE BOLDNESS WITH LONELINESS

If only the leader is explaining the idea, it is not yet a movement. The bolder the proposal, the more it needs a chorus.

Bring allies in as early as possible: organizers, experts, artists, unions, community leaders, influencers, local officials, and unexpected champions. Give them language, visuals, examples, and roles. Let them adapt the message to their own communities. A powerful idea should not feel like it belongs to one person. It should feel like something many people are ready to fight for.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



ZOHRAN MAMDANI

Making affordability impossible to ignore

UNITED STATES

In New York City's 2025 Democratic mayoral primary, Zohran Mamdani began as a long-shot challenger to Andrew Cuomo, a former governor with deep name recognition, establishment support, and major donor backing. What initially looked like a near-coronation became a competitive race because Mamdani offered a sharply different political proposition: city government could materially improve the everyday lives of ordinary New Yorkers.

His campaign was built around a bold but concrete affordability agenda: rent freezes, fast and fare-free buses, universal childcare, and city-run grocery stores. These were not abstract reforms. They spoke directly to the daily pressures of living in New York: housing, transport, food, and care.

Mamdani's strength was not only that he had big ideas. He made them simple, repeatable, and visible. Across speeches, interviews, debates, social media, and street conversations, he kept returning to one central question: what does it cost to live in New York? And he paired the diagnosis with specific policies that showed how the government could respond. By primary day, even his critics knew what he stood for.

The campaign paired boldness with organization. Thousands of volunteers knocked on doors, registered new voters, created digital content, and turned the campaign into an online and offline community. Mamdani walked neighborhoods, listened to voters on stoops, in bodegas, and on the subway, and used multilingual and culturally fluent outreach to hit different parts of the city. His digital strategy worked because it was not detached from fieldwork; it amplified a message already rooted in everyday experience.

This is what made the campaign relevant for democratic leadership. Mamdani did not ask voters only to reject an opponent or a political establishment. He offered a future they could feel: a city where public power could lower costs, expand care, and make everyday life more livable. Just as importantly, once in office he began connecting the campaign message to governing, putting a rent freeze in place and implementing measures to speed up buses.

New York's political ecosystem is particular, and Mamdani's ideological profile will not travel everywhere. But the deeper political method can: start from real pain, make clear what the government can do about it, offer a future people can picture, and repeat it with enough discipline that voters believe you mean it.

"What's truly radical is asking working-class people to survive while billionaires hoard empty luxury apartments."



FRANCIA MÁRQUEZ

Dignity as a political program

COLOMBIA

Francia Márquez entered national politics without softening her story to fit elite expectations. A former housekeeper, Afro-Colombian single mother, environmental defender, and grassroots leader from Cauca, she carried into the Colombian presidential campaign the struggles of communities long pushed to the margins: racism, extractivism, land dispossession, violence, and exclusion from political power. Her leadership began from real pain, but it did not stop there.

Her rallying cry, “¡Vivir sabroso!” (To live deliciously!) became one of the most powerful democratic visions in Colombia’s 2022 election. The phrase did not sound like a technocratic program, but it carried one: to live without fear, with dignity, with care, with clean water, and safety, with the right to enjoy life instead of merely surviving it. Márquez gave people more than a critique of inequality. She gave them a language for the future.

That boldness mattered because democracy can feel empty to people who have never experienced it as protection, dignity, or opportunity. Márquez refused to defend the system as it was. She pushed questions of racism, land, care, gender,

environmental justice, and territorial rights into the center of national politics. By linking her personal story to structural demands, she made inequality visible, and made excluded communities feel not like beneficiaries of someone else’s agenda, but authors of a new national project.

“I am here to break with the politics of death, and to build the politics of life.”



PITA LIMJAROENRAT

Making reform feel possible

THAILAND

In Thailand's 2023 general election, Pita Limjaroenrat became the face of a democratic breakthrough. As leader of the Move Forward Party, he offered a direct challenge to the foundations of Thailand's managed democracy: reducing the military's role in politics, decentralizing power, challenging monopolies, expanding rights, advancing marriage equality, and opening debate on laws long treated as untouchable.

Pita's leadership gave shape and confidence to what many citizens, especially young Thais, already felt. Anger at military-backed politics, inequality, censorship, corruption, and elite control had been building for years. Pita did not ask voters to defend institutions many saw as captured or broken. He asked them to imagine a freer, fairer, more accountable Thailand, and made that future sound practical, modern, and close enough to fight for.

Pita also made the idea travel. His speeches, rallies, digital communication, and plainspoken style helped turn reform from a risky demand into a generational cause. Move Forward had many strong leaders, candidates, organizers, youth networks, and local structures behind it. But Pita became the campaign's most recognizable translator: the person who could carry a complex reform agenda in language people could repeat, remix, and make their own.

The result was a political earthquake. Move Forward won the most seats in parliament in 2023, with 151 seats, becoming the largest party in the House. Pita then built a prospective coalition, but conservative forces and the military-appointed

Senate blocked his path to the premiership. Later, the Constitutional Court dissolved the Move Forward Party over its proposal to amend Thailand's lèse-majesté law, and banned Pita and other party executives from politics for ten years.

The backlash also showed how far Pita and Move Forward had shifted the terrain. They made once-unthinkable reforms part of mainstream democratic debate. Even when blocked from office, Pita's leadership helped prove that bold democratic politics could be popular, disciplined, and future-facing. He did not only name what was broken. He made millions believe reform was possible.

"You can pick up a few flowers, but you cannot stop spring."



LEARN MORE

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3

FACE THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Address the hard issue.
Refuse the authoritarian frame.

THE PLAY

Every political context involves hard issues that everyone knows are shaping the conversation, but many leaders avoid because they are divisive, uncomfortable, or risky. The elephant may be migration, insecurity, corruption, economic anger, distrust in the elites, a cultural conflict, or a fear that opponents are already exploiting.

Avoiding the elephant won't make it disappear. It creates a vacuum. When democratic leaders stay silent, authoritarians and bad-faith actors fill the space with scapegoats, conspiracies, cruelty, and false solutions. They take real fears or frustrations and attach them to a story that serves their power.

Facing the elephant means entering that conversation directly, but not on your opponent's terms. It means naming the issue people already care about, acknowledging why it matters, separating real concern from false explanation, and offering a democratic answer rooted in dignity, rights, material reality, and public responsibility.

This is not about chasing every provocation or responding to every single attack. Some issues are bait. Some frames are designed only to trap you. The task is to identify the hard issue that is genuinely moving people and address it without validating lies or authoritarian solutions.

In polarized societies, this is especially difficult. Different communities may identify different elephants. Disinformation can distort what people believe is happening. And yet, hiding from the issue only allows bad-faith actors to define it. Democratic leaders need enough courage to name what is hard and real, enough discipline to reject the trap, and enough imagination to show people a better path.

The goal is to prove that democracy can face conflict honestly without surrendering to fear, contempt, or cruelty.



WHY IT WORKS

- **FACING THE HARD STUFF EARNS TRUST.** People know when leaders are dodging. Naming the issue directly shows that you are not afraid of reality, even when the conversation is uncomfortable.
- **AUTHORITARIAN OWNERSHIP IS AVOIDED.** When democratic leaders name hard issues clearly, authoritarians lose the monopoly on speaking about people's fears.
- **REAL CONCERN CAN BE SEPARATED FROM FALSE EXPLANATIONS.** People may be genuinely worried about a specific topic. The democratic task is to acknowledge the concern without accepting scapegoats, conspiracies, or authoritarian solutions.
- **DEMOCRATIC COURAGE IS SHOWN.** The point is not to sound brave. It is to show that democracy can face conflict honestly without surrendering to cruelty, contempt, or panic.



HOW IT WORKS

1

IDENTIFY THE REAL ELEPHANT

The elephant is never the provocation of the day. It is the hard issue already shaping how people feel, think, vote, distrust, or lose hope, even if democratic leaders avoid naming it. Look for the subject that creates tension inside your own camp: migration, insecurity, inflation, corruption, sovereignty, crime, religion, national identity, cultural change, or distrust in elites. If your side avoids it while opponents keep gaining power from it, that is not just a communication problem. It is a political vacuum. Do not only ask, *What do we want to talk about?* Ask, *What are people already talking about without us?*

2

NAME THE FEAR BEFORE YOU NAME THE ANSWER

People do not move toward authoritarian frames only because they are manipulated. They often move because something real feels unresolved: unsafe streets, weak public services, loss of control, humiliation, disorder, corruption, or a sense that the elites are not listening.

Start right there. Name the fear, pressure, or frustration in language people recognize. Do not begin by lecturing people out of their concern. A leader who cannot describe the fear honestly will not be trusted to answer it.

This means demonstrating that democracy is strong enough to face reality without compromising its commitment to truth or human dignity.

3 SPLIT THE REAL PROBLEM FROM THE FALSE ENEMY

Authoritarian frames work by attaching real pain to a false enemy. They turn housing pressure into hatred of migrants. They turn insecurity into contempt for rights. They turn economic anxiety into resentment against minorities. The democratic move is to break that connection.

Say clearly: the problem is real, but the enemy they are naming is false. People need safety, services, fairness, dignity, borders that work, institutions that function, and leaders who take responsibility. Cruelty, scapegoating, conspiracy, and repression will never solve the problem. They will only make society more divided and easier to control. This is the hinge of the play: accept the problem; reject the authoritarian explanation.

4 ENTER THROUGH YOUR OWN DOOR

Do not walk into the debate using your opponent's words, categories, or false choices. If you repeat the authoritarian frame, even to deny it, you help spread it.

Enter through your own values. If the issue is migration, do not begin with the far right's image of threat. Begin with order, dignity, work, housing, rules, contribution, and equal treatment. If the issue is insecurity, do not begin with their fantasy of repression. Begin with safety, functioning institutions, prevention, accountability, and protection from abuse. If the issue is sovereignty, do not begin with nationalist panic. Begin with self-respect, democratic responsibility, and the country's ability to choose its future.

The goal is not to sound softer, it is to choose the battlefield.

5

**OFFER A DEMOCRATIC ANSWER
THAT FEELS CONCRETE**

Moral clarity is not enough. If people are worried about a hard issue, they need to hear what will be done. Move quickly from values to visible answers: better services, fair rules, serious enforcement, institutional reform, or whatever the issue requires. Be specific enough so that people can imagine the difference.

Authoritarians often win because they make cruelty sound practical and democracy sound abstract. Do not let them. Show that democratic politics can be firm, concrete, and useful without becoming cruel.

6

DRAW A BRIGHT LINE

Facing the elephant means confronting authoritarianism honestly. It does not require meeting authoritarians halfway. Some lines must be clear.

Say what you will not do: you will not dehumanize people, abandon rights, create enemies, excuse violence, or treat entire communities as disposable. This matters because hard issues create pressure to blur moral boundaries in the name of realism.

A strong democratic answer combines seriousness with limits: we will deal with the problem, but we will not become what authoritarians want us to become.

7

TURN THE ANSWER INTO A LINE OTHERS CAN CARRY

If only the leader can explain the position, the play has failed. The answer must become usable by candidates, organizers, spokespeople, volunteers, allies, and ordinary supporters.

Build a simple message architecture: this is the real problem; this is the false blame; this is our democratic answer; this is what we will not accept; this is what we will do.

Give people phrases, examples, stories, images, and facts they can repeat. Prepare them for the trap: what not to say, what not to amplify, and how to return to the democratic frame when opponents try to pull them back.



TIPS

A DON'T TURN THE ELEPHANT INTO A SEMINAR

Hard issues need clarity, not lectures. If your answer sounds like a policy panel, a legal memo, or a moral scolding, people may hear distance instead of leadership.

Use plain and simple language. Say what the problem is, what is false, what you stand for, and what should happen next. The goal is not to simplify reality into slogans, but to make the democratic answer understandable enough to travel.

B REFUSE THE PSYOP

Not every provocation is an elephant. Some attacks are designed to waste your time, spread lies, normalize hate, or force you into your opponent's frame. Before reacting, ask: *who will benefit if we respond exactly as they want?*

Face the real issue people are carrying. Avoid the bait designed to make you repeat the authoritarian frame.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



HEIDI REICHINNEK

Facing the migration trap without surrendering to it

GERMANY

In the final stretch of Germany's 2025 federal election, migration became one of the most dangerous issues on the campaign terrain. Friedrich Merz and the conservative CDU/CSU pushed a hardline migration motion through the Bundestag with support from the far-right AfD, breaking Germany's long-standing firewall against cooperation with the far right. For Die Linke, the trap was clear: avoid the issue and look weak, or enter the debate on the right's terms and risk being seen as insensitive to a major issue of the campaign.

Heidi Reichinnek, one of Die Linke's most visible leaders, chose a third path. In a fiery Bundestag speech, she faced the issue head-on, not by speaking against migrants, but by exposing how conservatives were using migration to normalize far-right politics. She named the real elephant in the room: democratic parties were opening the door to authoritarian forces while pretending it was only a debate about border control.

That clarity cut through. Reichinnek's speech went viral, reaching millions and giving Die Linke a fighting message at a moment when many voters, especially young people, feared the far right was setting the terms of politics. Her message was not soft or evasive. It was direct. She turned a defensive position into a rallying cry.

The party paired that moral confrontation with a material agenda focused on rent, housing, wages, and cost of living. That mattered. Die Linke did not only say what it opposed; it showed what real security should mean: a home people can afford, public services that work, wages people can live on, and a democracy that does not scapegoat the vulnerable to hide political failure.

The result was not produced by one speech alone. Die Linke's comeback also depended on organizing, door-knocking, social media, youth energy, and a renewed focus on everyday economic pain. Reichinnek's intervention became a defining moment because it showed how to face a culture-war trap without surrendering to it. She did not dodge the elephant. She named it, reframed it, and fought back.

When opponents weaponize fear, do not hide from the issue, but do not enter through their door. Face the real concern, expose the manipulation, and connect your answer to dignity, material security, and democratic red lines.

**"Don't give up,
fight back,
resist fascism."**



MARK CARNEY

Naming the rupture in the world order

CANADA

At Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney did something many democratic leaders had avoided: he said clearly that the old rules-based international order was no longer simply “under pressure.” It had ruptured. Speaking to a global elite audience used to softer language about “transition,” “uncertainty,” or “strategic competition,” Carney named the elephant in the room: the U.S.-led, rules-based international order that democracies had relied on was giving way to a harsher order where powerful states increasingly used tariffs, supply chains, financial systems, and economic integration as instruments of coercion.

The speech mattered because Carney did not treat the threat as external only. He did not speak as if the danger came only from familiar autocracies like Russia or China. Without building the speech around Donald Trump by name, he addressed the reality many allies were already confronting: elected authoritarian and illiberal leaders inside democratic systems were helping dismantle the very order they had once claimed to defend.

Carney’s move was not despair. It was reframing. He acknowledged the brutal reality—a world where “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must”—but refused to accept that middle-power democracies were powerless. Instead, he argued that countries like Canada should stop pretending the old order will simply return, build strategic autonomy, reduce vulnerability to coercion, and cooperate with other middle powers around shared interests and democratic values.

That is what makes the speech a leadership case, not just a foreign-policy speech. Carney faced a hard truth that many democracies prefer to soften: defending democracy today requires more than invoking institutions that authoritarian and illiberal actors have learned to ignore, exploit, or hollow out. It requires honesty about the world as it is, strength at home, and cooperation among countries willing to defend sovereignty, human rights, territorial integrity, and democratic self-government.

Sometimes the elephant is not a scandal or a campaign attack. Sometimes it is a whole world order collapsing in plain sight. Leadership means naming that rupture before denial becomes strategy. Carney did not ask democratic leaders to panic or retreat behind walls. He asked them to stop pretending, face the new illiberal terrain, and build enough collective power to act.

“We must act together because if we’re not at the table, we’re on the menu.”



LEARN MORE

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4

STRATEGY, DISCIPLINE, AND SWEAT

Turn energy into organized power

THE PLAY

Passion can open the door, but only strategy, discipline, and sweat keep it open. Democratic movements often begin with energy, outrage, or hope. But without strategy, that energy scatters. Without discipline, the message drifts. Without systems, the work depends on a few exhausted people holding everything together.

This is especially true when democratic actors are in opposition or facing authoritarian pressure. The playing field is rarely equal. Opponents may have more money, more media access, more institutional power, and more capacity to provoke, distract, and exhaust. In that context, energy is precious. It cannot be wasted.

Strategy gives direction: it defines the goal, the people you need to move, the terrain you are fighting on, and all you must ignore. Discipline protects execution: it keeps the team aligned when pressure, attacks, and distractions come along. Sweat is the work itself: the calls, doors, meetings,

follow-ups, logistics, training, decisions, and operational labor that make victory possible.

This is not about hustle for the sake of it. Working hard in every direction is not a strategy. Discipline is not exhaustion. The strongest teams work at a certain pace. They know when to move fast, when to prepare, when to adapt, and when to say no.

Authoritarians often understand the power of machinery, repetition, and focus. Democracy defenders need discipline too, but rooted in purpose, care, and accountability. A disciplined democratic leader does not simply demand more from people. A leader helps build the structure that allows people to give their best, stay focused, and keep going.



WHY IT WORKS

- **ENERGY IS TURNED INTO POWER.** Passion gets people in the room; strategy keeps them there, and meaningful work turns action into a political alternative.
- **LONG-TERM MUSCLE IS BUILT.** Motivation fades, but plans survive. When the rush dies down, discipline keeps the team moving and makes victories repeatable.
- **YOU BECOME UNBREAKABLE.** Fatigue will come and conflicts will flare. So, if you know how to face them, the movement may bend but it won't break.
- **EFFORT IS TURNED INTO TRUST.** People trust leaders and movements that show up, deliver, and do what they said they would do.
- **SUCCESS BECOMES REPEATABLE.** Systems, routines, and clear roles turn one-time wins into a culture that knows how to win again.



HOW IT WORKS

1

TURN THE SPARK INTO FIRE

Moments of energy are rare. When people are angry, hopeful, or ready to move, do not let that spark pass. However, do not confuse spark with strategy. A good strategy defines the goal, maps the path, and names the steps that matter most.

Ask the basic questions early: *What are we trying to change? Who do we need to move? What is our theory of change? What are the key moments? What resources do we have?*

Strategy is the framework that keeps the fire alive. Without it, energy does not become power. It becomes smoke.

2

MOVE FAST, BUT SET THE PACE

Speed matters. There are moments when a campaign, protest, scandal, court decision, media opening, or political crisis creates a window that will not stay open for too long. Democratic actors should not be so afraid of chaos that they miss the moment.

Speed without pacing burns people out and breaks systems. Roles become unclear, decisions bottleneck, calendars are improvised, and everyone starts reacting at once.

Momentum is not found. It is built. Set the tempo early. Identify when you need to surge and when you need to prepare. A good pace lets people move with urgency without living in a permanent state of emergency.

3 CHOOSE WHAT TO IGNORE

Strategy is not only a list of priorities. It is also a list of refusals.

Not every outrage deserves your full attention. Not every invitation fits the mission. Not every attack requires a response. Authoritarians and bad-faith actors often try to scatter democratic forces by provoking them in ten directions at once. Discipline means deciding what actually advances the goal and what just drains the team. Pick your battles. Protect attention. Say no before distraction becomes the plan.

4 MAKE DISCIPLINE A SYSTEM

Create shared calendars, clear roles, decision rules, message guides, check-ins, escalation paths, and review moments. Make sure people know who decides, who executes, who follows up, and who needs to be informed. Align every message, post, event, and public intervention with the strategy.

A disciplined team does not need to improvise everything under stress. It has habits that hold when pressure rises.

5 MAKE INVISIBLE WORK VISIBLE

The work that wins is often unglamorous: calling people back, confirming rides, training volunteers, preparing briefings, testing messages, following up with allies, documenting decisions, and making sure the room and the link are actually ready.

Leaders must respect this work, resource it, and celebrate it. Movements fail when they treat logistics as secondary or invisible. Every public victory sits on top of quiet labor someone did well.

6

MAKE JOY PART OF THE RHYTHM

The spreadsheets, doors, calls, meetings, and late nights can be exhausting. If the work only feels heavy, people eventually leave. Joy is not decoration; it is what keeps people in the work long enough to win.

Create rituals that make the grind lighter: music before canvassing or strategic meetings, food after long shifts, jokes in the group chat, weekly check-ins, small celebrations, public thanks, and moments where people remember why they joined. Joy turns the work into belonging.

The fight will always be hard. That is why disciplined teams know that morale is not automatic. It has to be built.

7

BUILD A SUSTAINABLE PACE

There will be late nights and moments of real pressure. That is part of the work. But a permanent state of emergency is not discipline or commitment; it is bad design.

Build rhythms that allow people to work hard, recover, and return. Rotate roles. Share the load. Avoid making the same people carry every crisis. Plan pauses after major pushes. Track when the team is losing focus, patience, or judgment.

Sustainable pace is not softness. It is how democratic organizations last long enough to win.



TIPS

A STRATEGY, NOT DOGMA

Planning is not about locking yourself into a script. It is about preparing to choose well under pressure. A good strategy gives direction, not handcuffs. Strategy is the framework.

Conditions change. New players enter. Crises hit. The goal is to adapt without losing your core purpose, without needing to predict everything. The strongest teams plan ahead, then pivot without panicking when reality demands it.

The test of discipline is not whether you follow the initial plan forever. It is whether you can adjust it while staying focused on the goal.

B DON'T MISTAKE ACTIVITY FOR STRATEGY

Busy teams can still be losing. Meetings, statements, posts, events, calls, and internal processes do not automatically become progress. They matter only if they move the needle towards the goal.

Build review moments into the work, but do not turn reflection into paralysis. Some movements get trapped in constant evaluation, endless meetings, and repeated debates about process. Decide exactly when reflection happens, who needs to be there, and what decisions must come out of it. We need to be honest about effort that looks impressive but does not build power, and about reflection that feels responsible but avoids action.

C PERMISSIONLESS IS NOT UNACCOUNTABLE

Some of the most important democratic work begins when people see a gap and act without asking or waiting for permission. However, speed and initiative still need democratic guardrails. Acting without authorization can fill a vacuum; acting without accountability can reproduce the same arrogance we oppose.

Move fast. Take responsibility. But build in consent, transparency, ethics, and the willingness to be challenged by the people you claim to serve.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



PÉTER MAGYAR

Winning on foot

HUNGARY

Péter Magyar's campaign against Viktor Orbán did not grow from Budapest television studios or elite opposition negotiations. It grew on the road.

Magyar visited around 700 Hungarian towns and sometimes held six or seven public events in a single day. At the beginning, the format was basic: a truck, a small crowd, Magyar standing up and speaking. He went to towns, villages, and Fidesz heartlands where the old opposition had often struggled to enter. Over time, the same rhythm produced larger gatherings, then thousands of people, then rallies that felt closer to protests.

This was not only personal stamina. It was an organizing method. Tisza built local "Islands": flexible groups where people could gather, talk politics, organize events, and

become part of the campaign without entering an old party structure. Behind the rallies, the campaign built databases, an activity app, training, canvassing, door-to-door work, local events, and a volunteer network that reached around 50,000 people across the country.

The digital operation did not replace ground organizing. It did help coordinate it. Local groups could see activities, mobilize people, organize events, and connect their work to a national campaign. The campaign looked physical and personal, while underneath it was becoming a disciplined organization.

The message was equally disciplined. Magyar kept returning to issues close to daily life: cost of living, corruption, hospitals, public services, transport, education, and the visible enrichment of Orbán-linked oligarchs. He also refused many of the traps Fidesz tried to set. Rather than spending the campaign reacting to migration, LGBTQI issues, Ukraine, Russia, the United States, or other abstract culture-war battlefields, he kept returning to local and material concerns.

This campaign produced one of the most consequential democratic breakthroughs in Europe. Magyar is not a simple or uncomplicated democratic hero: he emerged from within Fidesz's orbit, he speaks from a more conservative political tradition, and the long-term direction of the project he has built remains uncertain. Still, in April

2026, Tisza defeated Orbán's Fidesz after 16 years in power, winning 141 of 199 seats in Hungary's National Assembly, enough for a two-thirds constitutional supermajority.

**"Step by step,
brick by brick,
we will take
back our
homeland."**



RAHUL GANDHI

The long walk that rebuilt purpose

INDIA

When the Indian National Congress was reeling from years of electoral defeats, Rahul Gandhi launched the Bharat Jodo Yatra in September 2022. He marched roughly 4,000 kilometers from Kanyakumari at India's southern tip to Srinagar in the north. It was not spectacle; it was strategy. Gandhi committed to walking day after day, engaging with rural communities, Dalit villages, tribal regions, and marginalized voices. He mapped the route, stayed on message, and showed up through heat, rain, cold, and exhaustion, keeping his cadence steady when many expected him to fade.

He organized the Congress Party around the march: volunteers, local chapters, civil society partners, and media interactions were all lined up before the first step. Each stop had a purpose: meetings with farmers, conversations on inequality, public events with local leaders, and encounters with communities where injustice was felt directly. Together, these moments reinforced a narrative of unity, justice, and hope. Discipline kept the story intact.

As the Yatra advanced, it gained momentum not from flash, but from endurance. The public saw a leader who did not take breaks from message or presence. Media doubt, political pressure, difficult weather, and the physical demands of the march did not derail the effort. Gandhi's team managed logistics with precision, rest points, safety, engagement, and local coordination, so the movement could sustain itself.

The march worked not only as a symbol of endurance, but as an organizing structure: a repeated daily rhythm that created local meetings, volunteer participation, media moments, and direct contact with citizens across very different parts of the country. Through this effort, Gandhi also reshaped his image among many Indians: from a prince from a distant political elite to a leader willing to sweat, listen, and work in public.

In the 2024 parliamentary elections, Congress won 99 seats, more than in the previous two elections combined, and the INDIA alliance won 234 seats, blocking a supermajority for Modi's party. The Yatra did not explain that result on its own. But it helped Congress and Gandhi recover purpose, visibility, and organizational rhythm before a decisive electoral fight.

**"The Bharat Jodo Yatra
does more than walk,
it builds belief."**



BASSIROU DIOMAYE FAYE

Discipline as an engine of change

SENEGAL

Bassirou Diomaye Faye's path to Senegal's presidency in 2024 looked sudden from the outside: a 44-year-old opposition figure, released from prison just days before the vote, winning the presidency in the first round. But the victory was not improvised. It was the result of a political movement that had learned to stay disciplined under pressure.

The obstacles were severe. PASTEF, the party associated with Ousmane Sonko, had been dissolved. Sonko, the opposition's most visible figure, was barred from running. Faye himself was jailed. Many expected the movement to collapse. Instead, it adapted. Support shifted from Sonko to Faye, the message stayed clear, and networks of volunteers, local organizers, campaigners, and supporters kept moving even while leaders faced legal repression.

That discipline gave the campaign strength when the window finally opened. Faye did not need to build a movement from scratch after his release; he stepped into one that had already been organized, tested, and prepared. The campaign stayed focused on anti-corruption, democratic renewal, economic sovereignty, transparency, and a break with entrenched political elites. It did not scatter under pressure. It knew what it stood for.

The case shows how strategy works under hostile conditions. When the original plan was blocked, the movement found another path. When leaders were jailed, the networks carried the work. When time was short, the message was already known. This was not resilience as a slogan; it was resilience as structure.

Faye's victory showed that discipline can turn repression into a test of readiness. The movement's strength came not only from anger at injustice, but from preparation: clear messaging, organized networks, trusted leadership, and the ability to adapt quickly when the moment arrived.

**"I pledge to govern
with humility and
transparency and
to fight corruption
at all levels."**

Disciplined movements can't depend on perfect conditions. They build the muscle to survive disruption, transfer leadership, and keep the work moving when opponents try to break them.



LEARN MORE

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5

STAY WHOLE TO STAY USEFUL

**Climb up the mountain. Come down.
Stay human.**

THE PLAY

Political leadership is like climbing a mountain. The higher you go, the wider the view, but the thinner the air. Public-facing leaders can see more, carry more, and move more people. But altitude also distorts. Visibility, access, urgency, praise, attacks, security risks, and constant decision-making can separate leaders from ordinary life, from honest feedback, from their teams, and even from themselves.

This is not only a personal problem. It is a structural effect of power. Institutions often place leaders in environments where everyone needs something from them, filters what they hear, or treats them as if they should know everything. Over time, leaders can start believing the role's illusion: that they are indispensable, all-knowing, always needed, and somehow separate from the collective that made their leadership possible.

Democracy defenders face this distortion under especially hard conditions: harassment, uncertainty, public pressure, digital violence, and constant crisis. Exhaustion matters, but losing touch is a deeper danger. Leaders who lose touch become reactive. They stop listening. They confuse criticism with betrayal, visibility with ownership, and responsibility with control.

Staying whole and grounded is the discipline of fighting that distortion. It means building structures that bring leaders back down: open decision-making circles, people who can tell the truth, support systems inside and outside the organization, clear roles, escalation protocols, recovery rhythms, and boundaries that prevent everything from becoming the leader's problem.

The public-facing leader is one role inside a collective, not the whole collective. You can climb when the mission demands it. But you must also know how to come down: to rest, listen, repair, share responsibility, receive correction, and remember that you are always a person before you are a role.

You are not useful to the mission if you are destroyed by it, or if the mission becomes dependent on your exhaustion, isolation, or control. The goal is not to become untouchable. The goal is to remain human enough, grounded enough, and connected enough to keep serving the work with courage, care, and humility.



WHY IT WORKS

- **JUDGMENT SHOULD BE PROTECTED.** Exhausted leaders make worse decisions. Rest, reflection, and emotional support help you think clearly under pressure.
- **LEADERS ARE KEPT INSIDE THE COLLECTIVE.** Public-facing leaders carry visibility, but they are not the whole project. Shared roles and decision circles keep the work grounded.
- **THE WORLD YOU ARE TRYING TO BUILD IS MODELED.** A democratic movement that burns people out cannot credibly promise dignity, care, or freedom.
- **YOUR TEAM SHOULD BE PRESERVED.** A leader's exhaustion spreads. So does their calm. Taking care of yourself helps create a healthier political culture around you.
- **THE MISSION LASTS LONGER.** Leaders who stay grounded, supported, and replaceable are more able to step back, hand over, or recover without making the work depend on their exhaustion.



HOW IT WORKS

1

KNOW YOUR WARNING SIGNS

Pressure does not always announce itself as collapse. It often shows up as irritability, numbness, insomnia, impulsive decisions, tunnel vision, isolation, cynicism, control, or the feeling that only leadership can fix everything.

But these are not just personal warning signs. They are also signs that the role may be distorting reality. Public-facing leaders are surrounded by urgency, praise, attacks, filtered information, and people who need something from them. Learn your pattern before pressure starts leading instead of you.

2

BUILD HEALTHY DECISION CIRCLES

Personal humility alone is not enough. Structure your organization so truth can reach the people making decisions. Create circles where disagreement is allowed, information is not filtered to please the leader, and people can say, "I think this is wrong," without any fear.

The goal is better decisions, not endless debate. Leaders need people inside the organization who can challenge them before mistakes become public, costly, or harmful.

3 **ESCAPE YOUR OWN BUBBLE**

Internal circles matter, and yet they are not enough. Organizations have their own pressures, incentives, and blind spots. Leaders also need people outside the work who can help them stay human: friends, family, peers, mentors, therapists, coaches, or trusted people who do not depend on their approval. Capture is hard to detect from the inside. A leader cannot find their blind spot by looking harder. People, routines, and spaces that bring reality back into the room are always needed. These outside circles help leaders remember that they are more than the role. Real support is not applause. It is contact with reality.

4 **BUILD RECOVERY BEFORE CRISIS HITS**

Do not wait until you are falling apart to rest. By then, recovery becomes much harder. Build healthy rhythms before crisis arrives: sleep, exercise, therapy, prayer, meditation, time in nature, family meals, days offline, or whatever helps you return to yourself.

Leadership will always require moments of sacrifice. But sacrifice cannot become an operating system. Recovery is what allows you to keep choosing the work freely, instead of being consumed by it.

5 **LEARN TO COME DOWN**

After intense moments – elections, protests, launches, court decisions, attacks, arrests, threats, or major public fights – create time to descend. Process what happened. Listen to feedback. Repair relationships. Let the body catch up. Let the team breathe.

Coming down is not abandoning the mission. It is how leaders regain judgment. Sometimes it means resting before the next push. Sometimes it means sharing more responsibility. And sometimes it means recognizing that

the role can no longer be carried well, and therefore preparing a responsible transition.

A leader who never comes down starts confusing altitude with identity: the role becomes the self, pressure becomes normal, and crisis becomes home. Democratic leadership requires knowing when to keep climbing, when to push through, when to descend, and when to let others carry the work forward.

6

RESPECT THE ORGANIZATION OF DECISIONS

A healthy political organization protects leaders from becoming the decision point for everything. It should be clear who decides what, which problems belong at which level, when something must be escalated, and what is outside the leader's scope.

Teams should not bring every uncertainty, conflict, or operational detail to the public-facing leader. Leaders should also not break the structure by dropping into decisions that belong elsewhere. Good decision architecture helps everyone carry responsibility better.

7

MAKE CARE PART OF THE ORGANIZATION

Care cannot depend only on individual discipline. If the organization rewards exhaustion, punishes rest, or treats burnout as proof of commitment, leaders and teams will keep breaking.

Build care into the culture: realistic timelines, role rotation, conflict support, security protocols, and honest conversations about capacity. Care also means digital security, legal support, safety protocols, rapid response to harassment, among others.

Make it normal to say: "I need backup," "I need rest," or "I am not thinking clearly."

Movements fighting for democracy should not reproduce the same extraction they oppose. Care is not separate from strategy. It is exactly what allows people to stay in the fight without losing themselves.



TIPS

A DON'T TURN SELF-CARE INTO INDIVIDUAL GUILT

Leaders should take responsibility for their own health, but burnout is not only a personal failure. It is often produced by bad structures: impossible timelines, unclear roles, constant emergencies, lack of funds, emotional overload, harassment, and too few people carrying too much work.

It won't make any sense to tell people to meditate while the organization keeps exploiting their commitment. Fix the conditions too. Share work, clarify roles, build backup, plan recovery, and stop treating exhaustion as a badge of honor. Self-care matters. But collective care makes it possible.

B WATCH FOR THE SAVIOR TRAP

When pressure rises, leaders can start believing the mission depends entirely on them. That belief may feel noble, but it is dangerous. It isolates you, disempowers others, and makes the organization fragile.

Ask yourself: What am I holding that someone else could carry? What would happen if I disappeared for two weeks? If the answer is "everything collapses," that is not proof of your importance. It is a design flaw. The mission needs your leadership, not your martyrdom.

C REST BEFORE RESENTMENT

A warning sign many leaders ignore is resentment. When you begin to resent your team, your allies, your community, or the people asking for help, it may be a sign that you have crossed your limits. Do not wait until resentment becomes cruelty, withdrawal, or contempt. Pause earlier. Name what is happening. Ask for backup. Cancel what can be canceled. Recover before the exhaustion turns into damage.

Rest has nothing to do with disappearing from responsibility. It is in fact returning before pressure turns you into someone you do not want to be.

D TAKE THE HATE. DO NOT PASS IT ON.

Public-facing leaders will face attacks, smears, harassment, and sometimes hatred from opponents or even from their own side. Pretending it does not hurt won't work. The real task here is to metabolize pressure without turning it into contempt, cruelty, or control over your team.

Absorb what must be absorbed. Learn from criticism that carries truth. But do not let the poison become the culture.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



JACINDA ARDERN

Knowing when to come down

NEW ZEALAND

When Jacinda Ardern announced in 2023 that she would step down as New Zealand's prime minister, she did something rare in modern politics: she treated her own limits as a matter of public responsibility. After leading through the Christchurch mosque attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and years of intense scrutiny, she said she no longer had "enough in the tank" to do the job justice.

That sentence mattered. Ardern did not frame exhaustion as weakness, scandal, or failure. She framed it as honesty. Leadership, in her telling, required not only commitment, but the self-knowledge to recognize when the role could no longer be carried well. In a political culture where many leaders cling to power long after they have lost clarity or energy, stepping down became an act of discipline.

Her decision also separated the person from the role. She did not suggest that the mission ended because she was leaving. She made space for transition, continuity, and new leadership. By coming down from the mountain before it broke her, she showed that leadership is not measured only by how long you stay at the summit but by whether you leave the work healthier than you found it.

For democracy defenders, Ardern's example is powerful because it challenges martyrdom. Staying whole sometimes means knowing when to pause, step back, or hand over responsibility. That is not abandonment. It is care for the mission—and for the human being carrying it.

"I know what this job takes. And I know that I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice."



MARIA RESSA

Holding the line without losing yourself

PHILIPPINES

Maria Ressa has spent years under legal, political, and digital attack. As co-founder of Rappler, she became one of the most visible critics of Rodrigo Duterte's authoritarian style, disinformation networks, and attacks on independent media. The pressure was relentless: arrests, court cases, online harassment, threats, and constant attempts to turn journalism into a personal crime.

Ressa's leadership has often been described through courage, but her example is also about staying grounded under pressure. She did not pretend fear disappeared. Instead, she named it, organized around it, and refused to let it become the center of the story. Her response was not solitary heroism. Rappler built systems: legal defense, digital security, collaborative journalism, international solidarity, and a newsroom culture that kept working even as the attacks escalated.

That matters for this play. Ressa's strength did not come from being untouched by pressure. It came from refusing to let pressure isolate her or shrink the mission to personal survival. She kept connecting the attacks against her to a larger democratic fight: truth, accountability, press freedom, and the public's right to know.

For democracy defenders, Ressa shows that staying whole under repression requires more than bravery. It requires structures of support, clear purpose, and the ability to

keep fear in perspective. The goal is not to become fearless. The goal is to remain free enough inside to keep choosing the work.

"Courage is contagious."



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Stories of Hope." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Special Volume.



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6

SEED IT, DON'T OWN IT

Recruit, support, and multiply
democratic leadership

THE PLAY

Democracy cannot depend on charismatic accidents. Movements, parties, and civic organizations often wait for the “right person” to appear: the brave candidate, the perfect spokesperson, the inspiring organizer, the moral voice who can cut through the noise. However, waiting for heroes is not a strategy. It is a vulnerability.

Authoritarians build pipelines. They cultivate loyalists, influencers, youth wings, media figures, legal operators, party cadres, and ideological entrepreneurs. They know power lasts when it reproduces itself. Democracy defenders need their own answer, not a factory of obedient followers, but systems that find, train, support, and launch many kinds of democratic leaders.

Building leaders is not only about preparing people to run for office. It is also about growing the capacity of a whole ecosystem: organizers who can mobilize communities, candidates who can win elections, spokespeople who can explain the stakes, lawyers who can defend institutions, artists who can move emotions, local leaders who can hold trust, and young people who can renew the fight.

A leadership pipeline should not end with inspiration. It must connect people to real pathways to power: candidacies, party roles, movement leadership, public administration, local government, media platforms, and civic institutions. It should prepare people not just to speak beautifully, but to also organize, govern, negotiate, handle pressure, resist corruption, and stay accountable.

And it must prepare people to take over. Reproduction is one of the hardest tasks in political organizing: replacing founders, directors, candidates, spokespeople, and public-facing leaders without breaking the mission. A real pipeline goes beyond surrounding existing leaders with helpers. It develops people who can carry responsibility when those leaders step back, burn out, lose, win, come under attack, or move on.

Democracy needs leaders. It really does not need saviors. It needs pipelines strong enough to make leadership less lonely, less accidental, and less dependent on one name.



WHY IT WORKS

- **THE SAVIOR TRAP IS BROKEN.** When everything depends on one leader, the whole mission becomes fragile. Leadership pipelines spread responsibility before crisis hits.
- **DEMOCRACY IS RENEWED FROM THE GROUND UP.** New leaders bring new stories, communities, skills, and forms of trust into public life.
- **MOVEMENTS BECOME HARDER TO BREAK.** If one leader is attacked, exhausted, jailed, defeated, or co-opted, others are ready to step forward.
- **LONG-TERM POWER IS BUILT.** Elections, campaigns, and movements are not won only by moments of inspiration. They are won by ecosystems that keep producing prepared people.



HOW IT WORKS

1

SCOUT BEYOND THE USUAL SUSPECTS

People who already sound like politicians aren't the only available option. Some of the best democratic leaders are local organizers, youth activists, artists, union members, faith leaders, small business owners, lawyers, students, journalists, community mediators, or people who have never imagined themselves in public life.

Look for democratic commitment, community trust, discipline, curiosity, ethical judgment, learning capacity, and connection to people, not just charisma. Look for people others already turn to when things get hard. Look for those who listen well, learn fast, and care about something bigger than themselves.

Leadership pipelines fail when they reproduce the same elite circles. Democracy grows stronger when leadership comes from places power usually ignores.

2

TRAIN FOR REAL POLITICS, NOT ABSTRACT LEADERSHIP

Workshops that feel inspirational when in fact they hold little substance should never be the only offer. Train people for the actual terrain they will face: public speaking, door-knocking, fundraising, digital communication, campaign organization, coalition-building, governance,

media interviews, security, conflict management, ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence, and how to survive attacks without losing themselves.

Teach people how power works. Teach them how institutions work. Teach them how disinformation spreads. Teach them how to listen to voters, read a room, handle disagreement, and make decisions under pressure.

Leadership is not a vibe. It is a craft. People need practice before the stakes become unbearable.

3 BUILD A PATHWAY, NOT JUST A PROGRAM

A workshop is not a pipeline. A certificate is not a strategy. Training matters only if it connects people to real opportunities to lead. Help participants move from learning to action: running for office, leading a local chapter, becoming a spokesperson, organizing a community, or taking responsibility inside a movement.

Build the bridge between preparation and power. Provide selection, training, coaching, visibility, peer support, role placement, and follow-up. You aim to help people step into responsibility with the support they need to succeed—not just to leave them feeling inspired for a weekend.

4 GIVE RESPONSIBILITY BEFORE THEY FEEL READY

Learning how to be a leader does not magically produce a leader. People become leaders by carrying real responsibility. Emerging leaders shouldn't be kept in symbolic roles forever. Let them chair meetings, speak to the press, lead canvasses, manage volunteers, negotiate with allies, or represent the organization in public. Give them support as well as real stakes.

They will probably make mistakes. And this is part of the process. The goal is not to protect people from every failure.

The goal is to help them learn without being abandoned. Confidence grows when people discover they can carry more than they thought they could.

5

BUILD MENTORSHIP, NOT DEPENDENCY

Creating copies of existing leaders is not real mentorship. Helping people find their own voice, judgment, and style is.

Pair emerging leaders with people who can offer honest feedback, political memory, practical advice, and emotional support. Teach mentors to ask good questions, not just give instructions. The point is to help young leaders become grounded enough to lead without constant permission, not to make them loyal to one person.

Good mentorship creates independence. If people can only act when the founder, senior strategist, or party boss approves, you are not building leaders. You are building dependency.

6

CREATE NETWORKS THAT OUTLAST THE TRAINING

A leadership program should be carried on when the workshop ends. People need peers, alumni networks, and a place to return when politics becomes lonely.

Build cohorts that stay connected. Create spaces where leaders can share mistakes, ask for help, coordinate across regions, exchange tactics, and remember they are not alone. Track what participants do after training. Invite them back as mentors. Help them find roles in campaigns, parties, civic organizations, local government, media, or movement infrastructure.

The strongest pipelines create communities of practice, not just trained individuals.

7

PROTECT ETHICS AS MUCH AS SKILLS

It is well known that democracy needs effective leaders. And yet, those leaders should also be aware of what power can do to them. Train people in democratic norms: pluralism, accountability, anti-corruption, transparency, respect for opponents, care for teams, and the difference between persuasion and manipulation. Talk openly about ego, ambition, money, fame, loyalty, and fear.

Skills without ethics can produce better authoritarians. The goal is to help people win and, above all, to help them wield power without becoming the very thing they set out to oppose.

8

KEEP SUPPORT GOING AFTER THEY STEP INTO POWER

Getting elected, hired, promoted, or recognized is not the end of leadership formation. It is when the pressure becomes real. New leaders need support after they enter office, lead organizations, or become public figures. They will face attacks, compromise, bureaucracy, loneliness, and impossible tradeoffs. Keep coaching them. Help them govern, communicate, build teams, manage conflict, resist capture, and stay accountable.

A pipeline that stops at victory produces fragile leaders. A pipeline that continues after victory builds democratic capacity.



TIPS

A DON'T RECRUIT ONLY THE ALREADY CONVINCED

If your leadership pipeline only includes people who already speak the language of NGOs, parties, universities, or activist circles, it will not renew democracy. It will reproduce the same room with younger faces. Go where trust already exists: neighborhoods, schools, churches, sports clubs, local associations, markets, cultural spaces, and informal community networks. Find people who may not use democracy jargon but already practice democratic leadership in daily life. The future of democracy may not look like your current mailing list.

B DON'T CONFUSE VISIBILITY WITH READINESS

A viral speaker, charismatic candidate, or impressive young activist may have real potential. However, visibility is not the same as preparation. Assess readiness across different dimensions: judgment, ethics, community trust, listening capacity, discipline, resilience, ability to work with others, and willingness to learn. Public speaking matters, but it is only one aspect of leadership, and often not the most important one. Launching people too early can harm them and the mission. Prepare the person, not just the public moment.

C

BUILD MANY LANES TO LEADERSHIP

Not everyone needs to become a candidate, executive director, or public spokesperson. Some leaders organize quietly. Some build strategies. Some manage conflict.

A healthy democratic ecosystem creates many paths to leadership. Do not force everyone into the same model. The goal is not to produce one type of hero. It is to multiply the people who can carry responsibility where they are most useful.

D

SEED IT, DON'T OWN IT

A strong democratic leader does not need every idea, victory, or initiative to carry their name. Build things others can own, adapt, and carry forward. Give credit away on purpose. If people feel genuine authorship, the work becomes more durable, more legitimate, and harder to kill.



WHO'S DONE IT WELL



OCCUPY POLITICS

Training to enter power, not just talk about it

COLOMBIA

In Colombia, where distrust in parties runs deep and many citizens see politics as a closed arena, *Ocupar la Política* (Occupy Politics, OP) offers a different answer: prepare new leaders to enter power with democratic values, practical tools, and a community behind them. The initiative works with people who want to move from complaint to candidacy, from civic frustration to institutional responsibility.

Its model is built around three ideas: collective leadership, democratizing democracy, and political innovation. That first pillar is especially important. Occupy Politics explicitly rejects the heroic-leader model, promoting instead a leadership based on collaboration, adaptability, transparency, and shared responsibility. Rather than

relying on a single charismatic savior, the goal is to help people from different territories, sectors, and political backgrounds learn how to occupy democratic institutions and use them to transform public life.

“We train to occupy, we occupy to influence, and we influence to transform.”

The program is practical. It trains leaders for the real terrain of elections and public life: campaign strategy, political communication, negotiation, territorial organizing, programmatic agendas, responsible use of technology and AI, and election monitoring. It also created FormAcción, an open platform with tools, courses, and guides on planning, financing, mobilization, and campaign communication, turning training into resources that can travel beyond one cohort.

Its impact is already visible. OP has a network of more than 450 people across five regions of Colombia, and hundreds of citizen candidacies supported across the country. For the 2026 cycle, OP supported candidacies in 10 municipalities, trained 55 people, produced 15 candidacies, and saw five participants elected in Congress and recent territorial elections.



LET'S GO FOR PANAMA

Building a bench instead of waiting for a savior

PANAMA

In Panama, frustration with corruption and traditional parties created a familiar danger: anti-establishment anger could easily become cynicism, abstention, or support for authoritarian-style outsiders. *Vamos por Panamá* (Let's go for Panama) offered another path. Instead of waiting for one savior candidate to fix the system, it built a platform to organize, train, and promote independent candidates for the National Assembly and local government.

The strategy was practical. Independent candidates often struggle to become visible, credible, and legible to voters. Vamos gave them a shared umbrella: a recognizable identity, common values, anti-corruption credibility, training, public visibility, and a sense that they were part of something larger than their individual campaigns. The goal was not one heroic figure. It was a bench.

That bench delivered real institutional weight. In the 2024 elections, independents won 20 seats in the National Assembly, a net gain of 15; 19 of those deputies were affiliated with Coalición Vamos, making it the largest independent bloc in the legislature. The result was not symbolic. It changed the balance of power in a fragmented Assembly where no party held a majority.

Vamos shows that training alone is not enough. New leaders need a vehicle: a public signal voters can recognize, a path onto the ballot, a shared story, and a support structure that allows many people to run without disappearing into isolation. When parties fail to renew themselves, democracy defenders can still build leadership from the outside in, not by waiting for one person to save the system, but by preparing many people to enter it.

“A country does not change through one person alone. It changes through a generation willing to serve.”



BETTER POLITICS FOUNDATION

Training leaders across divides

GLOBAL

In many countries, citizens distrust politicians, parties struggle to attract new talent, and public life rewards polarization, short-term performance, and loyalty over responsibility. Better Politics treats political leadership as democratic infrastructure: something that can be researched, trained, funded, supported, and improved.

The Foundation operates as a global hub for political leadership innovation. Through the *Better Politics Accelerator*, it supports founders of Political Leadership Incubators —organizations that recruit, train, and support democratic political leaders in their own countries. It reports having helped launch 18 political leadership incubators serving nearly 40 countries, with participants from contexts including Chile, Germany, the Philippines, and Tanzania. It has also created the Better Politics Index, focused on measuring how political leaders are supported and developed as part of democratic health.

Better Politics also works directly on leader formation. Its Leadership Excellence in Politics initiative, developed with partners including the Kofi Annan Foundation, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, and NexusVesting, offers multi-partisan training for aspiring and newly elected leaders. Rather than seeking ideological agreement, the program aims to help participants hold power ethically, reject authoritarianism, understand citizens' expectations, and lead across divides.

That combination makes Better Politics especially relevant for democracy defenders. It does not treat leadership development as a nice workshop for promising individuals. It tries to build the field around them: incubators that scout talent,

training that prepares leaders for power, funding that helps new organizations grow, research that measures what is missing, and networks that let political innovators learn from each other across borders.

In an age when authoritarians build loyalist pipelines, *Better Politics* is helping democracies build something different: a global ecosystem for ethical, pluralistic, prepared political leadership.

“Renewing leadership. Reimagining politics. Rebuilding trust.”



OBAMA FOUNDATION LEADERS

Building a global community of practice

GLOBAL

The Obama Foundation Leaders program approaches leadership as something that grows through values, peers, coaching, and long-term connection. Rather than focusing only on candidates or elected officials, it brings together emerging changemakers from government, civil society, business, advocacy, education, technology, climate, and community organizing, people already working for the common good in their own regions.

The scale is significant. Launched in Africa in 2018, the program expanded to Asia-Pacific in 2019, Europe in 2020, and the United States in 2023. Its 2025–2026 class brought together 206 leaders from 70 nations

and territories, including cohorts from Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and more than 100 participants from across the United States. Graduates join the Obama Leadership Network, a global alumni community of more than 1,500 active changemakers. Its strength is the cohort. Participants do not simply receive training and leave.

The program combines full-group sessions, small-group discussions, individualized leadership coaching, relationship cultivation, and systems-level engagement. That matters because leadership can become lonely quite fast. People need peers who understand the pressure, challenge their assumptions, and help them keep growing.

The program also shows that democratic leadership is not limited to one arena. Some participants organize communities. Some build institutions. Some work in public offices. Some defend rights, expand education, address climate change, strengthen democracy, or create new forms of civic participation. A healthy democratic ecosystem needs all of them.

The Obama Foundation Leaders model is not only about transferring skills. It is also about building a values-based network that helps people stay connected, accountable, and courageous over time. The stronger the community around emerging leaders, the less likely they are to be-

come isolated saviors, and the more likely they are to build power with others.

“We train leaders to come from a place of ‘we’ and not just ‘me.’”



LEARN MORE

D-HUB RESOURCES



D-Hub. 2024. "Stories of Hope." *The Fight for Democracy Chronicles*, Special Volume.



D-Hub. 2025. "The Power of Democratic Leadership." *AATK Podcast Series*

OTHER RESOURCES



Better Politics Foundation.
"Better Politics Accelerator."



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Ocupar la Política. "2.0: Teaser." *YouTube*



Vamos por Panamá. "Vamos por Panamá."
Web Page

WE CAN HELP YOU.

At the Democracy Hub, we understand the emotional and strategic challenges of confronting modern authoritarianism—uncertainty, confusion, pressure, and relentless attacks on democratic values.

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Our mission is to increase the effectiveness of those fighting authoritarianism. We emphasize collaborative peer-to-peer learning, comprehensive training, coaching, strategic support, and fostering networks of solidarity and exchange. We aim to ensure that democracy advocates worldwide are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfill their mission.

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Our goal is to ensure that democracy advocates around the world are equipped with the vital relationships, deep knowledge, and essential skills they need to fulfil their mission.