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Hope in America?

> The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, remade and reorganized; while the political and economic and social institutions in which it is embodied have to be remade and reorganized to meet the changes that are going on in the development of new needs on the part of human beings and new resources for satisfying these needs.
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> —John Dewey[1]

Hope is at the heart of democracy. Hope animates life in a democracy, moving citizens forward through new challenges, new ideas, and new experiments. When we are hopeless, and especially when we are in despair, not only are our individual lives more difficult but also our social and political lives suffer. We find ourselves disempowered, unable to solve shared problems and create improved ways of living and working together. The American presidential elections of 2008 and 2016 marked significant shifts in how our polarized citizenry experiences both hope and despair. Some citizens excitedly anticipated considerable improvement in their lives as a result of their preferred candidate's victory, while some backers of losing candidates feared the worst. As each presidential term played out, many citizens on both sides of the aisle found themselves increasingly disappointed with the leader representing their political party, and their positive outlook for the well-being of the country waned.

As presidential eras move on and new election seasons arrive, we are left asking, "Are there reasons to hope?," "How can I hope?," and "What should I hope for?" The answers are often shaped by our political environment and educational experiences. In this book, I will examine how addressing these questions in today's social and political context suggests not only reasons for *why* we can hope and particular content of *what* we ought to hope for but

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also, more importantly, an enriched understanding of *how* we hope together. I will argue that such shared work is more fruitful than mere independent wishes, optimism, or—increasingly popular in education circles—grit. I'm speaking here of substantial hopes for our future together as citizens and for our lives in America today, such as hoping for equal treatment of all citizens under the law or an economy that provides opportunities and economic mobility for everyone. These differ from insignificant hopes, which are often fleeting or relatively inconsequential, like hoping I'll get to shake hands with my favorite candidate on a campaign stop in my town.

Hope is seemingly well known and widely experienced, yet its source, cultivation, and relationship to democracy are all worthy of more careful investigation. This is especially the case in politically contentious times, when citizens tend to hitch their hope on particular politicians and find themselves increasingly divided from those endorsing the other party's leaders. America has historically tended to think of itself as a beacon of hope. Indeed, many countries and immigrants have long looked to us in that spirit and many of our political leaders have aimed to inspire us by referencing that image in their speeches. We celebrate America as a place where people set out to forge a new and better way of life, buoyed by promises of liberty, equality, and opportunity for all—though too many of us ignore that those ideals have not been fairly extended to everyone. But, an array of anecdotes and data suggest that many Americans, including the youngest generations, are now struggling to hope. Examples ranging from rampant opioid addiction to rising suicide rates suggest that aspects of hope and despair stretch far beyond our elections or our frustrations with political leaders and deep into our personal lives.[2] If hope is waning in America, our very identity as a country, our sense of ourselves within it, and our role in the world may be at risk. Moreover, our well-being as individuals and as a citizenry may be in danger.

This book does not make a call to return to American roots, as though there was a time when the American Ideal was pure and the American Dream was possible for all. It does, however, highlight some of the best of what our past has to offer as a source for moving forward. It is a present- and future-directed endeavor that grapples with past and current struggles. Those include recognition that the American Ideals, represented in our key principles of democracy, have long been tied up with white supremacy, economic disparity, and other problematic power relations that have made life and hope in America much more difficult for some citizens than others. My intent in this book is to help resuscitate hope within America by offering a notion of

hope that is grounded in real struggles. It is an account that grows out of philosophical pragmatism, a tradition deeply tied to both our country's history and democratic ways of life. Despite the religious history of our nation, it is not a hope that transcends this world through appeals to God. But, believing in God may help some Americans pursue a better future by buttressing their resolve, providing visions of how we might live more justly, and uniting them with fellow believers in communities not only of worship but also of civic involvement. Instead, it is a hope that is related to *our* experiences and *our* agency (our ability to participate in and impact democratic life). It is a hope that can be cultivated among our citizenry.

As we move into the 2020 election, I aim to focus less on political leaders and more on our own actions to improve our lives and country. Along the way, I intend to offer insight into how we might identify leaders who may better support our efforts as citizens, so that hoping becomes something that we do together, and that is sustainable from one election to the next— regardless of the winning party or candidate. Importantly, I aim to shift our focus to future generations and how we might cultivate hope within them so that they take an active role in leading America through times of despair and struggle by using hope as a unifying force. For that reason, I will turn later in this book to looking at citizenship education in particular, a key venue for teaching hope and learning habits of democratic living. *I argue that schools and civil society should nurture hope as a set of habits that disposes citizens toward possibility and motivates citizens to act to improve their lives and, often, those of others*.[3] These habits are flexible, adapting to our changing world so that long after our current struggles in American democracy have faded and new ones have developed, habits of hope will likely have lasting relevance and usefulness. As such, this project of teaching hope, while grounded in present struggles, is aimed at sustaining and improving democracy well into the future.

More than a Campaign Slogan

Democracy, as Walt Whitman said, is "a great word whose history remains unwritten."[4] Hope helps us write the story of democracy because it shapes the future we envision and pursue. As we chart that course, America unfolds as a venture that often requires bold vision, action, and collaboration. Early in our history, we recognized the precarious nature of our experiment, and we

worked hard to bolster it by proclaiming the benefits of democracy through political speeches, documents, and monuments. We foregrounded the development of good citizens within our schools based on our hope of preserving and expanding democracy among our ranks.[5] This was most pronounced in the bills justifying the expansion of public schooling written by Thomas Jefferson, who hoped to bring education to a wider demographic and to better prepare citizens for the responsibilities of self-government. These aims were furthered during the common school movement of the 1800s propelled by Horace Mann, who sought to develop a shared American identity in growing citizens by enrolling an even larger population. While those celebrations of and missions to improve democracy have dissipated in recent decades, hope has lingered as we craft the story of democracy. Most notably, we see hope used as a campaign slogan and within our political rhetoric—perhaps a sign of its appeal to citizens and of its need within democracy.

Hope took center stage in Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, as supporters donned now iconic t-shirts adorned with Obama's face and the simple word: "HOPE." But on the campaign trail, hope traces a longer history. I offer here only a brief glimpse of candidates in recent decades who have emphasized hope during their campaigns, and I reveal some of the ways in which they have employed hope. Let's begin with John F. Kennedy, whose zest and youthful looks complemented his message of hope borne out through public action. Riding to victory on a Frank Sinatra campaign tune titled "High Hopes," JFK directed our attention not toward the glory of America's past but rather to a vision of what America "someday can, and through the efforts of us all, someday will be."[6] And to achieve that future, his inaugural address famously implored, "Ask not what your country will do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

During Bill Clinton's nomination speech, he recalled listening to JFK's "summons to citizenship" as a teenager. Trying to breathe fresh life into that sentiment, he spoke of the work ahead as citizens aimed to improve life in America, chanting five times: "We can do it."[7] That proclamation was later revived by Obama, who routinely exhorted crowds to join him in a chorus of "Yes, we can!" Like Clinton before him, Obama found hope for the future by looking at what Americans had achieved in the past, bolstering his confidence that America can continue to be improved. As he accepted the presidential nomination, Obama claimed, "Our union can be perfected. What we've already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."[8]

While many candidates offered a vague and indeterminate sense of hope through their speeches and slogans, Obama attempted to articulate some of the common hopes of Americans. A tour of America led him to conclude: "at the core of the American experience are a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbable experiment in democracy work."[9] During his victory speech, he laid out what some of those specific hopes are, including things, such as good schools for our children, and particular ways of life, such as showing compassion for others. He argued that identifying our common hopes is a useful way to move America forward through political divisiveness, racism, and other struggles.[10] Like JFK, Obama insisted that hope requires courageous action on behalf of citizens.

> I've never been more hopeful about our future. I have never been more hopeful about America. And I ask you to sustain that hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism—the kind of hope that just ignores the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. I'm not talking about the wishful idealism that allows us to just sit on the sidelines or shirk from a fight. I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us, so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting.[11]

While the idea of hope was more pronounced within the campaigns of Democrats in recent decades, it has also played a role in those of Republicans. They invoked moving imagery to symbolize hope while also showing, like their Democratic counterparts, that hope required effort to support and improve America. Ronald Reagan spoke often of America as the shining "city on the hill" that was a symbol of hope and freedom for immigrants and countries around the world. He chose to conclude his farewell speech with that image and reflections on how Americans had made our country a better place during his presidency.[12] George H. W. Bush later followed, describing citizens and volunteer organizations hard at work to improve America as "a thousand points of light."[13] Then, his son George W. Bush ran on the slogan, "A safer world and a more hopeful America."

Tapping in to the idea that hope requires an initial sense of security before one can explore and build a better America, some Republican

candidates, including John McCain and Donald Trump, focused on protection. In 2016, Trump sought to assure economic security as well as the physical safety of Americans from the threats he perceived from terrorists and some immigrants. In light of increased poverty and a standard of living that had remained relatively flat for the last three decades, many economically struggling Americans found hope in Trump. While Trump's campaign may have been setting a stage for hope, many of his speeches sought to engage and rally voters by focusing on the severity of our country's problems.[14] Unlike his Democratic and Republican forerunners who drew on both the promises and the shortcomings of the past as justification for inventing a better future together, Trump claimed he would bring about a better life on behalf of Americans. He positioned himself as a strongman who both knew what was best for Americans and who would do the will of the people.

A reporter interviewed visitors to Washington, DC, during the weekend of the inauguration and Women's March in 2017, asking what each citizen was hopeful for and what they were going to do as a result of that hope.[15] Citizens on the right shared stories of excitement about reclaiming an American past that they believed to be better than the present, especially in terms of economics and military power. They expressed confidence that President Trump would make things better and vowed to back him. On the left, some citizens were emotionally reeling in the aftermath of the surprising election outcome. They worried that Trump might bring harm to particular identity groups that he disparaged during the election, including women and immigrants. They called for interest groups to come together in resistance and urged others to volunteer on behalf of people at risk, to donate to groups championing those identity groups, and to become active in politics, especially at the local level. In the center were people who were troubled by the divides in American politics and who chose to engage in civic action and dialogue in hopes of working across differences. Each interviewee across the political spectrum was trying to articulate a reason and a way to hope, and many had defined content of what they hoped for already in mind. Perhaps some interviewees sensed that hope is too often a political slogan used in passive recitation, but that doesn't require one to actually *do* more than cast a vote and perhaps donate to a campaign. Perhaps some recognized, as I argue in these pages, that democracy requires a deeper and more sustainable form of hope that is enacted and endures long after the polls close and inaugural balls end.

Changes in Democracy and Our Citizenry

Before looking at what hope means and how we can cultivate it, let's first briefly take stock of current conditions that relate to hopelessness in political life. While recognizing the interplay between personal hopelessness and political outlook, I will focus on hopelessness as it relates to democracy, as my primary aim is to revive democracy as a whole, though of course this depends on bolstering the hope of individual citizens also. This is especially the case when democracy is understood in a participatory sense, relying on the contributions, efforts, and deliberations of the individuals who compose it.

Given my focus on political life, I speak of citizens. But in an era when defining a citizen is increasingly contentious and avenues for becoming a citizen are increasingly limited, I want to be sure that I am not misunderstood. I am not drawing the boundaries of citizenship as a legal status of where one lives, is born, or what rights and services one is entitled to. Rather, I talk more broadly about citizenship as a social and political identity and practices that may not reflect one's legal or documented status. I want to be inclusive here because I recognize that hope is relevant for everyone and may be especially important for those who are struggling to even be recognized or valued in America. The task of restoring hope and reviving democracy requires an all-hands-on-deck approach, and I know that even those who may not qualify as legal citizens can significantly shape and improve American social and political life.

In pragmatist spirit, the account I offer in this book must attend to real conditions—recognizing their constraints, complexities, and possibilities. Unfortunately, these are conditions where hope is struggling, where elements of democracy may be in jeopardy, and where the hope that is present is largely privatized—confined to just our personal pursuits, often for economic or material well-being. While I do not want to overstate current problems in the way that citizens as a whole view democracy and its stability, I highlight here some of the more worrisome patterns emerging among certain populations in order to uncover problematic potential trends and to head them off with the ideas I put forward in this book.

To begin, two prominent interpreters of a recent study using the World Values Survey and other polling sources found that democratic citizens have "become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives."[16] Those citizens

have increasingly withdrawn from participating in formal processes of democracy, such as citizen ballot initiatives or even voting, and from activities in the public or civil spheres, such as joining in organizations or protests.[17] There has been a dramatic shift in how the wealthy view democracy, in particular, with 16% of them now believing that military rule is a better way of living and an astounding 35% of rich young Americans holding such a view.[18]

Globally, after widespread growth of both liberal and electoral democracies and their values in the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first, the tide has turned. "The year 2016 was the eleventh straight year in which countries suffering net declines in political and civil liberties outnumbered the gainers. In nearly all these years, the losses substantially exceeded the gains."[19] Support for democracy has receded and support for authoritarianism has increased. Yet, roughly a quarter of people across thirty-eight major countries polled in 2017, including the United States, remain committed to democracy.[20] Within those countries, those with the highest levels of education are more likely to endorse a representative democracy, while those with the least education are more likely to support a military government, including 24% of Americans with a secondary education or less.[21] Additionally, those who see the past as better than the present are less satisfied with how democracy is working.[22] When looking at American Millennials born between 1980 and the mid-1990s in particular, 35% say they are losing faith in democracy, with percentages even higher for black and Hispanic Millennials.[23]

Critics of some interpretations of the World Values Survey and other polling data point out that these trends may reflect mere lifecycle issues that we've seen before, where younger people tend to show stronger signs of disaffection across decades, rather than a trend toward decreasing support for democracy as a whole.[24] Indeed, many of the strongest supporters of populist-authoritarian parties are actually older, and often, poorer, citizens.[25] Many of them increasingly feel "left behind," with unmet needs and concerns unrecognized by mainstream political leaders.[26] Some social commentators argue that a significant portion of the American population increasingly feels economically trapped and jealous of others (often perceived to be immigrant or minorities) who seem to be getting some advantages that are moving them ahead, such as lax immigration laws or affirmative action. As a result, they feel fear, resentment, and distrust toward others, focus on looking out for themselves, group with those who feel similarly slighted, and seek leaders who will reassert their position of power within society.[27] While some people may

dismiss mere feelings, the experiences of perceiving oneself as left behind has real consequences, including harmful actions, in our country. Regardless of the debate around how the World Values Survey should be interpreted and the level of alarm it raises, there are clearly issues of concern when it comes to the hopelessness of some of our citizens and the outlook for democracy.

Leaders Fall Short and Citizens Become Passive

There are likely many factors impacting this current state of affairs, and I will touch on just a few here. First, some recent American presidential candidates ran on messages of hope and yet the visions evoked have often failed to be fulfilled in reality, crushing the heightened expectations of citizens.[28] Federal and local politicians often use the rhetoric of hope, but they tend to distort what hope really is and what it requires of citizens. Instead, they may make reference to the supposed destiny of the nation with God as its backer. Sometimes those politicians put forward goals that aren't sufficiently based in evidence or reality to be feasibly achieved, don't arise from the citizens themselves, are not well understood by the citizens, or are not held open to revision or criticism.[29] Or, as in the cases of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, some citizens place their hope in the leader himself, invoking a messianic figure who will save the country. The promises of democracy are also coming up short. While some people see liberal democracy as a good in itself, most celebrate it for the freedom and prosperity it typically brings.[30] When those promises are unfulfilled, some citizens begin to doubt not only the leaders but also the system.[31]

I will argue that, rather than passively relying on the hope promised by politicians and being disappointed by shortcomings, citizens must participate in shaping and fulfilling hope. Rather than hitching hope and overall support for democracy to a leader's fulfillment of campaign promises, this approach makes hope more genuine and robust. It changes the nature of the game, from spectator sport, where armchair quarterbacks bemoan the failed attempts of others, to active participation in a team working toward goals together.

Hope for Some, But Not for Others

A second factor influencing the current state of hope and democracy is structural violence and inequality, which is exacerbated by interpersonal

and community-based violence. Common among poor and racial minority communities in America, such injustice has wreaked havoc on hope.[32] In some cases, it has rendered hope exhausting.[33] Many marginalized citizens are told that they must never give up hope and that they must keep trying to earn a better life for themselves, in part through improving their own character regardless of the stagnant harmful practices of others. As a result, many of those citizens are left either hopeless or perpetually chasing a vision of justice that is out of reach, while some turn inward to their racial, ethnic, or other local communities to engage in alternative practices that bring hope and forms of civil engagement that may not always be recognized by dominant groups.[34] Poor citizens, in particular, sometimes get so entrenched in attending to every little economic crisis along the way (How will I pay to fix my flat tire so I can get to work tomorrow? How will I afford back-to-school supplies?) that they have neither the time, energy, or resources to plan for a better long-term future or for the future of our country as a whole, thereby making it hard to engage in hope or in democracy.

These struggles take a toll on both physical and mental health. Indeed, medical science has revealed that prolonged experiences of pain and hardship amplify hopelessness by causing the body to release neurochemicals that disable us from feeling positive.[35] Within children in particular, structural violence has been shown to cause rage, aggression, depression, and fatalism. Those mental and physical struggles spill over into the classroom, negatively impacting academic achievement and civic engagement.[36] And children of color commit suicide at higher rates than their white peers. Yet, black and Hispanic adults are likely to retain a generally more optimistic outlook than their poor white counterparts, many of whom lack cultural supports, see few opportunities for economic advancement, and seek avenues for escape, leading to what some have dubbed "despair deaths" through suicide and overdose.[37]

While white despair deaths have become increasingly visible and acknowledged across the country, especially in the midst of a rash of opioid addiction, the struggles of black and Latino people are largely unacknowledged by mainstream America. Sometimes this is because dominant people are unaware of the struggles of those living in what African American Studies scholar Eddie Glaude calls "opportunity deserts." But many times, those more powerful people insidiously ignore what is happening in those black communities, in particular, a reflection of a long history of placing less value

on the lives and well-being of black citizens. Those communities, Glaude explains, are

> places of tremendous hardship, joblessness, and what seems to be permanent marginalization. Opportunity deserts are those communities, both urban and rural, that lack the resources and public institutions that give those who live there a chance to reach beyond their current lives. They are characterized, in part, by (1) the absence of social networks that point out pathways for professional and educational advance and (2) heightened police surveillance that increases the likelihood of someone's landing in the criminal justice system.[38]

Within these communities, black citizens struggle to hope under such limiting conditions that constrain one's ability to imagine and pursue better lives. Though Glaude speaks only of black communities, these opportunity deserts likely extend into other nondominant racial and ethnic communities. Moreover, white people who perpetuate living in ignorance or denial of black and other minority suffering, fail to see the hope-shattering patterns of their own behavior which reflect valuing some lives more than others, thereby further inhibiting sustainable hope in those struggling communities. And when those same people insist that black folks and other minority people should keep on hoping and do not recognize that democratic ideas of liberty, equality, and opportunity have long been unjustly distributed in America, they propagate conditions of harm and exhaustion. Inequality of hope, democratic participation, and well-being in America will continue to be rigged as long as we continue to deny the many ways in which our country has valued some people over others.[39]

Disconnection and Distrust

Third, citizenship in America has increasingly become focused on personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and private success. Historical accounts of rugged individualism have now joined forces with calls to educate children in grit and expectations that one will fight to earn one's position and goods in a competitive marketplace.[40] Increasingly, being American is reduced to individual pursuit of the American Dream in terms of wealth and property, relinquishing *e pluribus unum*, common goods, and other collective ends

historically valued in America. This focus on individuals and private success feeds a climate of distrust toward others who might get in our way, who may be after some of the same things we are, or who may jeopardize our personal interests.

Distrust may be helpful for a democracy to the extent that it can keep citizens on guard against tyranny. Additionally, minority members who've faced a history of being harmed may use distrust to rightfully protect themselves from reoccurring harm.[41] Moreover, minority members who lack economic resources tend to be more distrustful of others, in part because they have more to lose if others fail them or take advantage of them.[42] But today's environment has reached a troubling level of distrust across demographic groups. When people lack trust in others, collaborative effort is discouraged. They doubt others will act for the right reasons or on behalf of the common good. Moreover, they may feel others are not worthy of self-government and should be closely overseen by military or authoritarian leaders.

Relatedly, Americans increasingly do not trust each other to make wise political decisions. That distrust is magnified by growing political polarization and hyperpartisanship, with more citizens increasingly detesting their counterparts on the other side of the aisle, and calling them derogatory names like "libtards" or "deplorables."[43] And whereas a significant percentage once claimed to desire compromise between parties, only 46% of Democrats and 44% of Republicans do today.[44] This may be because citizens are increasingly encouraged to fight for their own advantage and not settle for middle ground.[45] Or, it may be because citizens are less willing to compromise with those believed to be unwise or untrustworthy.

The situation of distrust and refusal to compromise is exacerbated by citizens having little interaction across lines of difference. Experts in civil life explain,

> One reason that Americans trust each other less may be that they no longer engage in the large, connected civil associations that predominated in the twentieth century. Religious congregations and unions were two of the biggest components of civil society; together they drew an outright majority of American adults as recently as 1970. By 2012, they reached just one in three adults. Newspapers also played an integrating role, but their audience has fallen dramatically.[46]

Not only have rates of civil participation declined but also the composition of those groups has changed. A leading sociologist of democracy, Theda Skocpol claims that while "for decade after decade in U.S. civil life until recently, major voluntary associations involved considerable popular participation and mobilized people of different occupational and class backgrounds into the same or parallel groups," civil organizations are now more segregated by social class and lack a shared identity that historically united them across differences.[47] More recently, the most wealthy Americans organize using their clout and political ties, largely in terms of business and individual interests, almost entirely only with each other. Upper-middle-class professionals tend to work only with their similarly highly educated peers on social problems. And working-class people, historically involved in union work, have increasingly dropped out of civil society.[48] This situation of dwindling civil life is especially troublesome for rural people living in so-called civic deserts, which lack places to meet, ways to deliberate about issues, or opportunities to interact with people different from themselves—experiences that might aid in overcoming fear, resentment, and distrust.[49] As more people are unable or unwilling to participate in organizations that, in many instances, have demonstrated considerable impact on political and shared life, those people may feel less able to influence democracy today.

The isolation of citizens from each other and especially from those different from themselves contributes to the experience of democratic distance, a concept that Christopher LeBron draws from James Baldwin.[50] Even though we may share the land that is America, our physical location within the same country is not enough to bind us as countrymen, for our experiences of reality within that space are often quite different—we are distant from each other when it comes to our experience of democracy. A black man, for example, experiences far more checks on his freedom, as he faces greater likelihood of being pulled over by police when driving, greater chances of being shot by police, or greater prison sentences when found guilty of the same crime as a white man. As a result, blacks and whites have very different experiences of freedom in America and such differences magnify the gaps between us, leading to distrust for those whose experiences and claims seem so radically different from our own.[51] And it leads blacks to be rightfully distrustful of and angered by the hypocrisy of whites who proclaim freedom and other ideals in America yet fail to recognize how those are not carried out equitably across our land.

Trust does not fare any better when it comes to trusting politicians. A majority of Americans now say they distrust elected public officials, especially at the federal level.[52] In part, this distrust has been driven by bad governance and political scandals. But distrust is also magnified as populations age, become less financially stable, and consume more media.[53] As a result, some older citizens may now feel that strong authoritarian leaders they find trustworthy are needed to rule over our changing country.

Often those Americans who have not been successful in the past, or do not see viable avenues for being so in the future, fatalistically accept these conditions of inequity, distrust, and divisiveness. They become passive about countering or changing them, resigning themselves to the way the world is. Whereas, I will explain, hope asserts that the world can be changed and even improved. Other Americans, often those who have enough resources and power to be comfortable with the present conditions, indulge in the privilege of being cynical or apathetic. Sometimes one's position of relative comfort leads one to disregard calls to improve the lives of others, writing them off with a simple "that doesn't affect me."[54] Often cynicism functions like an armor one uses to shield oneself from risk or danger. Cynics quickly discount proposals for change or improvement, grumbling "why bother?" or "there's no way that's going to work." Thereby, they protect themselves from the effort those proposals might require and the potential harm they might bring. It is safe to be cynical, whereas hope entails risk—a proclivity toward possibility whose outcomes are unknown or unsure. Yet, even as cynicism may protect one from having to care about or engage in real effort and the problems that may result, it also relinquishes one's ability to even do so. For when we are cynical and believe that there's nothing we can do to make a difference, we hand over our power.

The collective action of hope also often requires venturing into areas of uncertainty. Sometimes naysayers focus on those uncertainties and breed distrust of leaders in social and political movements so that forward momentum stalls. Some spread states of hopelessness or jaded negativity through memes and messages on social media, especially skepticism about the role and effectiveness of government.[55] Cynics, believing that their political efforts are useless or ineffective and perhaps that everyone acts in self-interest, are left to look out merely for themselves, without a sense of responsibility to act on behalf of others. Indeed, cynics may mock others who do not hold such views as naïve and out of touch with reality. Cynicism functions as a distancing maneuver, separating citizens from each other, from democratic institutions,

and from civil organizations, where visions of an improved world and action to achieve it tend to occur.

In America, loneliness and social isolation are increasingly widespread, on the rise, and the worst for members of Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s.[56] Loneliness can lead one to feel disconnected from others and disengaged from political life. Additionally, loneliness and isolation seem to relate to political perceptions. For example, of Millennials described as "lost and disengaged," many feel unprepared for and unsure of how to participate in political life, leaving them feeling less confident than the roughly half of Americans who believe that citizens can influence political life.[57] My notion of hope aims to span those divides between people and to overcome cynicism, while building belief in the efficacy of civil and political engagement.

Privatized Hope

Finally, what is left of hope has become privatized.[58] This phenomenon is exacerbated as neoliberalism continues to assert Margaret Thatcher's claims, "There is no such thing as society, only individuals and families," and "there is no alternative to the market." Hope is reduced to a mere drive to achieve one's own limited dreams, typically only through financial terms and material goods, such as a salesman hoping that he earns the end-of-year bonus for highest sales of the year so he can buy a fancy new sedan as a sign of his success to others. Sometimes such achievements are seen as a zero-sum game, where our personal success is threatened by other citizens or immigrants who appear to be competing for our desired goods, position, or power, leading us to be further distrustful of them. And, as we focus on our personal desires, we may lose sight of public goods that benefit all citizens as well as our collective avenues for fulfilling them.

When citizens are rendered isolated competitors, they lose the ability to detect social problems and the motivation to ameliorate them, especially if the effects on one's self or family are not immediate. One economist describes some of these citizens as the new "complacent class," who are content with the way things are as long as they are not directly harmed and as long as they can stay surrounded by people and things that confirm their experience of the world. We see this demonstrated in the rise of hyperpartisan confirmation

bias and echo chambers, where those citizens only turn to others like themselves to confirm their beliefs. In their complacency, the members of the complacent class are unable to "inspire an electorate with any kind of strong positive visions, other than some marginal adjustments."[59] I aim to show how hope is better understood and enacted as a social and political endeavor that brings us into contact with an array of others as we craft substantially improved visions of the future, many of which depend on first identifying and solving social problems.

In sum, these changes in citizens' lives and views debilitate individuals and democracy as a whole. They keep us from recognizing and addressing collective problems and from leading better lives together. Citizens sit around waiting for reasons to hope, sometimes becoming swept up in campaign rhetoric when election cycles come around, unable or unwilling to see that hope is generated through action as citizens working together. Moreover, these conditions and their causes contribute to the seeming opposite of hope: despair. When we are in despair, we aren't sure how to move forward. We feel disconnected from our goals and from the agency we need to pursue them. We also tend to feel disconnected from other people, which is significant because those other people might help us craft our goals or provide us means for achieving them. This sense of isolation blocks the solidarity with others often needed to fulfill our aims.[60]

In addition to our personal struggles, political despair grows when we don't see enough political will or action to address major public problems. This leads us to doubt our ability to solve problems and may actually undermine our ability to do so. We may come to feel that our social problems are so great that we cannot possibly tackle them or even influence them. Indeed, there is some basis for such feeling, because data shows that individuals without significant wealth and resources are far less likely to influence government and its leaders.[61] For those knowledgeable of or sensing this inequity, their political despair played out through withdrawal from political life reflects more than just cynicism or apathy.[62] Finally, political despair can tempt citizens to give up on their commitment to justice, freedom, and better living for themselves and others.[63] As a result, authoritarianism and other forms of governmental rule may seem more appealing. When many Americans forgo those commitments, our social order and long-standing values may be undermined. Hence, we must overcome despair to revive and improve democracy today.

Moving Forward

In this book, I aim to articulate what hope is, why it matters to democracy, and how we should cultivate it. Rather than seeing hope as a mere personal emotion or tied to faith in God, I situate hope in explicitly political realms by considering the role hope plays in democracy and how it might be fostered in schools and civil society. Speaking to concerned and struggling citizens on both sides of the aisle, as well as educators working to develop good citizens, I intend to offer philosophically grounded yet accessible insight into our current state of affairs and suggestions for improvement. I will propose how we might move forward together to build hope—not a particular program of political action, but a way of life that can help to support democracy in general.

I come to this project as a white, Midwest farmer's daughter who retains the communal hard work ethic of family farming and the value of civic participation of my youth. My worldview was broadened as I left the farm for college, married a man in the military who served during a contentious period of war, experienced divorce and remarriage, and spent considerable time living and traveling abroad. I am now a well-educated, middle-aged adult living in a large city, and my political affiliation has shifted from Right to Left. Across that span of time and ideology, my life has been relatively privileged. Despite encountering some personal hardship, facing sexism, and witnessing the political frustration and economic struggles of my rural and less-educated family members, I have not experienced the significant or lasting oppression, racism, and injustice of the sort that has led many other citizens to despair. Certainly, the arguments I make in this book are influenced by this positionality. But they are also shaped by the hope I have cultivated, including a proclivity to see opportunities to work across divisions and to envision better futures ahead for social and political life in America. I realize the case I make will be a hard sell to some of you, and, indeed, I have much to learn from the questions and challenges you pose. Nonetheless, I invite you to join me in exploring such hope in the chapters to come.

In the next chapter, I begin by revealing some of the problematic ways in which hope has been understood. I consider one of those problematic forms of hope, grit, in much more detail later in the book. I then turn to the tradition of American pragmatism to construct an alternative account of hope that arises out of our American history and addresses our struggles today. In the third chapter, I detail how hope works as a set of pragmatist habits, a

unique understanding of identity and proclivities to take action. In chapter 4, I explain how habits of hope can sustain and improve democracy, while at the same time, democracy can provide conditions that support hope. I describe both the content of what we might hope for in a democracy and the process of how we hope together. I show how each shapes our identity as Americans.

But hope is more than just a political project, it is also an educational one. In chapters 5 and 6, I look at how we can cultivate hope formally through education and informally in our lives together. I critique increasingly popular calls to teach grit, which may seem to be related to hope, but raise serious problems for us as individuals and as a democratic society. Instead, I locate learning how to hope within citizenship education that builds student agency, crafts new stories about America and the future we desire, and engages in dissent and other forms of effort to put forward alternative ways of living. I primarily describe teaching how to hope within the K-12 context, a context in which education is compulsory and many of our ways of interacting with others are still relatively malleable. But many of my proposals can be extended into college classrooms, and some are developmentally appropriate there. I use "teacher," "school," and "student" such that, in most instances, they might also refer to "professor," "university," and "learner of any age." Throughout the book, I describe a way of hoping together that may better support democratic life in these challenging times, and may be adapted for the unknown future of our country.