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HOW DEMOCRACY CAN BE RECLAIMED: LESSONS FROM ELECTIONS WORLDWIDE

TRANSATLANTIC PANEL DISCUSSES THE
RETURN OF DEMOCRATIC RULE IN HUNGARY
AND POLAND, 'GOOD POPULISM', HOW
WEAKENED ECONOMIES AFFECT OUR
POLITICS, AND MORE.

Report by Arnaz Mahbub, Rachel Pineo, John Austin, and Ben Speggen

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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY



EISENHOWER INSTITUTE
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Can a democracy be reclaimed once autocratic and kleptocratic rulers take power?

That was the big question put before a panel of international experts during a June 24 Heartlands Transformation Network discussion hosted by the Jefferson Educational Society.

Whether countries can return from the brink of losing, or nearly losing, their democratic societies is a question that bears asking — especially because anti-democratic, nationalist, and ethno-nationalist movements are threatening democratic systems throughout the world. Those leading these anti-democratic movements often feed fears, peddle disinformation, stoke resentments, and favor nostalgia over real, practical, policy-driven solutions to transitioning or still struggling economic regions.

What gives hope — as the panelists revealed and as evidenced in Hungary most recently and Poland not long before that — the answer to the question “can a democracy be reclaimed?” is a resounding “yes.”

In April 2026, former Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán stepped down from the Hungarian parliament after a landslide defeat in which the public rallied to throw off his kleptocratic and economically debilitating rule in favor of the pro-Europe, pro-democracy Péter Magyar and his Tisza Party. Magyar’s big win dramatically demonstrated that even after years of election rigging and purposeful destruction of democratic institutions and norms – democracy can be reclaimed. Three years prior in 2023, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk’s victory pried the control of Parliament out of the grip of the national-populist Law and Justice Party, allowing the Polish people to begin rebuilding a democracy that had been similarly dismembered.

Both cases illustrate that democracy does not necessarily disappear all at once or overnight. Rather, countries see a steady erosion and democratic backsliding through attacks on courts, public media, civil society, elections, and public trust.

As the panelists also explained, the reclaiming of democracies does not happen just at the ballot box and on election days. Rather, those pro-democratic parties and players must work to restore trust among the people, a trust best gained by continuing to listen to the people and deliver meaningful results that improve their lives.

The discussion included:

- Bulcsú Hunyadi, a leading Hungarian political analyst and Head of Programmes at Political Capital;
- Robin Johnson of Monmouth College in Illinois, U.S., who has written about how Democrats win elections in rural, and working-class districts in the American Heartland that now typically vote Republican;
- Maria Skóra, Policy Fellow at Das Progressive Zentrum in Germany and author of work on democratic renewal in Poland and Hungary; and
- Rob Ford, political analyst at the University of Manchester, who studies Reform UK and the populist radical right in Britain.

A timely element to the discussion, which was moderated by JES Vice President Ben Speggen, was then-British Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s announcement just days prior to resign his prime minister post. At the time, it was largely anticipated that Andy Burnham, the former Greater Manchester mayor, was poised to take over at No. 10 Downing Streeting. That projection has since become reality with Burnham made the new PM fresh off the experience of helping to breathe new life into the older industrial community of

Manchester. His election signals hope that he could do the same for other “left-behind” regions of Britain and beat back the rise of the ethnonationalist Reform Party.

Panelists’ perspectives reflected in what follows were offered in real-time as the news was developing.

Case Studies in Reclaiming Democracy

Why were Péter Magyar and the Tisza Party able to defeat Viktor Orbán and Fidesz after 16 years in power in Hungary? As Bulcsú Hunyadi explained, the victory was the result of several factors coming together at the right moment.

The economy had weakened; the cost of living had risen; and public services such as healthcare, transportation, and education deteriorated under Orbán’s rule. At the same time, Fidesz lost credibility after years of corruption scandals and abuse of power. Orbán’s government had built a strong disinformation system, but once the government lost credibility, its propaganda became less effective. Magyar was also an unusual challenger because he had once been part of the Orbán’s Fidesz system. That gave him knowledge of how the system worked and credibility when he turned against it. He also spent two years traveling across Hungary, visiting around 700 municipalities and speaking directly with people, especially outside the largest cities.

Bringing in the U.S. perspective, Robin Johnson affirmed the power of connecting with residents directly. Through his work focusing on Democratic candidates who win in rural, working-class, and older industrial districts that have been the hotbeds of support for U.S. President Donald Trump and his MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement, Johnson acknowledged that there is no secret formula, but that successful candidates show up, listen, speak in normal language, and become part of the community. They knock on doors, attend local events, and talk with people who may not agree with them. Johnson emphasized that candidates cannot rely only on national talking points or consultant language. They must speak in a way that sounds real to the people they are trying to represent. A phrase like “fix the damn roads” — Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s winning slogan — works because it is direct, practical, and connected to everyday life.

Given their successes in reclaiming democracy at the ballot box came just three years apart in Hungary and Poland, Maria Skóra offered a comparison of the politic dynamics at work in each country. Poland’s pro-democracy forces were able to remove the Law and Justice Party from government, but the victory was not as clear or unified as in Hungary. Poland’s new government was built through a coalition of parties with different priorities, and the office of the President remained aligned with Law and Justice. This made democratic repair difficult. Courts, public media, and human rights protections had been damaged, but fixing them has been challenging in many instances since the office of the President has veto power. Skóra’s main warning was that destroying democracy is much easier than rebuilding it. Even after a strong election victory, restoring democracy can be slow, messy, and incomplete.

Rob Ford discussed the United Kingdom and the rise of Reform UK. He explained that mainstream parties cannot defeat the radical right only by criticizing it. They also have to tell a better story about who they are, what they stand for, and what they will actually deliver. Ford used Andy Burnham as an example of a politician who can speak to voters in a direct and believable way. Burnham’s strength is not just that he criticizes the radical right, but that he frames politics around ordinary people and tangible improvements. Ford also warned that “good populism” must not become toxic populism. It is possible to speak for ordinary people against powerful elites, but it becomes dangerous when politicians treat

opponents as enemies or promise things they know they cannot deliver.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Several clear themes emerged from the discussion around how to successfully reclaim democracies – key factors and features that cut across the political dynamics in the U.S., UK, Hungary, Poland, and other advanced democracies. These include:

- The importance of animating a “good populism,” the need for political leaders to engage in direct communication and engagement with voters;
- The impact that corruption and a failing economy can have on political credibility;
- Organizing and mobilizing voter turnout;
- The importance of credible follow-through on political promises; and
- The particular challenges of reassembling a democracy that has been compromised.

‘Good’ Populism

Populism is often treated as automatically dangerous, but the panel showed that there is a difference between democratic populism and anti-democratic populism. ‘Good’ populism focuses on people’s real needs, and speaks clearly to residents about concerns surrounding housing, roads, wages, healthcare, schools, corruption, and the cost of living. Those engaging in “good” populism take residents’ anger seriously, but rather than further stoking their ire, present concrete, tangible solutions. They engage residents in conversations, listening to them rather than talking down to them or engaging in scapegoating.

In Hungary, Magyar used good populism by focusing on everyday problems and the corrupt elite around Orbán. In the United States, Johnson’s examples showed that successful candidates in working-class districts often win by being practical, local, and honest. In Britain, Ford described how Burnham tells a “little guy versus big guy” story while still staying within democratic politics. The lesson is not that democratic leaders should copy the style of anti-democratic populists. The lesson is that they should speak more clearly, more directly, and more honestly about people’s lives.

Engaging With Voters Proves Critical to Success

Panelists made clear that democracy cannot be rebuilt from television studios, social media posts, or national party offices alone. It must happen through real contact with people. Hunyadi explained that Magyar’s campaign in Hungary worked partly because he went to hundreds of towns and villages and showed up in places where people often feel ignored. Johnson made a similar point about American state legislators who win in districts many pollsters would otherwise write off as unwinnable based on political party. Door knocking that lasts just seconds no longer cuts it, Johnson explained, relaying that candidates who spend time listening rather than rushing away make real, lasting connections with voters.

This kind of in-person politics at an intimate level builds trust because it helps candidates understand constituents’ concerns instead of assuming they already know. In a time when politics is often shaped by national media, consultants, and social media fights – and in an era of rising misinformation and disinformation campaigns – direct voter contact becomes increasingly important. People are more likely to trust leaders who show up in their communities, listen to them, and speak with them rather than to or for them.

The panel also showed that word choice, language, and tone matter. Political language can easily become too abstract, too professional, or too disconnected from daily life. People do not always talk about “affordability” or “economic insecurity” in the same way that policy experts do. They talk about rent, groceries, roads, schools, jobs, and whether they can imagine a future for their children. Successful democratic leaders use language that isn’t abstract, esoteric, or convoluted. They do not make politics sound more complicated than it needs to be.

Corruption and the Economy Are Political Killers

In Hungary, corruption had been known for years, but it became much more politically damaging when people’s own lives became harder. When public services deteriorated and living costs rose, the luxury and corruption of the elite became harder to accept. This helped damage Fidesz’s credibility and made anti-corruption messaging more powerful. Hunyadi explained that Magyar’s status as a former insider also made this message stronger because he could provide personal stories and specific examples from inside the system.

The same lesson applies beyond Hungary. In the United States, many voters in rural and older industrial places turned toward Trump and the MAGA movement because they felt the economy had failed them and that national leaders were not listening. In Britain, Reform UK has gained support in places where voters feel cynical, distrustful, and left behind. Across countries, when democracy does not seem to deliver, voters become more open to anti-system messages. This does not mean that economic problems explain everything, but they are central to understanding why anti-democratic movements become attractive.

For pro-democracy leaders, this means that defending democracy cannot only be about institutions and values, even though those things matter. It also must be about whether people feel that democracy is working in their lives and that things are improving on a personal level or have the potential to improve. If people cannot afford basic needs or feel that public services are failing, they may stop believing that a democratic government can help them. That creates space for leaders who promise simple answers, blame outsiders, or attack democratic institutions.

Mobilizing Turnout Relies on Hope

Democratic victories require people to believe that change is possible – and they must be willing and motivated to be active, engaged participants in their own system. In Poland, high voter turnout, especially among young people and women, helped remove the Law and Justice Party from power. In Hungary, Magyar’s campaign reached rural and smaller communities that opposition forces had often failed to mobilize.

Civil society also played an important role. Even when the Tisza Party avoided some culture-war issues during the campaign, civil society still stood up for democratic values, including during the Budapest Pride march after the Orbán government tried to ban it. Political parties may make strategic decisions about what issues to emphasize during campaigns, but civil society can still defend rights and democratic values in public life. A healthy democracy needs both: political movements that can win elections, and civic movements that keep democratic values alive beyond elections.

In contrast to the fear and anger often leveraged by anti-democratic movements, mobilizing turnout requires hope. People are more likely to participate when they believe their actions matter. One reason

the Hungarian case was so important was that many people began to believe change was possible after years of feeling that Orbán's system could not be challenged. Once that belief changed, Fidesz's propaganda became less powerful. The possibility of change created more participation, and more participation created more possibilities.

Credibility Is Key

In Hungary, Fidesz's disinformation machine had been powerful for years, but it stopped working as well when people could see the gap between propaganda and their lived reality. The same principle applies to pro-democracy leaders after they win. If they overpromise and fail to deliver, they can lose credibility quicker than proposed solutions may become realities. Ford warned that leaders must not promise people everything they want if they know they cannot deliver it. Skóra also showed how difficult it is in Poland when a new government cannot easily fulfill its promises because of institutional obstacles and coalition disagreements.

This is why reclaiming democracy requires both hope and honesty. Pro-democratic leaders have to offer a positive vision, but they also have to be realistic. They need to show voters what change is possible, how it will happen, and why it may take time. They also need to keep explaining what they are doing. Ford's warning about the Starmer government in Britain was important here. A government can win power and even effect some change, but if it fails to tell voters what it stands for and where it is trying to take the country, it can lose public trust. Routine, consistent communication about progress – or even lack thereof in the face of continued or new challenges – matters.

Democracy Is Not Lost Overnight – Nor Easily Rebuilt

Restoring democracy after an autocratic period is much harder than many people expect. Courts, public media, civil service institutions, and public trust do not repair themselves immediately, as Skóra explained, drawing from Poland's experience. There may also be "autocratic enclaves," or people loyal to the old system who remain in important positions and block reform.

Poland shows that even when pro-democracy forces win, they may face legal, political, and institutional barriers that slow down reform. Hungary may now have a stronger mandate for change, but it will still face the difficult work of rebuilding institutions, restoring the rule of law, and keeping together a broad coalition of voters. This means that citizens and democratic leaders should consider that it is easier to defend democracy than to rebuild it after serious erosion.

This also means that democratic victories should not be treated as the end of the story. Winning power creates responsibility. Pro-democracy leaders need to show that they can govern better than the anti-democratic leaders they replaced. It's critical they rebuild trust not only by changing laws, but by showing people that government can be honest, competent, and responsive.

Simply put, democracy may be reclaimed, as Hungary and Poland show us, at the ballot box. But elections are only the beginning and do not singularly guarantee the future fortifying and strengthening of democracies. The road to democratic backsliding and erosion is not short and quick; but neither is the road to rebuilding democracy. Engaging with citizens – listening to their concerns and proposing real, tangible ways to address them, and then taking action to deliver results – matters. Pro-democratic leaders can do much to reclaim democracy, but they needn't wait until their democracy is lost.

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About the Initiative

The Heartlands Transformation Network is a transatlantic collaborative partnership dedicated to closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity. The initiative works to return community pride and optimism about the future, and diminish the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist, and ethnonationalist political movements that threaten our democracies. The initiative, its learning exchanges, convenings, events, study tours, presentations, publications, and other learning products are conducted with partners including the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College; the Brookings Institution; the Georgetown University BMW Center for German and European Studies; the Jefferson Educational Society; the Ruhrkonferenz of North-Rhine Westphalia; Policy Manchester at the University of Manchester, UK; the University Allianz Ruhr; the German Consulate General in Chicago; the University of Michigan; the European Commission Directorate of Regional and Urban Policy; and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, among others.