

- Analysis

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW TO STOP A COUP

While keeping people focused on a strong, robust election process is a must, we also need to prepare for a coup.

Daniel Hunter September 18, 2020

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WASHINGTON, DC - AUGUST 15: Demonstrators gather outside of the condo of P... [see more](#)

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We have a president who has [openly said he might not respect the outcome](#) of our election. We have to be ready if he claims victory before votes are counted, tries to stop counting, or refuses to accept a loss.

Some days I feel confident it will happen. A [poll showed](#) over 75 percent of Democrats think this is possible — and a shocking 30 percent of Republicans do too!

Other days I feel confident this is tough talk from a president not good at planning ahead. Still, he is good at the kind of misdirection that can keep us complacent and reactionary — which could lead us to stop doing the important groundwork of getting out the vote, protecting the post office and fighting voter suppression.



● We need a plan to prevent a Trump takeover — and this anti-coup research shows the way

So what I'm offering isn't asking us to stop what we're doing now. Instead I'm part of an effort called [Choose Democracy](#), which is prepping people for the possibility of a coup while keeping people focused on a strong, robust election process. After all, the best way to stop a coup is to not have one.

These guidelines are drawn from the [wide body of experience and evidence](#) from the many countries that have experienced a coup since World War II. You can read some fuller case studies from [Choose Democracy](#) or a longer evidence-based handbook for this moment from "[Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy](#)."

1. Don't expect results election night.

Election season 2020 is shaping up to be very unusual. Many mail-in ballots may not be counted until days or weeks after Election Day. Since Democrats are expected to use them more frequently than Republicans, voter tallies are expected to swing towards Democrats post-election night (they call it a "blue shift"). As a result, a wave of confusion may unfold starting election night.

The strange Electoral College creates multiple intervention points. After election night (Nov. 3), trumped up claims of fraudulent ballots may cause a wayward attorney general or other government officials to try halting counts or excluding ballots.

As election results start coming in the message needs to come through loud and clear: Count all the votes and honor the result.

On Dec. 14, the delegates of the Electoral College meet and vote for the state's outcome. This is typically done without fanfare, but in contested states we might see governors and state legislatures sending in different results — one reflecting the results from voters, the other claiming “it’s a fraud” and “we know best.” This is worrying in swing states like Pennsylvania, where the governor and state legislature are of different parties.

All these issues then get resolved on Jan. 6 by the new Congress. And if the House and Senate don’t agree about the result, then a convoluted process unfolds where the newly seated House — via one state, one-vote — determines the president. Meanwhile, the Senate (by majority) votes for the new vice president. (#ShutDownDC provides a [visual break-down of these steps](#).)

During this time expect false flags and outlandish claims. Be very cautious with news. Don’t simply pass on whatever seems like dramatic examples of wrongdoing — but take the time to check if it has been verified, already debunked, or from a source you don’t trust. Encourage people in your community to prepare for some uncertain weeks. As election results start coming in the message needs to come through loud and clear: Count all the votes and honor the result.

2. Do call it a coup.

One reason to use the language of a *coup* is that people know it’s wrong and a violation of Democratic norms — even if they’re not familiar with the exact definition of a coup.

We have to be ready to declare loudly and strongly: This is a coup.

Language like “election tampering” or “voter suppression” signal deterioration of the democratic process. But if we get ourselves into a coup situation — like where Trump just won’t go — we need to help people help our country move into a [psychic break](#).

We know it’s a coup if the government:

- Stops counting votes;
- Declares someone a winner who didn’t get the most votes; or
- Allows someone to stay in power who didn’t win the election.

These are sensible red lines that people can grasp right away (and that the majority of Americans continue to believe in).

People who do power grabs always claim they’re doing it to save democracy or claim they know the “real” election results. So this doesn’t have to look like a military coup with one leader ordering the opposition to be arrested.

If any of those three principles are violated, we have to declare loudly and strongly: This is a coup.

3. Know that coups have been stopped by regular folks.

Coup attempts have happened all over the world, and over half have failed. That’s because coups are hard to orchestrate. They are a violation of norms that require quick seizure of multiple levels of institutions with a

claim that they are the rightful heir.

Coups tend to fail when government institutions (like elections) are trusted, there is an active citizenry and other nations are ready to become involved.

The role of citizenry is crucial. That's because during the period right after a coup attempt— when the new government is claiming it is the “real” government — all the institutions have to decide who to listen to.

To start preparing, talk to at least 5 people who would go into the streets with you — the safest way to take to the streets is with people you know and trust.

A failed coup in Germany in 1920 gives an example. The population felt beaten down by defeat in World War I and high unemployment. Right-wing nationalists organized a coup and got the help of a few generals to seize government buildings. The deposed government fled but ordered all citizens to obey them. “No enterprise must work as long as the military dictatorship reigns,” they declared.

Widespread nonviolent resistance quickly began. Printers refused to print the new government's newspapers. Civil servants refused to carry out any orders from the coup. And leaflets calling for an end to the coup were spread by airplane and by hand.

There's a story of the coup leader wandering up and down the corridors looking in vain for a secretary to type up his proclamations. The acts of resistance grew and eventually the democratic government (which still had grave problems) was returned to power.

The moments after a coup are moments for heroism amongst the general population. It's how we make democracy real.

4. Be ready to act quickly — and not alone.

Typically power grabs are organized in secret and launched suddenly. **Most campaigns that defeat coups do so in days:** The Soviet Union in 1991 took three days, France in 1961 took four days and Bolivia in 1978 took 16 days.

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Mass

• direct action might be the only way to stop Trump from stealing the election

It's rare for any country's leader to publicly admit they might not respect the results of an election. There's some good news in that — because people who stop coups rarely have the chance to get training, warning or preparation. In that way, we're ahead of the game.

A group of D.C. insiders called the [Transition Integrity Project](#) ran multiple simulations, such as what might happen if Biden wins by a slim margin or if Trump simply declares victory when there's no clear winner. In every simulation they concluded that a “show of numbers in the streets may be decisive.” Regular people make the difference.

To start preparing, talk to at least five people who would go into the streets with you — the safest way to take to the streets is with people you know and trust. Talk to people you know in civil service and various roles about how they could non-comply with coup attempts. Use this time to get yourself ready to act.

5. Focus on widely shared democratic values, not on individuals.

In [Argentina in 1987](#), a coup got started when an Air Force major, resenting attempts to democratize the military and bring it under civilian control, organized hundreds of soldiers at his base.

While the civilian government tried to quietly negotiate a settlement, people took to the streets. Against the government's pleading, 500 regular citizens marched to the base with the slogan “Long live democracy! Argentina! Argentina!” They could have spent time attacking the major. Instead, they were appealing to their fellow citizens to choose democracy.

The major tried to keep them away with a tank, but the protesters entered the base anyway, and he knew that

open firing on nonviolent civilians would cause him to lose more credibility. Soon 400,000 people took to the streets in Buenos Aires to rally in opposition to the coup.

Coups are not a time to just watch and wait until “someone else” figures it out. No matter who you are you can be a part of choosing democracy.

This gave strength to the civilian government (which had largely been absent). Civic organizations, the Catholic church, business groups and labor unions united under a pledge to “support in all ways possible the constitution, the normal development of the institutions of government and democracy as the only viable way of life.” The coup plotters lost their legitimacy and soon surrendered.

This approach is different than protesters going in the street with a list of issues or a grievance against a vilified leader. Instead, it’s exalting widely-shared core democratic values. In our project we use the language of “choosing democracy.”

This affirms another finding from the research on anti-coups: Because coups are an attack on the current institution, loyalists to the traditional way — who may never join other movement causes — are open to joining actions in the street. That’s if we make the invitation about democratic values they can connect with.

6. Convince people not to freeze or just go along.

Imagine that at your job a corrupt boss gets fired and a new one is brought in. Instead of leaving, your old boss says, “I’m still in charge. Do what I say.” A bunch of your co-workers say, “We only take orders from the old boss.” At that point, doubt arises.

That doubt is how coups succeed. Enough people freeze. Even when only a few people go along with the coup and act as though that’s normal, people may reluctantly accept it as inevitable.

In all the research on preventing coups, there’s one common theme: People stop doing what the coup plotters tell them to do.

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In Germany, from military commanders to secretaries, they refused to obey the orders of the coup. In Mali they called a nationwide strike. In Sudan protesters shut down government-supported radio stations and occupied airport runways. In Venezuela all shops were closed.

This is very different than mass marches at the capital or street protests shutting down intersections. It's not about protest but about getting people to reassert core values — like showing up at elected officials' offices to get them to agree to honor election results. And it's not about single points of actions like marches in D.C. — but instead actions like mass strikes from youth and students refusing to go to work or school until all votes are counted.

Coups are not a time to just watch and wait until “someone else” figures it out. No matter who you are you can be a part of choosing democracy.

7. Commit to actions that represent rule of law, stability and nonviolence.

Stopping a coup is dependent on the size of mobilizations and winning over the center. It is really a fight for legitimacy. Which voice is legitimate? Some people will have already made up their minds. The aim, then, is convincing those who are uncertain — which may be a more surprising number than you expect.

Mass resistance to coups wins by using walk-outs and strikes, refusing orders and shutting down civil society.

To swing them to our side, that uncertain center has to be convinced that “we” represent stability and “the coup plotters” represent hostility to the democratic norms of elections and voting.

We prevent that possibility when we dehumanize potential defectors, make sweeping statements like “the police won’t help,” never encourage people to join our side and create chaotic scenes on the street.

Historically, whichever side resorts to violence the most tends to lose. In a moment of uncertainty, people pick the side that promises maximum stability, respects democratic norms and appears to be the safer bet. It’s a contest of who can be the most legitimate.

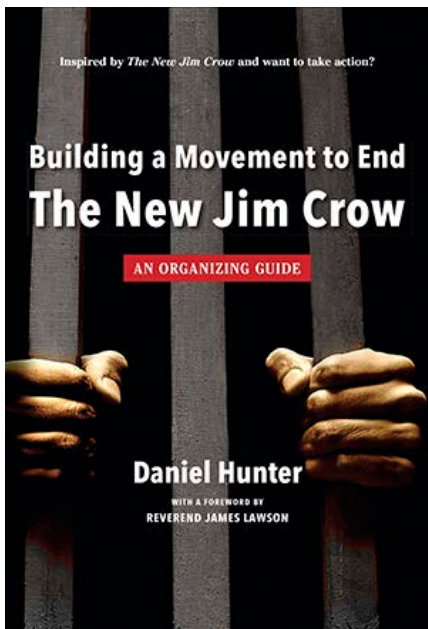
Mass resistance to coups wins by using walk-outs and strikes, refusing orders and shutting down civil society until the rightful democratically-elected leader is installed. For mass movements to succeed against coups, they should refuse to do violence to the other side.

8. Yes, a coup can happen in the United States.

It may be hard to imagine that a coup could happen in this country. But whenever there is an order to stop counting votes, we call it a coup.

Even by the strictest definition of coups, there has been a militarized coup in the United States. In 1898 after reconstruction in Wilmington, North Carolina, seeing the rise of a prosperous and successful Black population, white racists organized a coup. They gave rallying cries like, “We will never surrender to a ragged raffle of Negroes, even if we have to choke the Cape Fear River with carcasses.”

Despite a terror campaign before the election, Black turnout was high and a slate of Black candidates was voted in. Black power was met with white supremacist violence, with white squads killing 30 to 300 people, including newly elected officials. Over 3,000 Blacks fled this extreme violence, and the era of Jim Crow began.



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9. Center in calm, not fear.

It's scary to believe we're having to talk about a federal coup in the United States. And we know that fearful people are less likely to make good decisions.

Let's aim for calm and avoid hyperbole. Be a reliable source by double-checking rumors and spreading high-quality facts. Sure, read social media... but spend some time, you know, doing real things that ground you.

Breathe deeply.

Remember how you handle fear.

Play out scenarios, but don't become captured by them.

We're doing this to prepare, just in case.

10. Prepare to deter a coup before the election.

The best way to stop a coup is to never have one. People are doing lots of good work on issues of voting rights, urging turn-out, stopping repression, uncovering fraud and getting people to commit to democracy. That may be enough.

The best way to stop a coup is to deter it.

Another way to prepare is to get people into the mindset of taking action so they don't freeze. The classic formulation of this is the "if-this-then-that" model designed by the [Pledge of Resistance](#). In that model people prepare themselves for an action by saying "If it comes to this bad thing, then I'll act." By signing a pledge before the crunch moment, you get wider buy-in.

In that spirit, [Choose Democracy](#) has created a pledge:

1. We will vote.
2. We will refuse to accept election results until all the votes are counted.
3. We will nonviolently take to the streets if a coup is attempted.
4. If we need to, we will shut down this country to protect the integrity of the democratic process.

You can [sign the pledge](#) to Choose Democracy and join with folks across the political spectrum! These public commitments ahead of time increase the political cost of attempting a coup — because the best way to stop a coup is to deter it.

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