

Understanding the State of the Right One Year After the January 6th Insurrection

Panelists: Mab Segrest, Serena Sebring, Steven Gardiner, Tarso Luís Ramos

Moderated by Koki Mendis

01/06/2022

Koki Mendis: All right. Thank you, everyone, for joining us, this is a great group for this conversation today. Excited to see a lot of people who are known to PRA, who are maybe new to PRA on this call with us today. As you've undoubtedly seen in your inbox, on social media, in the news today, in the weeks leading up to today, there is certainly no shortage of astute analysis and commentary on the one year anniversary of the January 6th insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. So why join us today for this briefing, for this 90 minutes to potentially two hour long call? Well, great question. As an organization that is both a research and strategy center that foregrounds knowledge of the Right to inform the struggle for a just and inclusive democracy, we at PRA, and with our partners from [Blueprint North Carolina](#), aim to use this time today to ground ourselves in the long term strategies of the Right to consolidate power and whittle away democracy. We look at the centrality of White nationalism and Christian nationalism in imagining and building a new nation state premised on White minority rule. We focus on expanding the conversation from a two way fight between the people and the power holders to include the undeniable role of the social movement Far Right. And we highlight the intractability of the culture war in both the organizing success of the Right and the path forward for the Left.

Today, we situate January 6th in a longer trajectory of ongoing insurrection that is only now capturing the attention of the American public, and we answer the questions that are foremost on our minds. What do we do if we keep losing? What are some of the most significant challenges that we as social justice movements face? What are the opportunities for building a united front right now? And most importantly, what must we be doing right now in this moment to forestall the foregone conclusion that the end of our democracy is nigh? This is, as you can tell, a lot to cover in an hour and a half to two hours. So I'm going to start us off by acknowledging up top the profound role that the ongoing

coronavirus pandemic has played in creating the ideal conditions for mass mobilization—on both the Left and the Right—for widening and throwing into high relief deep inequities and gross injustices in our existing systems of social control, and for amplifying the power of neoliberalism to distract individuals fending for themselves and their families from recognizing the slow and steady assault on our democracy currently underway. While the events of January 6th and the past year have occurred under this unique context, our conversation today will tackle more broadly trends on the Right and strategies for the Left that will have lasting consequences beyond this particular pandemic moment—assuming that there is a particular pandemic moment.

We will start today by hearing from each of our panelists: PRA's Executive Director, [Tarso Luís Ramos](#), and PRA Research Director [Steven Gardiner](#); and Executive Director of Blueprint North Carolina [Serena Sebring](#), and Senior Strategist for Blueprint North Carolina's anti-racist research program [Mab Segrest](#). Blueprint North Carolina is a progressive ecosystem with nearly 60 formal partner organizations and an expanding web of network allies committed to building independent power for an anti-racist, inclusive democracy. We are so grateful for Serena and Mab for joining us today to provide a fascinating and informative look at how right-wing organizing has been and is taking shape at the local and state level. A few housekeeping notes as always: this briefing is being recorded and the recording will be distributed to everyone who registered for today's briefing, along with a copy of PRA's brand new State of the Right report, [Capitol Offenses: January 6, 2021 and the Ongoing Insurrection](#), written by Tarso Luís Ramos and Steven Gardiner. The report will also be available on our website in the coming days.

Today, we will hear from each of our panelists, then provide our panelists time to reflect on one another's contributions before we open the discussion to our full audience. Thank you everyone for being with us today. Please feel free to drop your name and where you're joining us from in the chat, as I see some of you are already doing. Please also keep yourselves muted, but feel free to use the chat to chime in on the discussion and raise any questions you may have. As I mentioned, we will open up to a group conversation and Q&A at the end of this briefing. All right. With all that long winded notes out of the way, Tarso, I'm going to start with you today.

Tarso Luís Ramos: Thank you, Koki, and it's wonderful to see so many people joining us today. Thank you beautiful people for taking some time out of your days to join, to make some a collective meaning, I think, of the current political moment and what we do and what we make of it. Thank you, Koki.

You know, the first anniversary of the Capitol storming is certainly an

occasion to take stock of the robust current state of America's insurrectionist and anti-democratic factions, right? Those who would sooner dispense with democracy altogether than to lose their hold on power and momentum towards consolidating more of it. As Koki noted, there's been a lot of reporting on the J6 anniversary, and a lot of it's been excellent. We know—and so I'm just going to stipulate these things to be true—we know that the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol building, the federal building (but at State Capitols all over the country as well), was one element in a series of Team Trump efforts to overthrow the 2020 presidential election. An attempted coup, in fact. Neither the insurrection nor the coup attempt are over. They are both ongoing and by important measures, intensifying. Three things—among the many things that maybe have been glossed or been lacking in national media attention, include first, the dynamic interplay between what we might call the grave diggers of democracy at the state and national levels: the insurrectionists in suits, if you will; and the growth and consolidation of a mass base for Trump's restoration or something like it. Second is that national reporting generally has overlooked how all of this is playing out on the ground in communities around the country, in the places where we live and organize. Yes, we have tallies of dangerous legislation working through the states. But what's happening also in communities? How has the insurrection shaped reality on the ground and prospects for progressive organizing? And thirdly, what are the likely scenarios and key challenges facing social justice and pro-democracy organizers during this period? That is, what do we do with what we know? I look forward to getting into these and many other questions with my colleagues.

On the first point, I want to start by acknowledging that the January 6th insurrection and coup attempt failed at its immediate purpose, and in the process, it really threatened to split Trump's MAGA coalition of White nationalists, Christian nationalists, libertarian opportunists, [and] laissez faire deregulators. After all, they stormed the Capitol, chanting "Hang Mike Pence," right? Possibly not a formula for keeping the Christian Right in your coalition. We saw desperate calls from other key allies to the Trump regime in the right-wing media sphere, desperately trying to, you know, get Trump to call off the assault on the Capitol and so forth. Amazingly, the coalition has not only held together, it's even consolidated since that time into a more tightly coordinated authoritarian bloc that carries each other's standards, right? Anti-CRT, anti-voting, anti-trans people, anti-repro rights, anti-immigration; groups like the Heritage Foundation, Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Policy Center, and a number of others are all working the same narratives and policy angles, arguably in closer lockstep than even before the January 6th insurrection and coup attempts. And the goals of this bloc couldn't be clearer: White minority

rule. As Bob Wing observes in a wonderful recent essay—if you haven't seen it, titled "Since the 2000 presidential election"—he says it's become evident that the Republicans cannot win without suppressing voters of color, and Democrats cannot succeed without unleashing those voters. So after a brief moment of protests in which Mitch McConnell declared that the Senate would not be intimidated by thugs, Trump reorganized his coalition, still acting as commander in chief of his emergent nation. Like a latter day Jefferson Davis, he's accused but not tried for his acts of treason.

I think that Steven is going to talk about the degree of some of the mechanics of the ongoing insurgency and the slow moving coup. So I'm going to leave that to Steven. I want to say a few words about the war, the culture war, campaigns of the Right: anti-trans, repro, CRT, voting, and immigration pillars of their program. These issues mark—they mobilize and they demarcate the exclusionary boundaries of an imagined real people of America. What I think it's useful to think of as a new and emergent nation being mobilized in order to sanctify a new kind of state. A necessarily authoritarian government to be won—with violence if necessary, but quite possibly by means of a bloodless coup next time, which we'll talk more about.

The successful cultivation of this mass base is one of the Right's most significant and dangerous accomplishments. In the mass base for this new nation state project is presumably a high percentage of those who voted for Trump in 2020, about 74 million people who did. The percent of those Trump voters who think the election was stolen is 68 percent. That's 50 million Americans. So as the old civil rights adage goes, not everyone at the lynching is a member of the Klan, and this is the moment we're living now. So while regime loyal paramilitaries and street fighters like Oath Keepers and Proud Boys have drawn appropriate media and congressional scrutiny, one of the most striking features of the January 6th rioters is how different most of them are from the sort of avowed White nationalists who staged the 2017 Unite the Right demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. Of the over 700 insurrectionists arrested so far, 87 percent or so had no discernible affiliation with a militia or White nationalist group. A similar number were gainfully employed, almost half of these are business owners or another white collar job. They were, in short, more MAGA than they were militia. And this shows us that the animating ideas of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally are now, in somewhat less explicit versions, perhaps, the common sense perspective of tens of millions of people in the United States.

Research on the January 6th insurrection shows that the fear of Great Replacement: this White nationalist idea that Whites are being replaced with dark skinned immigrants in an intentional strategy run by Jews, they

find this idea of a Great Replacement to be a key driver of the insurrectionist movement, and the single most reliable predictor for belief that political violence was justified to Stop the Steal, right? The big lie. Believing QAnon conspiracies was also very highly predictive. In polls, over 50 percent of Trump voters and Republicans believe that minorities are now favored over Whites. This idea that Whites have lost their nation in a government that's responsible and responsive to their needs. Research also shows that the insurrectionists--again, many of them business owners or White collar types--came from increasingly multiracial and frequently blue or purple counties, where this fear of Great Replacement encountered White cultural anxiety. The odds of sending an insurrectionist to DC were six times higher in counties where the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites is in decline, right? So this is not Red State America, as the media often puts it, showing up on the Capitol steps. This is, in many cases, relatively economically comfortable White people perceiving a demographic shift that they're interpreting through this notion of replacement and losing their status as the real people to whom government is responsive and responsible.

So on the second point, what's happening on the ground? We're going to hear a lot, I think, from Serena and Mab about that in North Carolina and beyond. So I just want to add, I just want to introduce a couple of quick points. For the White minority rule authoritarian coalition, the ongoing insurrection has not been on the steps of the federal capitol. The action has been in the states, and to some degree in counties, for action like school boards, and also in the courts. So we have a very decentralized insurrectionist movement at this point. And fascists and other far, far-right brown shirt types of groups have gone hyper local. An excellent report from Vice documents over 100 Proud Boy actions in the year that just ended, in 2021, spread across 73 cities and 24 states. So the post-J6 Capitol arrests have not stopped these groups. We've seen a decentralization, an infusion into county fairs, in local street demonstrations and protests around the country. And we have to anticipate their militant resurgence at key inflection points in the coming year. Social justice protests, school board hearings on CRT, voter drives, elections, and so forth.

And on the third point and here, I hope—I'm just going to name a few things that I hope we can return to in general discussion. You know, what are the likely scenarios and key challenges facing social justice and pro-democracy organizers in this period? I know that Steven and perhaps others are going to offer some forecasts about what's coming down the pike. I just want to name a few broad challenges facing progressives that I hope we can discuss later on. One: how to adopt a more effective united front approach to blocking the further consolidation of far-right power, while simultaneously building the

infrastructure we need for long term transformation of the current system and adjust multiracial and feminist democracy. A second is, why is the left so bad at culture war? And what can we learn about how the Far Right is waging culture war that can inform progressive strategy? Thirdly, why we mustn't shy from adopting a loud and public pro-democracy stance, even as we acknowledge that what passes for democracy has always been a system of rights for some in this country. But we have really no choice but to transform this set of systems; the alternative is, frankly, just turning over the state to fascists. And then finally, how to learn—how to incorporate more of a three-sided fight approach into the development of progressive strategy so that we're not only thinking about our contest as being with the state or with corporations, but we understand that we have to have a strategy for engaging far-right groups. I think all of these things are acknowledged, but not yet incorporated into the regular production and rolling out of progressive strategy. And I think in the largest terms, our strategies ahead lie in those in those key areas. And I turn it back to you, Koki.

Koki Mendis: Thank you Tarso, thank you for really contextualizing who we're talking about today and setting us up for some good questions for the—towards the end of our conversation, and what we as the Left can be doing in this moment. Steven, Tarso queued you up for several key contributions, so take it away.

Steven Gardiner: Hello, everyone, great to be here. Happy New Year 2022. Or as some people are joking, you know, 2020 (2). So, maybe not. Hopefully not. It falls to me here to talk about the future and what sort of is on PRA's forward facing radar in terms of potential threats and developments of concern on the Right and the Far Right.

So first of all, I just want to make clear that in talking about the future, we don't pretend to be able to predict individual events. I mean, some things are easier to predict than others. But this is more a question of looking at trends that are happening now and saying, is there a reason to expect that they're going to change or end, or maybe in some cases escalate? And so that's what I'm talking about. A few contexts here: the various trends that we're seeing are typically considered separately. So you know, whether that's the vote and voter suppression, whether that's the insurrectionist violence or the intimidation of communities, or whether that's culture war legislation and agitation, and sort of narrative media activity. These are seen as, oftentimes, as being separated from each other. And that is one of the things that we want to say is: we can talk about them separately, but they form a part of a package of an ecosystem of far-right social movement activity that is impacting policy and state institutions,

and capture of state institutions, and influence on public policy. That it's impacting the public culture and shifting, or attempting to shift, the Overton window in a direction that basically says, as bad as things are right now, as much as we still live with systemic racism and White supremacy—to the extent that we still live with, you know, all of these hierarchical and misogynist and heterosexist kinds of institutions—they're not bad enough, is what these people are saying, and they want them to be worse. And in and around political violence, including intimidation, including threats, including militarization of protests and political space and disinformation.

So in those three areas—state capture, culture war, and political violence—I'm going to say a few things and keep this fairly brief. Those three things, by the way, they're not really separate from each other. They're just ways of parsing out or thinking about the terrain so that we can come up with some ways of working on them. That is, people with progressive values, we really have to make sure that whatever tactics we use in one of these areas, like, say, political violence, doesn't affect the other areas, like, for example, policy, in such a way that it makes things worse. So we don't want to say, Oh, those January 6th insurrectionists who engaged in political violence, that the answer to that is more surveillance, more cops, more incarceration. This is going to come back to haunt us. This is primarily going to impact—as we saw with the War on Terror and the War on Drugs—people of color, immigrants, Black folk, Muslims, not whatever the rhetoric is...White nationalists....And even if it were to focus on, say, White nationalists, this is not exclusively or even primarily a problem of crime, but of culture and policy. So that for context, here are some things from trends that we are looking at, some of them redundant with some of the things that Tarso was saying, but pushing these out a little bit, for 2022 and beyond, some trends.

So at the level of policy and institution capture: as Tarso mentioned, the important action has moved from the federal level, with Trump's departure, to the states and localities. And these typically can be parsed out as two categories, two broad categories, that seem separate, but we want to argue are deeply connected to each other and the formation of this (and advancement of this) what we're calling a MAGA nation, or a coalition of forces that is grounded in authoritarian means to produce an ongoing—from their point of view, hopefully permanent—White minority rule state. From our point of view, exactly what we need to be contesting at every moment. So on the one hand, we have attacks on the formal system of democracy through legislation that's making it harder to vote, easier for highly partisan state legislatures to influence what votes should be counted, gerrymandering for both state and congressional legislative districts, and limits on the rights of citizens to

challenge unfair election practices in state court. So as the one hand, a kind of tax on the formal system. On the other, so-called culture war legislation and related policy fights that restrict, for example, or potentially ban access to, abortion; that criminalize protests; that attack the rights of trans people to fully participate in various institutions; that seek to ban teaching about systemic racism and White supremacy, critical race theory, in public schools; and impose restrictions on government ability to respond to COVID-19 and other kinds of public health crises. Those are four examples, the ones that pop out, some of the ones that pop out from 2021 in the aftermath of J6.

So, I'm going to give a few numbers in a second. But first, I want to emphasize that not only are these various culture war issues—CRT, anti-trans, anti-reproductive justice, COVID-19—not only are they connected to each other, supported by the same legislators, formulated by the same think tanks, funded by the same right-wing foundation, and amplified by the same MAGA-aligned media, they're also closely tied to the attacks on formal democracy. These are not separate things. They're all part of the same strategy for White minority rule through authoritarian means. Because if you're a minority in a nominally democratic society—or from our point of view, an aspirationally democratic society—you can't rule as a minority without authoritarianism. In essence, even if, you know, the oddities and inequalities grounded in White supremacy of the American system make it possible legally, it's obviously unethical and unsustainable. OK. Also, the culture war activities at the state and local levels have drawn the MAGA factions, for example, the Christian Right and ethnonationalist and racist Right, closer together, as Tarso mentioned. You could have expected that January 6th, in much the same way that the Oklahoma City Bombing, for example, [could have] created some divisions within the right, some denunciation. Instead, what we see is gathering around a Trumpist or a MAGA agenda, focused on things like CRT (critical race theory, or teaching or thinking in terms of systemic racism) that has created a kind of gravitational pull on the Christian right towards the ethnonationalist right and vice versa, [and] has increased the visibility of, say, people in militia and Patriot style organizations to take up Christian Right issues. Or it would have in the past and parsed out and separated that way. These movements are coming closer together and not just as a sort of marriage of convenience, but as recognizing common cause.

So, some numbers: in 2021, year just ending, 19 states passed vote and voter suppression laws, 30+ of them, that—and we think this trend is going to continue in 2022, leading to a vicious cycle of anti-democracy legislation, which then leads to legislatures that are dominated by anti-democracy legislators. So it's an—ever increasing, potentially—strategy in those states where these

laws are being passed to cement, to block out, the possibility of a change in the dynamics of who is running the states, which ultimately determines who is going to be in the Congress and who is going to be president—because of the way in which American voting intersects—voting patterns are structured by law. So just to be clear, I mean, it's easy to—I mean, I know we're working in sort of nonprofit space. It's easy to be nonpartisan. But in fact, the 19 states that have resisted voting in one way or another, 14 are Republican trifectas. That's where one party controls both houses of the Legislature and the governorship. So 14 Republican trifectas; two are controlled by Democrats where there have—they've passed in Arizona and New York, where they have passed some some laws that restrict voting. But then the other three are divided with Republican legislatures. So this is predominantly—this anti-democracy thing—is a predominantly GOP trend, with Democrats more wanting to keep the not-very-democratic system that we have, and the MAGA Republicans wanting to make it worse.

Similarly, in the culture war lanes, 100 anti-trans bills (record breaking year), eight of which passed, creating outsized interest in mobilizing the MAGA base and contributing to the culture war. Likewise with CRT, which was mentioned on Fox News for four months in 2021 1,300 times. In both cases, we are already seeing bills pre-filed for 2022. So again, continuation of a trend. With political violence, I'm just going to briefly say that these motivating factors of worrying about the Great Replacement—both in terms of race and ethnicity, but also in terms of changing culture—are mobilizing this base that includes a faction that is about armed protest, that is militarizing protest space, and making this into another form of participation voter suppression. And whereas in 2020, most of those protests were focused on opposing racial justice movements, in 2021, they've moved to mostly being executed at state capitols. And this is where that action is likely to be in 2022 as well: armed protesters at our state capitols reinforcing these culture war and democracy suppression measures. Thank you.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Steven. A great complement to Tarso setting up the “who”, you know, really setting up the terrains of contestation that we're going to be talking about today. Serena, I'm going to turn to you. PRA really looks at these trends on a national level, and we really depend on partners like Blueprint North Carolina to report back on what you're seeing on the ground and how they relate to these national trends. So we're really looking forward to hearing your analysis today.

Serena Sebring: Thanks so much. Really honored to participate in the

conversation, even though, Steven, your last sentence left my heart pounding a little bit. So I'm just going to try to push through that. My name is Serena Sebring. I'm really excited to join this conversation. I'm Executive Director of Blueprint North Carolina, which has been, since 2007, a broad based coalition of progressive nonprofits doing civic engagement work, for the most part. We partner broadly with 60 organizations currently. And the goal has been for some time to expand this American electorate to make sure that every voter votes, every vote counts, etc. And I came into this role in 2020 in January, so kind of big shoes I was stepping into in a really difficult moment, that precedes this one that we're leading into.

So just to think back a little bit about what 2020 looked like, before we jump into 2021: 2020 was the time when we were really expecting, in the post-election period, massive unrest in the streets. We were fearing that some of exactly what did take place would take place. And we were seeing, across that year, an escalation of this culture war that Steven was just talking about. So as the, you know, COVID has spread across our state, we were also seeing, you know, these debates out in front of the statehouse with people who were anti-maskers at that point; people who were carrying guns. And it was the first time that many of us learned who the Proud Boys were, as we saw them showing up increasingly around the time of COVID spread. And then that predates a time when we were looking at, how do we do the typical work that Blueprint has done to protect elections to help people get out to vote? That was challenged not just by this COVID epidemic, but also by a widespread fear of this growing culture war—in the context of a situation where we had just been seeing massive street protests against police violence, and the trust in law enforcement in a widespread way was very low. And so the answer is, to how do we do that work of greeting people at the polls, giving out the PPE, was really complicated by all of those factors. And we started to think about safety as essential, as a precondition for the exercise of our right to vote. And that led us to some really important work that that sets the stage for where we are now in North Carolina.

As I said, Blueprint has been, for some time, in 100 counties of the state doing get out the vote work in that context. We received reports from people in places like eastern North Carolina, rural parts of our state—specifically Black communities in rural locations—of voter intimidation practices that were not new in 2020, were far from new—were in fact very old and very familiar, but not talked about on a national or even a statewide political platform in ways that would make democracy a real thing for all 100 counties of this state. What we saw instead was, as we started to collect the data in places where we had sheriffs who were associated with the Oath Keepers themselves, we saw in

places like Alamance County sheriffs who just look the other way as far-right extremist and White supremacist organizing shaped elections for many years. And when I say shaped elections, what I mean is they would come to the polling places and lay out coffins in front of polling places in rural Black communities to remind—as a reminder of the threat that was inherent in this democracy.

So when I hear this conversation now, the first thing that comes to mind and all of the fear about democracy in peril is, has this democracy been a real thing for many of us for a long time? It's a real question. And I think that the internal flaw in this democracy that we celebrate today has been for some time the enslavement of Black people, of five hundred years of political violence against Black people. And so the idea that democracy is in peril is something that we know in our bones. We know in our communities, we know in our—for generations. And so the idea that this is a particular moment when we have to stand up and fight for democracy is an interesting one, because I know many people who have been fighting for democracy to be a real thing for a long time. So I just I want to honor that. I think it's really important that as we ground, you know, what does it look like in North Carolina? What it has always looked like in North Carolina is the disenfranchisement of Black communities. And what is at stake now is an opportunity to right that wrong, that we—as everybody's eyes are trained on, what are the consequences of not attending to the inherent qualities of fairness, of inclusivity, of race consciousness, in fact of being anti-racist, of being pro-Black in democracy? That is what it would take to have an actual, inclusive and anti-racist democracy.

So I would say that the view from the ground here—I live in Durham, not a particularly rural place. But the view is different based on where you sit in North Carolina. For us, the eastern part of our state is primarily rural. It's where many of the larger Black rural populations are. We call it the Black Belt. [It's] agricultural, and a place where over the last year we've seen really important things happen in terms of democracy, and I draw that circle pretty wide about what impacts democracy. So when I think about what happened in Pasquotank County over the summer with Andrew Brown Jr's murder, and we look at, what is the electoral system that sets up the justice system, that either supports the safety of Black communities and Black people or doesn't. All of this is very vital and real in communities that are smaller or that have a history of voter suppression in the ways that many parts of our state do.

What we're learning is that the insurrection is not distant. It's not a year ago. It's now, it's close, it's in our communities. We listened to people who worked those polls that we supported in 2020, and heard that in the aftermath of that, they too were receiving death threats. They were receiving threats to their families, to their businesses; and that in the wake, what has come out is that

these threats don't come from some invisible or anonymous source. They come from our communities, from our little league coaches and our school teachers—that these are very close culture wars that are being fought. And that's true not just in rural communities, but you know, when there's only so many people in a place, it becomes very apparent, those ties. And so that's a lesson that we can learn in this time, that the insurrection is not far. Those who conducted it are our neighbors, they are our colleagues. And that is a shift that we have to make if we are going to face this on the ground.

Another thing that we're hearing a lot about in these times on MSNBC, which I probably watch too much of, is this idea that the Right has gone local. The Right has gone local. And what I can say after doing this work in these counties, is that the Right has been local for a long time. And yes, that that has increased. But also that points to where our strategies—there's power in the granularity that they are exercising. There's power in understanding relationships and community as vital to building strength. And that is something that we seek to do. Not because they are, but because that's how power is built.

I would also just—I want to give a real shout out over the last year to Christina Davis-McCoy and to Laura Flanders, who I know are on this call. I'm super grateful to see ya'll. The work of Christina, to organize, and of Laura, to document, what is going on with the rise in private paramilitary centers in our state—it is foundational to protecting anything like a democracy. We are finding—and I know Mab will say more about this—we are finding that paramilitary training centers are being sited in places that are specifically vulnerable to this environmental hazard. And what that looks like is small Black communities. Laura just did a piece on a town called Hoffman. Hoffman, North Carolina has 588 Black, primarily Black residents, and they have been fighting against a paramilitary training center there for some time that came in under the auspices of training official military forces, and now trains White supremacists. Just up the block from Black residents who have fought very hard to attain the piece of the American dream that they have, and are now being subject to the sounds of bombing as these—as they train. The center was set up and sold to the county commissioners as a gun range, essentially. And instead, they're doing breaching exercises, which shake the ground and endanger the health, the property values, and the livelihoods of residents, who are—need a democracy that can change those conditions, who need to have a voice in the conditions of their community if any of us are going to have a claim to live under a democracy as well. So I just want to say thank you. Thank you, Laura, for dropping that in the chat. I see I'm almost out of time. I'm really grateful to be in this conversation and to hear now from Mab.

Koki Mendis: Thank you Serena. I think it really is so grounding to hear what exactly we're talking about, what it looks like on the ground for the people in your communities, our communities. And yes, Mab, over to you to hear, you know, more on what you're seeing in North Carolina and how that applies more broadly.

Mab Segrest: Thanks so much, and I'm honored to be given the chance to speak to you today when so many on this call have deep experience and analysis that could be shared as well. Serena and I are here together from Blueprint and we are both here from one organization, not because what we are doing is the only or most important model, or in the worst place—which goodness knows there's too much competition for these days. But frankly, one of the other panelists dropped out. And together, we can explain how we are working to develop an on the ground and county-by-county model for response to the rapidly developing authoritarianism, or confederacy, or fascism that this past year has brought into full view. We welcome the chance to have a necessary and honest conversation with compatriots within and across borders of state and nation on what the fuck to do in these very old and very new times. Thanks to Political Research Associates for all these 40 years of providing context and conversation for both resisting and building. And to Tarso and Steve for doing the deep dive again down right-wing rabbit holes—necessary to write the report, but threatening the individual sanity.

I myself grew up in an apartheid Alabama, but saw enormous changes come from enormous struggle and sacrifice by the time I was 15, 1965. When I came to adulthood as a lesbian, gay, homosexual, butch, dyke, queer in the US South, considered a sinner by most Christian denominations, a pervert by the psychiatric establishment, and a criminal, according to the sodomy laws in 25 states and all the southern states up until 2002. I was a proud felon for crimes against nature, whose Class H felony status carried 10 years.

So I have seen enormous changes for the better. And I know that they also changed for the worse. In, for instance, the 1980s and 1890s—I get my centuries mixed up these days because we're going back so fast. But the amazing Ida B. Wells had a moment of realization riding on a train, I think, from the recent lynching of three Memphis Black friends, that the tide was turning politically and it would take a new kind of organizing to both advance and to defend the terrain. The task would also be to figure out how to live freely in captured territory. And I think that we are at such a point of inflection today.

With many others in the 1980s, I was engaged in the fight the Right. The goal in organizations such as National Anti-Klan Network, Center for

Democratic Renewal, Western States Center, North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence—which Christina and I helped to staff—was to keep the Far Right out of the mainstream, which is to say out of state power. And I have to say, we lost that war.

Last year, insurrectionists who stormed the Capitol had allies in the Senate and House chambers who literally opened some of the doors to let them in. And within a terrible short time, the entire Republican Party, with the exception of 10 people, swung behind Trump. Even as Trumpist forces won elections and gerrymandered state legislatures. Noam Chomsky recently called this version of Lincoln’s party “the most dangerous organization in human history.”

To me, one marker of this year has been the propensity of the Right for political violence. According to a January 1, 2022 poll, one in three Americans say violence against the government can be justified, the largest such response in the 20 years since the question was asked. This includes 40 percent Republicans, 41 percent independents, 23 percent Democrats, 40 percent White people, 80 percent Black people. Barton Gellman’s excellent Atlantic article, “January 6 was just practice,” uses similar polling data to put the number of committed insurrectionists at 12 percent, which would be 21 million people in the United States. Gellman quotes this guy, Robert Pape: “This is a really new, politically violent mass movement,” although I’m not sure that the Confederate Army did not precede it with its reconstitution by the Ku Klux Klan in 1867. In The Washington Post on December 17th, three retired generals warn of an imminent coup, but deep divisions in the military and a social scientist in a new book warn that we are closer to civil war than any of us believe. Holy shit.

Questions are being asked publicly in response to Trumpism over the past four years. How do we prevent the destruction of democracy or a coup or civil war? But it seems to me that time may be running out for the solutions being proposed if, for instance, there is whatever chance that Trump or one of his clones could win in 2024 with majorities in House, Senate and Supreme Court. We need to do everything in our power to keep that from happening, but also realize that Kyrsten Sinema, Joe Manchin, Merrick Garland, Liz Cheney seem to be the ones blocking our standing in the gap. And that’s not encouraging. Progressives, Democrats, Leftists, we’re losing leverage because we’re losing—they’re destroying the fulcrums around which levers transfer state power and force. Relative free and open elections, peaceful transfer of power, balance of powers, the rule of law: acknowledging that these have functioned in an illiberal democracy, founded in slaveocracy and genocide—but surely they are still fairly good ideas. So I think we must ask more publicly, what happens if we do not save democracy or prevent the coup? Because in many places in this country, the loss has already happened, as we can attest in some places in

North Carolina. So I would add to PRA's list of to-dos that all our actions to save our democracy must almost work as strategies in the terrains we exist in if we do not.

But we're already beginning having answers to these questions, because the places—some places have already lost, like reproductive rights in Texas, when women flooded over the Oklahoma border, or states that were viciously gerrymandered in 2010-11 post-Citizens United; it created supermajorities, a brutal White minority rule. So in North Carolina with Blueprint, we have started this mapping process of what I think of as occupied and liberated territories, which can happen across a railroad track, on different ends of a rural road, in urban enclaves with strong Black and brown voter organization, versus rural areas dominated by a White majority— county commissioners and sheriffs in the Black Belt South, along the borders in Texas and Florida, on land held by indigenous peoples, and so forth. What does this power struggle look like at the granular and county level, as Serena was saying? Once we know more fully where the motherfuckers are and where our folks are, you begin to identify issues to raise and ways to draw the line. Because I am convinced that the vast majority of people in this country really do not want a civil war, whatever answer they might take to the polls.

So North Carolina is one of these battleground states where democracy is being held, lost, and found every week and every day. Our markers include slavery, the Wilmington Massacre in 1898; Greensboro Massacre in 1979; Jesse Helms; seemingly forever more contemporarily, that 2010 process of gerrymandering; and our guys Mark Meadows, Madison Cawthorne, who were far up in the insurrections' processes; the fight over Nikole Hannah-Jones and the 1619 project that led to her refusing a position—a tenured position—at UNC Chapel Hill. Blueprint has gone the farthest in mapping the paramilitary industrial complex in 4 rural counties west of Fort Bragg, which is the largest military base in the world. How a county commissioner is using the ordinances and zoning processes to say no to private contractors, training military police, private individuals, and the insurrectionists among them in the skills of combat with millions in grants from the military. Rest assured, some of them being trained would make Raleigh into Baghdad, because those are the last wars that they fought.

In conclusion, this is the fight of our lifetime, and we continue to be up to it in whatever terrain and whatever form it takes. It's both the meaning of and the possibility of life. It requires intergenerational conversations, because some of the old timers can tell tales of discarded but powerful strategies, and the younger timers are wired to technologies and new ways of being because they know their survival depends on them. So thank you all for the work that you

do and the chance to be in on this conversation. I turn it back.

Koki Mendis: Thank you Mab for that excellent call to action, I think it's, you know, using the historical context of our country, and North Carolina more specifically, to really contextualize the moment that we're in and why it's so important we're having this conversation today. It is a perfect segue way into continuing with a panel discussion. Tarso, Serena, Steven, anyone would like to reflect on some of the comments that you've heard from your fellow panelists at this moment, or if you are ready to start reacting to things we're seeing in the chat that is also on the table. But there is a lot here to keep discussing and I'm excited for our next part of our conversation. Any takers?

Tarso Luís Ramos: Sure. I just want to reflect on a few things, particularly that Serena and Mab shared. One is, you know, Serena's observation that voter suppression is not a new phenomenon and indeed, patterns of voter suppression today reflect patterns of, you know, racist terrorism going back generations. And so when we think about the consequence of escalating violence now, we need to think not only about the practical interference of folks getting to the polls in a particular location, but the ways in which this fundamentally shifts culture over the long term.

Second, I want to reflect on Serena's observation around the limits of what passes for democracy in the United States. You know, there is a habit whereby it's only when the rights and privileges of relatively privileged sectors of society are infringed that the conversation turns to one of authoritarianism. Whereas in fact, we've had structures of authoritarianism within the United States for a very long time through its management of both externally and internally oppressed, marginalized, and attacked communities. And so the technologies for this are not novel. They don't emerge from outside our borders. They're well developed within those borders over generations and centuries, and are coming to the fore in different ways now.

And I want to appreciate, among many other things, Mab your provocation about, how do we prepare for the possibility that the coup next time is successful? And so how do we be sure that we're not putting all of our eggs into one basket of trying to compel the mechanisms of democracy, in those closest to the levers of formal power, to prevail in our ability to what—have a legitimate result at an illegitimate institution like the Electoral College? Right. So we are indeed in some difficult times, and I know that one of the approaches that PRA has adopted, from a long legacy of movement work in history, here has been a block-build approach—that we don't as yet have sufficient power among what we might call progressives, civil rights, community, and others, to ourselves

block the further consolidation of state power by the Far Right, which is well underway. So we do need to mobilize people who may not be in it for the long journey for fundamental transformation, a just, inclusive, multiracial democratic society, but need to be mobilized in the near term. But it can't all be about the block. We're not trying to just protect this, you know, this system. It's got to be about the build. And so what are the investments we can make as part of the provocation?

I hear you making, Mab, an infrastructure that serve us both in the block, but also in self-defense and community safety, and a build towards what may be a generational struggle. Right? Generation-like struggle for democratic possibility in the United States. And so I just want to raise those observations for it. I think they are central to questions of strategy in a moment where, among the obstacles to doing these things, is an ongoing level of denialism. I think among many liberals, you know, clinging to a kind of belief that there is a gravitational center in American democracy, that there's a swing towards the right, but somehow it has almost a natural law that things will swing back to the left or to some kind of imagined center. And so there's still work to be done in breaking through that denialism in a situation where that's not the physics of the moment; that the moment is a bullet train headed towards authoritarianism and White rule in this country. So those are some of my reflections on the themes that you all brought forward. And I think there's a lot of hunger from what I've been able to follow in the chat for talking about some brass tacks opportunities for organizing. And so I invite our conversation to turn in that direction.

Koki Mendis: Who wants to start the trickier, the more difficult content of what do we do and how do we do it?

Serena Sebring: I could—I can share some of the things that we've been building and want to build. The experience of the 2020 election and post-election period trained all of our eyes on safety. You know, for a moment, we were very, very concerned with, how are people going to stand in lines? How are people going to come to these places and are sometimes full of intimidation? And you know, it was, I would say in my organizing experience, an easier time to have a conversation about, what does community-based safety look like, than any I've experienced. We were questioning in the summer of 2020, frankly, what does what does safety look like? And I actually think that this is the way to just keep pushing on that. What does community-based safety mean? If we understand this whole conversation to be about democracy, about governance, the whole function of governance is to create community safety. And so there

is something that points us towards democracy in every conversation about safety, about how do we keep us safe? Not to rely on systems that we know are sick with racism right now, are sick with transphobia and homophobia, are full of woman-hating rhetoric. Like, we know that these systems will fail to keep those of us safe. And so how do we—and there are more of us—continue to have our eyes trained on community safety? What can we do together that we could not do alone?

I know in North Carolina, we started talking in the post-election period about, how do we have just distribution centers for food, for basic supplies, that are churches that are not specific to the congregants at that church, but are community resources? How do we repurpose some of the infrastructures that we already have to really attend to the safety needs of what we will need if Mab's right? Frankly, if Mab's right, we need a full safety infrastructure, and we probably need that anyway, because the one we have has failed us. And as we work towards that, we get closer to democracy and get closer to what is good for the collective and for the whole. And so for us, for Blueprint, the answer is in community based collective decision making and organizing—together, a really big team justice, not just the folks we agree with. As folks have said on this call, already, the Right is not concerned with the petty fractional differences that the left is. The Right is not concerned that some are anti-abortionists and some just hate CRT. They will roll together and we have to, too. It is important that we develop both spaces of radical imagination and also spaces that can hold those that are coming to even understand what it means to imagine something different. And so that is what we seek to do.

Mab Segrest: I can say Amen to that, and also, C3s, C4s, and PACs are not radical imagination. And I do think that we have to begin to think beyond those structures, because they're not working. And they depend on an electoral system that actually works and a state where you can petition for redress of your grievances and have a policy change. And these folks are not interested in policy, they'd much rather talk about critical race theory than do something with the pandemic, you know. So we have been—and I've worked in C3s before, and we just—they don't work for liberatory practices and they don't work now for survival. So I'm not saying close them all, at all. But I am saying we have to have a foot inside and a foot outside. I mean, that's what I was trying to say, and I'm not even sure what I mean about it. But the strategies have to work before and after this coup, you know.

Like what Serena is talking about, to get all this stuff for community safety. If we still have a democracy, whatever it is, we'll have better democracy. We don't have democracy anyway, you know. So how do we have those strategies

and how do those who live and work in C3s and C4s, you know, also realize you walk out the door—you walk out the door of that office and you can go to your mosque or your church or your bowling alley, your barbershop. There's a lot of places people organize, and they organize more freely outside of these spaces, and the imagination dwells more outside of these spaces—to the extent that nonprofits can shore those up, which I think Blueprint does and so forth. But they cannot be the base of the imagination, and we have been too—our imaginations have been too truncated by trying to work in these structures that are run by the IRS, you know, for god's sake.

And then in terms of, like, other kinds of strategies, I do think that intergenerational conversations are really important. Because just as a queer, etc., you know, I really remember like, I lived as a felon for most of my life. I mean, you know, I could have got 10 years for, you know, like having sex on a Saturday night or whatever night I was—whatever time of day I was doing it. 10 years in jail, you know. And we thrived as felons and sinners and perverts and everything. I mean, we built an alternate culture from that. And then we got marriage and we got the army, for god's sake, and they can be taken away from us. But we have that other experience of like making our lives in an existential way, vibrantly, in a way that the culture then had to demand to. And I don't know if younger people do that, and I don't know whoever's got— you know, like getting married, I don't know what that does to imagin—or whatever, but we have lived other ways. We have that in our muscle memory. You know, like really Black people didn't get the vote until 18—1965. I mean, it didn't last very long. You know, so these things that we have done before, we have gained this ground very fast that they're trying to take away from us, even though they're pushing back very far too. And we need to talk to, you know, we need to talk about that. And I find younger and very brilliant generations of activists really want those conversations too. So ways to structure those, you know, increasingly, I think, is important. Those two things.

Koki Mendis: Tarso, go ahead.

Tarso Luís Ramos: I'd like to jump in on a couple of things here. I really appreciate, among other things, the lens around the importance of intergenerational exchange in knowledge, reviving knowledge from other periods of struggle that can serve us well in this moment. And you mentioned a few Mab. I want to pull out—I think that this mapping project that Blueprint North Carolina is doing is so important and potentially really a model for other communities. I think one of the things that has been lost since the time of the mid-century African-American freedom movement is this kind of

granular and geographic knowledge of the location of the organized opposition, organized bastions of White supremacy, in ways that can inform strategy build, and so forth. And clearly, you know, that's a muscle that needs to be exercised again, and I really applaud you all for taking the lead in that. I think some very important ways.

And that's a good example of a rupture that happened between one period and another, where certain kinds of work that had been built into movement building, is no longer so common as it once was and needs to be again. I think another has to do with sort of the politics of the moment where we're several generations away now from the experience of building a united front against fascism, against authoritarianism, in the politics of what that means to build that. And so I think there is an opportunity now—because we clearly live in a very different world, but if we look globally, an increasingly authoritarian one. I think there are opportunities both in the international field, and looking at our own history in the United States and in other places, of figuring out how one—what engages in a broader set of coalitional politics without dissolving oneself within it. And so I think there are some real opportunities there.

A couple of other places where I see some real opportunity and need: I think that part of what the culture war strategy of the Right has yielded for it is the ability to craft a common set of worldview and identity among really disparate communities, communities that 40 years ago would not get in the same room together. You are not going to get, you know, suit and tie libertarians in the same room with Pentecostals and think that you had a coalition. That was something that took decades to build. And there are a lot of communities and people in this country who are not happy with the direction of the country, and they don't have a political home at this moment. I think there are millions of White evangelicals who look at the overt racism of the Trump regime and don't know what to do—know it's wrong, and don't know where to go with it. There is not an infrastructure for mobilizing the tens of millions of progressive religious people in this country in their own terms and in their own right, because that's not how our nonprofits and other things have been built to facilitate. And there's a tremendous need to form a kind of prefigurative vision of a multiracial nation, people that will bear a multiracial democracy, in which the majority of people in this country, including a plurality of White people, imagine themselves thriving. In fact, perhaps the only scenario in which they might imagine themselves thriving, as opposed to the false promises of more White supremacist set of arrangements.

I think that imagining that community, and imagining the cultural work associated with forming that, is a kind of cultural expectation that we are—from disparate communities in a struggle together—is a really important project for

the Left, and for progressives and liberals to not think in those kind of cultural terms. We tend to respond to challenges in policy terms, right? So here comes the Right with a set of cultural attacks that galvanize a base, and the Left's response, all too frequently, is to look at shoring up the social safety net and look at an economic justice policy initiative—which I'm not criticizing, I think are necessary but insufficient to this moment of actually engaging in a kind of culture war battle with the Right. So I think there are a lot of opportunities for reclaiming lost knowledge and reapplying it to the current conditions, and that requires enormous political will.

And then the last thing I want to mention in this space, is I think we have to also recognize that we are under tremendous assault from centrists, including centrists within the Democratic Party, who are trying to lift up a false narrative that the Black freedom struggle in this generation is somehow responsible for the failures of the Democratic Party—for instance, in the Virginia governor's race—and that aspiring to a multi-racial democracy in this country, that holds democracy to the standards of democracy, is somehow the problem. And we need to push back hard against that. It's not just the far right that's attacking the racial justice movement. It's a centrist, a center that's attacking foundations that are funding that work, that are attacking the leaders from the grassroots to the national of that work. And we have to have a resounding response to that, without foregoing the possibility of continuing to work with folks who are more centrist and moderates around a block strategy as well. It makes that trying work. Makes it really trying work under those circumstances. But we have to—those are the waters we need to navigate in this moment, among others.

Mab Segrest: I mean one thought—.

Koki Mendis: Go ahead, Mab.

Mab Segrest: One thought about like, what's been left behind? I mean, in the 60s and 70s, the National Council of Churches was that group that brought together progressive Christians, and actually the social gospel in the 50s and 60s out of the civil rights movement was what transformed the country. And what the right saw was they had to like, co-opt and destroy these undergirdings. And so they went after the Protestant Denominations and National Council of Churches, and they went after them by this campaign for conservatism in the pews so that the Methodists and the—not the Baptists, they well, the best Baptists are the best people, but— I'm not going to say anything else. But anyway, let me get back to my point. You know, like they really did change

the base in the church, changed the pews in the church in a way that then filtered up so that all those folks in the God box that used to be Riverside Drive weren't there anymore. You know, so—and then by the '90s—and the things that had perplexed me the very most about all these Christian evangelicals whom I grew up among, whom I got in my family, who came after me for the five verses in Leviticus about homosexuality, they have abandoned Jesus. I mean, they have—evangelicals are not evangelical anymore. They just want power. I mean, really, it's astounding to me. I mean, Flannery O'Connor wrote this story about—prominent in it was the Church of Christ without Christ. So I think bringing back Jesus might be an interesting thing to do, because nothing Jesus said will support anything they are doing and it supports everything we are doing. And they have abandoned Jesus for abortion only, and fetuses as the main humanity. And Jesus didn't say anything about that. So anyway.

Serena Sebring: I just—I did not know what kind of call we were going to have today, I didn't expect this one in particular, but I'm grateful Tarso, that you brought us to this piece about faith because I think, you know, we are going to need it. I think we're going to need it. We face tremendously difficult and really disparaging context, that we are going to have to work towards telling a truth that nobody wants to hear. We're going to have to work towards mobilizing when people are fighting just to leave home. We're going to have to dig deep into everything that, I know, comes from faith, and towards what? Towards what is the question, right? What is it that this plurality of folks can see is in their best interest? And I think we know it more than we surface in these political conversations. You know, I think that there is something in all of our traditions in the, you know, if I go back to the church like Mab, you know, like where one or more of us are gathered in his name. Where I am because we are, as in Ubuntu, in a South African context like—we from many traditions know that the greater “us”, the bigger “we”, is a spiritual space. And so I call that into this 2022 as well. I call that hunger for connection and right relationship with each other into our work of democracy because I don't think—you know, my partner, Jenee says “democracy ends with a y.” It's a process, right? It's a way to get somewhere. But the why is our humanity. The why has to be also essential in these conversations because we have a difficult road ahead.

Koki Mendis: Thank you Serena, Mab, Tarso, Steven. I think this is a great opportunity to continue our conversation by addressing some of the audience questions, one of which that has come up a couple of times when we started talking about it, and I wonder if there's a way to come to some more concrete ideas, but how do we build this broader “we” is a big question on everyone's

mind. Tarso and Steven, I know that you both included that in the PRA report and maybe could do a little overview of, you know, what you wrote over this last couple of weeks and also thinking about sort of the pro-democracy stance too. Steven, do you want to take this one away?

Steven Gardiner: I'll start, and I think in fact, some of the things that Mab and Serena were saying are relevant because a lot of understanding what the Right has done to build—to imagine their “we”, is that they have made this an intensely institution-by-institution and locality-by-locality fight. So it's taking this to churches, to clubs, to school board fights, to places where people will feel like they have agency, because they're not talking to the void of the United States Senate or American foreign policy—which both have to be addressed, by the way. But that our energies where we often—as I see it in recent years, especially in sort of the nonprofit industrial complex world—fail, is in taking a cultural message to where people are at and listening as well as speaking. So I mean, this is one of my things.

My second point that I make is, you know, where are our strategies—one of the questions from the audience was, What about the—about 10 percent of the people charged in the Capitol insurrection being from the military? I mean, I think this is a serious question. I mean, veterans are about seven percent of the population, so this is not radically out of proportion. So it's important to keep that in mind. But you know, this is yet another place—and I'm just using it as an example, I happen to be a veteran—where we could do organizing, where, you know, there's outreach, there are people who are in groups. I'm part of a group called Veterans for Peace. There are other organizations like this where, even if people are not—to go to the united front point—progressive in their values, they may well be (and in many cases are) anti-minority rule, anti- turning the country over to Texas and Florida and so on. So, you know, we have to figure out who we can work with on what issues, and we have to fight these fights locally. And at the same time, building that “we” is also going to depend on understanding that that effort itself is going to be attacked directly from right-wing hostiles. So the fight against CRT—CRT was an effort, is an effort—calling it CRT is even silly—the fight is against talking about systemic racism as a reality now, not just historically in the United States, in public schools. Very salutary kind of effort that comes under attack and builds base at the local level for the Right without ever having to even do something like propose a law nationally.

Tarso Luís Ramos: I guess I just want to riff on a couple of things—a couple of things here. One is just acknowledge earlier, Mab, in your critique about the—or acknowledgment, really, just of the limits of the C3, C4 structures and so forth.

You know, what I heard in that was a sort of “yes, and.” There are some other things we’re going to need. And among those is probably an increasing capacity that operates outside of those structures and, frankly, increasing underground capacity to keep people safe and other sorts of things. This particular forum is probably not the proper one for those conversations, but they need to happen. And we should also recognize, as we did in some preliminary conversation ahead of this session, that COVID makes some of that more difficult. Some of the informal ways that we would gather in movement spaces, and have side conversations, and figure things out that need to be discussed in confidence, have been harder to come by. And so we need to be thoughtful and intentional about how we create some spaces for those kinds of discussions going forward. So just acknowledge that that important part of the work, not all that happens, you know, in the office; that often happens on the Zoom. Nor should it.

I guess, a couple of thoughts. One is, you know, I see some fabulous conversation that’s happening in the chat, just to double down something Mab said earlier: there are many folks in this call who you know we’d all love to be sitting and listening to as well. I acknowledge a certain thread, which is skepticism about our ability to win over certain kinds of groups and populations. And I think that’s well acknowledged. The trick is to ask, over what time horizon are we talking about? Right? I think it’s true. If we just look at the polling, the snapshots of today, it looks pretty dismal out there for a lot of what we’re trying to achieve, at least in terms of trying to get to anything like a governing majority, right, for a just, inclusive, multiracial feminist democracy. But this is a process, right? Not a snapshot in time. And I think that among the things that need to get built are the relationships and habits of working with each other across difference in the kinds of coalitions that we would need if we were to—if we are serious about governing down the road.

And for that matter, to speak to some of the cultural work, you know, this is a country—given the realities of how it’s structured, who’s in it, what they believe, how power is currently organized—there are certain things you can’t go around. You’ve got to go through them. Like this children’s book I read my kids about, you know, you can’t go around certain problems. You just, all you can do is trudge through them. And you can’t get around the level of religiosity in the United States. You have to engage with religious people. You know, you can’t get around the reality of White supremacy. Got to engage with the White folks. The idea that we’re going to build, you know, majority winning coalitions based on what we have now is just not realistic over the long run, as we see the goalposts move what we do. If we think that, you know, a governing majority is 50 percent plus one in an electoral system, well, there goes that arithmetic, right, the next cycle. So we need something larger and more durable.

And I would argue that among the many things within that that we need, in this conversation about building a larger “we,” is there do need to be new narratives in stories, compelling stories, about the prophetic role of White people in this moment towards building a multiracial democratic society. Not that White people can do it for the rest of it. That that’s not the point. But White people need to see themselves as agents, right, in realizing a future that we’re all pulling towards. I don’t think we have those stories. I don’t think we have that, you know, that narrative that can begin to knit together a broader collection of people—and with which a surprising number and types of people might over time identify, right? I think that means, when we think about, what does it mean to reach out? I think we need to think instead about, how do we leverage resources for folks who are already there, right? There’s a tradition—and Frederick Clarkson on our team at PRA writes a lot about this—the way that progressives are going to engage religious people, whether they’re Christians, or Jews, or Muslims, or others, is, you know, it’s to do outreach from secular organizations. Like, that’s going to be a facet of building, you know, infrastructure and strategy for religious progressives. At its worst caricature, it’s like rent a priest or minister or a rabbi or what have you, right, for a protest or this or that, rather than leveraging resources for the creation of independent infrastructure led by progressive religious people, to organize and expand the base of other progressive religious people.

So if we think about the neater for points for the Right, you know, they weren’t wringing their hands in the early 70s. They figured they’d lost the culture. You know, they were losing the imperial battle in Vietnam. They had lost the mainline churches, they had lost the youth culture, and they went back to the drawing board and they realized in part of building a new long term strategy towards governing power, they not only needed to suppress the vote and do lots of other things, but they had to conceive entirely differently about what a winning coalition could look like, one that it would take them decades to build. So yes, we need to do some block work, but we—our imagination for what we can achieve and with whom cannot be limited to, who can we mobilize, you know, in the next election cycle. And to this, I take Mab’s point very seriously. If we think that the level of power the Right, the Far Right, the authoritarian Right, has built can be reversed in one or two election cycles, we are fooling ourselves. You know, we do have to do everything we can to deny them victory and further consolidation of power in that. So it’s not like, forget elections and move on. Not at all. But we need to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. We need to be able to engage in those processes and deny, but understand the difference between a block and a build. And some of the build strategy is going to take a much longer time horizon before it yields that kind of

power and leverage, because there are no shortcuts in organizing. It takes the time it takes. But if you don't set out to do it, it won't happen. And too much of the organizing strategy has been governed by the every two year election cycle. And that's proved to be an arithmetic of diminishing returns.

Mab Segrest: I'd like to say something to this White person question. I see there's lots of SURJ folks on here, and I do think they are showing up for racial justice—since 2010 and the Tea Party, when many people of color called on White people to once again, please do something—has really done excellent organizing on this question of White anti-racism, nationally and so forth, in a way that, in an organizational form, that could go wrong in many ways once you just get White people together. So I just wanted to acknowledge that.

And oh yeah, but my other pet peeve, since I have microphone on, which I usually don't—but I think there's too much conversation about White fragility, and not enough conversation about White courage. Because the way you ask the question is a way you get the answer. And there are White people who have worked their asses off over generations on this question. And there's ways—there's formulas to do it and we learn courage from Black people, from people of color we've been around. I mean, that's where we get it. So it ain't White courage, but it's White induced, infused courage, I don't know—it's infused from somewhere, you know? But just the science of it, maybe, or something, but just more conversations on what makes White people be brave and take risks? And what do we need to do that? And all that kind of stuff. But really, I think SURJ is having really important conversations, not just conversations, but forms of organization out there, and I just want to acknowledge it.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Mab. Serena, I saw a lot of emphatic nodding, do you want to chime in?

Serena Sebring: You know, sometimes she's just on a roll, Mab Segrest. Just drop it like it's hot, Mab. I think that one of the reasons that I get so excited about this, is that I understand in southern context how very important it is to have multi-racial coalition spaces that are Black led. And I think that that is, you know, we still face a demographic, you know, situation, in which no singular race could turn the needle. And especially not Black folks, you know, cannot save the day for America. You know, like we cannot be responsible for everybody. So other folks are going to have to come alongside and when y'all do, I hope folks bring courage. I do. I think that that is what's needed, and I just appreciate Mab for naming exactly that. And I also think it's important to name, because there is a place for all of us on team justice. There is a place for all of us to be agents

in this change. But the only role that I'm hearing in the dominant narratives for White folks, is patriot, you know, or some variation of that. Like, there are heroic narratives of how we show up for each other in the places that we come from, either White folks or Black folks, poor folks, rural folks—we all have to not just believe that we ourselves have a place in this work, but see that in others as well. And you know, just the history of White supremacy being what it is, I think it's really important to lift up and trust in Black leadership in these multiracial formations. And I think that that is actually how we practice democracy amongst ourselves.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Mab, thank you, Serena. You know, I think we've talked a lot about what needs to happen, and I want us to think a little bit about, and reflect on, some of the questions in the chat and the comments in the chat, about how we make it happen. So this idea of narrative control being a really interesting one, right? How does the Left, how does a progressive coalition do that with the state of media in this country? And whether our panelists want to tackle this question of resource and amplification of the messages that we know we're capable of creating, and capable of creating a united front with? But how do we actually disseminate that message? Anyone want to tackle this question? Or alternatively, talk about sort of how the Right has managed to shape media to its ends.

Tarso Luís Ramos: I'm going to make just a couple of very quick points on this. One is, I think a lot of progressive organizations—I'm part of one—you know, are not very good at distinguishing between messaging for our closing constituency, and messaging and narrative that's designed to broaden our base and build a bigger "we". And so you know, more often we hear with critique that the Left talks to itself, and so on and so forth. Partly, that's because it takes resources, but it also takes a vision for the kind of coalition we're trying to build. And so I think the first thing is, you've got to know who you're trying to reach, and then you got to—you actually have to put people in those communities in charge of the narrative messaging, right? So it's that outreach, it's organizing. It's folks delivering messages to people like them that can move them over time. So I think those are a couple of things. I do think there's something really complicated and chilling about the right-wing media ecosystem in the United States. You know, during the Trump presidency, we had what amounted to a private version of state media, right? It wasn't NPR, you know, it wasn't, you know, government—it's barely a government funded anymore, anyway. But it was private media serving as state media. And that same private media, now serving as insurrectionists, or as somebody put in the chat, I think it was

Michael Novak, really less about insurrection, and maybe more about getting into a low intensity conflict kind of dynamic in the United States. I think that's fair.

So, you know, that is—actually kind of different than what we see in the rise of authoritarianism in many other places: the level of a right-wing media infrastructure, both formal communications media and then social, you know, ability to hijack what the tech billionaires have brought to us in place of an actual free or legitimate media press in the United States. So those things create a very difficult kind of communication environment as we all know, all the more reason to right size the scale of what we can accomplish— we do need more independent media of the sort that Laura Flanders on this call and others have been producing. We need to invest in that. We need to build its scale, and we need to right size the audience outreach that we're after around a strategic map that gets developed collectively. It will be messy. We won't need just one thing, it would need different approaches. But we're clear about why we—who we're going for and why, and how that builds the bigger “we” over time.

And then I guess the last thing I just want to throw in at this point is kind of a throwback to what Serena and Mab were just speaking to about the importance of having Black and other people of color-led multiracial organizing. I strongly believe in that, and we need to break the cycle that is perpetuated by many liberals, some progressives, certainly funding streams in which Black people in this country are put in the position of being the parachute, right, when the plane of democracy is going down, but never the pilot. And so we have to really think about how we continue to build, and resource, and elevate the leadership of communities that have the most to gain from democracy in this country, and historically have had the most to lose, and given up the most for the failures of democracy to deliver. And so there is a way to organize systems of accountability so you want what Mab was talking about, which is, you know, too many White people in one place, thinking that they've got the answers. But there are a lot of different ways to think about what those accountability mechanisms can look like. They need to—they're gonna look really different, you know, in Boise, Idaho, than they are in Durham, North Carolina. But there are different kinds of models within our own movement history that we can draw upon, so that we keep our eyes on the prize, and making sure that we are having appropriate application of leadership and power as we build this thing. So I just wanted to echo, I think, those very important observations. You know, again, Black folks, indigenous folks, Latinx folks, APIs can't be put in the position of saving White folks when they've, you know, suddenly realized that the pendulum keeps going in one direction, rather than swinging back.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Tarso. Staying with the how, I'd like us to move to this question of labor organizing, someone had raised in the chat. Serena I saw that you responded to it and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about, you know, any role that labor might play in North Carolina, but also, you know, open up to the whole panel. How do unions plug into this creating a broader "we" strategy?

Serena Sebring: Oh yeah. I mean, my comment in the chat was just, we love unions. We love labor organizing. We think that they are essential to building power. And I don't have a really complex answer to that question other than we definitely have coalition members that are unions, and that we recognize that, you know, to build people power in the context of a capitalist society requires an organized labor component. And I think this is just very important. So I'll leave it to others on the panel to address it more deeply than that. But go unions, yes.

Mab Segrest: One thing I learned recently, being on a panel with the United Nurses Association, they won a huge victory in Asheville in a hospital; 70 percent voted for a union. And that, in an anti-union state and anti-union region, is really remarkable. And I wondered if it was because like, everybody knows what a nurse is, you know—like for workers organizing, and everybody knows that the nurse is the person who takes care of them, the doctor might come by every three days. But I thought that, that they were able to do that there gave me a lot of encouragement and they want to organize more in North Carolina, which I think would be a good thing. And people just leaving their jobs, I mean, they're just doing wildcat strikes and regular—all these shitty jobs forever. So I think that's a really positive thing. People kind of voting with their feet and seeing where the work is going to come.

Koki Mendis: Yeah, that's a great point, Mab. This is definitely a moment, an opportunity for labor organizing. I think unless there are more comments from the panel, any last thoughts some people would like to share, we can start to close, wrap it down.

Mab Segrest: I do have one last thought. I think not only do we need to invest in terms of this media question, in organizations like Laura Flanders', I think we need to invest in Laura herself. And one of the things we have done at Blueprint is to have an understanding with her where she not only does this first story, but she comes back a couple other times too. And she did a very brilliant job of just dropping into one little granular space—which was two

blocks outside of this paramilitary camp in between the Black Township—and talk to those people there who had been worried about this for years. And then go on the deep web and find all of this stuff too; and then interview Serena and interview, like really brilliant organizers, like organizers in North Carolina, and come up with a very compelling story. So it let us really elevate our narrative, to a different point. But we need also to elevate—Laura’s on public broadcasting now, but just keep on elevating that too. And it’s a struggle, and she does it brilliantly. So I think she needs support.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Mab. Tarso, go ahead.

Tarso Luís Ramos: Yeah, if we’re closing out, I just want to really underscore that we’re not—we’re in a long term struggle, right? We’re in a generational struggle for democratic possibility. Some things are going to get worse before they get better. And there are also incredible organizations and movements that have risen to the forefront. And so we do have some wind at our sails. I would argue that social justice forces are competing in the culture, in ways that I’ve not witnessed in my lifetime. You know, child of the Reagan period, and all the rest of it. And so there’s a lot, there’s a lot we have to work with. We’re not, you know—history as here has not been written, right? The outcomes are not foretold. And so it’s important to develop strategy based on a very cold eye assessment of the balance of forces, and the balance of forces are rough, right? The balance of forces are really rough. But that’s the stuff of strategy, right? The point is not to be pollyannaish and assuming things are going to get better, the point is to look at how bad they are and develop the strategy that will begin to turn the tables.

And so what I’ve appreciated deeply about this panel is holding those those things together, right? Not glossing over just how tough it is. A real optimism comes from going on anyway and saying, OK, those are the conditions. What do we need to both survive this and to turn things around? And it’s going to take that kind of commitment and that level of clarity for us to navigate forward. And so obviously, the community that’s come here is a community that shares a certain kind of political alignment around needs. But folks on this call are from all over the country, from all kinds of little corners, some big cities, from small towns, from rural areas. And so this is part of what it means to build a bigger “we”.

But the granular application of how we’re going to build is going to be shaped by local conditions. And so I also want to acknowledge the limits of what we can come up with in terms of generalizing a strategy that’s going to work in all places. And it’s the brilliance of local organizers—folks like Serena, folks

like Mab, lots of people who are on this call—to think about what we’re pulling towards nationally and then figuring out what it means, right, in terms of local conditions, to move that ball forward. That’s going to make the difference. That’s really going to make the difference over time. There is no silver bullet, there is no one way. And experimentation and a diversity of strategies and experiments is what’s going to lead to the discoveries about what can carry us forward in this movement. And so for anybody who’s leaving this feeling like, I’m not sure I got the formula. There is no one formula. Think about what you can take and apply, and then bring it back and we’ll talk about it some more.

Koki Mendis: Thank you, Tarso. There is no formula, but there is a blueprint. Serena, I saw you came off mute, did you want to—

Serena Sebring: Thank you, thank you, still good every time, every time. When you were talking, Tarso, about moving the ball forward, I was thinking, now I just hope we don’t drop the ball. I just, I do. I hope we don’t drop the ball. My youngest child just turned 19 yesterday and I made a commitment to do what I could—a long time ago—to do what I could to leave this place better than I found it, for them, for them. So I think we have another opportunity to at least not drop the ball. And if we win, we get closer to a vision of a world that we would be proud to leave to our children. And that is what I take from this conversation. I’m really grateful to think about that future, that visionary future, a year after what was such a not visionary day, this time last year. So thank you. Thank you for this invitation for the conversation.

Koki Mendis: Thank you so much, all, for joining us on this call. Thank you Serena, Mab, Tarso, Steven, for your brilliance, your analysis, your optimism and your realism. For those of you who are on the call with us, look forward to our memo on January 6th that we’ll be sending around to this list, including the recording as well, to share with your networks. You know, I think that as we continue to think about developing formulas and plans and regional strategies, local strategies, there’s a lot of opportunity for convening, and we hope to be able to do that with you all. This is the first of many, hopefully, in 2022, and we really are grateful to everyone for joining today and spending quite a long time with us. You know, this is no quick in and out panel. If any—you know, if you have any questions, you know where to contact PRA: contact at politicalresearch.org. And check out our website for lots more reading on this topic, on the Right, and stay tuned as we continue to develop strategies with our partners, including Blueprint. So thank you all for coming, and everyone have a great, you know, 2022.