

# Strengthening Local Government Against Bigoted and Anti-Democracy Movements

*Recommendations for Civic Leaders*

**WESTERN  
STATES  
CENTER**

*Western States Center, 2022*

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From rallies that intimidate local elected officials to violence directed toward state capitols, the rise in political violence and anti-democracy movements has dramatically changed America's landscape for local, state, and federal government officials. In recent years, white nationalist and paramilitary mobilizations have increased in response to government actions to stem the spread of COVID-19, posing an even greater threat to democracy and local government. While bigoted and anti-democracy groups have long had a presence in communities across the country, their willingness to initiate violence and target local governments has grown over the last several years. All over the country, authoritarian groups have used intimidation, misinformation, white nationalist appeals, and outright violence to attack or undermine our democratic institutions and shared values of an inclusive, multiracial democracy.

Local elected and government officials often find themselves on the frontlines of countering white nationalist and paramilitary mobilizations in their communities, often without a deep support system of their peers across the country. The result is that local leaders can feel isolated and overwhelmed by an issue that is increasingly impacting every corner of the country.

This resource is designed to provide a framework to help local leaders strengthen their communities' democratic institutions in the face of bigoted and authoritarian social movements working to undermine them. We hope this will be helpful to leaders as they decide what will work best for their community. This document is designed to grow and evolve with feedback from people on the frontlines of this crisis, and if you have questions, concerns, or ideas, please reach out to Western States Center at [info@wscpdx.org](mailto:info@wscpdx.org).

As our communities face multiple crises, community leaders across the country have shown bravery and commitment to our shared values as Americans. Through our collective dedication and commitment to protecting inclusive democracy, we can ensure that everyone can live, love, work, and worship free from fear and bigotry.

Thank you for your continued leadership.

**Western States Center (WSC)**



# Planning and Commitment

## *Summary*

This section focuses on ways local governments can prepare for conflicts instigated by anti-democracy actors before they occur by building support from a broad, diverse coalition in their communities that can demonstrate their shared commitment to defending an open and inclusive local democracy.

# *Build political will across business, government, and civil society to reject bigotry and white nationalism*

## **Recommendations and Local Examples**

As a first step, we recommend that local governments and leaders take each and every opportunity to build and maintain the political will to strengthen inclusive democracy and speak out against white nationalism. Anti-democracy movements like white nationalism are a political and cultural problem, and they require political and cultural solutions. Countering white nationalism is most effective through broad consensus-building when government, civil society, and businesses find their place in advocating for inclusion and against bigotry. It takes work to build alignment across sectors, and there is a role for everyone.

Local government leaders should consider how their leadership has built consensus in the past and what actions might be taken to build or strengthen a consensus against white nationalism. A key piece of this work is consistency. While a single action can be an important step, what really makes a difference is taking ongoing action that broadens in scope and significance over time.

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# Build political will across business, government, and civil society to reject bigotry and white nationalism

## Recommendations and Local Examples

At the local level, this might include steps such as:

- Passing a resolution denouncing white nationalism
- Making an agreement with other leaders to speak out jointly whenever an incident of white nationalist activity or hate violence occurs
- Creating a table for elected leaders, community leaders, business leaders, arts and culture leaders, and others to plan to counter the influence of white nationalism

As local governments move toward building this type of political will and coalitions are poised to respond, many cities around the country have passed resolutions against bigoted and anti-democracy groups including [Longview, Tex.](#), [Somerville, N.J.](#) (page 14), [Huntington Beach, Calif.](#), and [Salem, Ore.](#) A powerful example of community leaders speaking publicly against white nationalism can be seen in [this joint statement](#) with statewide elected officials and this [pledge](#) from businesses in Oregon. By speaking in unison, elected, business, and civil society leaders joining such statements contributes to a climate that closes political space for anti-democracy actors.

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# Strengthen city agencies against anti-democracy assaults

## Recommendations and Local Examples

Agencies as diverse as parks and recreation, law enforcement, public transit, and libraries face challenges from anti-democracy forces. For instance, bigoted attacks on public transit like this one in [Portland, Ore.](#), make commuting unsafe for all and may reduce ridership. Anti-democracy organizing as a response to inclusive programming such as Drag Queen Story Hours [across the country](#) and this program in [Gillette, Wyo.](#), can prevent libraries from fulfilling their core responsibility to serve the entire community and sometimes dovetail with attempts to cut funding. Parks departments may have to contend with bigoted rallies in the public spaces they manage, posing a risk of violence and making those spaces inaccessible to the community, including this example from [Salem, Ore.](#) Law enforcement can also be affected: people associated with anti-democracy groups have perpetrated [targeted killings of law enforcement officers](#), even as some members of bigoted groups [are law enforcement officers themselves](#), worsening bias in policing and the resulting lack of community trust.

*City leadership should support agencies through a process to evaluate the current or potential impact of white nationalism and other bigoted and anti-democracy threats.*

# Strengthen city agencies against anti-democracy assaults

## Recommendations and Local Examples

This work could include:

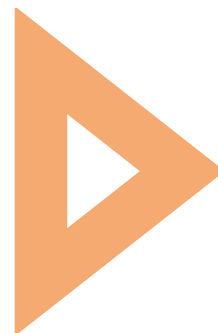
- Creating specific plans to strengthen each agency's work against anti-democracy activity, based on an assessment of existing and potential impacts
- Reinforcing core local government responsibilities and services at points that may be particularly vulnerable
- Pursuing critical goals around equity and inclusion
- Ensuring a work environment for public servants that is free from harassment and threats

Internationally, Germany provides an interesting example; the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth maintains a program called [Live Democracy](#), which partners with municipalities and provinces to “strengthen democracy and diversity and to counter group-focused enmity.” Each of the 300 local partners has a high degree of autonomy to decide which strategies will work best for them, including training and education, cultural organizing, and building expertise through issue-focused Competence Centers.

# Capacity and Action

## *Summary*

This section focuses on how local governments can increase their organizational capacity to tackle threats and take action within their existing powers to counter anti-democracy groups.





# Invest resources and change policy

## Recommendations and Local Examples

We recommend local governments use the political will they have built to take action and shape new policies.

This work could include:

- Creating a policy to guide a city's response to hate violence or graffiti in a way that ensures transparency
- Supporting communities affected by bigoted violence with investments in community-based groups that encourage civic engagement and respond to organized bigotry
- Investing in accurate data collection on hate incidents to gain a deep, institutional understanding of the impact of hate violence locally. (Some of the strongest programs to collect this information include assigned staff, a hate violence reporting hotline, and an option to report hate violence without involving law enforcement.)
- Committing to increased support for existing civil rights agencies or programs within local government
- Providing funding to community groups for innovative anti-hate work and partnering with local government to explore new policy responses based on existing and anticipated anti-democracy threats
- Increasing support for [arts and culture initiatives](#) that bring community members together across differences

Many cities currently have a process in place to review data on hate crimes or other impacts of systemic racism and white nationalism, including [Seattle, Wash.](#), and [Eugene, Ore.](#), which have compiled reports from city-collected data. Some states, including [New York](#), [Oregon](#), and [California](#), track hate crimes and incidents in their states and issue annual reports to the public.

## *Designate an office within the city, county or local jurisdiction to take on coordination of this work and codify how they will be supported*

### **Recommendations and Local Examples**

It is crucial for local government leadership to be transparent and accountable in taking on the work of countering white nationalism. That includes clearly and publicly identifying the local government agency, commission, or high-level staffer who is responsible for moving this work forward and the institutional support they will receive. This leadership should have a plan for mobilizing local government agencies and resources and for cooperating with civil society groups that represent communities targeted by hate violence and have worked to counter white nationalism locally in the past.

There are examples of local governments putting concerted resources and coordination into addressing issues that should be tackled across agencies, including racial equity and environmental sustainability. Similar government-wide leadership to protect democracy and defend against bigoted and anti-democracy movements should be cultivated as well.

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# *Provide staff with training to appropriately recognize and respond to anti-democracy activity they encounter at work*

## Recommendations and Local Examples

In order to prepare frontline staff to deal with anti-democracy and white nationalist threats effectively, we recommend ensuring staff at all agencies are trained in diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and to understand how white nationalism and anti-democracy movements may affect their work.

This work could include:

- Providing training in recognizing anti-democracy activities and symbols that staff may encounter at work
- Sharing city policies with employees on their rights and responsibilities when interacting with the public or their colleagues during and following bigoted or anti-democracy incidents
- Soliciting information from staff to build a more complete picture of how their work is affected or undermined by bigoted and anti-democracy activity
- Developing a plan to support staff if a bigoted or anti-democracy incident occurs at work, or if staff face personal targeting based on their employment responsibilities, including threats and doxxing
- Sharing information on how agencies will support staff who are targeted or threatened by racist or anti-democracy actors for doing their jobs, and to whom staff should report such activity if it occurs

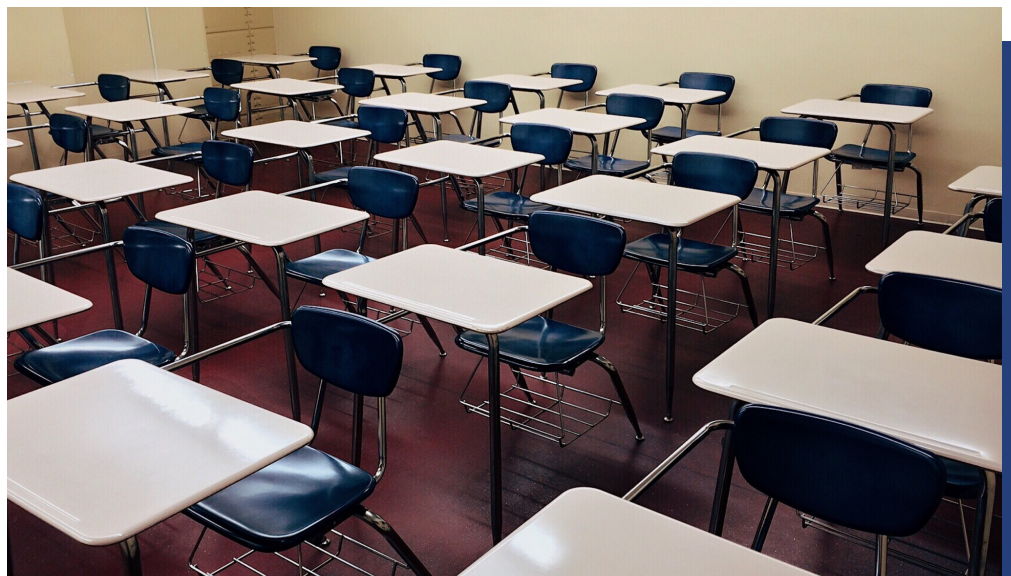
As an example of these practices in action, in 2020, the cities of [Portland, Ore.](#), and Spokane, Wash., held training sessions to deepen their understanding of white nationalist and anti-democracy threats while supporting their work toward anti-racism.

# Provide schools with the resources and support they need to strengthen inclusion and prevent white nationalist influence

## Recommendations and Local Examples

Schools are often at the epicenter of bigoted and anti-democracy attempts to undermine community and democratic institutions. Currently, much of this targeting is based on opposition to public health measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 and opposition to teaching truthfully about race, racism, and history in the U.S. This activity can undermine a school's ability to fulfill the core priorities of educating every student in a safe and supportive environment.

School administrators and [board members](#) have also faced personal threats and intimidation from bigoted groups. These threats often target women of color in leadership positions in particular, and in some cases have led to resignations, such as this high profile case in [southwestern Connecticut](#). At the same time, white nationalist groups continue to seek to influence and recruit young people, which can mean schools are facing challenges to the learning environment from organized bigotry in multiple ways.



# *Provide schools with the resources and support they need to strengthen inclusion and prevent white nationalist influence*

## **Recommendations and Local Examples**

A thoughtful and coordinated response from school leaders is necessary in these situations, and it is crucial to build local and regional support around school educators and administrators who speak out against bigotry. Local community leaders, elected officials, and even statewide leaders can profoundly influence the political conversation in a school district by supporting administrators and teachers who publicly oppose bigotry.

This work could include:

- Intervening before anti-democracy groups gain a foothold by supporting schools to teach an inclusive and accurate curriculum and resourcing activities like art, music, and sports that bring young people together across differences
- Providing training for educators and other school stakeholders to help them recognize signs that young people are being influenced by white nationalism and to help them feel empowered to report and discuss problems as they arise
- Building strong, high-profile, and community-wide support for school educators and administrators to reject white nationalism, maintain safe learning environments, and undertake equity work before (or after) they are targeted by bigoted and anti-democracy actors

Western States Center's [Confronting White Nationalism in Schools Toolkit](#) includes key recommendations on strengthening schools' responses to anti-democracy and bigoted threats in a context of white nationalist recruitment of young people and options for any member of a school community to take action. Bans on hate symbols by [Baltimore County Public Schools](#), [The Oregon Department of Education](#), and [New York state](#) are other strong examples of this at work.



# Consider legal strategies

## Recommendations and Local Examples

When appropriate, local governments should consider legal strategies to counter bigoted and anti-democracy groups. Local governments should also look for opportunities to support local residents and community organizations in taking legal action, or appeal to state attorneys general to take legal action to blunt the impact of bigoted and anti-democracy movements on their communities.

Examples of this work include:

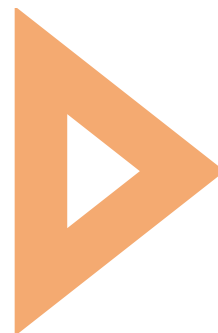
- The November 2021 victory of Integrity First for America (IFA) in their civil litigation against the white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and hate groups responsible for the 2017 Unite for the Right violence in [Charlottesville, Va.](#)
- This lawsuit, filed in [Washington, D.C.](#), against the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, seeking to hold them civilly responsible for violence at the January 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol attack
- The district attorney in [New Mexico](#) taking legal action against both a militia group for its role in a violent protest in the summer of 2021 and Facebook in order to obtain information related to the recruitment and organization of members of the group
- A ruling in [Spokane, Wash.](#), permanently barring members of the “Church at Planned Parenthood” from loudly demonstrating outside a local abortion clinic

In addition, [this resource](#), produced by Georgetown Law’s Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection (ICAP), includes fact sheets for all 50 states outlining the laws related to protecting citizens from unauthorized militia groups while voting or registering to vote.

# Vision and Power

## *Summary*

This section focuses on how local governments can, in addition to responding reactively to bigoted and anti-democracy movements, proactively strengthen the values and practices of open, inclusive democracy in their communities.



# Tackle structural white supremacy in tandem with countering white nationalism

## Recommendations and Local Examples

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As they counter white nationalism, leaders must also commit to pursuing racial equity throughout local government to strengthen inclusive democracy and build trust.

This work could include:

- Taking on racism in policing, as conscious or unconscious bias in law enforcement often creates openings for bigoted and anti-democracy groups to organize and grow within law enforcement and in local communities
- Committing to equitable processes and policies, which make local government less vulnerable to exploitation by, and attacks from, white nationalism

The Racial and Social Justice Initiative in [Seattle, Wash.](#), is a strong example of this work, and the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity \(GARE\)](#) has helpful tools and resources for local and regional government.



# Prioritize the work to counter white nationalism as a key threat to local democratic governance

## Recommendations and Local Examples

Local government leaders should recognize the importance of countering white nationalism as a fundamental part of protecting and supporting local democracy and the democratic institutions they represent. Bigoted and anti-democracy social movements threaten the safety of targeted and vulnerable communities, risk limiting their participation in the democratic process, and undermine the ability of local government to fulfill its functions for all residents. Clarity about the risks of failing to act in the face of this threat should govern leaders' decisions about how to counter white nationalism and defend inclusive democracy.

Examples of this work include:

- Statements issued by leaders denouncing white supremacy, white nationalism, hate groups, and racial violence, including by mayors in [Loveland, Colo.](#) and [Albuquerque, N.M.](#), and by the city councils of [Huntington Beach, Calif.](#) and [Nashville, Tenn.](#)
- The strong condemnation of the Proud Boys' brawl outside the Metropolitan Republican Club in 2018 remains one of the few times that leaders at multiple governmental levels have mobilized resources and spoken out significantly and swiftly against a specific local instance of anti-democracy violence. Increased attention from the press, the community and law enforcement in the wake of this incident led the founder of the Proud Boys to claim he was [leaving the organization](#) in order to avoid legal liability for his followers' violent actions.
- Statements like this editorial from a [Chair of the Oregon State Board of Education](#)
- [Oregon legislators of color](#) standing up against attacks on discussions of systemic racism in schools
- Officials at several levels of government denouncing a planned bigoted rally in [San Francisco, Calif.](#), causing the rally's cancelation by the organizers

# A Note on Safety:

Local government officials across the country have been targeted by anti-democracy groups with doxxing, threats of violence, and harassment in an attempt to intimidate them out of taking action in support of inclusive democracy. In speaking out and taking action against white nationalism, it is important to 1) make a plan for how to respond to potential anti-democracy backlash, 2) take safety precautions, and 3) speak out in partnership with other elected officials or institutions.

It's important to think through what digital and physical safety precautions may be relevant for you, and [Equality Labs](#) has some great resources on digital security in particular. Anti-democracy groups often use doxxing and threats of violence to intimidate elected officials and organizers, particularly women of color. This can be dangerous, and it is crucial for officials to speak out in support when they see it happening to a colleague or organizer locally. Bringing more powerful institutions into alignment with someone being targeted can be critical. This is important when planning pro-democracy action as well: speaking out with a coalition of other elected officials at different levels of government, people in positions of institutional power, and other respected community and business leaders can make it harder for anti-democracy actors to isolate one person to target.



# *Thank you!*

Thank you so much for your willingness to engage in the vital work of combating bigoted and anti-democracy groups in your community! We hope you'll stay in touch. As noted earlier, this document is designed to grow with feedback from people on the frontlines of this crisis, and if you have questions, concerns or ideas, please reach out to Western States Center at [info@wscpdx.org](mailto:info@wscpdx.org).

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