

# Assessing Political Demoralization: A Framework for Public Policy Analysis and Evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The United States symbolizes democracy in the new world and contributes to global prosperity. Nevertheless, incrementalism is a historically dominant national approach to public policy implementation that delays democracy and undermines human dignity. Human flourishing and national development are endangered by slow-moving democratic changes. This necessitates a social justice framework that traces the exploitation of incrementalism and the consequences of opportunity gaps. **Objectives:** This study aimed to answer and address the following research question: Are anti-democratic concepts part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and what reinforces it, if anything? **Methods:** Two categories emerged from a grounded theory of democratic social change. This combination of anti-democratic tenets and democratic principles led to abductive reasoning to fill the research gap. **Results:** The key finding was the existence of a systematic approach that led to democracy while simultaneously disempowering the same group through legal and extralegal means. Two processes hinder democracy: incrementalism and an anti-democratic demoralizing process. A constructivist social justice grounded theory was developed to analyze and evaluate public policy for barriers and facilitators of democracy. A thorough analysis and evaluation of the impact and consequences of public policy is recommended to better understand how such policies impede democracy and influence American perceptions of justice.

**Keywords:** Dual Approach to democracy; Incrementalism; Lindblom; Muddling through; Opportunity gap; Social justice framework.

## 1. Introduction

The opportunity to secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity to defeat the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.

— Sun Tzu

The United States is a global representation of both democracy and democratic prosperity. However, incrementalism is a historical and dominant national approach to implementing public policy that delays democracy and undermines human dignity. Without consistent democratic changes, human flourishing and national development are at risk. Consequently, a social justice framework is required to trace the consequences of opportunity gaps created by incrementalism and exploited by legislators, who either act in the interests of lobbyists or attempt to reclaim the status quo. While scholars have explored the US Constitution for anti-democratic ideas and processes [1], little has been written about incrementalism hindering democracy by reinforcing anti-democratic tenets and facilitating demoralization.

Lindblom was credited with the theory of incrementalism [2]. However, a critical inquiry into the founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the US Constitution, and The Federalist, revealed an incremental approach to public policy that hinders democracy [3]. Despite the various public policy techniques—incrementalism, institutionalism and political systems theory, rational-choice theory, elite theory, and group theory—there are only two methods with which to implement public policy: incremental and radical change, with incrementalism being the de facto public policy implementation method. Lindblom asserted that if “an administrator is given responsibility for formulating policy ... he might start by trying to list all

related values in order of importance ... then all the possible policy outcomes” [2: 79]. However, “public agencies are typically instructed not to use the first method. The second method [incrementalism] “... [is] a common method of policy formulation ... and superior to any other decision-making method available” [2: 79]. Lindblom believed incrementalism is superior to other decision-making models because it dispenses with reliance on theory, drastically limits the analysis of outcomes, alternative policies, affected values, and means-end approaches. In addition, he believed incrementalism relies on pragmatism [2], reduces risk through trial and error, and the test of “good policy” is in agreement among analysts on “agreeing on a policy” [4: 81]. Incrementalism is the preferred method used in marketing (i.e., bigger and better, new and improved) to reap the most profit. In public policy, incrementalism creates opportunity gaps, whereby legislators can enact legislation that hinders democracy and counters the desired effects by advocates and those intended by the federal government.

However, Atkinson argues that incrementalism began to be perceived as a conservative approach, accommodating the status quo with manageable and agreeable adjustments [4]. Critics of incrementalism believe that limiting incrementalism is more effective than refuting it. From one critic’s perspective, incrementalism with continuous variables and no thresholds or abrupt discontinuities is appropriate [4]. Incrementalism is not sound when decisions cannot be segmented, or budget constraints make trial and error impossible. Believing that incrementalism is not a problem, Lindblom later attributed the narrowing effect of public decision-making to social inequalities, media concentration, indoctrination, state information monopolies, and political docility [4]. This can be understood from the perspective of total wealth distribution, where the richest 10% own 72% of wealth. To counter this narrowing effect, Lindblom suggested that competition between ideas would stimulate inquiry into policy alternatives [4]. Lindblom was said to have complained about risky policy alternatives and veto points and institutionally generated opportunities that impede change. Lindblom also suggested that the “marriage of political and economic power removes the volition for change and grants the status quo an enormous advantage over alternatives that could threaten established patterns of dominance” and “the proliferation of veto points” are reasons “why the status quo has such a persistent pull” [4: 16]. Moreover, “cognitive constraints, combined with complex problems and many decision-makers pursuing inconsistent goals, stand squarely in the way of comprehensive problem solving” [4: 16]. Anyebe regards the incremental approach as a barrier to innovation that lacks decision-making guidelines [5]. Moreover, incrementalism discourages policy alternatives.

There is a need to address social disparities resulting from implementing public policy. This study aims to develop a constructivist grounded theory to answer and address the following research question: Are anti-democratic concepts part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and what reinforces it, if anything? Anti-democratic tenets are “divide and conquer strategies that include misinformation, dehumanization, social distinctions, subjugation, nativism, and fear. They are leveraged in an attempt to control, govern, or hinder democracy and social change” [3: 14]. Social scientists have been tasked with tracing “the unintended consequences of human action” [6: 104] and “turning to history as a source of evidence” [6: 105]. Democracy, the cornerstone of social well-being and national prosperity, requires principles that preserve and respect its beneficiaries.

Although many measurements use the costs associated with policies, there is a dearth of frameworks to assess public policy quality. Legislators, policy analysts, and evaluators know the amount spent on specific programs and where funding is allocated. Moreover, policy evaluation relies on metrics developed from theories of change. This means that legislators, analysts, and evaluators often lack awareness of the quality of social change brought about by policy and whether the gap in democracy is meaningfully addressed. While government spending benefits those responsible for implementing program mandates, those who are supposed to benefit the most continue to face challenges that need to be addressed through public and social policies. Continued social injustice can lead to aggression, despondency, and retreatism.

Social justice requires an analysis of public policy and an evaluation framework. The framework should be a tool for assessing the quality of democracy and how a public policy or social program benefits low-income, disenfranchised, and minority groups. Such a framework should be integrated into qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies, assist with cost-benefit analysis, and be flexible enough to analyze and evaluate policies independent of specific theories of change. Awareness of the gaps in the literature led to the construction of a public policy analysis and evaluation framework that utilized Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. This framework fills those gaps using a dual approach by integrating anti-democratic tenets with a normative and motivational framework comprising the first principles of democracy: "The first basis from which [democracy] is known" [7: 22] and supports the democratic ideal of government for the people. "The first principles of democracy include knowledge, human dignity, fairness, hope, unity, and security" [3: 5]. Anti-democratic tenets have historically been leveraged to undermine democracy and maintain the status quo. These categories can help identify democratic breaches. By contrast, the first principles of democracy framework could contribute to the establishment of a minimum standard for policy analysis and evaluation, as well as to the transformation of democracy.

Public policy analysis and evaluation rely heavily on quantitative methodologies. However, scholars have increasingly incorporated mixed methods to assess and evaluate public policies. A mixed-methods approach to public policy takes a holistic perspective and includes a qualitative cost-benefit analysis of the targeted population. This social justice framework takes a historical approach to public policy formulation and incorporates analysis and evaluation of empowering and disempowering strategies without the stepwise method of rational choice, which requires the analysis of detailed policy alternatives, impacts, and consequences [5]. Legislators and public policy analysts can better understand the quality of public policy by focusing on social justice, which was the motivating factor for the American Revolutionary War.

The significance and novelty of this study include knowledge and hope within the framework of transformational social justice. Social justice and transformational aspects of the framework are based on normative democratic principles. This framework is used because good American public policy upholds the "original public meaning" of the US Constitution [8: 3]. Unconstitutional public policies create a strong case for chastising "atrocious breaches of moral obligation and social justice" [9: 43]. This study facilitated the construction of a grounded theory framework that permits anti-democratic strategies to be detected and promotes the transformative first principles of democracy. The first principles of the democratic framework are based on abstract concepts that accommodate a

spectrum of liberal ideologies. Furthermore, many public policies can be analyzed and evaluated without creating evaluation models for each policy.

This study discusses two processes that inhibit democratic social change: incrementalism and demoralization induced by anti-democratic strategies. In adopting a social justice approach to public policy analysis and evaluation, the framework integrates the first principles of democracy. The proposed social justice framework expands on the pillars of social justice. To increase readership, a narrative discussion of the incremental approach to public policy was determined to be more appealing than a deconstruction of public policy. An overview of the methodology is presented before examining the processes that hinder and contribute to democracy to explain why searching for anti-democratic and democratic strategies and tactics in public policy is important.

## 2. Methods

Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory was employed to answer the research question and construct a grounded theory. The grounded theory methodology was developed by Glaser and Strauss [10]. This tradition is called classical grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss developed a methodology to develop theories embedded in substantive content through what they believed was an inductive process. Whether grounded theory relies on inductive reasoning is controversial [11]. Glaser and Strauss believed that the inductive method allows theoretical codes and codes used in grounded theory to emerge from substantive content through the constant compare-and-contrast method of data analysis [10]. The literature review is another area of disagreement between grounded theory traditions. Postclassical traditions such as Corbin, Strauss, and Charmaz are more accommodating than classical traditions [12, 13]. Glaser and Strauss advocated avoiding conducting literature reviews before constructing a grounded theory to avoid being influenced by them [10]. Even though the constructivist tradition of grounded theory permits a researcher to review the data before data analysis, a literature review was conducted post hoc.

Charmaz's constructivist tradition was chosen for its suitability for critical inquiry [14]. Critical inquiry employs a systems-thinking approach, multiple perspectives, and reflective skepticism [15]. Researchers can include "questions concerning social justice" [14: 3] in the data analysis process and explore implicit meanings [16]. Therefore, the constructivist tradition is optimal for exploring democracy, social change, and politics from a critical inquiry perspective when analyzing Foucauldian "power, inequality, and marginality" [14: 11]. The analysis uses grounded theory's constant compare-and-contrast method and other grounded theory principles: theoretical sampling, theoretical coding, abstraction, and abductive reasoning. Theory generation can be enhanced by sensitizing concepts: conceptual constructions that provide a general perspective from which to analyze data [17].

### 2.1. Data analysis strategies

The theoretical sample comprises the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, the US Constitution, and The Federalist Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 14, 22, 38, 42, 43, 51, 54, and 83. During the data analysis, grounded theory's methods of theoretical sampling (a purposive sample from which theory is expected to emerge), theoretical coding (coding process with the generation of theory in mind), constant comparison, memoing [10, 18],

and methodological self-consciousness were applied [14]. All data analysis was performed manually. The coding stages were open (the idea that coding starts from a blank slate and codes emerge from the substantive content), selective (in-depth coding of selected texts or themes), and axial (coding process to explore relationships between codes) [19]. Abductive reasoning and multiple data analysis strategies were employed in the data analysis process. These strategies included deconstruction (the decomposing of the word into units and Derrida's power analysis) [20], perspective-taking (analysis of the cognitive and emotional perspective of another) [21], the use of systems thinking (the exploration of a phenomenon as units, processes, and their relationships to the whole) [22], holistic thinking (looking at the whole picture to gain insight into a phenomenon) [23], as well as dramaturgical analysis (analysis of symbolic and explicit messages conveyed during routine exchanges)[24], and Clarke's situational analysis (analysis of relationships between internal and external factors and how they relate to the studied phenomenon) [25]. A detailed discussion of the abstraction process from which the concepts emerged was discussed by Inesia-Forde in *Reconceptualizing American Democracy: The First Principles* [26].

The constant comparison-and-contrast method of grounded theory was employed, and two categories emerged: democratic principles and anti-democratic tenets. Each category is accompanied by six subcategories that can be found in the four founding documents. Among the categories of disempowerment are nativism (a tactic that promotes an us-versus-them ideology based on strict criteria for inclusion) [3: 15], misinformation, social distinction, dehumanization, and subjugation. The dispositions of the theoretical codes were examined using the compare-and-contrast method of grounded theory. Transformational power strategies, democratic outcomes, the first principles of democracy, and procedural and motivational (a proxy for empowerment) dispositions emerged from the empowering category [27–41]. The transformational value of the empowering principles, which were initially explored at the individual level, led to the application of the principles to the meso level of analysis, with the members of the Continental Congress being the explored group. Values were then applied at the macro level to determine whether these principles were valuable at the social movement level [3].

### **2.1.1. Pairing of concepts**

The rationale for pairing the concepts was as follows. Misinformation was associated with knowledge owing to the liberal use of political language (see Figure 1). "Political language is rhetorical or divisive when it is not both" [42: 125]. Fear has been associated with security as a logical opposite, and as a consequence of insecurity (i.e., "security for the preservation of peace and tranquility, as well as against threats from foreign arms and influence, as from the kind arising from domestic causes") [9: 12]. Fairness was coupled with social distinctions outlined in Article 4 of the Articles of Confederation (paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice) [43: 1]. The Federalist social distinctions appeared as "no woman should dispose of any estate of a determinate value without the consent of three of her nearest relations, signified by their signing the deed" [9: 545]. The Founders wanted Americans to believe that social distinctions "arise out of necessity in civilized nations and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views" [9: 4]. Knowledge of the "landed interest," a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, and a moneyed interest, with lesser interests, was mixed with misinformation [9: 34]. It is also possible to correct misinformation regarding the "merciless Indian savages" [3] by exploring the reasoning behind the

exclusion of Native Americans [45]. Owing to the historical lack of recognition of specific classes of people at some point, human dignity has been paired with dehumanization as a logical opposite. Similarly, hope was paired with subjugation as its logical opposite. Furthermore, unity was paired with nativism, as nativism of any species is a divisive tactic.



**Figure 1.** Paired concepts

### 2.1.2. Emergence

New research questions emerged and were followed to obtain a systematic perspective on the origins of democracy in the United States. While analyzing the incremental approach in the US Constitution and Federalist Papers, several notable ideas were entertained. One idea was the role and relationship of the incremental approach to public policy on democracy, social change, and the first principles of democracy: knowledge, human dignity, fairness, unity, hope, and security. In addition, the dispositions of the empowering and disempowering categories were compared with their counterstrategies: knowledge, human dignity, fairness, hope, unity, and security. Disempowering concepts were identified as anti-democratic, power strategies, transformative, divisive, procedural, and demotivating. They serve multiple functions, including war tactics, social control, divide-and-rule, the pacing of democracy, triggering social change, maintaining the status quo, and demoralization, all of which result in subjugation. Applying sociological imagination [46] led to an exploration of how these concepts could appear in public policy, specifically social policy, as concepts rooted in sociology, political science, and psychology. In politics, psychology is used as a tool for persuasion, whereas sociology is used for prediction and planning. Both fields have been investigated for means that lead to and sustain social control. Their use in these fields has been explored, and some explanations have contributed to abductive reasoning. This framework was nested in grounded theory and presented as an abductive discovery.

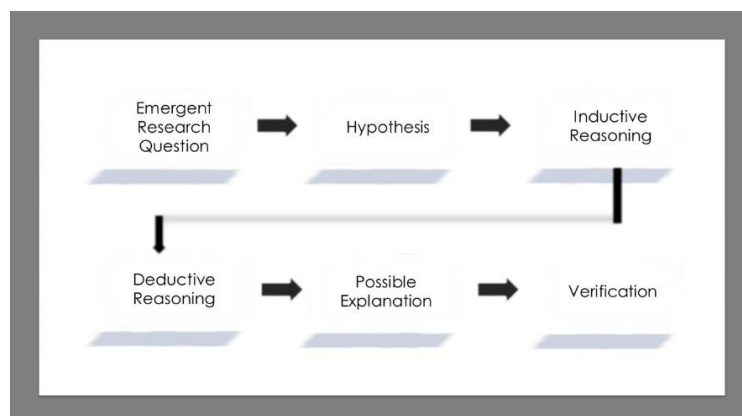
Providing abductive discoveries within the same grounded theory study adds rigor and may facilitate the development of formal theories and the emergence of a novel worldview. However, few scholars who construct grounded theory include abductive discoveries, as the grounded theory methodology requires [10, 18]. Although it is an effective method for developing plausible grounded theories, abductive reasoning does not guarantee an explanation. The social justice-grounded theory is the fourth abductive discovery before constructing an abductive preference [3].

### 2.2. Abductive reasoning

In the early 1900s, Pierce, an American founder of pragmatism [18, 46], coined the term “abduction.” The term has been used to make novel discoveries [18, 48], although it lacks a consistent definition [48]. It plays a crucial role in

developing these theories [17]. The concept of abduction is one of three types of inferential reasoning: induction (reasoning from the particular to the general), deduction (reasoning from the general to the particular), and abduction (combining induction and deduction reasons to produce an explanation for a phenomenon) [49]. Inference rules govern the abduction process [48], which leads to a satisfactory explanation that eliminates doubt [18]. Researchers use abductive reasoning [18] to generate or justify their hypotheses [48]. Abductive reasoning is a logical, methodological, and scientific method of inference that provides social scientists with new knowledge, plays a prominent role in philosophical debates, and significantly affects the philosophies of science and epistemology [18, 48].

As a cognitive process, abduction connects things not previously associated and allows us to infer implied facts from a given fact [18, 47] (see Figure 2). There are two types of abduction: selective and creative. When the condition is known, selective abduction may infer an antecedent of a particular fact [47]. An antecedent can be inferred through creative abduction to provide a plausible explanation of a particular phenomenon [47, 48]. Creative abduction can take two forms depending on the proposition introduced in the antecedent: conditional-creative abduction and propositional-conditional-creative abduction [47]. A conditional-creative abduction has its proposition defined in theory, whereas the latter introduces an undefined proposition [47].



**Figure 2.** Abductive reasoning model

According to Plutynski, abductive preference differs from abductive discovery [50]. Although some scholars and philosophers agree that abductive discovery and abductive preference are distinct, the issue is controversial. This controversy concerns the factors that determine abductive discovery or preferences: subjective opinion, politics, pragmatism, or rationalism. An abductive discovery is an alternative explanation constructed with theoretical codes in abductive preference, and the most plausible and parsimonious theory answers the main research question. It is possible that abductive discoveries in one research question become an abductive preference for another research question. Abduction can be explained using the cooking program *Baking Championship* on the Food Network [51]. The ingredients of the theme are theoretical codes. The baked goods created are abductive discoveries; the winning dish is the abductive preference. Any of the baked goods could have been the abductive preference; however, they did not meet the judges' requirements, which made them abductive discoveries instead. If one assumes the winning dish did not make it to the table, another baked dish would have become the preferred or abductive preference. In this example, abductive discovery is simply an alternative way of creating a baked dish. Similarly, abductive

discoveries are constructed from emerging theoretical codes, with the preference of answering the main research question.

### ***2.2.1. An illustration of abductive reasoning***

Below is an example of the abductive reasoning process employed during the data analysis, which led to abductive discoveries and preferences.

*Hypothesis:* Anti-democratic concepts are part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and something reinforces this.

*Inductive Reasoning:* The substantive content of the American founding documents provides the basis for inductive reasoning. Incrementalism in the US Constitution is characterized by a balance of power (the three branches of government), the Electoral College (a tactic to secure a “new form of government,” representative democracy), and suffrage rights (African Americans, women, and persons under 18 years of age were not entitled to vote) [45].

*Deductive Reasoning:* The exemption of “paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice” from being “entitled to all privileges and immunities of free citizens in the several states” [43] was later expanded in 1927 [52, 53]. The then political language of the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” [44], was addressed in the US Constitution as was the idea of “Slaves [being] considered as property, not as persons” [9: 545].

*Plausible Explanation:* The incremental approach to public policy is a barrier to democracy and democratic social change because opportunity gaps are exploited by policymakers who pass legislation contrary to people’s interests, as expressed in social justice movements.

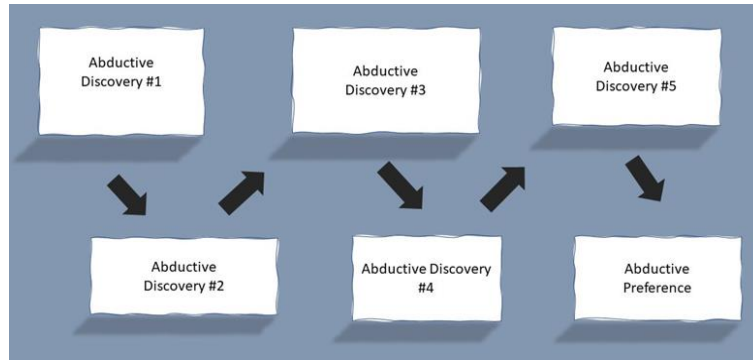
*Verification:* In 1927, the dehumanization of paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice was expanded [50, 51]. Their exemption was addressed incrementally in *Skinner v. Oklahoma* [54], the 13th Amendment [45], and the Bill of Rights [45]. The right to vote was extended to non-property-owning White men and other groups when their humanity was recognized (5, 19, 24, and 26 amendments) [45]. Despite the 15th Amendment [45], state legislators implemented anti-democratic tactics to prevent citizens from voting (such as poll taxes and literacy tests). To ensure fair voting, the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* [55] was enacted, and Jim Crow laws were overturned in recognition of the human dignity of people of color.

## **3. Results**

The abductive discovery resulted in a transformative social justice framework. The framework incorporates a demoralization process to answer the research question: Are anti-democratic concepts part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and what reinforces it, if anything? The process emerged from events and attitudes in the US founding documents and the consequences of exploiting opportunity gaps in incremental policy formulation. While the incremental approach could lead to demoralization, the demoralization process contributes to negative and unsustainable anti-democratic social change (see Figure 3). The first principles of democracy were used to construct a motivational, transformative, and normative framework that contributes to positive and sustainable democratic social change. The creation of a social justice framework is the evolution of abductive



discoveries: the first principles of democracy [3, 25], a conceptual framework for leveraging democratic polarities [56], a socio-ethical framework of democracy for public administrators [57], and the demoralization process [58]. It is assumed that the first principles of the democratic framework were the counterstrategy used by the Founders to thwart Great Britain’s plan to evince a “Design to reduce [colonists] under absolute Despotism” [44].



**Figure 3.** Abductive discoveries leading to abductive preference

### 3.1. Democracy hindering and facilitating processes

The two processes that hinder democracy are discussed: opportunity gaps in the incremental formulation of the public approach and an unsustainable demoralization process. A third process was incorporated not only because it is based on the first principles of democracy and deemed a normative counterstrategy to the anti-democratic demoralization but also because the concepts are motivational. Positive and sustainable social change may result if incorporated into a social justice framework. Democracy appears to be triggered by institutionalized democracy-breaching, disempowering strategies. These anti-democratic strategies destroy hope, dehumanize, oppress, delay democracy, and threaten human freedom. These strategies reinforce power structures and promote dichotomous societies. Therefore, compromises during policy formulation and the text’s preferred meanings must be critically examined [59]. Democracy and anti-democratic tenets are associated with values, attitudes, and beliefs that become intuitive once internalized and integrated [3, 37, 38]. For example, well-being (security) can be achieved through human dignity internalization and integration. By contrast, dehumanization has the opposite effect. Owing to the potential of anti-democratic strategies to catalyze democratic social change, they are likely to provoke a response through elections, organized protests, or more aggressive means. Consequently, the discussion begins with anti-democratic strategies that may evolve into a demoralization process.

#### 3.1.1. Political demoralization process

Demoralization is a condition that can result from traumatic events with a strong emotional impact [60]. Common life experiences can become extremely stressful [60]. In this case, demoralization is a strategic process whereby anti-democratic strategies are leveraged for physical or psychological subjugation. It has been suggested that demoralization is characterized by two core symptoms: distress (e.g., anxiety, sadness, discouragement, and resentment) [60] and subjective incompetence (e.g., feeling trapped or blocked owing to lack of ability to plan and initiate concerted action toward a specific goal or objective), which coexist when assumptions relevant to self-esteem are questioned [60]. Subjective incompetence is a persistent feeling of failure to meet one’s or others’ expectations and difficulty in coping with and resolving problems [61].

Hence, anti-democratic strategies could result in “helplessness, hopelessness, (a sense of psychological impotence), and subjective incompetence” (the self-belief of lacking personal ability or skill(s) [61: 672]. These feelings lead to the person giving up. Helplessness is a sense of abandonment or being left out [61]. It is attributed to the loss of gratification from external events or objects that cannot be reclaimed through active self-intervention [61]. Hopelessness is characterized by a self-perception of inadequacy, a sense of responsibility for the event, and a belief that this will last forever [61].

Britain first employed disempowering strategies to dehumanize and subjugate the American colonists. The power of the anti-democratic strategies is most evident in Britain’s “long train of abuses and usurpations” [44]. Britain planned to evince a demoralizing “Design to reduce [colonists] under absolute Despotism” [44]. The effective implementation of demoralization leads to hopelessness, fear, oppression, alienation, and subjugation. As power strategies, anti-democratic strategies and tactics are often the most effective when applied to unsuspecting individuals [62]. Consequently, they hinder democratic social change and have devastating consequences for future generations.

The demoralization process begins with nativism (see Figure 4), a tactic that promotes an us-versus-them ideology based on strict criteria for inclusion. Nativism can be identified as unity based on a bond of shared beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors that manifest those beliefs. Owing to the shared identity in nativism, social distinctions are introduced, where factions are created and assigned socially constructed identities to weaken the out-group.



**Figure 4.** Anti-democratic demoralizing process

Misinformation and fear are used to reinforce the ideology of us-versus-them. In the context of misinformation, one of the most devastating effects is interference with another person’s right to self-determination. Although fear motivates individuals to act, it can thwart motivation. Dehumanization follows the process of fear and precedes subjugation. As evidenced by the King of Britain’s treatment of the Founders [44], silence, inattention, and violence can be subtle manifestations of dehumanization. Dehumanization can result in resistance, psychological abuse, and unhealthy coping mechanisms owing to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that disregard others’ dignity. Subjugation, a strategy, and an end goal complete the process. During the subjugation process, various tactics are used to control individuals physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Subjugation could cause severe psychological trauma. This is especially true when the victim does not comprehend the strategy behind the political tactics.

**3.1.2. Incrementalism’s opportunity gaps as a hindrance to democracy**

Opportunity gaps in incrementalism facilitate and reinforce the hindering effect of democracy. Several theories can explain opportunity gaps, including political systems, groups, and elite theories. However, incrementalism in and of itself is not the cause of social injustice; it creates opportunities for the status quo to thwart the pace of

democratic social change owing to its invisible hand and pacing democracy or maintaining power by upholding policies that support the status quo. Regardless of their motivation to exploit opportunity gaps, public policies' poorly managed negative consequences adversely affect millions of people and national development. By reinforcing disempowerment at the macro level, incrementalism could serve as a mechanism for controlling factions and maintaining the status quo, because "relief is only to be sought [to control] its EFFECTS" [9: 5]. Examples of incremental policies in the US Constitution [45] include the Electoral College, the recognition of citizenship rights, suffrage rights, equal access to education, voting rights [55], and verbal notice of a suspect's due process rights attained through an evolving process that at times spanned centuries [45, 55, 63, 64, 65]. Much like the creation of factions weakens democracy, separation of power also weakens. Nevertheless, institutional actors in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government hold enormous power over civilians and reinforce behaviors that disempower them. An effective democratic social change process can, however, mitigate the effects of institutional power. The power of unified efforts to protect members' human dignity is evident in collective bargaining, lobbying, professional groups, and coalitions.

### ***3.1.3. Democratic empowerment***

It is advanced that democratic principles were woven into the nation's founding documents to promote fairness by reducing the effects of asymmetric power associated with disempowerment strategies used by Britain. These were leveraged as a strategy that led to America's first national social justice movement, the Revolutionary War. This strategy brought about revolutionary social and political changes by systematically leveraging and neutralizing disempowerment. Therefore, an empowering social change process would be a strategic approach to the problem of oppression and would rest on the effective application of various species of knowledge, including knowing how and when to use strategies and with whom and when to share intelligence, build coalitions, instill courage, and secure well-being. Democratic social change is linear. Individuals are empowered at each stage of the transformation process. Empowerment begins with knowledge, the awareness of a problem.

Awareness leads to a second empowerment process, the evaluation of fairness and conscientization—the realization that there are differences that have led to disparate treatment, which elicits an attitudinal, behavioral, and affective response [29, 30]. The person then moves on to the stage of human dignity. In acknowledging their humanity and right to be treated with respect, the individual recognizes that they are as human as the individual who has taken advantage of them. Hope is the next stage. As a result of this stage, one can plan and imagine courage-infused solutions that can be implemented with the support of others [39]. The penultimate process of social change is unity. The process of hope allows individuals to envision the support of others who may assist in achieving security and sustainable social change. Security is the last process in the democratic social change framework and the final cause of government [66] (see Figure 5). Security can be summarized as "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," [44] or more broadly, including national security and the 11 dimensions used to measure the level of democracy through measures of well-being: civic engagement, environmental quality, health, housing, income and wealth, knowledge and skills, safety, social connections, subjective well-being, work-life balance, and work and job quality [67].



**Figure 5.** Democratic social change process

#### 4. Grounded Theory: Assessing Political Demoralization

This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

Dr. Martin Luther King, *I Have a Dream* (1963)

It has been suggested that the either-or approach to democracy is a historical tactic used by those seeking to maintain the status quo by slowing down the pace of democracy when it is actively sought through policies and other means. The “either” in either-or cautions against social change threatening the status quo. The “or” is the threat of a barrier to democratic social change. The approach employs longstanding and new species of disempowerment strategies that create social unrest during otherwise empowering democratic social change (a strategic transformational “process driven by principles woven into the founding documents” [3: 15]) used to promote social justice policies. As a barrier to democracy, the either-or approach may lead to a spectrum of problems, from feelings of insecurity to demoralization, as measured by evidence of alienation. It is possible that the either-or approach could lead to feelings of disconcert in the interstices of social change and social acceptance owing to the exploitation of the opportunity gaps created by the incremental approach to democratic governance. Although minority groups may be empowered, they are also often disempowered. The either-or approach to democracy is a historical tactic used by those seeking to maintain the status quo or slow down the pace of democracy when it is actively pursued through policies or other means. During an otherwise empowering democratic social change movement promoting social justice policies, this approach uses longstanding and new anti-democratic tactics that disempower, disrupt, and create social unrest. A spectrum of problems may result from this approach, ranging from feelings of insecurity to depression and demoralization, as measured by evidence of alienation. Anti-democratic strategies serve numerous purposes, including social control, divide-and-rule, pacing democracy, triggering social change, and maintaining the status quo.

The social justice approach is a tool for analyzing, evaluating, and making decisions regarding policies and practices that prevent democracy from flourishing. It uses a systems approach to determine which power strategies are being leveraged at the juncture between democratic social change and societal acceptance. The either-or approach is useful for understanding opportunity gaps in the incremental approach to public policy, particularly in relation to state and federal legislation and extralegal practices that harm social justice. By exploiting opportunity gaps, official recognition of human dignity and empowerment of oppressed classes is resisted [68] (see amendments 15, 19, 24, and 26; arts. 1–3 [45]; art. 4 [43, 9]). Incrementalism impedes human development and the empowering effects of democratic social change in the same way that it can lead to a trickle-down democracy and expose controversial legislators, their supporters, and the invisible hands.

The either-or approach recognizes the Founders' alliance with Britain on their terms or increased resistance, a process that contributes to prolonged oppression. While the king "exposed [them] to all the Dangers of Invasion without and Convulsions within," sent "Swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance," quartered "large Bodies of Army Troops among us," and transported "large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the Works of Death, Desolation, and Tyranny," at "every stage of these Oppressions," the Founders "Petitioned for Redress in the most humble Terms," and "conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations" [44]. However, "these too have been deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity" [44]. During the period when the colonists petitioned for redress, the king gradually increased the severity of his oppressive strategies against them [44]. As tactics to support the king's strategy, he imposed "taxes on us without our consent" to deprive "us, in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury or tried for pretended offenses" and sent "swarms of officers to harass our people and eat out their substance, burned towns, and destroyed the lives of our people" [44]. Additionally, he made his fellow citizens "executioners of their friends and brethren or to fall themselves by their hands" [44]. Similarly, "Black resistance caused lynchings to spike in the early 1890s" [69: 175]. When oppressive strategies such as misinformation, dehumanization, social distinctions, fear, nativism, and subjugation are used against the less resourceful or powerful, they represent unfairness. By counteracting the effects of anti-democratic strategies through positive and sustainable social change, the implementation of the first principles of democracy can replace the program of disempowerment. When oppressive strategies are used against less resourceful or powerful ones, they represent unfairness. These strategies include misinformation, dehumanization, social distinction, fear, nativism, and subjugation. The motivational value of the first principles of democracy is discussed in *The First Principles of Democracy: A Socio-Ethical Theory* [57].

#### 4.1. Social justice framework

Evaluators seldom if ever talk about themselves as political figures, persons involved in the distribution and exercise of power.

— MacDonald in *Evaluation and the Control of Education*, 1974

Historically, a radical approach to democracy has been considered untenable and unlikely to change. Although an incremental approach to policy has benefits, incrementalism ritualizes democracy to serve the interests of the status quo at the expense of the people. Social justice-oriented policy analysis [59] and evaluations must be democratic [42] and based on "justice and truth" [70]. Although policy analysis and evaluation are similar, there are two differences between evaluation and analysis: Policy analysis requires relational thinking, action, and engaging in the process of repositioning (perspective-taking) [59]. Both assessments share the same respect for the rights of others and diverse voices in knowledge construction, fairness, diversity, and power assessment culture [42, 59, 70]. Power assessment is not restricted to the influence of the power elites during policy formulation. It includes policy analysts [59] and evaluators [70]. As evaluators serve their sponsors [42], and the "evaluation methodology itself has sometimes" contributed "to systematic injustices" [70: 575], a social justice public policy framework reflecting the "democratic principles enshrined in the U.S. Constitution" is necessary [42: 127]. A social justice-oriented analysis [59] and evaluation aim to examine the holistic nature of social problems [70].

A social justice-oriented evaluation aims to increase understanding at multiple levels: the individual, the community, and society [59, 70]. A democratic approach is used to generate knowledge about social problems and formulate effective interventions [59, 70]. Interventions should not marginalize “some groups in society to the benefit of others” [70: 575; see Appendix A]. As with traditional democratic social justice frameworks, this framework embraces social justice pillars, including equity (fairness), diversity and participation (unity), freedom and human rights (which cannot exist without respect for human dignity), and safety and economic justice (security). It also contributes to two more pillars—knowledge and hope—without which people lose courage and inspiration.

#### 4.2. Assumptions

The overarching assumption of the framework is that the founding documents contain revolutionary democratic social change strategies used by the American Founders and are used today by corporate leaders, media, legislators, educators, religious organizations, NGOs, and others. This framework can evaluate anti-democratic strategies dating back to the colonial era when they were employed against everyone except White-property-owning men. However, there is a way to neutralize the effects of anti-democratic strategies and tactics to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Neutralization requires understanding how, when, and to what extent specific disempowerment tactics affect individuals, communities, and organizations. This calls for leveraging knowledge from many other species. While anti-democratic strategies and tactics harm oppressed individuals, they can also empower individuals motivated to react to unfairness [30]. Through empowerment, disempowerment strategies motivated the Revolutionary War. These strategies were later institutionalized and became widespread [69, 71]. Owing to normalization, recognizing tactics that support subjugation may pose some challenges. All anti-democratic tenets support the “us versus them” ideology. They all dehumanize and may lead to subjugation. For example, silence can be a tactic of dehumanization and subjugation. This tactic indicates a lack of respect for or interest in the party being ignored. Awareness of the tactic can prompt counter-tactics such as ridicule. However, silence as a tactic may signify strengths or weaknesses. The situational context provides clues as to how silence is used.

Therefore, policy analysts and evaluators must consider that success and failure in exploiting opportunity gaps rest on awareness of the institutionalized culture of leveraging strategies and counterstrategies. Analysts and evaluators must recognize empowerment and disempowerment to accurately predict policy outcomes. Although the short-term application of disempowering strategies can promote social change, long-term disempowerment leads to negative and unsustainable social change and dominance. Analysis and evaluation rely on detecting the anti-democratic tactics that support a corresponding strategy. There are several assumptions regarding the first principles of the democratic framework:

- Scientific knowledge and rational thinking are the best ways to make informed decisions. Abductive reasoning based on rational and critical thinking must always be applied to fill gaps where scientific evidence is lacking.
- Perceptions of justice affect policy impact and evaluation. People are most likely to accept and implement policy changes that are perceived as fair.

- Respect for human dignity is paramount to democracy; therefore, the central focus of public policy must be the preservation of and respect for human dignity, with the goal toward security loosely defined as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Hope is motivational and plays a central role in trust in government, social control, and feelings of well-being.
- Unity is a leading factor in achieving policy changes, goals, and positive and sustainable social changes.
- Security is broadly defined as well-being and is the final cause for governments and humans.

This methodology includes a historical approach to policy analysis and evaluation. This is useful because it allows the measurement of policy successes and failures, and the disempowerment and dehumanization of African Americans began with the transatlantic slave trade and continued through pseudoscience and the politics of minority inferiority [69]. The Federalist [9] essays and the US Constitution [45] document the history of Black disempowerment. Moreover, the Articles of Confederation documented the disempowerment of “paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice” [44]. Conversely, the empowerment of Blacks is touched on in The Federalist [9], and the empowerment of minorities is documented in the US Constitution [45]. However, the founding documents poorly documented the empowerment of the disadvantaged poor. Although the US Constitution documents political empowerment, the prohibition of slave importation was upheld decades later [69]. It took time for the 13th Amendment [45] to be enacted despite the Founders suggesting that “It ought to be considered as a great point gained in favor of humanity” that slavery as we knew it ended [9: 256]. In the wake of the end of slavery, several new oppressive tactics emerged, such as prison chain gangs [72], Jim Crow laws, continued lynchings, “separate but equal,” underfunded Black schools, housing discrimination, and economic discrimination [69].

#### **4.3. A narrative review of the incremental approach to public policy**

To continue the political tradition of incrementally recognizing African Americans' humanity, clever disempowerment tactics (e.g., genredization, the construction of race and ethnicity as a genre) conceal the nativist and dehumanizing tactic of the “separate but equal” doctrine. The insecurity that led to Jim Crow and Britain’s anti-democratic acts may have been the same spirit that led to the Founders fracturing “society itself...into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority” [9: 192]. However, rather than increasing oppressive strategies resulting from insecurity or fear, the US Constitution [45] demonstrates that social tension may have been reduced by granting human rights to different groups, albeit incrementally. It is the traditional approach to policy implementation and the “principle [*sic*] reliance of administrators as well as other policy analysts” in formulating policies [2: 88]. It is considered a “highly sophisticated form of problem-solving and denounced as no method at all” [2: 88]. The incremental approach is characterized by a gradual process of addressing power imbalances while creating opportunity gaps that are exploited to maintain power imbalances among the governed and the government, as well as the status quo and fractured minority groups. The voting rights of non-property-owning

White men were not guaranteed until their humanity was recognized. Likewise, legislators used an incremental approach to voting rights for African Americans, women, and individuals aged 18 years and older (see amendments 15, 19, 24, and 26) [45]. Even when voting rights were enacted, state legislators exploited opportunity gaps by enacting barriers to voting (i.e., poll taxes and literacy tests). People with same-gender attraction and women are also examples of the incremental recognition of human dignity. American history and the annals of science [73] contain powerful examples of marginalization for the benefit of the most powerful yet the most vulnerable and fearful group of people.

With the demedicalization of same-gender attraction and its removal from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual in the 1970s, oppressive power gradually dissipated among the LGBTQ+ population. During the same period, the US Supreme Court criminalized intimate same-sex relationships between men in 1998 and reversed the landmark *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 US 558 (2003) [74] decision. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) [75] was weaponized against the LGBTQ+ community during the 1994 presidential administration by the US government under the Don't Ask, Don't Tell military policy [76]. Approximately 10 years after the Lawrence decision, the Supreme Court ruled in *United States v. Windsor*, 570 US 744 (2013) [77] that Article 3 of DOMA violates the Constitution's [45] equal protection and due process clauses.

Social change in America resulted from tensions that led to a desire for recognition and respect for human dignity. The US government has recognized several groups as having human dignity, including the disabled, children, workers, minorities, and prisoners. Several policies have addressed desegregation, educational equity, inclusive classrooms, LGBTQ+ rights, organizational justice, social welfare programs, substance abuse programs, and other attempts to address people [36], albeit incrementally. The effects of incrementalism appear to be limited to minorities. Incrementalism, however, affects non-minorities just as often as it threatens minorities because it promotes the status quo and maintains social divisions [78]. An incremental approach to federal sentencing guidelines, health care policy [78], blockchain technology [80], and other policy areas has been demonstrated [78]. Although incrementalism emphasizes securing political support, addressing unforeseen problems, minimizing social conflict, and considering the skepticism of those whose interests are not being represented [78], it also emphasizes the importance of focusing attention on one group or area at the expense of others.

The problem of substance abuse among afflicted White Americans illustrates the effects of incrementalism and discrimination. The approach to addressing substance use disorder targeted Black communities. However, while the focus was on Black communities, the number of substance users among the White population increased. One reason is that there is a long history of doctors refusing to prescribe anxiolytics such as Valium and opioids to African Americans as treatment options. In the medical profession, this type of discrimination has resulted in a drug addiction epidemic that has mostly impacted Caucasian communities. As with the first eugenics movement in America, neo-eugenicists consent to the culture of death by leveraging the conspiracy of silence with the number of White lives lost [81]. Today, it is unnecessary to use the now illegal and obvious tactics of forced sterilization or Nazi concentration camps. Instead, consumer consent for substance abuse and drug overdose is implied. This rationalizes the politicization of the opioid epidemic. Moreover, the culture of silence promotes dehumanization



under the guise of scientific evidence and fosters the fear of Black people [81]. The raw numbers present a different magnitude of loss for the victims of the opioid epidemic. The Kaiser Family Foundation published that between 2018 and 2021, 170,949 White lives were claimed in contrast to 39,175 Black, 27,521 Latino, 1,647 Asian, 2,343 Native Americans or Alaskan Natives, and 142 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander lives claimed [82]. Although examining proportions provides insight into differences within groups, ignoring the number of lives lost is impossible. In 2018, 5.89 times more White lives were claimed than Black, 8.05 times more than Hispanic, 128.89 more than Asian, and 109.62 and 1,529.87 more than native Americans or Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders lives, respectively. Interviews with the victims' family members provide further insight into the magnitude of the loss. This is not a new phenomenon, and it is certainly not worthy of politicization through racialization, an anti-democratic tactic employed by scholars, politicians, and the media. This tactic not only exposes the character of those who use it but also delays the development of solutions to the opioid epidemic and stigmatizes people who suffer from substance abuse disorders. In the 1970s, a significant number of White middle-class women were addicted to Valium and alcohol, with former First Lady Betty Ford admitting to her addiction [83: 79].

The addictive nature of anxiolytic and analgesic drugs has been ignored for several decades. Consequently, White communities have been silently ravaged, and families have been destroyed. Based on their biases and political propaganda, policymakers turned their attention to minorities and treated crack cocaine as an epidemic. This tactic attempts to create the perception that "Different interests necessarily exist in different classes of citizens" [9: 192]. However, "It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part" [9: 192].

Media coverage of the War on Drugs dehumanized victims and crack-addicted infants. Consequently, the focus shifted from "crack babies" to "meth babies." Today, more than 88% of Caucasians with opioid substance abuse disorders are likely to die from overdose [84]. Valium and opioid analgesic addiction can be classified as state-sponsored substance abuse disorders, as opposed to addiction to illicit substances. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has regulatory oversight and prosecutes pharmaceutical companies that violate its rules; however, its drug approval process is far from ideal [85]. The "manufacturer controls the organization and execution of the trials," and while "manufacturers can, and frequently do, consult with FDA staff at various times to receive advice on trial design and outcomes," it is not a requirement [85: 362], a practice that resembles giving the key to the pharmacy to someone with an addiction.

Additionally, the FDA approved short-acting opioid analgesic pain management prescriptions in the 1960s and 1970s and long-acting formulations in the 1980s and 1990s [85]. Over the past 50 years, there have been many opportunities to collect information regarding the use and abuse of opioids and anxiolytics. FDA approved abuse-deterrent opioids in 2010, including non-abuse-deterrent hydrocodone [85]. Under certain circumstances, the FDA Modernization Act of 1997 allowed "efficacy" to be demonstrated by one adequate and well-controlled trial [85: 363]. Despite recent improvements in oversight, Phillips et al. published that "opioids warrant a unique regulatory approach" [85: 386]. Although decades of red flags informed the FDA of the silent crisis the government ignored, a focused, incremental approach ignored licit and illicit substance abuse among White Americans. This

was the same approach taken by the then government against White American excluded classes: “paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice” (see art. 4, p. 1) [43]. Silent crises are a form of othering and neglect that leads to the subjugation of the mind, body, and spirit. This is similar to the experiences of people plagued by poverty, mental illness, victims of human trafficking, and other invisible groups. Those affected have likely internalized and integrated ideas imposed by others and have fallen victim to a self-fulfilling prophecy; the belief that can influence behavior [86]. What is believed to be genetic could be a historically ingrained culture of disempowerment handed down from generation to generation. The disempowerment concepts form a framework that can explain the demoralization process perpetuated through generations, such as the cycle of poverty [87].

Considering an either-or approach to democracy reminds society that a politicized form of democracy cannot supplement respect for human dignity because respect for human dignity is the essential essence of democracy. Democracies are characterized by fair outcomes. The doctrine of democracy relies on people’s consent to be governed in exchange for the full spectrum of security necessary to maintain respect for human dignity. Without respect for human dignity, “the patient suffering” of people [44] is bound to run out without social justice. To alleviate the tension among individuals awaiting social justice, the government must address the opportunity gaps in the incremental approach to public policy. Global society has reached a level of knowledge and intelligence at which today’s legislators, national leaders, analysts, and evaluators are expected to understand that injustice is unhealthy and unsustainable.

## 5. Discussion

Research question: Are anti-democratic concepts part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and what reinforces it, if anything?

An either-or approach to democracy has historically been used by those who want to maintain the status quo with longstanding and evolving forms of disempowerment tactics while empowering democratic social change movements. The Founders adopted this approach when they claimed loyalty to the king while engaging in treason. However, a spectrum of problems may result from this disempowering approach, including feelings of insecurity and demoralization. The anti-democratic concepts are part of a political and social disempowerment program whereby power, “actions on others’ action” [88: 5] “that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” [89: 93] is leveraged against individuals to subjugate them through misinformation, fear, dehumanization, and division (nativism and social distinctions [3]). The aim of using a social justice approach to democracy is to achieve empowerment by weakening the effect of anti-democratic strategies and replacing them with the corresponding first principles of democracy as a counterstrategy.

While anti-democratic strategies can catalyze democratic social change, they can also lead to demoralization because they are divide-and-conquer strategies that fracture society and cause social division. Moreover, these disempowerment strategies could lead to generational demoralization. The two most obvious examples of the divide-and-conquer strategy are nativism and social distinction. Similarly, misinformation, dehumanization, fear, and subjugation are divide-and-conquer strategies that are leveraged to antagonize victims. Anti-democratic strategies undermine democracy as relics of antiquated institutional and national cultural practices that facilitate

and reinforce the subjugation of human beings. History bears witness to the fact that the use of anti-democratic strategies led to social atrocities such as lynchings, murder, and human experiments.

It could be argued that the divide-and-conquer strategy was a utilitarian approach to forging a new Republican government and nation by weakening the effects of direct democracy. The Founders were certainly aware that “if a majority be united by a common interest [knowledge, fairness, human dignity, hope, unity, and security], the rights of the minority will be insecure” [9: 192]. Although they may have served a purpose, controlling the effects of factions, the result of the anti-democratic strategies led to dividing “mankind into parties, [to the point that it] inflamed them with mutual animosity [as to] rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good” [9: 56]. The anti-democratic strategies and tactics may also have been utilized as a means of social control by pitting people against each other by focusing on differences instead of human dignity. However, these strategies have deleterious social consequences and go against America’s long-term national interests and social reconciliation.

The cycle of political violence continues to be perpetrated with the assistance of people who lack an understanding of the role of politics in governance and the sacrifices the government imposes on the people without their informed consent. Today, people continue to be sacrificed, following a script created for and during national development. However, these strategies did not advance human development. The most impacted, however, are human beings, poor individuals and minorities, who are used as political tools to sustain social division through the politics of envy and illusions of grandeur. Anti-democratic tactics and strategies enrich small and powerful minorities at the expense of a weakened majority. However, they are not the only vehicles that facilitate and reinforce hindrances to democracy.

One intervention that could reduce barriers to democratic governance is a social justice framework that assesses democratic and anti-democratic strategies. Traditional public policy analysis and evaluations do not consider power analysis or an assessment of democracy [42, 59, 70]. Social justice advocates and theorists call for the democratization of public policy [42, 59, 70]. As a social justice framework that assesses democracy and anti-democratic strategies, this framework could be used to analyze and evaluate public policy, particularly those exploiting opportunity gaps. Using the first principles of a democratic framework can assist in identifying outcomes when designing policies to bridge the democracy gap. Policies are assessed by asking questions that promote the emergence of specific strategies and tactics woven into public policy (see Appendices A and B).

### **5.1. Novelty, future research, and limitations**

The novelty of this original research lies in its important contribution to any field. Social justice analyses and evaluations are based on the pillars of social justice: equity, diversity, participation, freedom, human rights, safety, and economic justice. They contribute to two other pillars—knowledge and hope—without which people lack courage and inspiration. This contrasts with theories of change in that it can be used to analyze and evaluate different public policies without the need to design evaluation models for each policy. A social justice framework is useful for determining the impact and consequences of public policy and tracing detrimental practices that delay democratic social change. Moreover, analyzing and evaluating the impacts and consequences of incremental social

changes throughout American history is beneficial for helping users identify power strategies. This framework also provides a way to counter the effects of disempowerment by leveraging the first principles of democracy. Alternatively, policymakers can continue to look the other way and occasionally address the concerns of poor White Americans and minorities by ritualizing democracy through incrementalism.

Despite the existence of this social justice framework, it remains merely one method of addressing the opportunity gaps created by incrementalism. Incrementalism will continue to serve the status quo through opportunity gaps as long as “state legislators’ power to pass laws in contravention of Supreme Court decisions remain undiscussed” [92, p.65] and unaddressed. Although civil servants who pursue unconstitutional objectives can be held accountable through a limited number of mechanisms (e.g., impeachment) for bypassing Judicial decisions [92], more mechanisms must be instituted in order to protect the human dignity of Americans and, in turn, to maintain republicanism as a legitimate form of democracy. Future research should examine the implications of an incremental approach to formulating institutional policies and their impact on the targeted population using the constructed social justice framework. These evaluations should consider the perspectives of the affected groups. NGOs and other nonprofit organizations interested in social justice, democracy, and social change can evaluate their policies for unintended anti-democratic strategies and how these strategies affect perceptions of justice. Detailed analyses of US Supreme Court decisions throughout American history (e.g., decisions regarding education before and after *Brown v. Board of Education*) [64] or an average study of how long it took for a law that affects the disadvantaged to be overturned by the Supreme Court (e.g., sentencing disparities [90] and *Dobbs v. Women’s Health Organization* [91]) may enhance the framework’s rigor or reveal weaknesses. Comparisons between this social justice framework and other social justice theories and theories of change, such as policy analysis and evaluation frameworks, could support or refute the idea of a social justice framework that can accommodate diverse public policies.

The study focused on processes in US founding documents that facilitate and reinforce anti-democratic strategies for undermining American democracy. Therefore, this article does not go beyond the scope of the founding documents to include a comparative analysis of various policy implementation theories. In addition, this study is limited because the emerging codes and findings were based on the interpretation of the founding documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and selected speeches on the topic of democracy from world leaders [26] were later incorporated to add rigor. The historical nature of the founding documents may limit interpretation; however, it does not limit it to any perspective. Further research is needed to support the practical application of the framework beyond the examples cited in the narrative. Another limitation of this framework is that it does not incorporate a cost-benefit analysis model. It does not include indices that measure anti-democratic strategies, tactics, or the first principles of democracy; however, current tools measure dehumanization, hope, fairness, human dignity, and others. In addition, research is needed to validate, refute, and expand the existing framework as a social justice approach to policy analysis and evaluation.

## 6. Conclusion

A constructivist grounded theory approach was employed to answer the research question: Are anti-democratic concepts part of a process or strategy that hinders democratic change, and what reinforces it, if anything? To assist

analysts, evaluators, and policymakers with the formulation, a social justice framework comprising anti-democratic tenets and the first principles of democracy was developed. It is possible for these two processes to operate independently or for one (incrementalism) to facilitate the other (anti-democratic strategies). As a result of these interactions, incrementalist and anti-democratic strategies provide insights into the process of democratic social change. Lindblom's incrementalism theory was explored and used as an external validity. The narrative approach demonstrated how incremental public policy formulation can impede democratic social change. In today's world, knowledge is rapidly transmitted, and awakening is occurring among those who were once asleep. Politicians will soon be unable to ritualize democracy.

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#### **Competing Interests Statement**

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#### **Consent for Publication**

The author declares that she consented to the publication of this study.

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## Appendix A: Example Questions for Anti-democratic Tenets

The following sample questions are points of departure for public policy assessment and evaluation. Examples may reveal multiple forms of disempowerment.

### Anti-democratic Strategies

#### *Nativism and Social Distinctions*

Is the policy divisive? In what ways is the policy divisive (e.g., DOMA [75], Don't Ask, Don't Tell [76])? How does the policy exclude a group? Does the policy unfairly protect one group of people from the exclusion of another? Who are the policy stakeholders seeking to address the issue? Which parties benefit most from a specific public policy (the people, the police, corporations, employers, owners, and financial institutions)? Who gains the least from public policy? Does the policy benefit all people involved (e.g., employers and employees, police officers and civilians, prison guards and inmates)? Is the public policy enacted under the guise of addressing one issue (gang involvement), but the intent appears to be to curb a legal right ("the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" [45]). Does the policy protect a special interest group while it violates the rights of the people?

#### *Misinformation*

How have legislators and other politicians, activists, and scholars misinformed the public about public policy costs and benefits? How did legislators and politicians brand the policy? Who does branding favor and exclude? Does branding serve as a reminder of who is the status quo or the historical treatment of minority groups? Or is it a strategy to divide minority groups and weaken the political power of minorities and the working class in general? Is the policy addressing a racialized incident (between two minority groups) versus the underlying cause of the problem (selective implementation of laws)?

#### *Fear*

Fear is often an expression of insecurity. Threats to any of the 11 dimensions of well-being recognized by the OECD [67] could lead to fear. As represented by well-being, security encompasses mental, spiritual, emotional, psychological, social [93], and physical well-being [94]. Although national security is not among the 11 dimensions of well-being to obtain a democracy score used by the OECD [67], it is included in this framework as it is a relevant topic in public policy analysis and evaluation. This social justice framework incorporates the 11 dimensions of well-being the OECD has adopted to calculate a democracy-level score [67]:

- Civic Engagement
- Environmental Quality
- Health
- Housing
- Income and Wealth
- Knowledge and skills
- Safety
- Social Connections
- Subjective Well-being
- Work-life Balance
- Work and Job Quality

Does the policy threaten security/well-being? Did legislators, politicians, activists, and scholars play on people's fears or negative emotions to achieve buy-in? Is it a credible fear or exaggerated? Can buy-in be attained without fear? Did the mainstream media heighten fear?

#### *Dehumanization*

Does the policy disrespect human dignity (e.g., discrimination, infringing on the right to privacy, due process, proportionality in punishment, freedom of speech, expression, mobility, assembly, religion, and others)? Does the policy disregard the rights of special populations as subjects of human experiments? Are researchers or the policy forthcoming in providing full and informed consent to participants? Does the policy protect institutions (e.g., hospitals, schools, criminal justice system) and institutional actors (e.g., doctors, residents, district attorneys, judges, teachers) more than it protects those whom they are responsible for (e.g., patients, students, defendants, juvenile delinquents, consumers, inmates, and others)?

#### *Subjugation*

How will the policy affect the destitute, those with substance use disorders, minors, and seniors? Do people unnecessarily give up their First Amendment Rights—freedom of speech, assembly, and expression because of the policy? What are the consequences of giving up certain rights? How does the policy hinder democracy, respect for human dignity, or the pursuit of social justice? Does the policy subject the people through ostracism or does it criminalize behaviors the people have a right to engage in (i.e., freedom of speech, freedom of assembly)?

#### **Democratic principles**

Analysts and evaluators can use democratic principles to formulate a counterargument or strategy to protect citizens' human dignity within the United States' borders. As a result, the best tactics that can counter

misinformation, division (nativism and social distinctions), fear, subjugation, and dehumanization should be developed.

#### *Fairness*

How can legislators internalize the idea of protecting citizens' rights? What would make the policy fair? Which groups are excluded from a policy created to address an issue, and why are other groups that would be protected or would otherwise benefit from the policy (e.g., in the case of the crack epidemic, other drug users addicted to anxiolytic and powder cocaine) were excluded? Are there different approaches and interventions used with a targeted population based on race (e.g., a medical model for white substance users and a prison model for minority substance users)? How can the policy lift a marginalized group without creating barriers? How can the policy be designed to include only the group it was intended to target versus including incidental, innocent victims? How can the policy address religious liberty while benefiting the targeted population? Can the policy recognize and address the needs of people with disabilities or other challenges? How can analysts estimate the overall impact of the policy on society before implementation? How can legislators protect people's rights from fringe groups?

#### *Unity*

What could unite the American people? How can legislators deliberately attempt to be inclusive in providing for all people's rights regardless of socio-economic status, religion, gender, race, ethnicity, life choices, and disability? How does the policy recognize marginalized groups' humanity? How can legislators use social media and advocacy groups to support policies that uphold the principles of democracy? How can legislators use social media and other platforms and advocacy groups in a show of disapproval of an anti-democratic policy?

#### *Security*

What can be included in the policy to contribute to the mental, spiritual, emotional, psychological, social [93], and physical well-being [94] of society at large, and if relevant, institutionalized persons? What are novel ways to address existing insecurity? How can legislators encourage constituents to make use of existing community programs, family, and friends to meet various security needs in times of emergency?

#### *Knowledge*

What existing or novel ways to address current problems for which there is no empirical data? Are existing and novel interventions based on rational thinking? What are the weaknesses in current scientific research and the arguments of science advocates? How can the policy include exceptions that allow people to act on their behalf while not endangering others' health and well-being? What is the fastest way for legislators to inform the public of research findings or lack thereof? Are there effective interventions absent scientific evidence based on rational/critical thinking? How can legislators rely more on knowledge to govern than on fear and other negative emotions?

#### *Hope*

What actions can be taken to inspire optimism in government, institutional actors, institutional policies, and community organizations for this policy? How can people be assured that an enacted social justice policy will not be met with an alternative policy that dilutes the effect of the desired social injustice legislation?

*Human dignity*

In what ways does the policy uphold the Constitution of the United States? How can state legislators convince state attorneys to appeal to the US Supreme Court for enactments that clearly violate constitutional rights [92]? In what ways can the legislation uphold human dignity more thoroughly than even the U.S. Constitution (e.g., abolishing capital punishment at the state level, prisoners' right to vote, a prisoner's right to support his children and provide for their healthcare by earning the federal minimum wage)? What can be included in the policy to recognize all people's humanity?