



How Nonviolent Activists Helped Oppose the Coup

By [Stephen Zune](#) Jan 20, 2021

Activists prepared for months, expecting Trump to steal the election. They were right, and he failed.



Now and then. Front photo: Left to right, Doug Emhoff, Vice President Kamala Harris, Jill Biden, and President Joe Biden wave from the steps of the U.S. Capitol as they arrive for the inauguration on Jan. 20, 2021. Photo behind: Trump supporters take over the steps of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Photos by Photo By Bill Clark / CQ-Roll Call, Inc / Getty Images

Since President-elect Joe Biden's decisive win in November, there has been understandable consternation at the efforts by President Trump and his supporters to steal the election. It is also important to understand why, so far, and despite the recent violence in Washington, his attempts have been unsuccessful.

In the months leading up to the Nov. 3 election, many of us were warning that, even if the face of a clear Biden victory, Trump and the Republicans [might attempt a de facto coup](#). We warned that Trump might declare victory on election night before all the votes are counted, that he and his supporters would make false charges of vote fraud, and that he would refuse to concede even after it was clear that Biden was the winner. We also expressed concerns that his campaign would wage a legal battle to challenge the legitimate results, try to convince Republican election officials not to certify the results, encourage state legislatures to appoint Republican electors regardless of the vote count in the state, and convince the Republican-dominated federal judiciary to uphold these illegal measures.

Indeed, this is exactly what happened: in the aftermath of the election, Trump began calling Republican officials in five swing states where Biden won by relatively small margins to pressure them to overturn the election

results in counties that went heavily Democratic. He filed lawsuits based on false allegations of massive vote fraud, tried to strong-arm state legislative leaders to select Republican electors in states that Biden actually won, and made other efforts to overturn the election results. If he had succeeded, despite losing the national popular vote by 7 million votes, it would have denied Biden his victory when the Electoral College met on Dec. 14 and put Trump on course to govern for another four years.

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Those efforts failed, however, as did those by some Congressional allies to throw out the Electoral College votes from some key states when Congress met Jan. 6 to formally accept the results. The right-wing mob incited by Trump that stormed the U.S. Capitol that day in an attempt to prevent the certification shook the nation, but did not alter the results.

Much attention has focused on how the institutions of government held in the face of such unprecedented threats and how a number of prominent Republicans under enormous pressure from Trump and his supporters chose to adhere to their moral and legal responsibilities.

Even if things had gone differently, however, it is unlikely Trump would have been able to successfully steal the election. The reason was that millions of Americans would have engaged in massive nonviolent resistance to defend democracy. And this was likely the determining factor.

In the Philippines in 1985, Serbia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004, and Gambia in 2016, when incumbent regimes attempted to steal their elections, [large-scale nonviolent action succeeded](#) in forcing the election results to be honored. More conventional coup attempts in Germany (1920), France (1961), Bolivia (1978), Argentina (1987), the Soviet Union (1991), and Burkina Faso (2015) were similarly [reversed as a result of popular civil resistance](#) through rapid popular mobilization, massive noncooperation, building broad alliances of democratic forces, and maintaining nonviolent discipline.

As a result, starting this past summer, a number of groups began organizing and training for the possibility of massive nonviolent resistance to a stolen election in the United States.

One of these groups was [Choose Democracy](#), founded by George Lakey and other veteran nonviolent activists. It included a [pledge](#), which contained a promise to shut down the country if needed to protect democracy, that was signed by 40,000 people, including business and union leaders who prepared their members to take part in such massive resistance. The group led 17 trainings with more than 10,000 participants. Training coordinator Eileen Flanagan noted, “We were able to translate the research on nonviolent coup resistance into practical lessons that anyone could implement. This helped people feel empowered in the face of an unfamiliar threat, one of our goals, since we know empowered people are more likely to act effectively.”

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In a parallel effort, a 55-page resource entitled [Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy](#) was put together by four organizers of nonviolent movements. It examined actions people could take before the Nov. 3 election, provided background on potential post-election scenarios, offered a four-step process for people to start their own election protection groups, and included insights on “how nonviolent civil resistance movements have advanced democracy and accountability against authoritarian-style rulers in other parts of the world,” and applied those lessons to the United States.

The guide was downloaded or viewed more than 75,000 times, and associated social media accounts gained over 14,000 followers. Because of its popularity, the guide's co-authors started organizing trainings online, reaching close to 1,000 people, and Hold the Line teams formed in different parts of the country. I spoke with co-author Hardy Merriman, who worked on this project on his personal time, and he told me that *Hold the Line* aimed to be approachable and public-facing, inviting anyone concerned about democracy into a process of organizing.

“*Hold the Line* focuses on how individuals and communities can build from their own strengths and organize powerful and localized nonviolent actions,” he said. “It was designed to be useful to first-time as well as experienced activists. We wanted to equip people with tools to analyze the unfolding political situation in the nation and in their state, a framework to understand how to protect democracy, and a structure that would enable them to lead strong actions based on their particular circumstances.”

As was with the previous cases of successfully reversed coup attempts in other countries, leftists with experience in nonviolent direct action and grassroots organizing had to be willing to work with decidedly mainstream political figures and institutions. This created a valuable opportunity to create connections between that activist base, established institutions, and journalists. Noted Choose Democracy's Flanagan, “For many veteran activists, learning to align with people in the political center was a new skill.” While there had long been great disappointment among nonviolent activists at Joe Biden's militaristic foreign policy agenda and neo-liberal economic policies, there was an understanding that the struggle was ultimately not about supporting the Democratic Party nominee, but defending democracy.

The broadest effort at organizing for possible massive civil disobedience came from the coalition [Protect the Results](#)—consisting of nearly 200 progressive organizations, labor unions, and peace, environmental, feminist, anti-racist, and social justice groups—which stood ready to mobilize millions of Americans in mass protests in response to any serious attempt to steal the election. Labor federations in Seattle, Rochester, New York, and the state of Massachusetts called for [a general strike](#) in the event of an attempted steal, an idea endorsed by AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka.

Scores of other already existing local and national groups launched their own efforts of raising awareness of the threat, mobilizing potential responses, and engaging in nonviolence training.

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It is hard to imagine that the prospects of such massive resistance didn't have a deterrent effect on Republican legislators, judges, and others who might have otherwise been tempted to overturn Biden's victory. Similarly, though powerful corporate interests may have welcomed the tax cuts and other support they received from the Trump administration, they also recognized that the widespread instability and disruption, inevitably resulting from Trump stealing the election and potentially lasting for many months, would be bad for business.

The result of all this was that Trump and his allies were left with contradictory and amateurish legal motions which were repeatedly dismissed by the courts, largely perfunctory support from state Republican politicians,

and relatively small pro-Trump rallies dominated by the far right. Even before the storming of the Capitol, Trump had become an increasingly isolated and desperate lame duck president.

Though the implementation of massive civil resistance strategies to uphold democracy proved unnecessary, tens of thousands of Americans have now been trained in nonviolent direct action for the first time. Millions have considered the possibility of participating in such a movement. This increases the prospects for an unprecedented level of popular mobilization for future potential crises, including the threat from climate change.

The preparation by activists throughout the country also underscored the widespread commitment to preserving, however serious its contradictions and limitations, democratic representative government in the United States. While threats from anti-democratic right-wing elements of terrorism and other acts of violence is real and ongoing, the risk of a successful coup is actually quite small, especially if the American people are willing to fight nonviolently to preserve our freedoms.



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