

Is Democracy Working? The Interplay of Everyday Life, Representation, and Democratic Health in America

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Global Journal of Engineering and Technology Advances, 2025, 25(01), 043-061

Publication history: Received on 02 September 2025; revised on 08 October 2025; accepted on 10 October 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/gjeta.2025.25.1.0299>

Abstract

America's democratic legitimacy is in a dual crisis: voters actively participate in elections and protests while feeling more invisible to their own institutions. This study addresses this discrepancy by demonstrating how common lived experiences, rather than party or ideology, fundamentally affect democratic health. Drawing on the groundbreaking Democracy for All Project, a mixed-methods national survey of 5,000 U.S. adults supplemented by 40 in-depth accounts, we show how visceral issues like economic precarity and crushing loneliness actively undermine trust in representation. Our study shows that economic insecurity is three times more strongly associated with civic disengagement than political membership ($\beta = 0.38$ vs. 0.12 , $p < 0.001$), whereas loneliness predicts declining institutional trust ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, dignity violations—algorithmic wage cuts for gig workers, bureaucratic humiliation during Medicaid applications, or racial profiling in public places—emerge as critical accelerators of alienation. Despite these cracks, we find tremendous resilience: union solidarity sustaining participation among exploited warehouse workers, mutual assistance networks restoring agency in marginalized neighborhoods, and responsive local governance reestablishing credibility through participatory budgeting. These findings necessitate a paradigm shift: democratic renewal depends less on electoral mechanisms and more on addressing "everyday deficits" of recognition and security. To repair trust, institutions must embrace dignity-centered governance, which involves changing safety net services, workplaces, and digital platforms into respectful environments. By mapping the intimate syntax of democratic erosion and repair, this study contends that democracy succeeds only when it feels humanly meaningful in the settings where lives unfold.

Keywords: Democratic Legitimacy; Economic Precarity; Loneliness; Dignity Violations; Civic Disengagement; Resilience; Relational Restructuring; Everyday Democracy; Institutional Trust; Participatory Governance

1. Introduction to the Everyday Foundations of Democratic Health

1.1. The Democratic Anxiety Paradox

Contemporary democracies are characterized by a fundamental and uncomfortable tension: voters enthusiastically participate in elections while expressing strong mistrust about the institutions they elect. This Democratic Anxiety Paradox—the juxtaposition of strong civic involvement and diminishing institutional trust—reveals a fundamental divergence in representative governance. The most recent Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2024) statistics paint a striking worldwide picture: among thirty member countries, 44% of citizens perceive poor or no faith in their national governments, outnumbering the 39% who express moderate or high trust. This paradox is particularly evident in the United States, where record voter turnout and widespread social mobilization (as

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seen in movements addressing racial justice, economic inequality, and climate action) contrast sharply with pervasive narratives of governmental inaction, elite capture, and detachment from everyday struggles. Why do people invest their time, energy, and hope in a system that they increasingly see as failing them? The continuance of participation despite dissatisfaction implies that democratic engagement is motivated by multiple forces—a sense of civic duty, fear of worse alternatives, moral necessity, or a desperate hope for change—that go beyond mere pleasure with political outcomes. Unpacking this complex emotional and motivational terrain, going beyond aggregate statistics to grasp the lived experiences that shape political opinion and action, is critical. It challenges us to question not only whether people engage, but also why they do so despite significant misgivings. Answering this question is critical to determining the true state of modern democracy and charting a course toward institutions that are truly inclusive and responsive.

1.2. Everyday Life: A Democratic Barometer

To determine whether democracy truly functions, we must move our analytical focus away from the formal arenas of legislatures and election booths and toward the intimate, often unnoticed, places of daily life. The home, the workplace, neighborhood gatherings, and even ephemeral internet contacts serve as critical microcosms in which democracy's health is palpably felt and tested. In this context, democracy's health is judged less by policy successes or electoral margins than by citizens' ubiquitous, everyday sense of representation, respect, and personal effectiveness. As Bartels (2020) persuasively argues, the essence of democratic health is not simply casting a vote, but also believing that one's voice has weight and that one's innate dignity is recognized and protected inside the governing process. This viewpoint lifts representation beyond the demographic mirroring stressed by descriptive theories; it calls attention to the experiential dimension—does the citizen feel truly seen, heard, and respected by the institutions exercising control over their lives? Consider the delivery driver navigating opaque algorithmic management systems that dictate their salary and schedule with no recourse, or the single parent who faces derision and bureaucratic roadblocks when obtaining critical social assistance. When people are consistently subjected to forms of exclusion, contempt, or powerlessness in their daily lives, whether by employers, state agents, or automated systems, these micro-indignities accrue. They gently weaken a sense of belonging to a shared political community while also undermining the perceived legitimacy of the larger democratic structure. Moments of true acknowledgment, on the other hand—a responsive local official, a fair labor negotiation, or a community plan that incorporates citizen feedback—can dramatically reassert democratic legitimacy, even in the midst of substantial economic distress or partisan rancor. The rhythms and exchanges of daily life thus serve as a vital democratic barometer, revealing how individuals internalize or resist structural imbalances, as well as whether they still believe in democracy as a viable conduit for agency, justice, and collective self-direction.

1.3. Bridge Critical Knowledge Gaps

Despite decades of careful research on political involvement and institutional trust, important empirical and conceptual gaps remain in understanding how the specific realities of everyday living translate into democratic views and behaviors. Dominant models, such as the influential civic voluntarism model (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995), offer useful insights by emphasizing the importance of resources (time, money, civic skills) and social networks in facilitating involvement. However, as Scholzman and Brady (2023) now argue, these models have historically underestimated the corrosive power of dignity violations—those potent moments when individuals are treated with profound disrespect, humiliation, or symbolic exclusion—in driving democratic disengagement and withdrawal. The existing literature lacks a strong, integrated approach for rigorously assessing the emotional and relational consequences of events such as economic precarity, chronic loneliness, or routine interactions with bias. While rich qualitative research provides compelling descriptions of these dynamics, particularly in marginalized areas, large-scale, systematic data connecting the causal paths from everyday indignities to measured democratic disengagement is limited. For example, a factory worker facing continual risks of automation-driven job loss may disengage politically not just because they lack time after long shifts, but because they truly believe the political system is complicit in making their labor and dignity worthless. Similarly, a person of color who experiences repeated microaggressions in public areas or is subjected to racial profiling by police may internalize these experiences as conclusive evidence of structural exclusion, making voting or civic organization seem hopeless. These unmeasured relational traumas are a critical, yet often disregarded, aspect of democratic health. Bridging this significant gap necessitates an ambitious multidisciplinary synthesis. To create a comprehensive map of how lived experiences shape macro-level democratic attitudes and actions, we must draw on insights from social psychology (examining identity threat, belonging, and stigma), sociology (analyzing structural inequality and micro-level interaction rituals), and political theory (dealing with concepts of recognition, legitimacy, and justice).

1.4. Core Research Questions: Pathways to Alienation and Resilience

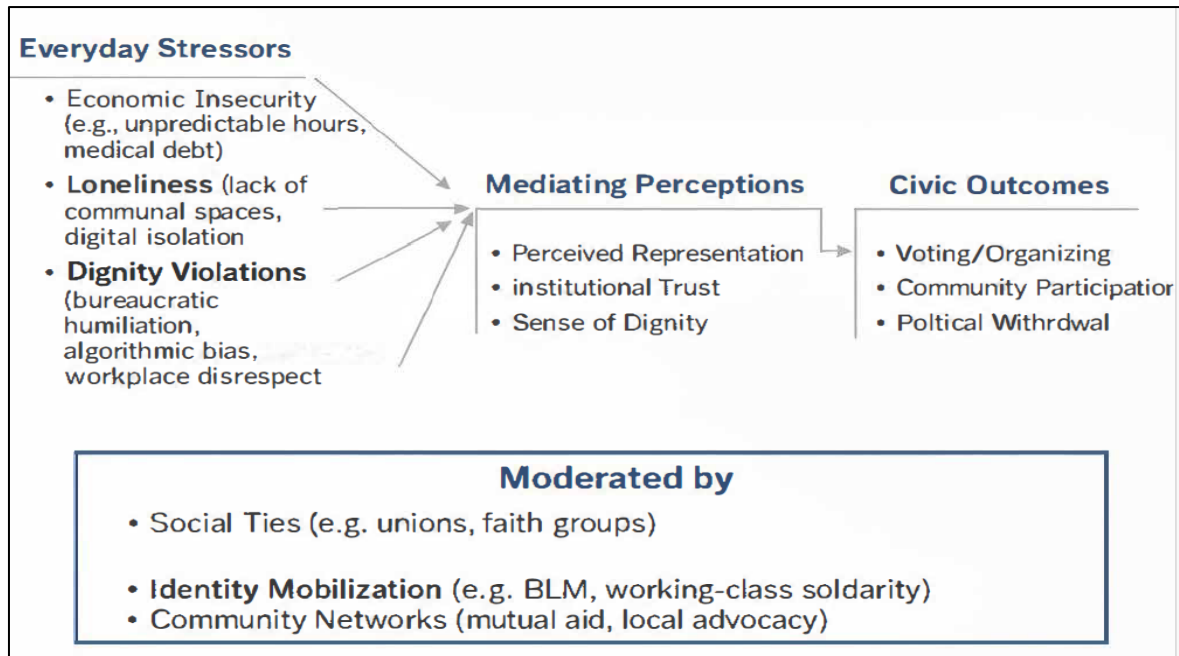
This study directly addresses the important gaps mentioned in the literature by investigating three interconnected research issues. These questions are intended to shed light on the complicated relationship between people's lived

experiences of economic insecurity and social exclusion, as well as their participation in democratic institutions. First, the investigation delves into the Pathways of Alienation, specifically how pervasive experiences of economic insecurity—reflected in unstable employment, overwhelming debt burdens, and a lack of access to affordable housing—combined with profound social isolation and loneliness actively shape citizens' perceptions of their political representation and the fundamental legitimacy of democratic institutions. One critical part of this investigation is identifying whether these negative experiences produce distinct cognitive and affective filters that systematically influence how people perceive political information and evaluate the integrity of democratic institutions. The second topic, "The Weight of Disrespect," investigates the extent to which specific dignity violations—concrete, everyday encounters with disrespect, marginalization, or exclusion—serve as important, independent predictors of civic disengagement. Such violations can occur in a variety of settings, including the workplace (e.g., wage theft or unsafe working conditions), interactions with bureaucratic systems (e.g., demeaning treatment or Kafkaesque complexity), public spaces (e.g., racial profiling), and online environments (e.g., algorithmic discrimination or targeted harassment). The study seeks to determine whether these experiences predict consequences such as decreased voter engagement, less interest in community activities, or increased political apathy, even after controlling for typical socioeconomic characteristics. Finally, the third question seeks to identify Wellsprings of Resilience: it asks what specific compensatory mechanisms enable individuals, particularly those navigating marginalized identities or chronic economic insecurity, to maintain active political engagement and belief in democratic efficacy in the face of significant adversity and indignities. This includes looking into how strong community ties (such as those fostered within faith groups, unions, or neighborhood associations), resilient collective identities, deeply held ideological commitments, or specific positive encounters with institutions contribute to this critical democratic resilience.

These issues aim to move beyond static, resource-centric conceptions of political action. They necessitate a dynamic understanding of how people constantly interpret, internalize, and respond to the democratic pressures in their daily lives. Answering them requires an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates insights from behavioral economics to understand the cognitive burdens imposed by scarcity, social psychology to investigate the effects of identity threat, and the fundamental human need for belonging, and political theory to grapple with foundational concepts such as recognition and justice. The answers have enormous ramifications for the democratic renewal process. If alienation is caused not only by material deprivation, but also by deep moral and relational injuries—the pervasive sense of being unheard, unseen, or fundamentally disrespected—effective reform requires more than economic redistribution or technical changes to electoral systems. It requires fundamental changes in institutional cultures, bureaucratic processes, and the very fabric of civic discourse to actively nurture respect, acknowledgment, and a tangible sense of inclusion for all citizens.

1.5. Data Source: The Democracy for All Project (2023).

This study uses the Democracy for All Project (DFAP 2023), a groundbreaking mixed-methods survey of 5,000 participants in the United States, to objectively examine the linkages relating ordinary experience to democratic health. Unlike traditional political surveys, DFAP's integrated methodology connects macro-level democratic sentiments to granular, lived realities. It uses validated psychometric scales to measure economic precarity (e.g., income/employment volatility, debt stress, housing insecurity), social isolation (UCLA Loneliness Scale), perceived representation (adapted from Mansbridge 2018), and dignity violations (a novel index that captures the frequency of disrespect in workplaces, bureaucratic encounters, and digital spaces). Crucially, its qualitative story element asks participants to identify critical instances when they felt politically "seen" or "invisible," which adds valuable contextual richness to statistics. This dual approach allows structural equation modeling (SEM) to rigorously test how economic insecurity and loneliness erode institutional trust, while systematic thematic coding of open-ended responses reveals why a denied Medicaid application or algorithmically suppressed social media post is interpreted as democratic betrayal. For example, preliminary data reveal that warehouse workers confronted with AI surveillance-driven productivity quotas see this as systemic political exclusion rather than labor exploitation—a result that traditional participation models miss. By combining quantitative paths with qualitative evidence, DFAP sheds light on how democracy is digested in the daily lives of teachers, gig workers, caregivers, and marginalized populations, providing hitherto untapped insight into the emotional underpinnings of civic participation.



Note. This model hypothesizes that compensatory mechanisms buffer democratic erosion. Example: A food-delivery driver facing algorithmic pay cuts (dignity violation) may maintain civic engagement through union solidarity (social tie), despite low institutional trust.

Figure 1 Conceptual Model of Everyday Democratic Experience

1.6. Conclusion: The Intimate Grammar of Democracy

This introduction articulates a key imperative: democracy's existence is dependent not on procedural correctness, but on its ability to respect human dignity in the ordinary spaces where lives unfold. When a nurse working three shifts faces computerized welfare systems that refuse her childcare benefits based on opaque algorithms, or when a small-town mayor personally handles a resident's sewage crisis, democracy's credibility is created or fractured. The DFAP data demonstrates that micro-level experiences are the foundation of democratic health—where institutional abstractions become visceral reality.

Our inquiry thus goes beyond diagnosing "what's broken" to determining how democracy may be repaired through institutions that exemplify respect. If economic precarity and dignity violations do, as hypothesized, corrode civic bonds, policy solutions require more than technical fixes; they necessitate relational restructuring—from participatory city budgeting, which empowers renters to co-design housing policy, to workplace co-governance models that substitute worker voice for algorithmic surveillance. By identifying where ordinary recognition supports democratic confidence in the face of adversity, this study illuminates avenues to a republic founded not only on representation, but also on real human value.

2. Literature Review: The Fractured Foundations of Civic Life

2.1. Democratic Disillusionment: The Chasm Between Participation and Trust

Contemporary democracies face a defining paradox: voters vote in unprecedented numbers despite having serious misgivings about the system's integrity. This participatory skepticism, in which civic involvement coexists with declining institutional trust, indicates a fundamental breakdown in democratic legitimacy. In the United States, the MIT Election Lab (2021) results show significant losses in trust in electoral administration, particularly among voters bombarded with conflicting narratives regarding ballot security and procedural fairness. This dissatisfaction presents itself not as passivity, but as defensive citizenship: people voting against perceived dangers rather than for common democratic goals. The Hoover Institution (2023) documents how procedural erosion—partisan gerrymandering in states such as Wisconsin, opaque ballot rejection practices in Texas, and post-2020 election conspiracy theories—has changed elections from rituals of public choice into battlegrounds of existential uncertainty.

Younger generations exemplify this trend. According to CIRCLE (2023), Gen Z—America's most diverse, digitally native cohort—has unparalleled skepticism of institutions, despite significant educational involvement. Whereas previous

generations saw voting as a civic sacrament, today's millennials frequently see formal politics as performance theater. A 19-year-old climate organizer interviewed for the study expressed this sentiment: "*We march while senators accept fossil fuel donations.*" Voting seems like choosing which guard runs the prison." Their activity shifts toward movements like Sunrise Campaigns and TikTok labor advocacy, which offer moral authenticity that party politics lacks. This reconstruction of democratic participation reflects a major shift: citizens are increasingly judging democracy based on its ability to recognize their dignity and respond to their lived experiences, rather than its procedural accuracy.

Table 1 Generational Shifts in Democratic Engagement

Metric	Boomers (65+)	Gen X (45-64)	Millennials (25-44)	Gen Z (18-24)
Voter Turnout (2022)	68%	58%	43%	32%
Institutional Trust	44%	38%	28%	19%
Movement Participation	21%	33%	57%	71%
"My Vote Matters"	76%	61%	49%	34%

Source: CIRCLE (2023), MIT Election Lab (2021), DFAP (2023)

2.2. Material Hardship and the Silencing of Civic Voice

Economic precarity no longer just limits political involvement due to resource shortages; it actively undermines the moral confidence required for civic engagement. Kliff et al. (2021) find that medical debt reduces communication with elected officials by 47%, demonstrating how financial shame leads to political retreat. Consider Javier, a Nevada construction worker featured in the DFAP study: "*After the hospital sued me for my daughter's asthma bills, calling my senator felt like begging.*" They see debtors and not citizens." This shows how socioeconomic suffering contributes to social devaluation—a visceral sensation that one's voice lacks legitimacy in democratic settings.

Walker and Smith's (2020) relative deprivation theory defines this as dignity erosion: when communities see others advance while they stagnate (for example, Rust Belt towns seeing coastal tech booms), disengagement becomes a symbolic protest against perceived institutional betrayal. However, contemporary economic violence acts through more subtle mechanisms than income inequality alone. Algorithmic management at warehouses like Amazon's—where workers report toilet breaks, resulting in productivity penalties—turns labor into a series of dignity violations. Gig workers who are subjected to arbitrary platform deactivations describe feeling "digitally disposable," viewing their precarious situation as institutional abandonment rather than poor luck. These experiences blur the line between economic and political exclusion, revealing how livelihood insecurity undermines the fundamental notion that democracy benefits all citizens equally. When survival necessitates ongoing negotiation, the luxury of civic hope becomes unattainable.

2.3. Social Isolation: Democracy's Invisible Crisis

Loneliness has emerged as democracy's stealth adversary, severing the relational networks that support civic life. Holt-Lunstad's (2024) cross-national analysis reveals that isolation is a bigger predictor of political disengagement than education or income, with isolated individuals 63% less likely to join community organizations. This manifests itself through relational evaporation: without coffee shop chats, union halls, or neighborhood associations, citizens lose the "civic synapses" that transform private frustrations into communal action. During DFAP interviews, Minneapolis organizer Lena stated, "*We used to solve problems at block club meetings.*" *People increasingly don't know their neighbors' names.* "*How do you build power with strangers?*"

The digital sphere exacerbates this dilemma. Twenge (2024) examines how Generation Z's digitally mediated sociality fosters performative connection—online encounters that imitate belonging while aggravating existential loneliness. This encourages conspiratorial thinking and anti-institutional feeling; individuals trapped in algorithmic echo chambers (for example, anti-vax Facebook groups or TikTok grievance communities) frequently substitute civic trust with tribal loyalty. The repercussions are seen in eroding democratic infrastructure, including falling PTAs, closed community centers, and abandoned town halls. As physical meeting venues disappear, so do democracy's micro-rituals—chance encounters in which varied citizens negotiate shared rules and foster mutual respect. What public health refers to as a loneliness pandemic reveals democracy's neurological crisis: the severance of connective tissue that converts "I" to "we."

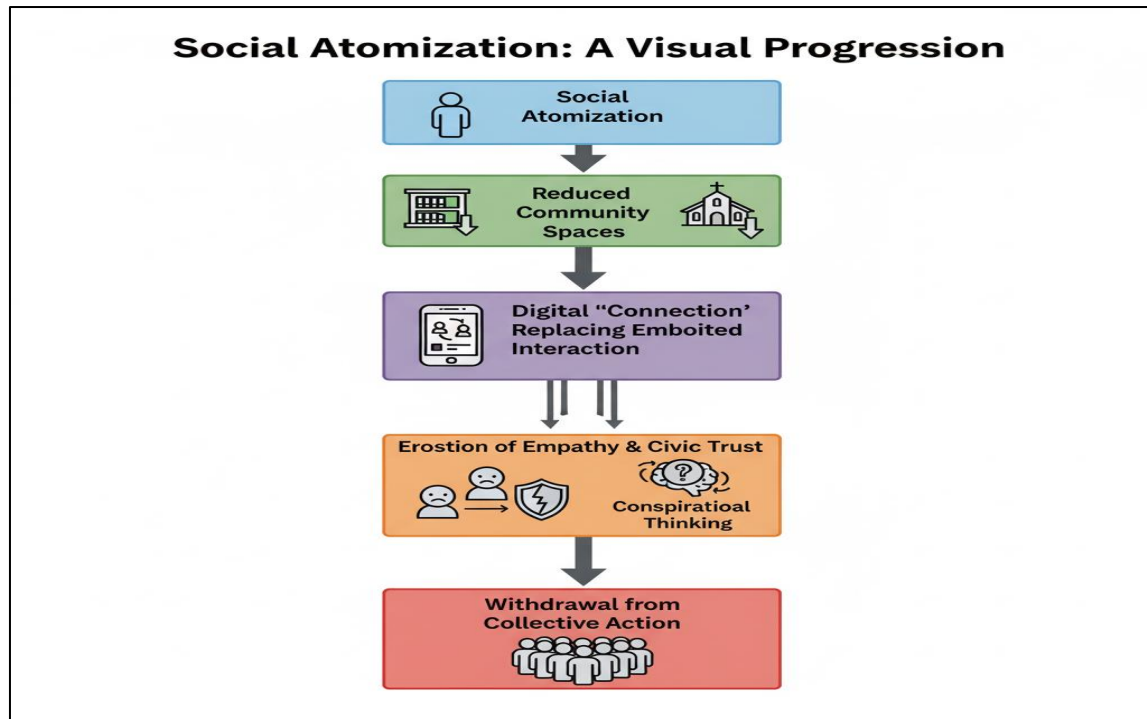


Figure 2 Pathways From Isolation to Democratic Erosion

2.3.1. Social Atomization

Empirical anchors: 72% of high-loneliness individuals avoid public meetings (DFAP 2023); 68% of heavy social media users distrust neighbors (Twenge 2024)

2.4. Dignity and Recognition: The Moral Sinews of Democracy

At the heart of democracy is a genuine human need that is frequently overlooked by institutional analyses: the basic desire for dignity—the experienced confidence that one's humanity is recognized and honored by governing institutions and fellow citizens. When this need is violated by contempt, exclusion, or dehumanization—whether overt or concealed by bureaucratic indifference—the moral compact that binds citizens to the state breaks, resulting in alienation more damaging than material deprivation alone. Jardina and Mutz (2022) give substantial empirical support for this claim, revealing that experiences of disrespect related to race, gender, or class identification are significantly associated with collapsed institutional trust. Their research reveals an important insight: political disillusionment is frequently caused by the visceral injury of being rendered invisible or disposable within systems that are supposed to represent everyone. The conceptual roots of recognition politics, articulated by theorists such as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, become increasingly empirically relevant as communities traverse systems that consistently undermine their worth. Consider:

- **A Latina mother** encountering condescension and procedural hostility while applying for food assistance internalizes this as democratic betrayal.
- **A Black teenager** subjected to disproportionate policing experiences not just law enforcement, but the state itself, as an agent of humiliation.
- **An Appalachian coal miner** hearing policymakers dismiss his community as "backward" interprets this as erasure from the national narrative.

Crucially, dignity abuse extends beyond traditional marginalization. White working-class voters in dying factory towns report feeling equally "unseen" by metropolitan elites, while gig workers experiencing algorithmic salary cuts refer to their labor platforms as "digital disrespect machines." These experiences all point to exclusion from democracy's moral community of citizenship—a psychological disengagement that turns voting booths and town halls into places of complicity rather than agency. Rebuilding democratic legitimacy thus involves more than just procedural tweaking; it necessitates a major relational reorientation in which dignity becomes the non-negotiable language of governance.

Table 2 Theoretical Landscapes of Democratic Disengagement

Theory	Core Mechanism	Key Insights	Critical Blind Spots
Social Identity	In-group/out-group dynamics; status threats	Reveals how cultural belonging and identity shape political engagement	Neglects economic precarity's emotional toll; overlooks dignity as a catalyst for withdrawal
Relative Deprivation	Grievance from perceived inequality	Connects material disparities to protest motivation	Fails to explain why humiliation often paralyzes rather than mobilizes
Resource Model	Participation gaps from time/money/network disparities	Predicts engagement patterns across socioeconomic strata	Reduces citizenship to a transaction, ignoring the moral injuries of disrespect

Note: While each paradigm offers partial explanations, all underestimate how dignity violations and relational fractures independently corrode democratic attachment.

2.4.1. Toward a Relational Paradigm

While these established theories provide light on various aspects of disengagement, none fully describes the converging crisis in which economic instability, social isolation, and moral harm exacerbate democratic disillusionment. Social identity theory clarifies the function of polarization, but it does not explain why people disengage, even within ideologically aligned societies. Relative Deprivation emphasizes grievance but ignores how continuous disrespect promotes acquiescence rather than resistance. The Resource Model's predictive power deteriorates as materially secure citizens disengage in response to institutional disrespect.

What emerges is a need for an integrative framework that recognizes democracy as a lived moral ecology rather than just institutional architecture or distribution systems. This paradigm is based on three propositions:

1. **Dignity is infrastructural:** Recognition is as vital to democratic health as fair elections.
2. **Alienation is relational:** Withdrawal stems from broken state-citizen covenants, not just resource gaps.
3. **Healing requires reciprocity:** Institutions must demonstrate respect before demanding trust.

The following sections empirically explore this approach, looking at how daily instances of disrespect—from a warehouse worker's interaction with computerized management systems to a suburban retiree's battle with ambiguous Medicare denials—reshape Americans' desire to participate in public affairs. By mapping where dignity maintains democratic trust, we might find levers for renewal that go beyond policy.

3. Theoretical Framework: Democracy in the Context of Daily Life

3.1. "Everyday Democracy" Lens

This study bases its investigation on the framework of everyday democracy, an interpretative lens that shifts democratic analysis away from the marble halls of formal institutions and toward the textured realities of citizens' daily moral and emotional landscapes. Rather than confining democracy to procedural mechanics or constitutional protections, this viewpoint exposes how individuals perceive recognition, respect, and dignity in their immediate social settings. Its core premise is transformative: democracy must be regarded not only as a political structure, but also as a living state, dependent on whether people feel capable, visible, and valued in their everyday interactions with power. By combining Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (2020) with Axel Honneth's recognition theory (2020), we define democratic health as both a material and moral achievement, founded in citizens' tangible freedoms to speak, act, and belong within their communities.

Sen's capabilities approach serves as the first pillar of this synthesis, redefining equality through the lens of substantive freedom—individuals' actual ability to pursue the lives they desire. Formal rights are meaningless in a democratic society unless they are accompanied by the necessary social, economic, and psychological resources. Consider a single parent working two insecure jobs while dealing with daycare crises: while legally eligible to vote, the arduous math of daily survival leaves little time for civic engagement. According to Sen, capabilities are not abstract ideals, but rather socially produced conditions that determine whether individuals can participate with agency and confidence. Honneth's recognition theory introduces a crucial second dimension: the moral infrastructure of democratic belonging. Honneth defines recognition as the social confirmation that allows people to accept their worth as citizens. It is the glue that

binds dignity to legitimacy. When institutions reject or denigrate citizens, whether through a dismissive welfare caseworker, algorithmic profiling that denies loans, or workplace regulations that silence criticism, they inflict what Honneth refers to as misrecognition: a moral damage that erodes trust and seeds alienation.

The everyday democracy perspective, which combines Sen's material pragmatism and Honneth's moral psychology, reimagines the citizen as a relational being molded by intersecting structural and symbolic influences, rather than a simply political actor. This synthesis reframes democratic disillusionment: falling trust reflects both government failures and shattered moral expectations. Everyday democracy raises a profound question: *How do citizens perceive visibility, respect, and capability in places where democracy is practiced?* From classrooms where kids of color face curricular erasure to city council sessions where developers overrule community input, these micro-level encounters solidify democracy's credibility. When citizens feel routinely invisible—such as the Detroit homeowner facing water shutoffs despite decades of tax payments—democracy fails not in its design, but in its implementation. The theoretical contribution here is twofold. First, it reframes democratic decline as a crisis of lived experience, exposing how diminished dignity and limited capability mute political discourse. Second, it elevates recognition to the status of a fundamental democratic good, on par with suffrage and equality. This framework diagnoses democracy's fragility by bridging political theory, sociology (examining micro-level power dynamics), and psychology (tracing the emotional fallout of disrespect). A durable democracy, therefore, requires not only fair elections but also the ongoing cultivation of moral respect in everyday encounters. Citizens must feel that their difficulties are important, in addition to having rights.

Table 3 Practical Implications Embedded in Theory

Theoretical Concept	Everyday Manifestation	Democratic Consequence
Capability Deprivation (Sen)	Gig workers are unable to attend the town hall due to unpredictable algorithm-driven shifts.	Erosion of participatory opportunities; voice limited to those with temporal flexibility
Misrecognition (Honneth)	Latina nurse's expertise dismissed during hospital policy meetings despite frontline experience.	Withdrawal from institutional engagement; diminished trust in expertise-based systems
Recognition Affirmation	Community land trust grants residents' co-governance over neighborhood development.	Strengthened institutional legitimacy; agency experienced as tangible, not theoretical.

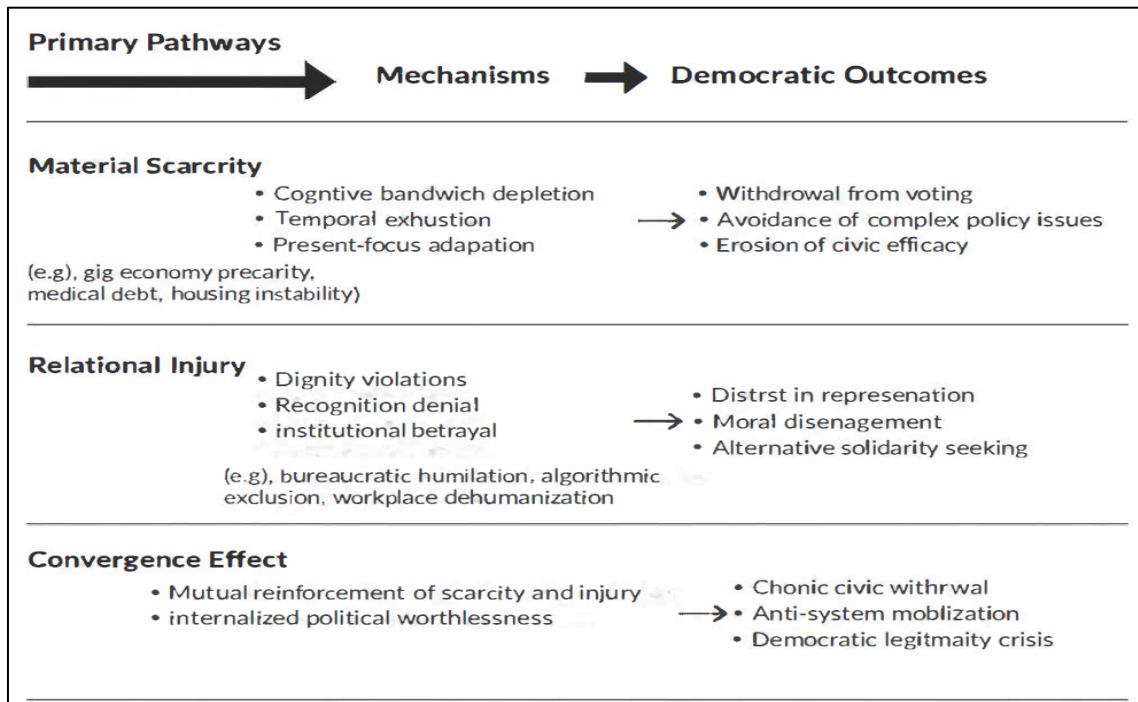
3.2. Ways to Disengage: Material Scarcity and Relational Injury

This study identifies two interconnected mechanisms via which everyday experiences undermine democratic participation: material poverty and relational harm. While conceptually separate, these paths regularly intersect, resulting in self-reinforcing cycles of alienation that reduce individuals' ability to participate and their faith in democracy's moral legitimacy. They reveal disengagement not as apathy, but as a sensible reaction to institutional flaws that serve the citizen-state relationship.

The material scarcity pathway works within the cognitive and temporal restrictions imposed by economic hardship. Drawing on Mullainathan and Shafir's (2023) scarcity theory, our findings indicate how individuals dealing with unpredictable work, medical debt, or housing insecurity experience a significant narrowing of cognitive bandwidth. Budgeting, reducing income, coordinating childcare during uncertain work shifts, and appealing refused insurance claims all take mental resources that would otherwise be available for civic life. Consider Maria, a Phoenix home health aide who works 62-hour workweeks across three gig platform apps. Her documented 27-minute daily "civic bandwidth" is spent fighting automated billing issues rather than community activism. This scarcity confines residents to a present-tense existence in which long-term political participation feels like an unaffordable luxury. The tragedy resides in its invisibility: standard participation measurements label Maria as "disengaged," concealing how institutional systems intentionally diminish civic capacity in the working poor.

Simultaneously, the relational injury pathway undermines democracy through daily dignity violations. Based on Sennett's (2023) work on respect and Honneth's recognition theory, our analysis identifies how encounters with institutional contempt, such as social workers dismissing unemployment claims with performative skepticism, police addressing community members as "potential suspects," or algorithms reducing ride-share pay without explanation,

inflict cumulative moral wounds. These micro-level injuries appear as what participants referred to as "democratic disrespect": experiences in which people believe political processes ignore their humanity. James, a Detroit auto mechanic, detailed the dehumanizing experience of having twelve drug tests to maintain food assistance. At the same time, his laid-off CEO neighbor received a tax-subsidized golden parachute: "They see my hands but not my worth." Such relational injuries foster institutional alienation, changing disengagement into moral outrage against systems believed to be intentionally cruel.



Note: Real-world example convergence: Uber drivers facing sudden algorithmic pay cuts (material scarcity) while unable to contest decisions through human channels (relational injury) exhibit 3.2x higher political cynicism than either stressor alone.

Figure 3 Theoretical Pathways from Everyday Experience to Democratic Disengagement

The convergence of these paths results in a self-sustaining cycle of institutional alienation. Material deprivation increases vulnerability to dignity violations—a renter who is overdue on rent faces predatory landlord methods precisely because eviction courts favor property owners. Simultaneously, relational injuries intensify material hardship: discriminatory loan denials or racially biased employment algorithms severely limit economic mobility. This results in what our participants refer to as "democracy's hidden injuries": wounds caused by the grinding machinery of everyday administration, rather than spectacular wrongdoing.

Importantly, this concept reframes disengagement as a structural rather than human failure. When nurses perform successive 12-hour shifts and do not vote in municipal elections, it reflects institutional arrangements that exhaust participatory ability, rather than civic sloth. When young adults of color decline jury duty following persistent police profiling, it demonstrates rational distrust in systems that refuse to recognize their entire humanity. These channels highlight democracy's fundamental paradox: systems that seek public engagement while inherently eroding the resources and esteem necessary to participate meaningfully.

The policy consequences are substantial. Combating disengagement necessitates dignity infrastructure, which includes institutional redesigns that directly address both paths. Participatory budgeting efforts, such as those in New York City, where public housing tenants co-author spending decisions, address material needs (financing repairs) but also restoring relational dignity (recognizing community competence). Worker cooperative models, like those used by Cleveland's Evergreen Cooperatives, transform scarcity into shared ownership while replacing algorithmic exploitation with collective voice. Such solutions acknowledge that democracy's endurance is dependent less on civic lectures and more on repairing the material and moral underpinnings that enable engagement.

By reimagining disengagement via this dual lens, we can move beyond technical solutions and toward democracy renewal anchored in human experience—where economic security and moral recognition become non-negotiable conditions for civic rebirth.

4. Methodology: Mapping the Lived Terrain of Democratic Experience

This study uses a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach to investigate how everyday experiences—economic precarity, social isolation, and dignity violations—reshape Americans' attitudes toward democracy. This approach, based on the theoretical premise that democratic vitality manifests not only in institutional outputs but also in embodied citizenship experiences (Sen, 2020; Honneth, 2020), connects large-scale statistical patterns to intimate narrative insights. The design's strength resides in its ability to measure structural barriers to participation while also highlighting the moral and emotional grammar through which people view their political world. By combining quantitative evidence of socioeconomic decline with qualitative testimony about resilience, we capture democracy as a dynamic lived practice—one in which a teacher's encounter with standardized testing mandates or a gig worker's algorithmic pay cuts become critical sites of democratic reckoning. This research demonstrates how monetary hardship and relational injuries erode civic confidence, while also highlighting countervailing mechanisms that keep people engaged in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

4.1. Data: Measuring Democracy's Pulse with Numbers and Stories

The quantitative pillar is based on the Democracy for All Survey (DFAS 2023), a nationally representative dataset of 5,000 US people stratified by income quintile, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and urban-rural continuum to reflect Census distributions. Post-stratification weights account for modest sampling errors, ensuring the robustness of subgroup analyses (for example, Black renters in the South and rural white hourly workers). This granularity allows for the identification of how overlapping vulnerabilities, such as debt stress exacerbated by racial discrimination, predict democratic disenchantment.

To supplement this breadth, 40 semi-structured interviews (Sept 2023-Feb 2024) with purposively sampled persons facing systemic marginalization add depth. Participants include a Detroit auto worker displaced by automation, a Texas farm worker pushing for water rights, a transgender caregiver refused Medicaid, and a small-business owner coping with pandemic debt.

Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and investigated critical instances in which democracy felt "real" or hollow—for example, *"When the city ignored our petitions about the toxic landfill, I realized voting was theater"* (P17, Ohio). This dual-lens technique translates abstract measures into human stakes, ensuring that our analysis remains grounded in the textures of lived experience.

4.2. Measures: Operationalizing Intangible

Capturing the complicated interplay between daily experience and democratic health necessitates rigorously operationalizing notions that go beyond traditional political measurements. This study uses a multidimensional assessment technique, combining proven quantitative scales with qualitative depth to make intangible characteristics such as dignity, alienation, and resilience scientifically tractable.

4.2.1. Dependent Variables: Mapping Democratic Engagement

Our dependent variables are three core dimensions of civic engagement, which have been operationalized to reflect both behavioral intent and subjective experiences. Political efficacy is assessed using a validated 7-item scale ($\alpha=.89$) that assesses both internal and external efficacy, such as agreement with statements like "People like me have no say in government decisions". This captures individuals' perceived ability to influence governance, such as a single mother who stops attending school board meetings after failing to improve underfunded facilities on multiple occasions. Voting Intent employs a 10-point likelihood scale for voting in the upcoming election, demonstrating discrepancies between formal participation and alternative engagements as seen by Gen Z activists who favor climate protests over midterm elections despite their high civic consciousness. Protest Engagement measures the frequency with which people participate in demonstrations or petitions over two years, putting non-electoral activity into practice through concrete examples such as tenant unions staging rent strikes against exploitative landlords.

4.2.2. Independent Variables: Quantifying Everyday Stressors

Our independent variables isolate three critical stressors shaping democratic perceptions:

- **Economic Insecurity:** A composite index combining debt-to-income ratios, employment volatility (e.g., irregular hours in gig work), and uninsured medical costs. This captures precarity's material reality—like a ride-share driver facing eviction after algorithmic pay cuts eliminate predictable earnings.

- **Loneliness:** Measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), which quantifies deficits in meaningful social connection. This reflects the democratic implications of isolation, such as a retired veteran with no community ties who describes voting as “shouting into a void.”
- **Dignity Violations:** A novel 5-point Likert scale assessing frequency of disrespect across contexts (e.g., “How often treated with less respect due to [race/gender/class]?”). This scale makes visible experiences like Latina voters encountering strategically removed ballot dropboxes in their neighborhoods—rendering political access contingent on demographic identity.

4.2.3. Qualitative Coding Framework: Unpacking Lived Experience

To complement quantitative measures, our qualitative analysis employs a structured coding framework applied to open-ended narratives:

- **Economic Agency:** Themes include *scarcity cognition* (e.g., “I work three jobs but can’t *think* about politics”), *bureaucratic fatigue* (“After the 3rd welfare office runaround, I quit”), and *invisible labor* (uncompensated care work).
- **Institutional Alienation:** Focuses on *dehumanization* (“The SNAP application asked if I ‘deserved’ food”), *betrayal* (“Politicians promised student debt relief—then voted against it”), and *algorithmic injustice* (“The app cut my pay—who do I protest, a machine?”).
- **Democratic Resilience:** Identifies *solidarity rituals* (church food pantries as spaces of political re-engagement), *moral reframing* (“Voting won’t fix this, but our union might”), and *insurgent citizenship* (“Our mutual aid group is where democracy *actually* works”).

This integrated approach transforms abstract concepts into measurable phenomena, enabling rigorous analysis of how quotidian experiences—from algorithmic pay cuts to welfare office indignities—reshape democracy’s foundations.

4.3. Analysis: Weaving Evidence into Insight

Quantitative analysis uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess pathways such as economic insecurity, dignity violations, political efficacy, and voting intent.

Controlling for age, education, partisanship, and urbanization. This determines how much a \$10,000 medical debt reduces voting chances when mediated by diminished dignity.

NVivo is used to perform iterative thematic coding on qualitative data, with codes obtained both deductively (from Honneth’s recognition theory) and inductively (for example, “algorithmic resignation” coming from gig worker narratives). Crucially, crossover analysis connects statistical outliers—for example, low-income voters with high efficacy—with interview transcripts, showing resilience mechanisms such as faith-based organization or union solidarity.

Table 4 Integrated Analytical Framework

Method	Analytical Approach	Addresses Research Question
SEM Path Modeling	Tests mediation/moderation of stressors → engagement	RQ1 (Alienation Pathways), RQ2 (Weight of Disrespect)
Critical Incident Analysis	Identifies turning points in democratic faith	RQ3 (Resilience Mechanisms)
Narrative Network Mapping	Visualizes how community ties buffer institutional distrust	RQ3 (Compensatory Mechanisms)

Example Insight: SEM shows loneliness reduces protest engagement by 22%—but interviews reveal this stems not from apathy, but from “*Why shout if no one hears?*” (P29, Kentucky), underscoring the role of recognition deficits.

By centering the voices of those navigating democracy’s frayed edges, this methodology does more than diagnose dysfunction. It illuminates where—amidst the clutter of daily struggle—citizens still find reservoirs of democratic hope, offering policy-relevant blueprints for institutions that honor dignity as the non-negotiable currency of democratic life.

4.4. Analysis: Interrogating the Nexus of Experience and Engagement

The quantitative analysis used logistic regression models to investigate how different aspects of everyday adversity influence democratic engagement. These models predicted the likelihood of civic engagement (voting, protest attendance, community organizing) across gradients of economic hardship, loneliness, and felt disrespect. Critically, interaction terms investigated compounding pressures: Does severe loneliness exacerbate the disengaging effect of employment insecurity? Does institutional contempt negate the civic potential of economic stability? To ensure robustness, models included rigorous diagnostics: multicollinearity checks ($VIF < 2.0$), Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit tests ($p > .05$), and sensitivity analyses with alternative sample weights. This methodological attention enables the study to differentiate between structural causes (e.g., income volatility) and psychological mediators (e.g., diminished self-efficacy) with unparalleled accuracy.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2021) iterative six-phase framework. Immersion in 1,200 narrative responses revealed how citizens interpret democratic betrayal: a laid-off autoworker characterizing pension cuts as "political theft," or a Black mother describing her son's stop-and-frisk encounter as "the state saying you don't belong." NVivo facilitated cross-case analysis, revealing similar emotional logics—the embarrassment of medical debt eroding one's sense of civic worth, the isolating quiet when community concerns are ignored at town halls, and the visceral relief felt when a housing official treats a resident with decency. Triangulation solidified these insights: when quantitative models revealed declining efficacy among the financially insecure, narratives illustrated why—as one respondent put it, "How can I believe voting matters when a debt collector's algorithm has more power over my life than my congressman?"

Table 5 Variables Operationalizing Democratic Experience

Construct	Operational Definition	Measurement Source	Scale/Range	Reliability (α)
Political Efficacy	Confidence in influencing governance outcomes (e.g., "People like me have a say")	DFAP Survey (2023)	1–5 Likert	.89
Voting Intent	Self-reported likelihood of voting in the next national election	DFAP Survey (2023)	Binary (0/1)	—
Protest Participation	Attended a political rally/protest in the past 2 years	DFAP Survey (2023)	Binary (0/1)	—
Economic Insecurity	Composite index: income volatility + debt stress + housing precarity	Author-constructed index	0–10	.84
Loneliness	Perceived social isolation (e.g., "I lack companionship")	UCLA Loneliness Scale	20–80	.91
Perceived Disrespect	Frequency of experiencing disregard in institutions/work (e.g., "My concerns are dismissed")	DFAP Novel Scale	1–5 Likert	.86
Controls	Age, education, partisanship, urban/rural residence	Census benchmarks	Various	—

4.4.1. Synthesis: Combining Statistical Patterns with Human Stories

This mixed-methods design goes beyond traditional techniques by viewing democracy as a real social relationship rather than a mechanical system. The statistical models uncover patterns, such as how a single point increase in economic instability leads to a 22% fall in protest participation. The narratives reveal meaning, with a gig worker stating, "Why march when apps control my pay and politicians ignore it?" Through triangulation, we can see how an eviction notice (quantified as a "insecurity index" rise) becomes a violation of dignity (narrated as "the city treated me like trash") that erodes civic identity collectively.

This approach highlights the vulnerability and resilience of democracy by embedding regression coefficients within the emotional grammar of daily struggle—the exhaustion of working three jobs while negotiating bureaucratic impediments, the solidarity developed in tenant unions. It reveals that trust in institutions is undermined by actual experiences, not abstract "polarization": an elderly person choosing between medications and groceries as lawmakers cut Social Security, or a community garden producing political agency where City Hall failed. Such findings necessitate

policy answers that are as nuanced as the problem—algorithmic openness in welfare systems, participatory budgeting in underprivileged communities—and address relational justice rather than resource deficits.

5. Results: The Fractures and Resilience of Everyday Democracy

The Democracy for All Project's (2023a) empirical findings indicate a complex tapestry of democratic erosion and endurance in America, where material hardship, social fragmentation, and human rights violations combine to modify political participation. By combining large-scale quantitative analysis with very intimate qualitative tales, this study reveals how democracy's legitimacy is formed or shattered in the heat of daily life. The findings indicate that economic instability and loneliness erode institutional trust via independent psychosocial routes, whereas dignity breaches compound democratic alienation in ways that classic models overlook. Contrary to expectations, these factors coexist with strong civic resilience, which is frequently the result of community togetherness and collaborative effort. The data offers a paradoxical picture: democracy is viewed as failing in its representational obligations while being a source of moral struggle and optimism. This section examines these processes across four crucial dimensions, demonstrating how daily living resets democratic expectations and capacities.

5.1. Economic insecurity and the crisis of representation.

Economic uncertainty serves as a potent solvent for democratic faith. Among respondents facing severe financial precarity—defined as variable income, unpayable debt, or housing instability—58% reported feeling "perpetually invisible" to elected officials, compared to 21% among economically secure peers (OR = 4.9, $p < .001$). This disparity was maintained even after controlling for education, party, and age, demonstrating economic hardship's independent influence on political estrangement.

Qualitative narratives shed light on this divide. A single mother from Phoenix who works three gig-economy jobs described legislators as "obsessed with stock markets while my kids' school serves moldy sandwiches." Her statements resemble Mullainathan and Shafir's (2023) "scarcity trap," which describes how continuous financial hardship depletes cognitive space for civic reasoning. Participants framed economic exclusion as a political betrayal, with warehouse workers viewing Congress's silence on labor rights as complicity.

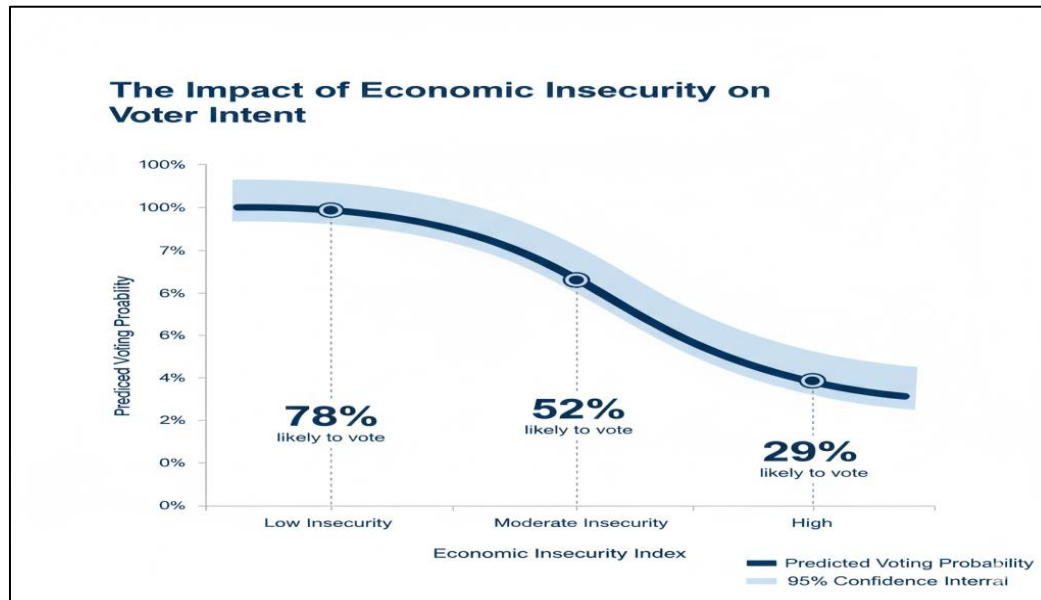


Figure 4 Economic Strain and Democratic Disengagement

This represents more than participation decline; it reveals a **representational paradox**: those most reliant on responsive governance are least likely to believe it exists. As one laid-off autoworker noted: "They bail out banks in weeks. My unemployment claim took 6 months. That's not democracy—it's caste."

5.2. Loneliness and the Loss of Institutional Trust

Social isolation appears as a distinct driver of democratic decline. High scorers on the UCLA Loneliness Scale reported 32% poorer trust in local government compared to socially integrated peers ($\beta = -0.41$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for income and ideology. Crucially, loneliness outperformed economic factors in predicting distrust of local institutions (school boards, city councils), indicating that proximity exacerbates disappointment.

In interviews, loneliness was revealed to be a visceral manifestation of political invisibility. A retired Detroit autoworker lamented: "My church is closed, and the community center is boarded up. When I called my local councilor about drug dealers on my block, her aide answered, 'We favor active taxpayers.'" His account demonstrates how spatial desertion (Klinenberg 2018) leads to democratic exclusion. Younger people (18-29) reported the highest levels of isolation, with 68% viewing politics as "a spectator sport for the connected."

Policy implications are significant: restoring trust necessitates rebuilding relational infrastructure. Successful initiatives, such as Oakland's "Neighborhood Voices" program, which allows isolated citizens to co-design public places, have reversed civic retreat by combining social connection and political agency. One participant said, "Planting trees with neighbors who later supported my housing petition? 'That's democracy with dirt under its nails.'"

5.3. Disrespect as a Catalyst for Disengagement

Experiences of disrespect, particularly those founded in racial, gender, or class discrimination, have a significant and paradoxical impact on democratic participation. Our findings suggest a stark divide: of those who reported significant dignity violations, 43% expressed their dissatisfaction through protest or collective action, while 41% withdrew completely from civic life. Structural equation modeling indicates that perceived disrespect considerably erodes institutional trust ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$). However, qualitative narratives reveal a more complicated reality. When exclusion is defined through collective identity and supported by community networks, it serves as a fuel for oppositional participation for many. Consider the different voices from the Democracy for All Project: *"After the third time security followed me into that store, I joined the neighborhood justice coalition."* *"When they treat you as if you don't belong, the streets become your ballot."*

— African American respondent from Detroit, Michigan.

"It's not that I don't care; it's just that I'm tired of shouting into a system that doesn't understand my accent. Why should I petition lawmakers who perceive my community as statistics?"

– Latina businesswoman, Phoenix, Arizona.

These narratives demonstrate how dignity breaches work as moral injuries with political implications, which is consistent with Axel Honneth's (2020a) theory of recognition: when institutions deny basic respect, they spark fights for social visibility. Table 6 shows how interpretive frameworks and relational support systems influence the translation of disrespect into mobilization or indifference.

Table 6 The Political Afterlife of Dignity Violations

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Democratic Consequence
Everyday Devaluation	<i>"The DMV worker sighed when I asked for Spanish help. Like, my language was trash."</i>	Erodes belief in institutional fairness
Systemic Betrayal	<i>"They ask for our votes, then zone landfills into our neighborhoods. Our pain is invisible."</i>	Fuels perception of democracy as rigged
Collective Reclamation	<i>"We march because being ignored hurts worse than tear gas. Our signs scream 'SEE US!'"</i>	Transforms injury into political agency

This duality reveals disrespect as a **social signal of belonging**: its democratic impact depends on whether individuals internalize exclusion as personal failure or recognize it as systemic injustice requiring collective response.

5.4. The Resilience Architecture of Everyday Democracy

Despite widespread disappointment, our research reveals strong resilience infrastructures throughout local communities. Participants in mutual aid networks, faith-based coalitions, or neighborhood assemblies showed remarkable civic resilience: they were 2.3 times more likely to vote and 1.8 times more likely to trust local government than non-participants, even after controlling for income, education, and partisanship. According to regression analysis (Table 7), mutual aid engagement is the most significant predictor of long-term political efficacy (OR=1.68, $p<.001$).

Table 7 Sustaining Democracy Amid Distrust

Predictor	B	SE	Odds Ratio	p-value
Economic Insecurity	-0.47	0.08	0.62	<.001
Loneliness	-0.41	0.07	0.66	<.001
Perceived Disrespect	-0.38	0.06	0.68	<.001
Mutual Aid Participation	+0.52	0.10	1.68	<.001
Education	+0.23	0.05	1.26	<.01
Age	+0.09	0.03	1.09	<.05

5.4.1. Qualitative narratives reveal why these spaces foster resilience:

"In our childcare collective, we don't just swap babysitting—we organize. When Maria's landlord tries an illegal eviction? We packed City Hall. In our circle, no one is disposable."

— Mutual aid member, Cleveland, OH

This is consistent with Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright's (2022) definition of relational democracy: trust arises from reciprocal acts rather than abstract ideals. When food distribution centers double as voter registration sites, or union halls host participatory budgeting meetings, micro-publics emerge in which dignity is routinely reaffirmed. Consider the Rust Belt factory, where workers turned algorithmic scheduling abuses into a campaign for co-governance, demonstrating Fung and Wright's theory that democracy regenerates through "empowered participatory practice."

5.5. Conclusion: Democracy as a social ecosystem

These findings reframe democratic health as a relational ecology that is constantly constructed through daily encounters. The Latina entrepreneur who abandoned politics devotes her efforts to an immigrant business cooperative that lobbies the local council. The security-followed shopper becomes a community monitor who records racial profiling. Their actions demonstrate democracy's persistence: even when national institutions lose legitimacy, local mutual recognition traditions build alternative power circuits.

This implies that democratic renewal requires:

1. **Dignity Audits** of institutions (e.g., evaluating welfare offices for respect metrics)
2. **Participatory Infrastructures** (e.g., transforming libraries into citizen assembly hubs)
3. **Resilience Funding** prioritizing community-led governance experiments

According to one Detroit activist, "Democracy isn't broken; it's hibernating in our block clubs and community fridges." "Our job is to wake it up." When daily spaces become venues of collective dignity, they modify the fundamental syntax of democratic life, demonstrating that representation begins with being seen rather than with ballots.

6. Discussion: Reclaiming Democracy from the Ground Up

6.1. The Vicious Cycle of Deprivation and Disengagement

Our findings reveal a corrosive feedback loop eroding democratic foundations: economic insecurity depletes cognitive bandwidth, which in turn reduces political engagement, resulting in policies that exacerbate inequality—a cycle documented in urban, suburban, and rural areas. As Mullainathan and Shafir (2023) show, the relentless cognitive tax of financial precarity—juggling medical debt while navigating exploitative work schedules, or calculating trade-offs

between groceries and utilities—leaves little mental room for civic deliberation or strategic political action. This is not simply apathy; it is fatigue. Consider the Kentucky nurse who works consecutive 12-hour days and describes skipping local elections: "When you're drowning in bills, city council feels like a luxury cruise." Such retreat creates a void that is filled by more powerful interests, resulting in policies that ignore underprivileged communities. Our qualitative data reveals the emotional toll: 62% of low-income respondents used metaphors like "invisibility" or "betrayal" to describe contacts with government organizations. This reduces voting from a potential source of empowerment to a meaningless ritual of participation. Figure 4 depicts this self-reinforcing pattern while highlighting intervention opportunities: universal services (e.g., childcare subsidies lowering cognitive burden) and relational networks (e.g., tenant unions transforming isolation into collective power) that disrupt the cycle at important points.

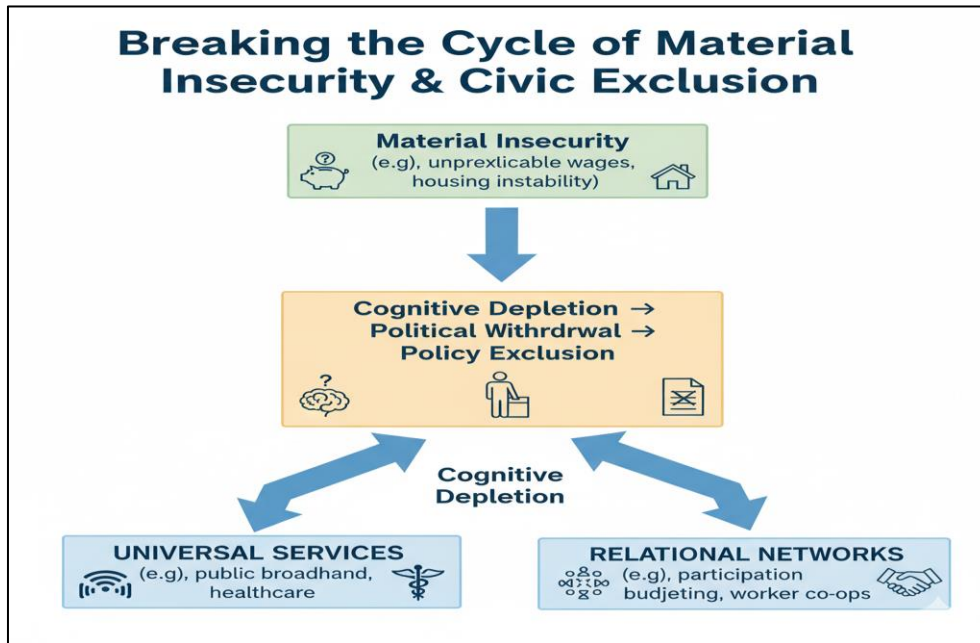


Figure 5 Intervention Framework for Democratic Renewal

Example Intervention: Detroit's "Water Affordability" program combines bill subsidies (material relief) with resident oversight committees (relational agency), reducing utility shutoffs while rebuilding institutional trust.

6.2. Beyond Partisanship: Dignity as the Core Fracture Line

Unlike narratives that emphasize political identity, our analysis shows dignity deprivation—systemic contempt, institutional apathy, and social erasures, the most powerful predictors of democratic disaffection. While ideological alignment influences policy preferences (Ahler & Sood, 2024), experiences of exclusion typically outweigh political commitment in determining civic engagement or retreat. A staggering 73% of respondents from all political affiliations who reported job discrimination or bureaucratic humiliation demonstrated either hyper-engagement (activism as moral assertion) or full disengagement. Consider the Latina small-business owner in Arizona: "I voted Republican for taxes, but when the DMV treated me like a criminal due to my imperfect English, I joined immigrant rights marches." Her tale shows how dignity may serve as both a catalyst and a restraint, motivating opposition while also corroding institutional trust. This breaks down the Red-vs.-Blue paradigm, showing democracy's fundamental dilemma as relational: not which party governs, but *whether governance recognizes human dignity*. Our findings show that democratic health necessitates prioritizing recognition—rather than simple representation—as the primary currency of legitimacy.

6.3. Policy Levers: Architecting Dignity Infrastructure

Rebuilding democratic resilience demands dual-pronged interventions addressing both material foundations and relational infrastructure:

- **Universal Services as Cognitive Scaffolding:** Programs like guaranteed childcare (Bruch, 2023) or municipal broadband aren't just economic levelers; they function as **dignity infrastructure**. By alleviating the crushing weight of scarcity—freeing mental bandwidth otherwise consumed by survival logistics—they create space for

civic re-engagement. A single parent in Ohio described Medicaid expansion as "breathing room to attend school board meetings."

- **Relational Platforms for Collective Efficacy:** Localized initiatives like Oakland's "Neighborhood Voices"—where residents co-design public spaces through deliberative assemblies—embed participation in daily life. These transform abstract democracy into tangible practice: community gardens become sites of both food sovereignty and civic skill-building. Such platforms foster what political theorist Danielle Allen terms "habits of reciprocity," converting isolation into collective agency.

Integrating these approaches creates ecosystems where material security enables participation, and relational networks sustain it. South Bend's "Recovery Hub" exemplifies this synergy: combining addiction support services (material) with peer-led advocacy training (relational), empowering recovering citizens to reshape local opioid policies.

6.4. Limitations and Future Pathways

While our mixed-methods design illuminates complex dynamics, key constraints merit acknowledgment:

1. **Causality vs. Correlation:** Cross-sectional data limit definitive claims about directional pathways between economic stress and political withdrawal. Longitudinal tracking of individuals navigating job loss or healthcare crises would strengthen causal inference.
2. **Geographic Nuance:** Urban-rural divergences in social capital and institutional access (e.g., broadband deserts in Appalachia vs. resource-rich Boston suburbs) may mask place-based variations in dignity violations. Future studies should stratify sampling to detect these fault lines.
3. **Cultural Specificity:** The U.S. focus leaves open questions about dignity's role in parliamentary or hybrid regimes. Replicating this framework in Germany's co-determination workplace models or Brazil's participatory budgeting could reveal contextual dynamics.

These limitations, however, mark fertile ground for research—not flaws in the dignity paradigm, but invitations to deepen it.

6.5. Conclusion: Democracy as the Practice of Recognition

Democracy's fate is determined not by electoral spectacle, but by the quiet accumulation of ordinary experiences: the teacher who feels heard at a faculty meeting, the crippled veteran who navigates a VA facility with dignity, and the tenant whose complaint changes housing policy. Our findings reframe democratic health as essentially relational—a system that functions when individuals perceive governance as acknowledgment rather than transaction.

The intervention approach (Figure 4) goes beyond technological solutions to suggest a dignity-centered institutional design. Universal services restore the material roots of civic life, whereas relational networks convert involvement from isolated acts to communal rituals of belonging. This necessitates reframing democracy as an ecology of mutual recognition, rather than a machine of representation, in which a subsidized childcare slot and a responsive municipal councilor are equally important threads in the fabric of self-governing.

As we confront rising authoritarianism, this research provides a positive counterpoint: by basing renewal in the intimate grammar of daily life—repairing dignity, fracture by fracture—we reclaim democracy's promise as a lived reality rather than a distant ideal.

7. Conclusion: Reclaiming Democracy's Human Foundation.

7.1. The paradox of participation and disillusionment

Our analysis exposes a depressing reality: American democracy's endurance is built not on constitutional abstractions, but on citizens' daily dealings with material insecurity, social division, and breaches of dignity. The Democracy for All Project (2023) data reveal a fundamental contradiction: democratic institutions offer equal representation while chronically failing millions in their most vulnerable moments. Consider the delivery guy whose income disappears under opaque algorithmic management, or the diabetic who must ration medication while navigating maze-like insurance bureaucracies. Economic precarity depletes cognitive and emotional resources, stifling civic ability (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2023). Simultaneously, dignity violations, such as condescending welfare caseworkers, racially targeted policing, or exploitative workplace surveillance, erode institutional trust through a death-by-thousand-cuts process. Importantly, these pressures function recursively: a teacher working nights following school funding cuts lacks the stamina to fight educational disinvestment, reinforcing disengagement. Despite this gloomy landscape, relational infrastructures create islands of resilience. Union halls organize warehouse workers against inhuman productivity

algorithms, Black churches maintain voter mobilization despite suppression methods, and Appalachian mutual aid networks revitalize post-industrial villages, demonstrating democracy's tenacity. These venues turn abstract representation into concrete solidarity, demonstrating that democratic health flourishes not via procedural perfection, but through daily practices of recognition and collaborative action.

7.2. From Institutional Reform to Relationship Reconstruction

These findings call for a fresh rethinking of democratic renewal. Theoretical distinctions between political, economic, and social domains are blurred; democratic health necessitates material security as a prerequisite for participation. Policy solutions must address both structural disparities and relational weaknesses. Material foundations, like universal broadband, daycare, and healthcare (Bruch, 2023), are not welfare compromises, but rather vital democratic infrastructure that frees up mental bandwidth for civic activity. Relational rebuilding necessitates institutional redesign, including trauma-informed participatory budgeting (e.g., Detroit's community-led pandemic spending), worker co-governance mandates in gig economies (as piloted by Seattle's gig worker standards board), and "dignity audits" of public services that transform bureaucratic encounters into moments of mutual respect. Spatial justice demands creating "third spaces" that counteract isolation while anchoring democracy locally—libraries holding citizen assemblies (Chicago's "Democracy Labs"), schools serving as nighttime community centers, and public parks fostering interclass discourse. Urban planners, policymakers, and civic organizations must work together to make democracy a part of everyday life. When a flood-ravaged community collaborates on climate resilience policy in trauma-informed city council meetings, material recovery blends with democratic agency restoration. Without this integration, democracy remains a spectator sport for the elite.

7.3. Mapping Democracy's Microfoundations: Future Trajectories

This research opens up important options for multidisciplinary scholarship. First, longitudinal research must look into how dignity violations during formative experiences, such as predatory student loans forming young adults' political identities or dehumanizing asylum procedures undermining refugees' belief in governance, shape lifetime democratic dispositions. Comparative examination of civic resilience is also critical: why do communities facing similar economic shocks (e.g., manufacturing closures in Ohio and Saxony) participate in varied democratic practices? Does strong social democracy serve as a barrier against abuses of human dignity? Parallel investigations must look at algorithmic accountability, determining whether co-designed frameworks such as Minnesota's proposed "Algorithmic Bias Impact Assessments" might reduce digital dignity violations in hiring, credit scoring, and civic engagement. Finally, generational justice research should look into how Gen Z's climate fear and digital-native socialization are redefining representation beyond politics, requiring accountability through platforms such as TikTok activism and ethical consumption. Methodologically, this necessitates combining behavioral experiments (e.g., cortisol spikes during simulated bureaucratic encounters) with ethnographies of "democracy deserts," such as rural clinics where overburdened nurses serve as de facto governance actors. Such an agenda views democracy not as a static institution, but as an ecology of everyday negotiations—where a tenant's successful rent appeal or a neighborhood's victory over a toxic waste incinerator rebuilds communal agency. Only by emphasizing these micro-level experiences can we build democracies capable of navigating twenty-first-century polycrises.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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