

Defense of Democracy Within Local Level Politics

By Kenneth D. Gantt

Across the globe, the struggle for democracy remains a defining challenge. In nations such as Venezuela, Belarus, Iran, and Myanmar, authoritarian regimes continue to suppress the voices of their people through power grabs, manipulative laws, and the marginalization of opposition. These acts deny millions the fundamental right to choose their leaders freely, replacing democratic promise with political theater. In many cases, democracy is stolen not by the force of arms but by the deliberate silencing of challengers and the manipulation of access to the ballot box.

The United States has long stood as a global advocate for democracy. We champion open elections, civil liberties, and representative government. Our foreign policy often includes helping emerging nations establish democratic institutions that empower all citizens, not just the powerful few. Yet even as we extend support abroad, we must remain vigilant and self-reflective at home—because the defense of democracy must begin in our own backyards.

In America, democracy is rooted not just in national elections but in local ones. It is in our towns and cities where government is closest to the people. Decisions on school funding, public safety, infrastructure, and zoning directly impact our daily lives. And for this reason, local elections have historically been nonpartisan, grounded in the idea that when it comes to our neighborhoods, we are not defined by party lines but by shared concerns and mutual accountability. At this level, we are neighbors first.

However, recent developments have threatened this long-held democratic balance. A troubling trend has emerged in which small factions within political parties seek to manipulate local elections—not through the strength of ideas or broad public support, but by leveraging technical legal barriers to restrict qualified individuals from participating. One such example is the weaponization of the Hatch Act, a federal law intended to preserve the political neutrality of federal employees, but which has increasingly been used in ways that undermine the democratic intent of local races.

Originally designed to prevent federal employees from using their official positions to sway partisan outcomes, the Hatch Act serves an important purpose. But its rigid application in cases where federal workers seek to serve in nonpartisan local roles, often in races where they hold no undue influence or positional advantage, has resulted in unintended consequences. In some cases, a federal employee is prohibited from running simply because another candidate in the race is affiliated with a political party—even without formal endorsement. This can turn a functionally nonpartisan election into a disqualifying event—one not decided by voters, but by legal technicalities.

When used as a political tool rather than a safeguard, the Hatch Act becomes a gatekeeping mechanism—one that excludes dedicated public servants who have already sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution from continuing their commitment to service in the very communities where they live.

Compounding this issue is the growing trend of selective political endorsements within these same races. When a small group within a party uses its influence to selectively endorse one candidate over others in a nonpartisan election, the spirit of fair representation is undermined. It sends a message—not of open competition, but of insider favoritism. It diminishes public trust not only in the candidates involved but in the party itself. This fosters a tit-for-tat political culture, where future endorsements are based less on merit or vision and more on loyalty, retaliation, or expediency.

These manipulations fracture communities. They shift the focus from civic engagement to political survival. Instead of holding our candidates accountable for plans, values, and service, we begin to ask, “How do I get my person across the finish line?”—often without truly considering whether that person has earned the trust of the broader constituency. It becomes about blocking others, not building coalitions. The result is a deep erosion of transparency, accountability, and neighborly collaboration—the very tenets that make local governance effective.

What’s worse, in jurisdictions without primary elections, the endorsement of a single candidate—especially when paired with efforts to dissuade or disqualify others—leaves voters with limited choices and hollowed-out democratic processes. A party’s internal decision-making process, conducted behind closed doors, effectively determines the outcome before the public has a chance to speak.

This is not democratic progress. It is a quiet, calculated form of political control, and it has no place in our local elections.

If we are to uphold the ideals we so often promote around the world, we must first commit to them here. We must reassert that local elections—particularly those historically and structurally nonpartisan—should remain open, inclusive, and focused on community solutions. We must support the right of all qualified candidates to run and be judged on their ideas, not their affiliations. We must reject tactics—however legal—that diminish our faith in the fairness of the process.

Democracy works best when it is competitive, transparent, and responsive. When we allow a handful of people to shape outcomes in the shadows, we don’t just hurt the candidates—we hurt ourselves. We lose faith in the institutions that are supposed to serve us. We become more divided, less informed, and more cynical.

Let us return our attention to the issues that matter: education, public safety, housing, infrastructure, and economic opportunity. Let us hold our local leaders to high standards of transparency, accessibility, and ethical conduct. Let us support systems that empower voters—not just insiders.

And let us defend democracy—not just with words, but with actions that ensure its survival at the level where it matters most: right here, in our own communities.

I'm Kenneth Gantt, a candidate for Ward 1, City of Fredericksburg. I find myself on the bubble due to party-associated activities that may force me to withdraw from this election, simply because I am a federal employee and have chosen to serve my city in another capacity. It's unfortunate—as a retired veteran, I've seen what suppressed voter participation and opponent nullification look like abroad, but I never thought I would have to fight against such actions here at home.