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Revitalizing the Center: The Liberal Wager for the 21st Century. A View from the United States[1]

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For my students at Amherst Colleges, source of encouragement and hope.

Introduction: Why Return to Schlesinger

In 1949, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. published The Vital Center in response to an age caught between two totalitarianisms: fascism, newly defeated, and Stalinism, in full expansion. His central thesis was not a defense of an incoherent, eclectic, and timid "middle ground." It was bolder: democratic liberalism, tempered by the social reformism of the New Deal, was the only political tradition able to recognize at once the need for social justice and the limits of state power, avoiding both conservative complacency toward inequality and the totalitarian faith in the historical perfectibility of man through coercion. Schlesinger understood this liberalism as the political project of a vital center precisely because it rejected passive neutrality. It demanded combativeness toward its enemies on the right and the left, and a mature political psychology able to accept anxiety, tragedy, and human fallibility as permanent conditions of life in society rather than problems to be solved once and for all.

This essay takes up the central thesis of The Vital Center, that democratic liberalism is a combative third way between right-wing and left-wing totalitarianisms, and proposes to update it in light of four contemporary challenges its author could not have anticipated: the rise of illiberal populism; the growth of inequality under neoliberal globalization; new planetary challenges (accelerating climate change, the rise of artificial intelligence, the multiplication of mass migrations); and systemic competition with authoritarian powers such as China and Russia. Even while acknowledging the continued validity of the normative and worldview core of Schlesinger's vital center, we need a deep reconstruction of its programmatic content, one capable of offering an effective and attractive liberal proposal for the world of today.

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Before going further, it is worth specifying which of the book's ideas still stand. Three, in this author's judgment, remain valid and indispensable. The first is the rejection of complacent equidistance. Schlesinger's vital center was not an arithmetic midpoint between two poles but a position with content of its own: the conviction that individual freedom and social justice are not goals in irresolvable tension but need each other. A liberalism that gives up on social reform becomes vulnerable to the demagoguery of those who promise justice through force; an egalitarianism that gives up on limits to power becomes, sooner or later, tyranny. This intuition, that freedom without equality is fragile and equality without freedom is oppressive, remains the most defensible normative core of contemporary liberalism.

Such a stance would be impossible, for individuals or for societies, without a psychology of democratic maturity. Schlesinger, influenced by the theologian and political thinker Reinhold Niebuhr, held that totalitarianism seduces because it offers certainty and meaning in the face of the anxiety of modern freedom (Niebuhr, 1944; Schlesinger, 1949). Building on this psychology, he pointed (in the chapter The Challenge of Totalitarianism") to the emergence of a personality type he called the 'anxious man'," the characteristic inhabitant of the free society of the twentieth century. Against this figure, Schlesinger explained, the totalitarian project had been the creation of a "totalitarian man," stripped of the doubts and anxieties that arise from awareness of his own limitations and decisions. It is perhaps the most precise formulation of the thesis that the totalitarian appeal lies in offering the individual a form of certainty against the anxiety of freedom. The mature liberal citizen, by contrast, must train the mind to tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict without fleeing into ideologies that promise to resolve social complexity at the root. Schlesinger's psychological diagnosis anticipated by several decades much of what political science now describes as intolerance of uncertainty, a predictor of authoritarian voting.

But these intellectual and moral attitudes would not suffice without a liberalism that aims to be a combative and relevant force rather than a neutral referee. Schlesinger criticized both the right, which naturalized the status quo and blocking reforms,

and the left, which, operating within a democracy, flirted with the Kremlin and downplayed Soviet crimes out of ideological affinity, pragmatism, or sheer stupidity. He made it clear (chapter "The Revival of American Radicalism") that the democratic tradition of his day, what we now call Cold War liberalism, was an activist tradition that rejected complaint and evasion and embraced, in times of crisis, responsibility and decision-making in defense of freedom and democracy. From this perspective, a vital and renewed liberalism does not avoid conflict. It takes sides, and that side is constitutional democracy, against any project that subordinate pluralism to a closed historical truth.

Almost eight decades later, the underlying diagnosis, that democratic liberalism needs a combative rather than defensive identity to survive between extremes, remains pertinent. But the map has changed radically. Any serious update of the vital center cannot simply repeat its original formula. It must rebuild it on four fronts Schlesinger could not foresee: the rise of populism as a phenomenon cutting across illiberal lefts and rights; geopolitical competition with authoritarian powers that offer a model of modernization without democracy; the obscene structural inequality produced by neoliberal globalization; and the existential risk posed by a set of planetary challenges capable of annihilating the order of human societies, and which demand from them unprecedented forms of cooperation in order to survive.

Four Challenges, One Attitude

Illiberal populism, a two-faced challenge, superficially resembles the double threat Schlesinger confronted, in the form of two external and clearly identifiable enemies: Fascism and Communism, each with state machinery, disciplined parties, and defined geopolitical projects. Yet contemporary illiberal populism is different. It is not a systematic ideology but a political style that can attach itself to right-wing or left-wing content, and it frequently grows inside democratic institutions rather than outside them, through legitimate elections followed by a gradual erosion of pluralism, what Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have described as the "slow death" of democracy.

A Schlesingerian update must recognize that right-wing populism (nationalist, identitarian, frequently anti-immigrant) and left-wing populism (which reduces all dissent to class betrayal or builds plebiscitary majorities against the elites") share the same antipluralist logic: the claim that there is a homogeneous people" whose authentic will is betrayed by intermediary institutions, such as parliaments, courts, the press, universities, and central banks, which can therefore be dismantled without guilt. A renewed liberalism cannot treat this as a problem of the right alone, as much of the liberal left did over the past two decades, nor ignore that much of populism's appeal stems from real failures of the liberal order itself to distribute its benefits.

Here the right Schlesingerian move is not a moralizing denunciation of populism from above, but an active contest over the very material and cultural anxieties that populism exploits, offering institutional answers in place of scapegoats. This requires liberalism to recover a language of national and communal belonging that does not cede that terrain to the identitarian right, along with a language of economic justice that does not cede the critique of capitalism to the anti-system left.

A step beyond the populist drift, the intensified systemic competition with the new global authoritarian powers poses another challenge to the liberal project. Schlesinger fought the Soviet Union, an economically inefficient regime that offered above all an ideological promise. China and Russia today pose a different and, in some ways, more dangerous challenge. They offer, China above all, a model of successful material modernization without liberal democracy, and they actively export surveillance technology, capital without democratic conditions, and diplomatic backing to authoritarian regimes in the Global South, eroding the presumption that economic development naturally leads to political opening.

In a display of self-critical lucidity that belies those who have dismissed Cold War liberals through caricature, Schlesinger acknowledged (chapter "Freedom in the World") that the persistence of racial inequalities, conflicts, and abuses in the West and its colonies contrasted with the supposed virtues of Soviet policy on nationalities, which Kremlin propaganda proclaimed in order to seduce African and Asian intellectuals. He therefore urged the United States to encourage allied Third World governments to evolve in a democratic direction and to work with them on socioeconomic programs to address the problems that gave rise to revolutionary situations: the vestiges of colonialism, the question of land reform, and industrial backwardness. I believe that in today's global contest, the response to civilizationist narratives mobilized by the Chinese and Russian autocracies in their drive for anti-Western hegemony must recover this self-reflective and constructive capacity present in Schlesinger's work.

An update of the vital center must recover Schlesinger's combative stance toward authoritarianism while correcting his blind spot: even some supporters of Cold War liberalism often tolerated allied dictatorships in the name of anticommunism, undermining the West's moral credibility in the Global South, a hypocrisy that authoritarian powers now exploit effectively in their own propaganda. A liberalism that is credible against China and Russia cannot rest on Western military or economic

superiority alone. It must show, through concrete results on inequality, governance, and cooperation genuinely free of geopolitical conditions, that liberal democracy delivers better material outcomes and greater political dignity than efficient authoritarianism, particularly for those Global South countries now wavering between the two models.

Another challenge is the growth of social inequality, which undermines both social coexistence and liberal legitimacy itself. Schlesinger wrote at the crest of the postwar Keynesian compromise, when regulated capitalism, strong unions, and the expansion of the welfare state seemed to have durably solved the problem Marx had posed as unsolvable: the contradiction between capital and labor. That compromise eroded from the 1970s and 1980s onward, and the neoliberal globalization of recent decades (financial liberalization, labor deregulation, downward fiscal competition, the financialization of the economy) has produced a concentration of wealth that in many Western countries has no precedent since before the First World War, as Piketty (2014) and Wolf (2023) have extensively documented. Both continue to register this concentration as a persistent global trend after the pandemic.

Inequality, then, is not merely a distributive problem. It is a problem of democratic legitimacy, one in which wild powers, in business and in institutions alike, must be regulated. When broad social sectors perceive, with reason, that the rules of the economic game have been captured by minorities with privileged access to political power, the liberal promise of equality before the law becomes a fiction, and the ground is fertile for narratives that promise to break that order by antidemocratic means. Schlesinger saw this clearly and summed it up masterfully (chapter "The Revival of American Radicalism") when he argued that the task of liberalism was to preserve individual freedoms and guarantee democratic control of economic life, admitting no concession at home or abroad.

A serious update of the vital center must therefore recover, without embarrassment, Schlesinger's reformist wing, which he himself placed explicitly in the New Deal tradition: effective regulation of financial capital; progressive taxation capable of taxing wealth and not only labor income (Piketty, 2014); strengthened collective bargaining; and public investment in the goods the market underprovides, such as housing, health, education, and green infrastructure. This is not a fake "democratic socialism" that subordinates the market to the state. It is a restoration of the Schlesingerian conviction that unregulated capitalism is as dangerous to freedom as an omnipotent state, because both generate uncontrolled concentrations of power.

It is with the new global risks that Schlesinger's original framework shows its clearest limit. The Vital Center was written for an era of sovereign nation-states competing or cooperating within a reasonably stable Westphalian system. Climate change, the disruption of artificial intelligence, and mass migrations driven by climate, economic, and violence crises are problems of a different nature: they cannot be solved through the domestic reform of any single country, however robust. These challenges demand sustained international cooperation, at a moment when multilateral trust is lower than at almost any time since 1945.

For that reason, the vital center model of an updated liberalism must abandon the illusion that these problems can be left entirely to the global market or to interstate goodwill, without falling into the technocratic temptation of removing them from democratic debate. Climate governance needs binding mechanisms with real power of sanction, not just voluntary commitments. The regulation of artificial intelligence needs frameworks that combine innovation with verifiable democratic safeguards, avoiding both the deregulation that concentrates power in a handful of corporations and the centralized state control that some authoritarian regimes already deploy for mass surveillance. And migration policy needs a liberalism that openly acknowledges that orderly border management is compatible with, and in fact necessary for, sustaining democratic support for open societies, rather than treating any concern about migration as intrinsically illiberal.

The Schlesingerian point that applies here is methodological rather than substantive. Faced with these challenges, liberalism must offer competent, evidence-based institutional management as an alternative both to the denialism of the populist right and to the depoliticizing catastrophism of certain sectors of the left, which at times substitutes a moralizing language for the building of broad coalitions and so alienates those it should persuade.

The Wager Tested: The 2026 Midterms

Ideas of this kind are rarely given the chance to be tested while the essay that proposes them is still being written; but the American midterm elections of November 3, 2026 offer an unusually timely exception. The approach defended in these pages (a combative liberalism that does not mistake itself for a neutral midpoint) took concrete form in that campaign through three decisions: a) to defend constitutional democracy openly against the authoritarian illiberalism of the far right; b) to back Democratic candidates able to compete in states and districts far from the party's traditional strongholds; and c) to treat the electoral process itself, with the institutions that count, certify, and adjudicate, as the ground on which that defense would be won or lost. Around these decisions the party offered a public-policy agenda centered on the cost of living, clean government, and competent management, and kept its distance from the polarized extremes. Whether such a liberal center can

answer MAGA was, until recently, a question for theory. It has now received a first, partial answer.

The results were decisive. By Charles Lane's (2026) account, Democrats recovered both the House and the Senate by sweeping margins, the polls underestimated their advantage, and Trump's vaunted base either turned against him or stayed home; exit polls found that 62 percent of voters believed the president put his own interests ahead of the country's. Noah Smith (2026) adds that the shift reached deep into red America, with Senate contests in Texas, Kansas, and South Carolina leaning Democratic as the count unfolded. Analyst like Yascha Mounk (2026) offers the most plausible explanation: inflation, corruption, the war of choice with Iran, and the cruelty of the administration all played their part. But the decisive factor was simpler: Trump had made enormous promises in 2016 and again in 2024, and "nobody believes them anymore."

For the argument of this essay, the most instructive lesson is Smith's reminder (2026) that "normal Americans do exist" and in great numbers. Kept divided by relentless partisanship, and pushed toward apathy by manufactured scandal, they nonetheless reassert themselves when corruption, mismanagement, and disdain for their daily struggles become too much to bear. This is the electorate Schlesinger had in mind when he insisted that the vital center was not an arithmetic midpoint but a position with content of its own: competence, decency, and loyalty to institutions. It is also the electorate that the antipluralist logic discussed above, on the right and on the left, needs to deny, because the claim to speak for a single authentic people requires that everyone else be an enemy or an accomplice. The results suggest, too, that the poles have limits of their own. Smith notes that even in blue territory some of the most maximalist initiatives, such as a billionaire tax in California, were rejected at the ballot box. The moral is not that the reformist wing defended earlier should be abandoned, but that redistribution must be credible in its design as well as ambitious in its aim.

Lane's (2026) assessment adds a necessary qualification. Before the election Democrats debated whether to expand toward the center or to mobilize the base with more progressive policies, and the outcome vindicated neither camp, since what won was simply running against an unpopular president. More important than any verdict on strategy, he argues, are the possibilities the result opens. Where America had seemed doomed to spiraling polarization, there is suddenly the prospect of "a new center, forged through healthy political competition." Swing states and swing districts have appeared across red America, and to hold them Democrats will have to govern in a manner acceptable to voters who, despite their disenchantment with Trump, remain far more conservative than the deep blue constituencies the party has grown accustomed to serving. That is the practical meaning of the vital center: not a retreat from conviction, but an obligation to persuade those who do not already agree.

Yet a victory is not a program. Mounk (2026) cautions that the furies Trump channels so skillfully will not disappear, and that Trumpism, MAGA, or some new populist insurgency will likely remain a major part of the political system even as Trump himself fades. Marlene Laruelle (2026) presses the point further: the midterms weakened Trumpism as an electoral vehicle, but they did not dissolve the grievances that fed it: economic insecurity, declining trust in institutions, resentment toward elites. What matters, in her view, is whether Democrats treat their win as an opportunity to address these conditions or merely as a mandate to manage the existing order more effectively, since the renewal of American democracy will depend on the capacity to "imagine a new political future." If the vital center is to be more than the party of the morning after, it must do what Schlesinger asked of it in 1949: turn a defensive victory into an identity of its own. The principles that follow are an attempt to specify what that identity might contain.

Toward a renewed *Vital Center*

The update this essay proposes can be summarized in five principles that preserve the Schlesingerian spirit while responding to a world Schlesinger never knew. It wagers, first, on a combative liberalism able to contest actively, rather than cede by default, both the terrain of identity and communal belonging that the populist right now dominates and the terrain of economic justice that the anti-system left now dominates. In parallel, this coherent liberalism must compete credibly with China and Russia for the trust of the Global South. It holds, further, that a redistributive liberalism must recover its reformist wing without embarrassment, understanding that extreme inequality is not a tolerable side effect of growth but a direct threat to democratic legitimacy. It maintains, at the same time, that an institutionally ambitious liberalism must build or strengthen binding mechanisms of global cooperation on climate, artificial intelligence, and migration, instead of leaving these problems to the market or to dispersed state will. Finally, underlying all the above, it demands the civic and epistemic attitude of a psychologically mature liberalism, in the deepest Schlesingerian sense of the term. Such a liberalism must go on offering what no totalitarian ideology can honestly offer: not the promise of definitively resolving the tension between freedom and equality, between openness and belonging, between market and state, but the civic disposition to manage those tensions permanently, without paralyzing anxiety and without flight into false certainties.

Perhaps my own perspective is best captured by the most-cited programmatic formulation in Schlesinger's book (chapter "Freedom: A Fighting Faith", page. 256), the one that best sums up the thesis that liberalism must be an active force and not a neutral referee, and that retains an impressive relevance:

> "Can we win the fight? We must commit ourselves to it with all our vigor and in all its dimensions: the struggle in the world against Communism and fascism; the struggle within our country against oppression and stagnation; the struggle within ourselves against pride and corruption: nor can engagement in one dimension cannot exclude us responsibility for another. Economic and political action can help restore the balance between individual and community and thereby reduce one a great source of anxiety. But even the most favorable social arrangements cannot guarantee individual virtue; and we are far yet from having solved the social problem.
> The commitment is complex and rigorous. When has it not been so? If democracy cannot produce the large resolute breed of men capable of the climactic effort, it will founder. Only of the effort, out of the struggle alone, can come the high courage and faith which will preserve freedom."

Schlesinger wrote The Vital Center convinced that democratic liberalism had to stop being a set of scattered good intentions and become a political force with an identity of its own, able to fight for its vision of the world with the same conviction as its totalitarian enemies. That call has not lost its relevance; what has changed are the actors, the means, and the fronts of the battle. Twenty-first-century liberalism cannot content itself with defending what was built in 1945 or 1989. Through concrete reforms against inequality, through new institutions for planetary problems, and through moral coherence in the face of authoritarianism, it must show that it remains the political proposition best able to sustain freedom, dignity, and justice at once. If Schlesinger's vital center was born to survive between two twentieth-century totalitarianisms, its updated version must show that it can thrive, and not merely survive, in the face of the many forms of authoritarian power now competing to shape the future of humanity.

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