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The Republicans go full authoritarian

Only Trump's flamboyant awfulness stands in the way of his party's power grab

Read this article in German.

Donald Trump, it turns out, may have been the best thing that could have happened to American democracy.

No, I haven't lost my mind. Individual-1 is clearly a wannabe dictator who has contempt for the rule of law, not to mention being corrupt and probably in the pocket of foreign powers. But he's also lazy, undisciplined, self-absorbed and inept. And since the threat to democracy is much broader and deeper than one man, we're actually fortunate that the forces menacing America have such a ludicrous person as their public face.

Yet those forces may prevail all the same.

If you want to understand what's happening to our country, the book you really need to read is 'How Democracies Die,' by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. As the authors — professors of government at Harvard — point out, in recent decades a number of nominally democratic nations have become de facto authoritarian, one-party states. Yet none of them have had classic military coups, with tanks in the street.

What we've seen instead are coups of a subtler form: takeovers or intimidation of the news media, rigged elections that disenfranchise opposing voters, new rules of the game that give the ruling party overwhelming control even if it loses the popular vote, corrupted courts.

The classic example is Hungary, where Fidesz, the white nationalist governing party, has effectively taken over the bulk of the media; destroyed the independence of the judiciary; rigged voting to enfranchise supporters and disenfranchise opponents; gerrymandered electoral districts in its favor; and altered the rules so that a minority in the popular vote translates into a supermajority in the legislature.
Does a lot of this sound familiar? It should. You see, Republicans have

been adopting similar tactics — not at the federal level (yet), but in states they control.

Laboratories of democracy

As Levitsky and Ziblatt say, the states, which Justice Louis Brandeis famously pronounced the laboratories of democracy, 'are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism as those in power rewrite electoral rules, redraw constituencies and even rescind voting rights to ensure that they do not lose.'

Thus, voter purges and deliberate restriction of minority access to the polls have become standard practice in much of America. Would Brian Kemp, the governor-elect of Georgia — who oversaw his own election as secretary of state — have won without these tactics? Almost certainly not.

And the GOP has engaged in extreme gerrymandering. Some people have been reassured by the fact that the Democratic landslide in the popular vote for the House did, in fact, translate into a comparable majority in seats held. But you get a lot less reassured if you look at what happened at the state level, where votes often weren't reflected in terms of control of state legislatures.

The fact is that the GOP, as currently constituted, is willing to do whatever it takes to seize and hold power.

Let's talk, in particular, about what's happening in Wisconsin.

There has been a fair amount of reporting on the power grab currently underway in Madison. Having lost every statewide office in Wisconsin last month, Republicans are using the lame-duck legislative session to drastically curtail these offices' power, effectively keeping rule over the state in the hands of the GOP-controlled Legislature.

What has gotten less emphasis is the fact that GOP legislative control is *also* undemocratic. Last month Democratic candidates received 54 per cent of the votes in state Assembly elections — but they ended up with only 37 per cent of the seats.

In other words, Wisconsin is turning into Hungary on the Great Lakes, a state that may hold elections, but where elections don't matter, because the ruling party retains control no matter what voters do.

The GOP's authoritarian tendencies

And here's the thing: As far as I can tell, not a single prominent Republican in Washington has condemned the power grab in Wisconsin, the similar grab in Michigan, or even what looks like outright electoral fraud in North Carolina. Elected Republicans don't just increasingly share the values of white nationalist parties like Fidesz or Poland's Law and Justice; they also share those parties' contempt for democracy. The GOP is an authoritarian party in waiting.

Which is why we should be grateful for Trump. If he weren't so flamboyantly awful, Democrats might have won the House popular vote by only 4 or 5 points, not 8.6 points. And in that case, Republicans might have maintained control — and we'd be well along the path to permanent one-party rule. Instead, we're heading for a period of divided government, in which the opposition party has both the power to block legislation and, perhaps even more important, the ability to conduct investigations backed by subpoena power into Trump administration malfeasance.

But this may be no more than a respite. For whatever may happen to Donald Trump, his party has turned its back on democracy. And that should terrify you.

The fact is that the GOP, as currently constituted, is willing to do whatever it takes to seize and hold power. And as long as that remains true, and Republicans remain politically competitive, we will be one election away from losing democracy in America.

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