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A moderate Trump?

Trump's pragmatism is purely tactical. His only goal is to win this year's elections — posing a real threat to US democracy

The fateful election year of 2024, in which American democracy must prove itself, has begun. President Joe Biden is kicking off his campaign with speeches on the anniversary of the storming of the Capitol, emphasising the threat that his predecessor Donald Trump poses to democratic institutions. Trump is not only ahead in the Republican primary campaign but also in many polls for the presidential election in November — despite his role in the storming of the Capitol, which is currently being tried in court. Or, perhaps, Trump is so popular precisely *because* he urged angry crowds to 'fight like hell' to keep him in office?

Matthew Schmitz of *The American Conservative* magazine denies this. He considers Trump to be 'a pragmatic if unpredictable kind of moderate' — and his popularity is explained by the fact that he is 'less an ideological warrior than a flexible-minded businessman who favours negotiation and compromise'. Proof: only 27 per cent of American voters, he writes, consider Trump to be 'too conservative'. Of course, hardly any of the countless authors who deal with the fascination with Trump consider him to be an ideologue who stubbornly follows the principles of a particular school of thought. But is it really all just a question of style? Is it the rhetorical bluster of a populist to mobilise the electorate in order to then switch to a moderate line once he is in office?

How to explain the US' extreme polarisation?

No, pragmatism is not synonymous with moderation, and unpredictability in a powerful office is a fundamental problem. Schmitz cites examples of popular moderate-conservative policies from Trump's first term in office, that occasionally even defied Republican orthodoxy: in foreign policy, he prevented military operations, which went down well with the war-weary American population. In trade policy, he went against the free trade dogma of both parties by increasing tariffs in order

to protect domestic industry against Chinese (and also European) competition. It is definitely worth taking a closer look at these examples. The same likewise applies to Trump's actually moderate positions on health care and social policy, although he has been mostly unable to assert himself against Republican orthodoxy.

However, Joe Biden is also currently pursuing a largely moderate policy. Certainly, after the neoliberal Clinton and Obama years, the Democratic Party has become somewhat more progressive, influenced by the popularity of Bernie Sanders and the Democratic Socialists. But the majority situation in Congress alone is forcing Biden to govern on the basis of bipartisan compromises. So, if politicians on both sides act in such a pragmatic, moderate manner, how can the extreme social and political polarisation in the US be explained? How does increasingly irreconcilable hatred arise among parts of the American population? And above all, where is the great and growing willingness to use violence to achieve political goals coming from?

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So far, the threat to American democracy does not arise primarily from the specific policies of the ruling party — even if there were enough radical measures during Trump's first term in office (the Muslim ban, the separation of asylum-seeking families at the border). Moreover, it is not known what a second Trump administration that is better prepared to govern would initiate when there are no longer any 'adults in the room' to rein in the president.

In fact, bipartisan compromises often occur. If surveys are to be believed, in principle, compromises would be possible even on controversial social and moral issues such as the right to abortion. However, many Americans believe that the country is heading in the wrong direction and that democracy is in acute danger. And there is a double divide here: it is mainly Republican voters, and among them in particular the supporters of Trump and the MAGA movement, who have existential concerns. Many dispute the legitimacy of Biden's presidency and believe that the 2020 election victory was stolen from Trump.

More and more Republicans are even fundamentally questioning the legitimacy of the Democrats and consider them to be an existential threat to the political culture of the US. And that is why they are more willing than Democratic voters to take radical action — if not political violence, then at least the systematic suppression of minority voter turnout and the infiltration of election authorities with Trumpists. For many, the US is

clearly in a 'cold civil war' against a progressive, cosmopolitan enemy that threatens to destroy the country and its values. Which is to say, democracy may be a luxury that can no longer be afforded in the face of this fundamental threat.

A self-proclaimed 'saviour'

No one knows how far these extremists are willing to go to fight the federal government, which, according to their collective delusion, is controlled by a conspiracy called the 'Deep State' – or, alternatively, an elite 'unity government' made up of 'Washington insiders' from both parties – that supposedly wants to destroy the country. Since entering politics, Trump has contributed to the demonisation of political opponents and the dehumanisation of political debate. His culture war and sexist remarks may function as an outlet for some men whose status is threatened, which could also explain his success among the African-American and Latino population, although this is by no means evidence of a lack of racism.

From the very beginning, Trump presented himself as a 'saviour' from the demographic threat of a majority-minority society — a society in which the sum of minorities is larger than the white majority. Strategists Roger Smith and Steve Bannon saw that there was no obvious leader for the populist Tea Party movement within the Republican party to challenge the political elite, including the Republicans themselves. Trump became this leader by populistically exposing the lack of responsiveness of the state and the elites: with regards to the unpopular free trade agreements, the controversial world power role of the US and the increasingly rejected migration. Today, Biden is playing into his hands when he once again bypasses Congress to organise military aid for Ukraine and Israel.

A key factor in Trump's popularity is his support for welfare state programmes such as Medicare and Social Security, as Schmitz correctly points out. This position contradicts the prevailing vulgar-libertarian privatisation line of the Republican establishment. But it is not quite that simple: the welfare state should only exist for those who deserve it. And given demographic trends, more and more Republicans are looking at group identities here: 'Real Americans' are only white people and for some, even only white Christians.

Trump's tactical behaviour arises from a purely transactional

As the party of white Christians, the Republicans see themselves as the last bulwark against a secular society dominated by minorities. The fact that only 27 per cent of

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Americans think Trump is 'too conservative' also shows that a significant portion of the MAGA base wants him to be even more radical. But Trump cannot win the election with only the MAGA base, Christian nationalists and right-wing extremist white supremacists — hence his pragmatism.

For example, Trump is behaving tactically in the disputes over the federal budget, which could soon lead to another government shutdown. He is encouraging those who completely refuse to compromise with the Democrats because the chaos of the government's inability to govern can hinder the legal prosecution of his role in the storming of the Capitol and in his attempt to remain in office despite his defeat. But Trump does not actually have a fundamental problem with rising national debt. His tactical behaviour arises from a purely transactional relationship with the various groups of voters and wings of the Republican Party. He cares about his personal power and his election prospects. This is exactly why he is 'pragmatic' on the abortion issue: he is already thinking about his election campaign against Biden and knows that the American population does not support the extremely restrictive proposals of his rivals in the primaries.

Biden hopes to reverse the motivation gap between the supporters of the two major parties by making the centrepiece of his campaign the threat to American democracy and the freedom of its citizens from an egomaniacal, unpredictable Trump (right alongside the achievements of his investment and infrastructure policies). But this strategy has not yet been successful, as Robert Kagan, among others, points out in his furious warning of a coming Trump dictatorship.

And this also describes the tactical thrust of Matthew Schmitz's commentary: despite all the Republicans' structural advantages in the US electoral system, which enable them to win an election against the majority of voters, Trump needs a broad coalition to win the election. As in 2016 (and also in 2020), enough voters need to put aside their uneasy feelings about Trump's character and moral and even intellectual suitability for the presidency, and choose him on the basis of their own individual interests, such as low taxes or less regulation. The defence of democracy, which Biden is calling for, against a vengeful, anti-constitutional would-be autocrat is in stark contrast to this electoral pragmatism — the threat must therefore be trivialised and suppressed, and Schmitz is contributing to this with his commentary.



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