DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 03.06.2024 | Ekaterina Venkina

The Trump verdict's ripple effect

What the Trump conviction says about US society five months away from an election that could be decisive for the future of democracies in the West

The horns on his furry hat dance up and down as he gestures and bobs his head. His face, painted in the red, white and dark blue colours of the US flag, is exhilarated, almost euphoric at all the attention. 'Trump is playing chess, and these liberal judges are playing checkers', he says.

The middle-aged man, speaking to reporters in a park outside the Manhattan Criminal Court, is one of Donald Trump's supporters. Dressed in shamanic-like garb, he clearly emulates Jacob Chansley, the self-described 'QAnon Shaman' and perhaps one of the most recognisable faces of the 6 January 2021 insurrection. Exalted and agitated, he awaits the jury's decision.

The historic verdict came two days later. Trump was found guilty on all 34 counts in the New York hush money trial. For the first time in the history of the United States, a former president was declared a convicted felon. He will be sentenced on 11 July. Legal aspects aside, Trump's case speaks volumes about the social climate in the country five months before the presidential election. An election that could be decisive for the future of democracy in the Western world. The conviction will not prevent Trump from returning to the Oval Office. But it could play a significant role in the outcome of the election.

Deep-rooted inequality

The American Dream may not be dead, but social disparities are widening, making the road to it bumpier for the disadvantaged.

Ironically, Trump, a former real estate tycoon and a New York native, was convicted in Manhattan. Although his real estate holdings in New York City have dwindled in recent years, he still owns a luxury apartment in Trump Tower and several leasehold properties. Some of the sites associated with Trump (but never owned by him) have recently rushed to

change their names to get rid of associations with him, such as Trump SoHo, now known as The Dominick Hotel.

The day after the verdict, the ex-president launched his counter-offensive at Trump Tower, which boasts lavish pink marble interiors, an indoor waterfall and luxury shops. 'If they can do this to me, they can do this to anyone', he told supporters.

While Trump holds his ground in the ivory tower of Manhattan's skyscraper, the city outside its walls is fighting an uphill battle against social disparities.

Wealth inequality in the US has increased since the pandemic, *Reuters* reported in February, citing a study based on Federal Reserve data. According to the figures, the net worth of White households in the third quarter of 2023 was 28 per cent higher than before the pandemic. For Hispanic households, it was 20 per cent higher. In contrast, the net worth of Black families fell by 1.5 per cent. In other words, after 2020, White holdings of stocks and real estate recovered and grew, as did Hispanic holdings, albeit at a slower rate. On the other hand, Black families, whose top priority is retirement security, are worse off than they were in 2019.

While Trump holds his ground in the ivory tower of Manhattan's skyscraper, the city outside its walls, though recovered from the surreal emptiness of the pandemic period, is fighting an uphill battle against social disparities. Homeless people huddle in sleeping bags a few metres from the entrances to the funky rooftop bars. Shelters for migrants are full, with stricter rules allowing adult migrants to be evicted after 30 days.

As the *New York Times* reported in January, city officials under former and current mayors Bill de Blasio and Eric Adams tried to hide the deepening homelessness crisis. According to the paper, they went so far as to manipulate public data.

The paradox is that while some top Republicans have sought to rebrand the party as a platform for the working class, the flow of money from mega-donors is crucial to the election

Meanwhile, social inequality is at the forefront of this election's agenda. It is also one of the factors behind the growing polarisation of American society.

campaign.

At the same time, after the jury's decision, it became clear that many of the billionaires close to Trump were prepared to rally around him even after the guilty verdict. One of them, Robert Bigelow, is the owner of a space design company. 'I'm sending President Trump another $5 million as I promised him', he told *Reuters*. 'I just donated $300k to President Trump', another donor, Shaun Maguire, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, wrote on X. In fact, Trump's campaign said it had 'nearly doubled' its daily fundraising record after the verdict.

The paradox is that while some top Republicans have sought in recent years to rebrand the party as a platform for the working class, the flow of money from mega-donors, many of whom are personally close to Trump, is crucial to the election campaign. Many of these businessmen are sticking with Trump because of his promises to cut taxes and are unwilling to weaken their support for him even after the guilty verdict. The flipside is that Trump is also looking to this group as he shapes his agenda.

The 'martyrisation' of Trump

Among active Trump supporters, many do not see the recent developments as a legal step and an action within the 'rule of law paradigm'.

'When he loses the case, it is going to be more of a corrupt, crooked system', said the man in the furry hat in anticipation of the jury's decision, alluding to the deep state conspiracy worldview typical of the most hard-line Trump supporters.

He previously claimed that he had been 'rejected by liberals', but found acceptance among Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters. For many like him, joining the MAGA tide is an attempt to minimise their social awkwardness and escape the stigmatising feeling of marginalisation. This MAGA affiliation is bought for the relatively low price of wearing furry hats with horns, cult-like praying for the ex-president and chanting 'Trump 24' at rallies. Will their tendency to see Trump as a martyr be diminished by this (and subsequent) trials? The most obvious answer is: highly unlikely.

So far, President Joe Biden has fortunately urged his supporters to distinguish

The outcome of elections is not forged in courtrooms. But courtrooms must and should provide an important foundation for a well-functioning democratic state.

between what happens in the courtroom and on the political stage.

In Trump's case, the verdict could facilitate some of the rhetoric that could be weaponised in the run-up to the ballot box. A 'martyr' and a 'convicted felon' are just two possible examples of such language.

So far, President Joe Biden has fortunately urged his supporters to distinguish between what happens in the courtroom and on the political stage. His message is clear: the outcome of the election must be decided at the polling stations. How the rhetoric evolves remains to be seen at the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in Milwaukee and Chicago, and at the first Trump-Biden debate in Atlanta, Georgia in July and August.

One thing is clear. What looked like one of the most tedious US presidential run-offs in recent years gained unexpected intrigue and momentum with the jury's decision in Manhattan on 30 May. For the first time in months, there is a palpable feeling: The game's afoot.



Ekaterina Venkina
Berlin

Ekaterina Venkina is a journalist focusing on politics and global affairs and an award-winning graduate of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. She was a 2024 Post-Grad Pulitzer Center Reporting Fellow. During her decades-long career, she has lived, studied, and worked in six different countries: Russia, Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany. She has been reporting for Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle since 2014, most recently from Berlin.