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Understanding the 72 million

How did a convicted felon, who sought to overturn an election that he decisively lost just four years ago, win the votes of so many Americans?

Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* will remember the scene where King Théoden, with his refuge of Helm's Deep poised to fall to the marauding orcs and their 'reckless hate', wonders: How did it come to this? Following Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election, many Americans are asking the same question.

How did a convicted felon, who sought to overturn a presidential election that he decisively lost just four years ago, win the votes of more than 72 million Americans? That sort of thing might happen in countries without strong democratic traditions – in Venezuela, Hugo Chávez was imprisoned after a failed coup attempt in 1992, only to be elected president six years later – but it is not supposed to happen in the world's oldest and most powerful democracy.

Trump is not just a criminal. He is also a charlatan, who has proved time and again that he knows almost nothing about policy, and an aspiring dictator, who has pledged to carry out mass deportations and vowed to prosecute his 'enemies'. Yet he has won not only the Electoral College, but also the popular vote — a feat he did not achieve in 2016 or 2020.

Wrecking ball Trump

The explanation starts with Trump's enablers. The same people who decry 'wokeism' for supposedly suppressing open public discourse seem to consider it *verboten* to criticise the mainly white, older and rural voters who have remained blindly loyal to Trump, no matter how nasty, dangerous or capricious his behaviour. They do not understand who Trump is or the threat he poses, the apologists say; they are responding to legitimate grievances, such as economic insecurity.

While this explanation has some merit, something more sinister may be lurking in a significant chunk of Trump's base. Many of them

may *want* to see their country's institutions destroyed. Instead of fearing Trump's threats to democracy and the rule of law, they view him as the wrecking ball they have been waiting for.

To be sure, Trump's voters might not want him to make good on every menacing promise he has made. But rather than view this as reason not to support him, they dismiss incendiary rhetoric as hyperbole. If anything, they reason, Trump's exaggerations prove that he is a man of the people — not just another polished politician making carefully calibrated statements agreed by a team of political strategists. It is the flattened logic of the blind believer — utterly incoherent and virtually impossible to challenge.

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It helps that many of Trump's supporters secretly – or, increasingly, vocally – share his worst instincts. His racism? Many white Americans are sick of talk of 'white privilege' and even sicker of immigrants supposedly pouring across the border to take their jobs and consume their tax dollars. His misogyny? Many of his young male voters, feeling outdone or rejected by their female counterparts, like the idea of reminding women of 'their place'. His threats to punish 'enemies within'? The answer is self-evident: they are enemies.

Trump's backers dismiss all other criticism as well. The experts who warn that Trump's plans will impose high costs on the US economy fail to appreciate his exceptional business acumen. Those who highlight his self-dealing to enrich himself and his family – Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner raised billions from Saudi Arabia for his investment fund – are overstating its scale and impact.

As for Trump's vulgarity, it is a non-issue — even, apparently, for his evangelical supporters. Trump might feign fellatio on his microphone at a rally, but he has also been chosen by God to act as a modern-day Cyrus. Just as the Persian king freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity, Trump's divine mission is to liberate (white) Christians from the 'prison' that is modern America, recreating the country as a bastion of evangelical values. Surely it was the hand of God that deflected the assassin's bullet at a rally this summer.

High-profile support

Trump had plenty of help in converting voters to his debauched religion. *Fox News*, Rupert Murdoch's highly profitable propaganda machine, distorted discourse and stoked outrage. Social-media giants largely – and, in the case of Elon Musk's X, completely – abandoned their efforts to contain disinformation.

Tech billionaires have also supported Trump's rise more directly – Musk was Trump's second-largest financial backer during this campaign – in the hopes of benefiting from a deregulation spree. (Tesla shares have already surged.) Such tech titans – together with the silent powerbrokers of Wall Street, like Jamie Dimon – are the modern American equivalents of the German business leaders who thought they could control Adolf Hitler.

Trump's fellow Republicans are under no such illusions, which helps to explain why even those who once attempted to challenge him have rolled over for him. Former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley mounted the most formidable challenge to Trump in the Republican primaries, only to endorse him as soon as she dropped out of the race, presumably to salvage her own political career.

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And then there are the cowardly Republican politicians who have helped Trump to shake the political radioactivity that should have engulfed him after he incited his supporters to march on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. The next day, figures like Senators Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham finally seemed prepared to wash their hands of Trump. But days later, they refused to vote for his impeachment. And when Trump launched his campaign for the party's nomination this year, they quickly fell into line.

Nobody wants to be on a dictator's bad side. And, given the US Supreme Court's ruling granting the US president virtual immunity from criminal prosecution, Trump will be nothing if not a dictator. If he wants to impose enormous tariffs on China, or withdraw from NATO, or throw immigrants into holding camps, he will. The same goes for punishing those who have defied him.

How did it come to this? A majority of white Americans have lost faith in their country. Members of the profit-hungry business elite have gained an unfettered ability to use their platforms and pocketbooks to shape

politics. And Republican politicians have sacrificed their own integrity – and American democracy – at the altar of power.

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Another take on the subject can be found here.



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