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Why America's democracy is (still) at stake

The Trump presidency had severely shaken the pillars of American democracy. But it's the Republican Party that is determined to tear them down

On 1 June more than a hundred democracy scholars released a 'Statement of Concern' about threats to American democracy. Although warnings about problems with American democracy are not new, this declared that the United States was at a turning point: it argued that the 'future of American democracy' was 'fundamentally at stake'.

To outsiders, such a statement might seem exaggerated — even apocalyptic — especially given the fact that now Joe Biden, rather than Donald Trump, is president. But students of European politics should pay attention to this statement, and the debate about democracy it has reignited in the US. Its dire warning was motivated by the type of corrosion of democratic norms and institutions that represents the gravest threat to democracy in Europe and other parts of the world today.

Trump's presidency

Scholars of Trump's presidency — including many who signed the statement — raised alarms about the threat he presented to American democracy. These were, unsurprisingly, dismissed by Republicans, some of whom in turn claimed that Democrats represented the real threat to democracy and freedom, since they advocated 'Venezuelan-style socialism' and 'political correctness run amok'. Perhaps more surprising is that some commentators ostensibly on the left dismissed such claims as well, insisting that rather than Trump the real threats to democracy came from unbridled capitalism, big corporations, American imperialism and so on.

Part of the reason many observers were able to dismiss the threat of Trump is that during his presidency no single dramatic or unequivocal move to overthrow democracy was taken — along the lines, for example of the coups that typically toppled democracy in the past or more

recently put an end to the democratic opening in Myanmar. But scholars of democracy understood that threats to democracy can be subtle as well as dramatic, ambiguous as well as unequivocal — and such threats have, perhaps counter-intuitively, become even clearer since Trump left office.

Not only did Republicans indulge Trump, rather than condemn or constrain him, enabling him to become increasingly brazen over time. The party itself grew increasingly illiberal and anti-democratic during his period in office.

Although Trump's illiberalism, corruption, lying and racism received constant attention from commentators during his time in the White House, what made him a real threat to democracy was not his personal inclinations but rather the responses of other political actors, particularly the Republican party, to him. Not only did Republicans indulge Trump, rather than condemn or constrain him, enabling him to become increasingly brazen over time. The party itself grew increasingly illiberal and anti-democratic during his period in office.

The result is that, even though Trump lost the election, American politics has not returned to 'normal'. Indeed, Trump's removal has made clearer the nature and severity of the threat to American democracy. We now have a two-party system where one of the two parties prioritises partisanship over democracy and is accordingly willing to promote policies that would seriously, if not fatally, impair the functioning and legitimacy of democracy's core foundation — free and fair elections.

Restricting voting access

Motivated by false claims of electoral fraud in 2020, Republicans are trying to limit access to voting and politicise electoral administration and oversight.

While it is certainly possible to have good-faith conversations about the conditions under which mail-in and absentee ballots are distributed and counted, whether identification should be required to vote (and, if so, what type) and so on, Republican efforts to restrict voting access are not motivated by a general desire to improve the quality of American elections. Instead, Trump and his Republican supporters claim mail-in and absentee voting and a lack of stringent voter-ID requirements enabled votes to be illegally cast and miscounted.

Since there is no evidence for such claims, it is clear that Republican attempts to restrict voting access are instead motivated by a desire to increase the difficulty of voting for groups viewed as more likely to support Democrats. Given our country's long history of attempts to

restrict African-Americans ability to vote, these efforts by Republicans are particularly destructive and divisive.

Republican-controlled legislatures are giving themselves the power to override electoral outcomes, permit Republican officials to take over local election boards, entrench partisan redistricting and more.

But even more dangerous than these attempts to restrict voting access — if only because the efficacy of such efforts in substantially diminishing voter turnout is unclear — are Republican attempts to increase partisan control over electoral administration and oversight. Republican-controlled legislatures are giving themselves the power to override electoral outcomes, permit Republican officials to take over local election boards, entrench partisan redistricting and more.

Should these 'reforms' be enacted, the non-partisan nature of American elections would be dramatically, perhaps fatally, diminished. For example, it is quite possible that, had these reforms been in place before November 2020, Trump's attempts to overturn the electoral outcomes in key battleground states would have succeeded. Had that occurred, of course, the US would have ceased being a democracy in any real sense of the word.

A warning to western democracies

Whatever one thinks of the policies pursued by Biden, neither he nor the Democratic party threatens the foundations of American democracy; the Republican party currently does. The party's insistence on electoral fraud and the policies it has tried to justify in response are a threat to the health of America's democracy. Without an agreement on basic facts and free and fair elections, a democracy cannot survive.

What is going on in the US should thus be a warning to small democrats worldwide. Particularly in democracies of long standing, as in western Europe and the US, coups or direct attacks do not represent the most important threat to democracy. The real threat comes from a gradual corrosion of a commitment to democratic norms and institutions.

If Americans in general, and Republicans in particular, do not begin prioritising democracy over partisan goals and recognise how fragile its health currently is, our country may indeed find itself on a slippery slope to long-term dysfunction and decay.

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