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Roundtable

APG ROUNDTABLE: SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON THE AMERICAN RIGHT

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In the run-up to the 2024 election, we are delighted to be publishing this roundtable on 'Scholarly Perspectives on the American Right', edited by Josephine Harmon and Richard Johnson, with contributions from members of the American Politics Group. We are also delighted to join the APG in celebrating their fiftieth anniversary. A sister organization of BAAS, the APG has done much to promote and expand the study of US politics in Britain and beyond, as the geographic span of the roundtable's contributors demonstrates.

The contributors provide accessible and incisive interventions into a key question raised by both the campaign and the contemporary United States: what models, methods, and contexts allow us to best understand the rise of the American right, and to predict its future course? As such, they are of interest to both specialists and nonspecialists and are also ideal classroom aids for teachers of American culture, history, and politics in universities and schools.

The roundtable also acts a prologue to a special issue of the *Journal of American Studies* on the 2024 election scheduled for 2025. In that issue, scholars – including some contributors to this roundtable – address questions that resonate with both the current presidential campaign and the wider concerns of American studies, including the experiences and practices of voters of colour, the place of populism in democracy, and politics in the Anthropocene. Alongside these articles we will publish conversations between leading scholars from across American studies, that examine the campaign and result through key lenses for the discipline today. Broad-ranging and interdisciplinary explorations of the 2024 election will continue in the Reader's Room, which will offer two roundtables on literary elections and presidential assassinations in popular culture, a special edition of "The Talk," with Princeton's James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor Eddie Glaude reflecting on the election and the 6 January insurrection four years on, and a series of specially commissioned book reviews.

Whatever the outcome in November, our hope is that the special issue will illuminate the complex histories and imaginaries that laid the groundwork for this "unprecedented" election, and demonstrate the insights that Americanists from across our diverse field can bring to the challenges facing the United States and its democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Politics Group (APG) of the Political Studies Association (PSA) in the UK celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a conference earlier this year at Queen Mary University of London. The APG exists to study US politics from a UK base, but over the years it has come to attract scholars from around the globe, especially the rest of Europe. Additionally, the APG attracts its fair share of US-based scholars, many of whom enjoy the international flavour of our organization and who see intellectual merit in studying their own country from the outside.

The contributors to this collection reflect that geographical scope, with authors based at universities in Britain, Ireland, Denmark, and the United States. Nearly all of these authors presented at the APG's fiftieth-anniversary conference. This roundtable brings them together due to their common interest in a major concern of contemporary US politics: how do we make sense of the American right today?

Many contributors at the conference dealt explicitly or implicitly with this question. The answers have many facets. The American right has been reconfigured since the arrival of Donald Trump on the presidential debate stage nearly a decade ago. Its changing nature has profound implications for how scholars of the US study its political campaigns, public policy, political institutions, political culture, and even democracy itself.

Indeed, a core debate of the Trump era is whether the concept of democracy, and of American democracy itself as an institution and tradition, is coming under pressure. Whether the Trump movement is a democratic or antidemocratic one, whether democratic institutions would be imperilled by a second Trump presidency, and whether such a problem is part of a structural shift in Western democracies are all questions that must be considered as we head into the Harris–Trump presidential race. If one core theme defines our roundtable, as it does for the conversations in offices and bars around the world, it is this one.

The contributions to this roundtable unpack these themes. Josephine Harmon considers the long-term democratic crisis in America that Trump manifests, whether one loves or hates him, and how this could unfold in a post-Trump future. Lane Crothers raises the alarm for democracy itself. John Kenneth White and Matthew Kerbel argue that the current two-party system is under serious strain and that current dynamics are simply unsustainable. Eddie Ashbee and Alex Waddan unpick the policy agenda of the "MAGA" Republican Party and place President Donald Trump in "political time." Clodagh Harrington examines the new electoral base of the Republican Party and the likely shifts in policy this might usher in. Richard Johnson looks back at the policy strengths but political weaknesses of the outgoing Biden administration, as it struggled to adapt to a new political reality.

Through all of these contributions, we hope to provide potential answers to these pressing issues that have redefined the discussions of political scientists and theorists of American politics and scholars of American studies alike.

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WHAT LIES AHEAD? THE POLITICAL CRISIS FOR POST-TRUMP AMERICA

The 2024 US presidential election has been billed as a fight for American democracy. It is an unwelcome rematch, and a harbinger that American politics has been commandeered by the spectre of the populist right. The American political struggle of today is mirrored in Europe, in the recent tensions around the European Parliament elections and France's snap legislative elections called by Macron in their wake. The US election is, then, one of multiple ongoing struggles between populists seeking to disrupt the status quo and establishment politics seeking to maintain institutional equilibrium. This is axiomatic of democratic politics in the 2020s.

Why American politics has succumbed to febrile partisanship seems part of a longer-term decline in the promise of its social contract, the mythologized American Dream. The question is whether American democracy itself has become a wedge issue.[1] This, it appears, is a casualty of social inequality and globalization's impact on national identity and working incomes in the West.

The main contention in our roundtable is the red elephant in the room, namely Donald Trump, the Republicans, the election's potential outcome and the state of American democracy. The core debate among our authors is how far Trump is an aberration who is fundamentally changing America, through culture, voter expectation, changing policy norms and views of democracy itself, and whether his legacy will last.

But while attention is fixed on a potential Trump comeback, the next political crisis for America will be where to head after Trump. For this first contribution, I want to consider how political styles and vision will recover in the vacuum that Trump will leave. Both parties have become consumed by Trump, one eaten by Trumpism and the other fated to fight against it. As for all of our contributions, discussing America's future after November is a task akin to reading tea leaves. My intervention here is less a prediction of American apocalypse and more one of a crisis of direction for America. Trump has disrupted the unified norms of the American public and rendered questionable what the shape of its politics will be within the decade. Where America goes after Trump – whether the clock starts now or in four years' time – is an equivocal blank space. This is in part precisely because Trump has consumed American public life, its airtime saturated by his image and imitable mannerisms, making the days of Obama a distant memory. This crisis in American political identity is part of a seminal shift, perhaps contingent on Trump but symptomatic of a wider

[1] With Trump and many in the Republican Party challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election result and evidence of the Trump base's increasing distrust in a system that both parties historically imbued with sacred significance in its nation's Constitution.

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crisis within Western liberal democracy. The path after Trump, whether now or in the future, will be the next crucial question for America.

Trumpism as a political project

Trumpism is a parody of Republicanism and of George W. Bush's red-meat pro-Americanism that has occurred first as farce and then as tragedy, to twist Marx. Trump is simply so American, embodying, in a way stranger than fiction, the cultural phenotype of America. Perhaps this is why he commands an almost religious following, with Internet memes caricaturing Trump as a muscle-ripped Captain America. However, to consider him as Sarah Palin-plus confuses her red-meat Tea Party Republicanism, which is protectionist and reactionary, with the iconoclasm of Trump. Trumpism is a mutation of Republicanism. His is a change in Republican vision and style, with a darker view of a tarnished American Dream, which we glimpsed in Trump's dystopian 2017 inauguration speech.

Trump's rise is a crisis in American democracy. This is clear, whether you are his supporter or opponent. Love him or hate him, Trump arose because of a problem in American democracy, however much the left and right disagree whether he is rectifying or worsening that problem. Notwithstanding Democrats' bitterness about Comey's last-minute intervention regarding Clinton's emails in 2016, which, they argue, disadvantaged her in the election, they as well as Republicans acknowledge that discontent among a sufficient number of voters elected Trump and his politics.[2] He is, as he puts it, their "voice." Trump is in this sense an agent of revolution. This is at the heart of the Trump political project, as an instinctive ideology comprising a vision of America based on abrasive exceptionalism and cultural antielitism. While his movement is in a sense a retaking of American democracy, it is simultaneously, in this way, a crisis.

This crisis manifests in, among other things, a Trumpist political style and vision, characteristic of the populist shift that is happening internationally. His rhetoric of a broken America and widespread disenchantment with the wealth divide in post-industrial America seems to resonate, in particular with the former industrial middle class. Trump is symptomatic of a populist movement creating a realignment in Western politics, where the character of politics has shifted to an antiestablishment ethos. This simultaneous norm disruption in Western liberal democracies within just a few years is a puzzle that all of us must continue to address. It suggests a structural shift in economic relations and social life due to technology, globalization and migratory flows. There is also an unmistakable class warfare sublimated within the culturally right, economically left (at least in rhetoric) populism of 2016 onwards. We may see not the end of this politics but its entrenchment into a less incipient form in Europe. Whether this is the beginning or the end for Trumpism, as an American version of a global populism, is unclear. It seems, more acutely, a crisis within Western liberal democracy.

A key question for the post-Trump era will be the direction parties take after him, to rehabilitate or embed his vision. For Trump, communication and vision are the point, his cosmetic branding and communication having outsize importance, pointing in a direction of travel like a giant foam finger. The medium, as it were, is the message.

[2] James Comey announced his decision to reopen the FBI's investigation of Hilary Clinton's emails eleven days prior to the US presidential election day in 2016.

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From anti-immigration to trade protectionism, Trump's rhetoric is the end for speaker and audience alike. Trumpism is a *cultural* movement. It is for this reason Trump's egoism resonates with the public. He is, while mystifying to MSNBC pundits and BBC commentators alike, profoundly likeable in red-state America, and even the UK.[3]

How the two parties establish their political projects beyond opposing or supporting Trump will be the next challenge. As a measure of how great Trump's impact on American politics has been, consider how the Obama years seem distant, its polarization tame by comparison. Where this leaves the parties' evolution is uncertain. It is clear they cannot go back. The American right will remain with a diluted brand of Trumpist populism, which took to the GOP host in 2016, or revitalize themselves by jettisoning Trumpist cultural politics around nationalism and immigration. Whether American politics rehabilitates itself, or whether this is an epochal shift, a reconfiguration of the right–left divide, will be answered in the coming years, whether in November 2024 or 2028.

A lot happened after the Trump trials. The prospects of a Trump victory were then seen as significantly less favourable than they were in early 2024. Trump's conviction on thirty-four counts, with sentencing pending at the time of writing,[4] was an unknown quantity, likely to garner sympathy in some quarters but deter floating voters, including the famous Obama–Trump voter. Most significantly, Biden's exit created an unexpected momentum for Harris and the Democrats. Contrary to the Democrats' disquiet, Biden's departure strengthened the party's position, having been behind in the polls in June 2024 and become an increasing political liability for the Democrats.[5] Harris's "brat summer" showed an ability to reach young voters, while Walz may draw out Rust Belt voters. Following Harris's entry in the race, Trump fatigue seemed to have finally started to set in. That said, her reach to voters beyond progressives seems limited. By contrast, Trump has an endless relevance to America, and appeal to voters' imaginations and hungry news cycles alike. Should Harris win, Trump is likely to stick around and continue to dominate American politics. Another presidential run may be less likely, as Trump's legal woes give the GOP's anti-Trump wing the opportunity to eject him on grounds of unelectability, which will be more effective than the moral grounds of Never Trumpers. Not only that, Trump is likely to be a casualty of his own celebrity, stuck in the entertainment news life cycle in which celebrity brands inevitably have a shelf life and are prone to infamy and irrelevance within a relatively short period.[6] Regardless of the manner or point of its end, there will be a post-Trump America. The question is what it will look like and what the challenge will be for the parties in the medium term.

[3] With Nigel Farage, now leader of Reform UK, pledging his support to Trump's campaign before reversing that decision to pursue the parliamentary seat for Clacton in the UK general election in July 2024.

[4] E. Orden, "Trump's Sentencing in New York Delayed until Sept. 18," *Politico*, 2 July 2024, at www.politico.com/news/2024/07/02/trump-sentencing-delayed-new-york-00166303 (accessed 8 Sept. 2024).

[5] "Who's Ahead in the National Polls?", *FiveThirtyEight*, at https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/2024/national (accessed 15 June 2024).

[6] By September, I predicted that a Trump victory was highly likely; for example, during my appearance on the podcast, 'A Chicken in Every Pot' with my co-author Richard Johnson in September 2025, two months prior to the US presidential election in November 2025.

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The next crisis after Trump: an unclear direction for the parties

The post-Trump political challenge to both parties will be to renew their political projects. To go back, as it were, they must go forward. While both parties may breathe a sigh of relief at Trump's departure, his politics is likely to remain in play, at least for a segment of the electorate in swing seats. In each case, the Democratic and Republican parties are left with the suboptimal scenario of dictating the other's fortunes more than they would like, not least since Trump has dictated the fortunes of them both. This may complicate their mid-term planning, ideologically, in policy and stylistically. Both the Democrats and the GOP are left with a rhetorical and philosophical vacuum created by Trump. His absorption of US politics into his style and vision has meant that meaningful political development of a vision outside of Trump has stalled since 2016. The crisis for the parties will be how to reorient themselves and whether to treat populism with a kind or harsh eye when Trump departs the political stage.

How the GOP rehabilitates itself is the first question. Having been captured by Trumpism, the GOP will have a difficult road out of it, unable to feed the Trumpist appetite in the party base without a candidate Trump, but with difficulties rehabilitating it due to the support Trumpism has gained in the base and sections of Congress. Trump has found and reinforced new constituencies on the social right, and taken the social right more seriously than predecessors, providing them with the red meat of the *Dobbs* ruling. Trump may continue running as long as he is able, and an ideological split within the GOP is likely. Republicans stuck with Trump as long as Trump was a vote winner; without this, he is in peril, both in terms of his hegemony over the GOP and his personal fortunes. Liz Cheney, by contrast, has set up a viable stall for a future run as President and is the most likely first Madam President of the United States.

Will Trump's brand of populism be resuscitated by the GOP after Trump? He has developed a populist style which has become a familiar flavour to voters. The success of any future populist is likely to be limited, as it requires a peculiar skill set, as we saw with the failed DeSantis bid for the GOP presidential nomination. Attempts to imitate Trump's political style show that he is an unusual communicator and, to this extent, perhaps an aberration, with another populist less likely to succeed on his scale.

The Democratic Party is also stuck in a cul-de-sac, pushed by the Trumpist threat to plan short-term and, in so doing, failing to rejuvenate the party post-Obama. The media speculation about Biden's decreasing fitness was a symptom of this failure of effective mid-term planning and his botched plan to hand over after one term. The Biden era has been a sticking-plaster solution to the problem of Trumpism, proof of which was found in Biden's increasingly low credibility. Obama's coalition has effectively fallen apart, with Trump himself a wedge issue. A new political project that provides an optimistic vision for America is lacking after the attrition of the Trump years. What is more, 'hope and change' is less saleable today. Public appetites may be set in the 'half-empty' politics of populism, an antielitism that simply elects new elites, with a rudderless class politics in the mix that bears some resemblance to classic left-wing economic critiques but which gave its blessing to a tax cut for Americans with top incomes under Trump in 2017, and which seems to reject social egalitarianism.

How the Democrats renew their project with a new political leader, vision and style is uncertain. The equivalent of a new Obama revolution is unlikely, with low trust in the 2024 political ecosystem compared to that of 2008, even during a financial crisis. Paradoxically, what the Trump voter wants is a kind of socialist revolution laced with

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red-meat social conservatism that advances nationalism and opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Such a new political alliance is found across the Western democracies and may herald a political realignment that may not evaporate with the end of Trump's political career. This might be why the direction for the GOP especially is unclear. The Bernie-Trump voter is a phenomenon. Both the left- and right-wing voter bases are rethinking American capitalism and neoconservatism. The Bush Doctrine, post-hanging chad 2000-era America seems gone. We are, in this sense, in a new political epoch.

The challenge for both parties in this polarizing environment is that both want to pull in opposite directions economically and socially, when a more counterintuitive combination appeals to a segment of the electorate. The direction of travel for the Democrats is toward a socially and economically progressive position that appeals to the young but alienates older voters, while Trumpism rhetorically advocates a New Deal-era economic protectionism for the working class mixed with the politics of corpocracy. Both mythologize the Rooseveltian era and manage the problems of labour, lost confidence and nostalgia for a more stable time in different ways.

Worsening polarization may continue. Whether the GOP reorients its position on immigration and race will depend on whether it is attracted to expand its voter base to pastures new. For now, in presidential elections, key battleground and red states with healthy Electoral College votes remain in play for the Republican candidate. Such red states may turn purple in some years' time (particularly Texas, which will move from thirty-eight Electoral College votes in 2020 to forty in the 2024 and 2028 presidential races, based on allocations for the 2020 census[7]). If the economic and social conditions that produced the Trump phenomenon continue and exacerbate the populist internal damage to democracies, with a worst-case scenario of backsliding, this politics may continue to attract supporters. How the right and left political projects renew themselves with respect to populism and its ethos of anti-institutional, anti-elite politics will be contingent on this.

The Trump saga is a wider story about the pressure that Western democracy is coming under, seen widely to have broken the social contract and been unable to deliver the efficiency that rising Eastern authoritarianisms claim to. Such a trajectory is concerning for the social health of American society – and is a bellwether of an international shift among voters against a centrist, neoliberal, technocratic approach to democracy that has let the market determine social equality, in favour of an emotional, iconoclastic revolt that combines a desire for unreconstructed proletarian revolution with the ersatz comfort of social conservatism. It is likely we are living through a democratic crisis and that it will be necessary to respond to this petition for change productively, to rearticulate a vision for democracy and the social contract in a globalizing world – in short, to address the concerns that led to Trumpism, where this is reasonable and possible.

Heading into a post-Trump America, we will be left with the question of whether it will inherit a new, reconstituted America, whether Trump has remade the GOP and American politics, and whether American democracy will survive, decline or be renewed post-Trump.

[7] "Electoral College," National Archives, at www.archives.gov/electoral-college/allocation (accessed 8 Sept. 2024). For historical trends in electoral college vote allocations see also "State Electoral Vote History," *270 to Win*, at www.270towin.com/state-electoral-vote-history (accessed 8 Sept. 2024).

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Not with a bang but with a whimper: the vacuum of post-Trump America

This is how the Trump era is likely to end: by presenting a challenge about America's political direction. The most likely risk is not the perceived Armageddon from a second Trump term but the midterm crises in both parties and the longer-term disillusionment and populist house style that Trump has cultivated. There is a wider crisis implicated in this, about how populism will continue to impact American politics and democracies around the world. The United States is experiencing an interregnum characterized by a crisis of identity and uncertain direction for both the Democrats and Republicans, symptomatic of this wider change.

Trumpism has torn asunder prior political visions for America. This will be the next challenge for the political projects of the parties. This is the longer-term impact of Trump. A second Trump term may create institutional rot. Even notwithstanding this possibility, he has reprogrammed the American electorate on his terms, to be receptive to his manner of politics. The GOP will continue to be mired in Trumpism for some time, while the Democratic Party will be freed of its anti-Trump *raison d'être* but could be stuck in a purgatory, having focused on opposing Trumpism and consequently failing to rejuvenate itself after Obama. While Harris partially filled that vacuum, and while she attracted new support among the young, her longevity was questionable and her candidacy was an effort to rebuild the Obama and Clinton programmes. This may be insufficient to revitalize the party and country in the 2020s. We may see a vacuum in both parties, and the general cultural fractiousness of the Trump years continue. While it could be a close call for the American polity, it is likely that the story of American populism will end in an underwhelming and ambivalent place. There will be a need for a meaningful political project to address the causes of Trumpist populism – namely democratic disillusionment, its origins in the broken social contract and the sense of a collapsed American Dream. This is the same project European liberal capitalist democracies are facing, with the latest populist upsurge by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France and the far-right parties in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups in the European Parliament elections in summer 2024. This is part of a broader challenge for liberal democracy and its ability to cope with globalization, digitization and their social externalities.

An immediate crisis was averted by Biden's departure. The emergence of Kamala Harris added a newfound optimism to a progressive bloc that seemed palled in pessimism prior to her arrival. Had Harris been elected, this may create renewal of a kind. This optimism, however, may be superficial and in its rudiments perhaps unable to address the causes of Trumpism. It remains unclear how far Harris is associated in floating voters' minds with the corporate Clinton style that apparently cost her the election in 2016. Most tellingly, Harris's progressivism remains fixed in an anti-Trump space and seems to lack a larger vision. The question of the life span and appeal of Trump-style populism, with its characteristics of reactionary social conservatism, distrust in institutions and an apparent flirting interest in authoritarian solutions, remains undiminished. More seriously, the problems that catalysed his politics remain. What Trump has also catalysed is an explicit opposition to deindustrialization among the American working class, although refracted through reactionary cultural politics and lacking a meaningful pragmatic agenda. The problem may continue if Democrats fight the Trumpist symptom in a way that perpetuates the problem; if, in other words, anti-Trumpism becomes the Democrat cause and addressing the

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causes of polarization and the populist swing is neglected. Anti-Trumpism among Democrats has in many ways become the panacea for progressive unity. While it has prompted younger progressives into action on social justice, it has paradoxically diminished its wider programme, which has stalled since the end of the Obama administration. The historical trends around democratic discontent, however, must not be underestimated. Whether the Democrats have begun their reincarnation, or will maintain a kind of stasis, is still up for debate.

Trump has changed American democracy. Its contours going forward are hard to determine, beyond an immediate existential crisis. The future after November could be one caught between an unsatisfactory stasis and a period of turbulent transition into renewal for both parties. The story is, in this sense, not over with Trump. The question remains whether we are in a longer-term crisis for democracy, no longer the system associated with wealth and power. America's handling of their iteration of this crisis is a forerunner in that wider story.

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AFTER THE INSURRECTION: PROSPECTS FOR INSURRECTIONARY POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES AFTER 6 JANUARY 2021

Introduction

My contribution to the roundtable explores the question of how social movements end. It does so through an assessment of the aftermath of the insurrection at the US Capitol that took place as Congress met to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election on 6 January 2021. While there is a plethora of research on how right-wing populist movements have emerged and how they operate around the world, there is comparatively little consideration of how such movements might end. In other words, substantial attention has been paid to the way(s) right-wing populist movements rise to (and maintain) their power, but much less effort has been dedicated to addressing the circumstances under which such movements decline. This paper seeks to address this imbalance in the literature about right-wing social movements by examining the aftermath of the 6 January insurrection.

A review of the literature on social movements suggests that there are at least four main reasons movements decline over time. These are: (1) political alienation and isolation as the movement grows more extreme, (2) erosion of support once the group's main goals are achieved, (3) co-optation of the group's goals by established political actors with access to power, and (4) suppressive state action.[1] Surveying the contemporary state of insurrectionary populism in light of these variables, most evidence suggests that support for the people and ideas that underlay the insurrection of 6 January

[1] Doug McAdam, "The Decline of the Civil Rights Movement," in Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson, eds., *Waves of Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 325–48.

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2021 is unlikely to decline any time soon. Effectively, 1 and 3 – alienation and co-optation – have only worked to reinforce insurrectionary attitudes and desires on the part of conservatives, radicals, and many Republicans across the United States. Meanwhile, 2 and 4 – achieving movement goals and state suppression – have not occurred on sufficiently broad a scale for there to have been a substantial impact on the movement.

The insurrection as a right-wing populist eruption

The assault on the US Capitol by thousands of supporters of Donald Trump on 6 January 2021 has become an iconic, if frightening, moment in American political history. In what has come to be known as "the Insurrection," thousands of people breached the Capitol grounds; many of them subsequently entered the building, fought with security personnel, threatened the lives of members and staff of the House of Representatives and the Senate, and chanted "Hang Mike Pence" while a makeshift gallows was erected outside the Capitol building. Others occupied key offices around the Capitol complex, including those of leaders like Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, while yet more people entered both the House and Senate chambers, vandalizing and rifling through materials they found in those locations. One protestor was shot and killed while attempting to break into a protected chamber near the US House of Representatives; several officers defending the Capitol complex later died as well. Hundreds of other law enforcement agents were wounded before the US Capitol was emptied of insurrectionists and the House and the Senate were able to conclude their Constitutional obligation to certify Joe Biden as the incoming President of the United States.

Notably, many insurrectionists defined themselves as right-wing populists. Right populists typically define "the people" in ways that integrate language, culture, race, history, religion, economic productiveness, and other factors into an idealized "us" that elites are working to betray. Right-wing populists see traditional social, cultural, and political relationships as markers of an identity that needs protection against "outside" forces and "outside" groups that portend the replacement of the established order with an alternative one. They insist that political majorities of a limited, "true" community have the right to assert social and political power even if majorities of their fellow citizens think otherwise. Such claims are made as part of an effort to protect the rights and power of the idealized community against the proposals and actions of the elites and outsiders whose proposals – indeed, in some cases, whose existence – is seen to pose an existential threat to the ideal community.[2] Insurrection, in such a context, is a patriotic act.

Assessing the aftermath of the insurrection and the potential end of the movement

Taking the four major causes of movement decline in turn, it is clear that radicalization (point 1) has not led to the alienation and isolation of the 6 January activists from their more mainstream political allies. There was, notably, an initial period in which

[2] Lane Crothers and Grace Burgener, "Insurrectionary Populism: Assessing the January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol," *Populism*, 4 (2021), 1–17.

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established political leaders such as Republican House minority leader Kevin McCarthy, along with a bevy of Trump administration officials, criticized Trump for inciting the insurrection. However, most such leaders – including McCarthy himself – eventually accepted the legitimacy of Trump's claims and now honor the 6 January activists as heroes. Meanwhile, polling has found that Republicans increasingly believe Joe Biden's election to have been illegitimate while at the same time believing that the insurrectionists were not violent during their attack on the US Capitol. Republicans have also become less likely to believe that Trump bore responsibility for the assault or that the events of 6 January 2021 constituted a threat to American democracy.[3] Over time, then, many Republicans have come to see insurrection as a perfectly ordinary form of political activity rather than an extremist threat. Accordingly, the insurrection has lost its status as an extreme event likely to lead to alienation and movement decline.

In addition, the insurrectionists have not had the kind of systematic success that might lead to the movement's decline (point 2). For example – and obviously – the insurrectionists have not achieved their goal of replacing Joe Biden with their preferred candidate, Donald Trump. This fact has only fueled right-wing populism in the United States. There has been no "moment of success" that insurrectionists can point to as justification for calling off their movement. Rather, Joe Biden's evident presence in the position of President stands as a daily reminder of their failure. It, accordingly, encourages renewed efforts to overturn the (allegedly) illegitimate results of the 2020 election. Consistent with the existing literature on social-movement decline, then, insurrectionary populism is unlikely to disappear in this context.

Meanwhile, much of the Republican mainstream has returned to supporting Trump, integrating insurrectionary rhetoric and claims into ordinary political discourse (point 3). However, rather than leading to a mainstreaming or moderation of insurrection-related politics, as the literature about the decline of social movements suggests should follow the integration of social-movement demands into the agendas of established political actors, the resurgence of pro-insurrectionary rhetoric post-6 January has seemed only to embolden insurrectionist sympathizers. Trump himself, of course, has made the insurrection a centerpiece of his 2024 campaign to return to the White House. He uses a version of the Star-Spangled Banner (the United States' national anthem) recorded by imprisoned insurrectionists at his rallies and refers to those arrested after attacking the US Capitol as "hostages" of a radicalized and politicized Department of Justice. Similarly aggressive claims have informed many conservative campaigns across the political system since the 2021 insurrection. Rather than moderating insurrectionary rhetoric, then, much of the Republican Party has accepted insurrectionary claims and adopted their goals as well (point 3). Co-optation has thus seemed to embed insurrection in Republican and conservative US politics rather than moderate it.

The fourth cause of movement decline, state action, has occurred since the insurrection, but only to a limited effect. American government agencies have proceeded along two major lines in responding to the insurrection: law enforcement agencies have made extended, if slow, efforts to identify, charge, and convict those who invaded the US Capitol on 6 January, and the US House of Representatives

[3] Rachel Weiner, Scott Clement, and Emily Guskin, "Republican Loyalty to Trump, Rioters Climbs in 3 Years after Jan. 6 Attack," *Washington Post*, at www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/01/02/jan-6-poll-post-trump (accessed 14 April 2024).

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formed the so-called "January 6th Committee" to investigate both how and why the attack happened, as well as to assess ways to prevent similar attacks in the future.

For example, the January 6th Committee reviewed thousands of hours of video evidence regarding the insurrection; investigated millions of pages of documents, emails, and text messages related to the insurrection; took depositions from hundreds of witnesses both present at the Capitol and involved in planning the events of the day; and assessed the activities of government officials and agencies in responding to the attack. It also held nine public hearings in which evidence about the attack was laid out before anyone interested in watching. These public hearings proved to be quite popular, drawing much larger audiences to the committee's work than Congressional hearings typically attract.[4]

Meanwhile, as of 3 May 2024, Department of Justice investigations had led to the arrests of 1,430 defendants for a variety of charges relating to assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers or employees; assaulting a member of the media or destroying their equipment; and entering or remaining in a restricted federal building or grounds, among others.[5] Approximately 820 individuals pled guilty to a variety of federal charges, including 255 who confessed to felonies. Some 162 individuals were found guilty at contested trials; another thirty-seven individuals have been convicted following an agreed set of facts. Approximately 884 federal defendants had had their cases adjudicated and received sentences for their criminal activity on 6 January. Some 541 were sentenced to forms of incarceration ranging from prison to home detention.[6]

Yet these investigations and convictions have done little to dampen support for the insurrection, at least systematically. As was discussed above, support for the insurrection among Republicans has increased over time. So, too, has the sense among many that the participants in the events of 6 January 2021 have been abused by a partisan "witch hunt" that has unfairly condemned Donald Trump as an inciter of sedition. Moreover, in June 2024 the US Supreme Court ruled, in *Fischer* v. *United States*, that prosecutors had gone too far in using the charge of "obstructing an official proceeding" when bringing cases against 6 January 2021 defendants. Given that many prosecutors relied on this charge in multiple 6 January cases, including one brought against Donald Trump himself, this ruling constituted a significant limitation on prosecutors' powers to bring cases related to the insurrection. The Court's ruling thus effectively eliminated one of the central tools used by federal prosecutors to bring the 6 January insurrectionists to justice. It is, accordingly, hard to conclude that state suppression of the insurrection has worked to undermine the insurrectionary populism revealed on 6 January 2021.

Concluding thoughts

For many, the insurrection seemed inconceivable – until it happened. After all, the people who entered the Capitol on 6 January claimed to be patriots – they claimed

[4] Cf. John Koblin, "At Least 20 Million Watched Jan. 6 Hearing," *New York Times*, at www.nytimes.com/2022/06/10/business/media/jan-6-hearing-ratings.html (accessed 30 Jan. 2022); Rebecca Bunch, "The TV Ratings Guide," at www.thetvratingsguide.com/2022/10/thursday-cable-ratings-101322-january.html (accessed 30 Jan. 2022).

[5] January 6th Data, at https://x.com/jan6thdata (accessed 18 June 2024).

[6] United States Attorney's Office, District of Columbia, "Three Years since the Jan. 6 Attack on the Capitol," at www.justice.gov/usao-dc/36-months-jan-6-attack-capitol-0 (accessed 18 June 2024).

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to be defending the Constitution and supporting American democracy while engaging in a struggle to stop a Constitutional body from doing its Constitutional duty regarding the election of the President of the United States. Even more surprisingly, many of those who fought with police and attacked the actual seat of American government had insisted, and would continue to insist, that they "back the blue" (the police), revere the military, and otherwise support the institutions and values that they were in the process of attacking. The contradiction seems unsustainable – yet many who entered the Capitol grounds on 6 January did not consider such matters to be contradictory at all.

Accordingly, it would be a major miscalculation to assume that the forces that unleashed the insurrection in January 2021 have gone away, or even that they have been tempered by the passage of time. The United States is in the unprecedented position of having a losing candidate in a previous election engage in a years-long process to undermine the legitimacy of the US electoral system while simultaneously leading a political movement seeking power through the very election system he bemoans. The right-wing populism that motivated the insurrectionary eruption of 6 January 2021 has not disappeared. Neither has the danger that it poses to American democracy today.

Illinois State University LANE CROTHERS

IS THIS CONTENTIOUS PARTY SYSTEM REACHING BREAKING POINT?

The summer of 2024 marked one of the greatest upheavals in American politics in history. Joe Biden's disastrous debate with Donald Trump brought an abrupt end to his candidacy and the quick elevation of Kamala Harris to the top of the Democratic ticket. Such a profound change occurred at a moment when the two-party system had undergone years of considerable stress. Prior to Biden's sudden withdrawal, 50 percent of voters "dreaded" a Biden–Trump rematch, and 59 percent believed that both candidates were "too old" to serve another term as President.[1] But the Democratic Party quickly righted itself after Biden's much-maligned debate performance and without any internal dissent chose Harris. This is indicative of a

[1] Fox News, poll, 9–12 Sept. 2023, text of question: "If the 2024 presidential election is a rematch between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, will you look forward to it or dread it?" Look forward to it, 47 percent; dread it, 50 percent; don't know, 3 percent. ABC News, poll, 9–10 Feb. 2024, text of question: "If reelected, Joe Biden would be 82 years old at the start of his second term and if elected again, Donald Trump would be 78 years old at the start of his second term. Do you think only Biden is too old for another term as president, only Trump is too old for another term as president, both are too old for another term as president, or neither is too old for another term as president?" Only Biden, 27 percent; only Trump, 3 percent; both are too old for another term as president, 59 percent; neither is too old for another term as president, 11 percent.

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healthy political party focussed on winning and pursuing the popular policies begun by the Biden administration.

Instead, it is the health and long-term sustainability of the Republican Party that is in question. In 2024, Republican voters took the unprecedented step of nominating a convicted felon to the highest office in the United States. Donald Trump's hold on the base of the Republican Party came after years of dissatisfaction with the direction of the country. In 2016, Trump rode that wave of discontent to the White House. And with his rise came the collapse of the once formidable Republican establishment. Republican officeholders came to fear Trump's base and his ability to cast them into exile. Today, Donald Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party is complete. And it is that takeover that jeopardizes the longevity of the American two-party system. Could the two-party system disintegrate given such high levels of public disenchantment and, if so, could that disintegration be permanent?

At first glance, any collapse of the US two-party system seems unlikely. Over the years both parties have cemented their hegemony by writing themselves into the laws of the country that have advanced their monopoly of power. These include a first-past-the-post electoral system, the creation of single-member electoral districts and the Electoral College, approving ballot access restrictions that place third parties at a considerable disadvantage, passing campaign finance laws giving the major parties access to immense amounts of cash, and the exclusion of third parties from most presidential debates. These laws remain in place and should accrue to the parties' advantage in 2024. Despite a multicandidate field, history suggests that third-party candidates without strong grassroots support are not likely to be competitive, and that the election will come down to the binary choice of Harris versus Trump.[2] And early signs point to a similar third-party collapse in 2024. Moreover, the two major parties have written themselves into the laws of the United States that give them primacy in such important areas as automatic ballot access.

Today, the Democratic Party is acting in accordance with the norms traditionally associated with a healthy major party. As mentioned earlier, establishment Democrats pushed an incumbent President out of the race, fearing a defeat and the potential loss of democratic norms. Although Democrats boast a progressive and a centrist wing, and although these wings can sometimes differ over policy, such disagreements are hardly unusual for a competitive, broad-based "umbrella" party in the American system. In Congress, progressives have largely stood by the Biden administration, especially as he has enacted a variety of long-sought-after progressive goals, including the American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Bill, the CHIPS and Science Act, a PACT Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act that placed caps on prescription drug costs.

Instead, if the breakup of the two-party system in the US is to occur, it will be because of the transformations Donald Trump has wrought within the Republican Party. Trump has cast aside the party's heretofore touchstone values of fiscal conservatism and personal responsibility, along with a strong defense posture that opposed Russian aggression, as evidenced in the Republican opposition to aiding Ukraine.[3]

[2] Those candidates include Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Jill Stein, and Cornel West, among others.

[3] A majority of House Republicans, for example, opposed aid to Ukraine and it was Democrats who provided the margin of victory to get the latest aid package to President Biden. "How the House Voted on Foreign Aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan,"

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Instead, Trump's Republican Party has become a vehicle for the grievances of blue-collar, non-college-educated whites who are resistant to the racial, cultural, and economic changes that are enveloping the country, and who prefer an "America First" posture that seeks to impose high tariffs and withdraw from international alliances. As the party has slipped further from its Reagan-era moorings, Republican politics have become fixated on expressions of outrage. We see the effects of this deterioration in the party-in-government, where Congressional Republicans are unwilling to compromise with Democrats but are equally unable to govern on their own. There was no greater example of Republican disarray than the battle for Speaker following the 2022 midterm elections when Republicans captured a small majority of seats in the House of Representatives. In January 2023, Republicans took fifteen ballots before Kevin McCarthy won the gavel. But McCarthy's tenure was the third-shortest in the history of the House.[4] After ousting him in October 2023 for compromising with Democrats on the budget, the various factions within the House GOP were stalemated for three weeks until the little-known Mike Johnson was chosen as a replacement.[5] Similarly, House Republicans have been unable to work with Democrats on solving border security issues after Donald Trump scuttled a bipartisan compromise in the Senate that would have instituted the first immigration reforms in decades.

We can observe a similar deterioration in the party-in-the-electorate, where parallels to the fragile Republican governing coalition are found in the divisions that have fractured Ronald Reagan's once-dominant conservative electoral coalition. The performative politics of the Republican party-in-government are mirrored in the Republican party-in-the-electorate, where primary voters are predisposed to choose candidates who share their moral outrages. In these contests, matters rise to prominence if they channel the anger and frustration of the base – including whether critical race theory should be taught in public schools, whether transgender kids should be required to use public bathrooms that conform to their birth gender, or whether a "cancel culture" discriminates against those who do not share prevailing cultural values. The result is the selection of Republican candidates who win the loyalty of a shrinking party base but cannot build broader coalitions that can win general elections.[6] Add to this the crucial issue of abortion, where Republicans find themselves trapped in a Pandora's box in which they are battling among themselves to find a consensus

New York Times, 20 April 2024, at www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/04/20/us/politics/ukraine-israel-foreign-aid-vote.html.

[4] Christopher Hickey, "McCarthy Has Lost the Gavel. It Was the Third Shortest Speakership in History," *CNN*, 3 Oct. 2023, at www.cnn.com/2023/10/03/politics/house-speaker-shortest-kevin-mccarthy-dg/index.html#:~:text=It%20was%20the%20third%20shortest%20speakership%20in%20history.,-By%20Christopher%20Hickey&text=When%20Speaker%20Kevin%20McCarthy%20failed,to%20oust%20McCarthy%20as%20speaker.

[5] Kevin McCarthy has referred to the "five families" that comprise the GOP majority in the House: the Republican Study Committee, the Freedom Caucus, the Republican Main Street Caucus, the Republican Governance Group, and the Problem Solvers Caucus. Emily Wilkins, "McCarthy Turns to 'Five Families' to Keep Peace among GOP Rivals," *Bloomberg*, 28 Feb. 2023, at https://about.bgov.com/news/mccarthy-turns-to-five-families-to-keep-peace-among-gop-rivals. Georgia Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene has filed a motion for Johnson's removal and has urged him to resign.

[6] The 2022 midterm elections were rife with multiple examples, including Doug Mastriano in Pennsylvania, Dan Cox in Maryland, and Kari Lake in Arizona – all of whom were defeated.

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position that's acceptable to a public that is strongly opposed to the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade*.[7] An April 2024 survey conducted by CNN found that 65 percent of Americans disapproved of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe*, with 47 percent expressing strong disapproval.[8] The result is a smaller, activist, and energized Republican base that has alienated college-educated, suburban voters who formed the basis of the Reagan coalition.

Donald Trump has cost the Republican Party crucial support from two generations of voters: millennials and zoomers, who will soon constitute a majority of the electorate.[9] In 2020, millennials and zoomers comprised 41.5 percent of the electorate, by 2024 estimates are that they will be 48.5 percent of all voters, and by 2028 they will be a majority.[10] Past elections with Trump as the Republican nominee showed him performing especially poorly with younger voters. In 2016, 55 percent of voters aged 18–29 backed Hillary Clinton; four years later, 60 percent of the same age group supported Joe Biden.[11] A survey taken in July 2024 shortly after Kamala Harris became the Democratic nominee found her retaining Biden's 60 percent of the youth vote.[12] As early as 2008, young voters flocked to Barack Obama, giving him 66 percent of their votes, and 60 percent supported him again in 2012.[13] As V. O. Key noted in *The Responsible Electorate*, new voters are an important subset of the electorate as these first-time voters for a political party are likely to stick with that same party.[14]

As these current young votes become a larger proportion of the electorate, Republicans are likely to find themselves unable to compete on a level playing field. Rather than appealing to these voters, the party has relied on its institutional

[7] Donald Trump has proposed leaving the issue to the states, which lacks broad appeal and in some cases is anathema to voters in places like Wisconsin and Arizona where outdated anti-abortion laws are now in force.

[8] CNN poll, 18–23 April 2024, text of question: "In 2022, the Supreme Court overturned the *Roe v. Wade* decision and ruled that women don't have a constitutional right to an abortion. How do you feel about the Court overturning *Wade*?" Strongly approve, 20 percent; somewhat approve, 14 percent; somewhat disapprove, 18 percent; strongly disapprove, 47 percent.

[9] There are signs that some of these voters have wandered from the 2020 Biden coalition, but it is too soon to say whether they will either return to the Democratic fold, not vote, support Trump, or cast a protest vote for a third-party candidate. But if the past is prologue, Democrats should win a majority of these voters.

[10] Alberto Medina and Sara Suzuki, "41 Million Members of Gen Z Will Be Eligible to Vote in 2024," Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement," Tufts University, 18 Oct. 2023, at https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/41-million-members-gen-z-will-be-eligible-vote-2024.

[11] Exit polls, *CNN Politics*, 23 Nov. 2016, at www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls; and *CNN Politics*, 3 Nov. 2020, at www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results.

[12] Erica Pandey, "Exclusive Poll: Harris Opens Up Early Edge with Young Voters," *Axios*, 25 Jul. 2024, at www.axios.com/2024/07/25/poll-harris-biden-trump-young-voters.

[13] "Election Results," *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2008, at https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/elections/2008/results/president/national-exit-polls.html; and "President: Exit Polls," *New York Times*, at www.nytimes.com/elections/2012/results/president/exit-polls.html.

[14] V. O. Key Jr., *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936–1960* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 22.

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advantages to tilt the playing field in its favor. Specifically, Republicans have won handsome dividends from a Supreme Court majority built on first-time nominees from Republican Presidents who have lost the popular vote,[15] the Electoral College with its bias toward Republicans in small rural states, the maintenance of the Senate filibuster, and Congressional and state legislative gerrymandering. Nonetheless, the inevitable pull of generational change is producing diminishing returns. Republicans cannot indefinitely stave off a demographic tidal wave that grows with every election cycle and where a majority of voters in 2028 will be millennials and zoomers. Political scientist David Faris notes that because the Republicans' greatest strength is among voters aged forty-five and older, there is a "natural demographic churn" that should favor the Democrats as the years progress.[16] Older voters who support Republicans do not look much like the emerging America of millennials and zoomers. As Kevin Munger correctly notes, the boomers are "an almost entirely *white* phenomenon."[17] Millennials and zoomers, on the other hand, are far more diverse in their racial makeup.[18] It is projected that by 2026 zoomers will become the first majority nonwhite generational cohort since the country's founding.[19]

How Republican elites and swing voters respond to the 2024 incarnation of Donald Trump will determine the party's future. We see a couple of possibilities. One is an uneasy alliance of Democrats with the Never Trump Republicans and independents who are driven to the Democrats by default. This would cast Democrats as the dominant party-in-government while relegating Republicans to a rump reactionary party that holds statewide offices in portions of the South and Mountain West but is noncompetitive nationally. While possible, this arrangement is dynamically unstable. Some former Republican elected officials support Kamala Harris in 2024, believing that Donald Trump represents a threat to democracy.[20] But it is difficult to see how an alliance that stretches from Bernie Sanders on the left to Liz Cheney on the right would be anything more than temporary. The strong potential exists for such an arrangement to dissolve under the pressure of ideological differences once the immediate threat to the republic posed by Trump has passed.

[15] Both George W. Bush and Donald Trump lost the popular vote in 2000 and in 2016. Bush won the popular vote in 2004 and nominated John Roberts and Samuel Alito. Trump placed three justices on the Court: Neil Gorsuch, Brent Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett.

[16] Philip Bump, *The Aftermath: The Last Days of the Baby Boom and the Future of Power in America* (New York: Viking, 2023), 271.

[17] Kevin Munger, *Generation Gap: Why Baby Boomers Still Dominate American Politics and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 32.

[18] Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – And What They Mean for America's Future* (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 347.

[19] Carl Smith, "How Much Could Younger Voters Affect Future Election Outcomes?", *Governing*, 10 April 2023, at www.governing.com/now/how-much-could-younger-voters-affect-future-election-outcomes.

[20] In August 2024, the Harris campaign launched Republicans for Harris. See Alex Gangitano, "Harris Team Launches GOP Group with Endorsements from Ex-Trump Officials, Key Republican Voices," *The Hill*, 4 Aug. 2024, at https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4809725-kamala-harris-campaign-gop-initiative-prominent-republican-voices.

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The second possibility is for the Republican party-in-the-electorate to follow the lead of the Republican party-in-government and collapse after the election. The historical analogue here would be the Whig Party, which disintegrated in advance of the Civil War. A Trump defeat could splinter Republicans who are tired of losing with Trump from those who remain devoted to him regardless of electoral outcomes. Should disaffected Republicans persist in being unable to seize control of the GOP, the logical alternative would be for them to abandon it altogether to form their own party despite the many aforementioned obstacles to third-party development.

If Republicans find themselves in a position where they cannot win without Trump supporters, but they can't win with them either, they face the prospect of losing national elections for the indefinite future. Under these circumstances, the prospect of losing under a center-right third-party banner might look like an enticing rebuilding project. Again, the historical analogy would be the Republican Party itself, which emerged from a minor-party alliance of estranged Whigs and northern Democrats.

As a presidential system with winner-take-all elections, the American system does not easily lend itself to multiple-party competition. But it has happened before. A stable period of Democratic–Whig competition collapsed during an era of extreme polarization around the issue of slavery prior to the Civil War. In an 1860 editorial in *The Atlantic* endorsing Abraham Lincoln for President, James Russell Lowell wrote, "The very government itself seems an organized scramble," adding that politics has "become personal and narrow to a degree never paralleled."[21] Those words ring true today. Republican control of the US House has transformed governing into an "organized scramble," with Congress unable to manage even the essential business of government.

It is these "personal and narrow" differences of the 1850s that characterize American politics nearly two centuries later. Describing the "hollow parties" of today, political scientists Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld call them "hard shells, marked with the scars of interparty electoral conflict."[22] It is the hollowed-out Republican Party of Donald Trump that makes it vulnerable to a potential breakup of historic proportions. While no one can be certain about the outcome of the 2024 election, the history of the Democratic and Republican parties has been that they are not merely bound together for the purpose of obtaining power, but united around a common set of principles. In 1770, Edmund Burke offered what has become a standard definition of a political party: "Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed."[23]

The Republican Party of Donald Trump is a party united behind one man devoid of any governing philosophy. That was amply demonstrated in 2020 when the

[21] James Russell Lowell, "The Election in November," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 1860, at www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/politics/policamp/lowell.htm.

[22] Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld, *The Hollow Parties: The Many Pasts and Disordered Present of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 3. Schlozman and Rosenfeld describe both major parties as being hollowed out, but their description is particularly apt when characterizing today's GOP.

[23] Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 317.

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Republicans, for the first time in the party's history, failed to write a party platform. In essence, the party declared it was for whatever Donald Trump wants. In 2024, Republicans avoided the usual detail associated with a major party platform, preferring to express themselves in broad generalities endorsed by Trump.[24] The hollowness of the Republican establishment pre-dated Trump, but Trump understood that the GOP was ripe for, in business terms, a hostile takeover. Today, that takeover is complete. Donald Trump is fixated on obtaining power and revenge. And while a political party exists for the purpose of controlling the government, it has been (and must be) much more than that.

Today, there are principled Republicans profoundly uncomfortable with Trump, as Nikki Haley's support in the Republican primaries demonstrated. Should Trump lose in 2024, these pressures could push the two-party system past the breaking point. Either principled conservatives will reclaim their party and engage in serious policy debates, including updating what conservatism means as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, or the GOP potentially splits apart. To paraphrase Lincoln, the Republican Party must be either Trump's party or a conservative one.[25] It cannot be both.

The questions posed in this year's US presidential election are clear: will the United States remain a constitutional republic? Or will the United States cast aside democratic norms and values? How will Republicans respond to either a Trump victory, or more likely a Trump defeat? These are the questions of our time. And it is up to the Republican party, more than it is to the Democrats, to determine the future of American politics and whether the once invincible two-party system will splinter into something far different than what contemporary Americans have known.

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TRUMPISM AS A POLICY AGENDA: SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW

Efforts to define "Trumpism" or outline the "Trumpist" policy agenda may seem self-defeating given Donald Trump's mercurial personality and politics. Indeed, at first sight, the Republican Party's failure to put forward a platform at the 2020 National Convention appears to confirm that Trump's mark on the Republican Party was primarily about personal branding rather than identifiable policy initiatives or objectives. Instead of a list of policy positions the Republican National Committee simply issued a statement noting that "the Republican Party has and will continue to enthusiastically support the President's America-first agenda," without further elaborating the

[24] "2024 GOP Platform: Make America Great Again!", 8 July 2024, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2024-republican-party-platform.

[25] Abraham Lincoln, "House Divided Speech," Illinois Republican State Convention, Springfield, IL, 16 June 1858, at www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm.

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character of that agenda.[1] It would, however, be a mistake to dismiss the Trump administration's impact on the policy agenda and the overall trajectory of policy. Trump's time in office saw a resetting of policy priorities in core areas. There was a decisive break with the political legacies bequeathed by Ronald Reagan and, at the same time, many of the policy shifts made by the Trump administration were left in place, or indeed extended, by the Biden White House. Trump fell far short of being a "reconstructive" President.[2] He did not bequeath a comprehensive, or even coherent, policy blueprint for the future. Nonetheless, he did disrupt the established economic and foreign-policy status quo and set the US political process on different trajectories. Seen in this way, the Trump presidency can justly be described as proto-transformative.

Trump is very widely described as a populist.[3] Nonetheless, although legitimate, this only goes so far. Populism is by definition more of a sentiment or emotion than a body of thought. At the most, it is a hybrid formation or a thin ideological "crust" layered on top of a much more structured ideology.[4] Populism, taken alone, does not lay a basis for a coherent political and policy trajectory.

Having said that, political hybrids such as populism take different forms and rest upon different mixes. Some commentaries, looking at processes of policy development during Trump's term of office, have concluded that the populist "crust" was very thin indeed and there was relatively little that broke with established, mainstream Republicanism insofar as Trump, notwithstanding all the rhetorical flourishes, pursued an orthodox conservative economic agenda structured around tax cuts, deregulation and the dismantling of the 2010 health care reforms.[5] Early in Trump's presidency, Paul Pierson argued that Trump's populist rhetoric did not mean that there would be a break from the "long-standing Republican commitment to a radically inegalitarian brand of market fundamentalism."[6] Certainly, the major legislative accomplishment of Trump's presidency, which was the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, seems to confirm this view. Alongside this, we can point to the fate of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), the brainchild of Senator Elizabeth Warren which had been established during the Obama era and quickly developed a reputation for aggressively pursuing extortionate loan companies.

[1] Republican Party Platforms, Resolution Regarding the Republican Party Platform Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/342191.

[2] Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

[3] Richard Conley, *Donald Trump and American Populism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Michael Kazin, "Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles," *Foreign Affairs*, 95, 6 (2016), 17–24; Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP16-026, Aug. 2016, at www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/trump-brexit-and-rise-populism-economic-have-nots-and-cultural-backlash.

[4] B. Stanley, "The Thin Ideology of Populism," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13, 1 (2008), 95–110.

[5] Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe, *The Ordinary Presidency of Donald J. Trump* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

[6] Paul Pierson, "American Hybrid: Donald Trump and the Strange Merger of Populism and Plutocracy," *British Journal of Sociology*, 68, 1 (2017) S105–19, S117.

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Under Trump, the agency pulled back from its formerly proactive stance.[7] The Trump administration's budget proposals for FY 2021, released in early 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic, which upended the federal government spending plans and called for major cuts to domestic discretionary expenditures, including reductions in the budgets allocated for Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can also be cited.[8] While these plans were a signalling exercise inasmuch as they would not have been enacted by Congress, they illustrate the Trump administration's readiness to impose further cuts on households facing poverty or near poverty. In sum, seen from this perspective, the Trump agenda was simply a surface-level reworking of the neoliberal policy path established during Ronald Reagan's first term in office.

Nonetheless, while these claims are sometimes made in forceful terms, we argue that while elements from the established conservative agenda remained in place, Trump's ascendancy marked a very significant shift in the cognitive and normative assumptions underpinning Republicanism and conservatism in a number of core policy arenas.[9]

Although earlier Republican Presidents had imposed import controls as an expedient, Trump elevated protectionism to a principle. He derided the idea that globalizing processes and trade liberalization were a net economic benefit and, in a tweet posted in December 2018, declared, "I am a Tariff Man."[10] In this, he was not only echoing the demands of "paleoconservatives" but also siding with the left of the Democratic Party rather than mainstream conservative opinion. And, although the Trump White House's calls for infrastructural development secured little traction, they were also a policy departure for much of the right. Alongside this, there was a turn to a form of industrial policy whereby government uses its capacities to channel investment and growth towards particular firms and sectors, although more often than not it had a personalized and arbitrary character. Just after the 2016 election, Trump claimed a victory in prevailing upon Carrier, the heating and cooling firm, to retain some of its operations in Indiana, thereby rescuing around a thousand jobs. Firms were warned that they would face tariffs if they offshored production.[11]

If we turn to social policy, the Trump administration was important not only in terms of what was placed upon the policy agenda, but also in terms of what was removed. Before Trump's victories in the 2016 presidential primaries, Republicanism had defined itself through its pursuit of small government. Paul Ryan, the party's 2012 vice presidential nominee, who became Speaker of the House of Representatives in October 2015, authored a succession of plans each of

[7] Clodagh Harrington and Alex Waddan, *Obama vs Trump: The Politics of Presidential Legacy and Rollback* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 47–53.

[8] Richard Kogan, Kathleen Romig and Jennifer Beltran, "Trump's 2021 Budget Would Cut $1.6 Trillion from Low-Income Programs," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 9 March 2020, at www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/trumps-2021-budget-would-cut-16-trillion-from-low-income-programs.

[9] Edward Ashbee and Alex Waddan, "US Republicans and the New Fusionism", *Political Quarterly*, 95, 1 (2024), 148–56.

[10] Donald Trump, 4 Dec. 2018, at https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1069970500535902208.

[11] Dani Rodrik, "Trump's Defective Industrial Policy," *Project Syndicate*, 10 Jan. 2017, at www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-defective-industrial-policy-by-dani-rodrik-2017-01.

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which sought the dismantling of government social provision. Just as European populist forces have distanced themselves from the cutting of social provision, or at least from that targeted at the "people" regarded as legitimate and deserving citizens, Trump emphasized his commitment to leaving the most expensive federal, non-defence, government programmes intact. Indeed, even prior to his run for the 2016 presidential nomination Trump had derided Republicans for their ambitions to cut back or privatize the two largest federal government social programmes, Social Security and Medicare.

There have been further shifts. In the years preceding 2016, many Republicans had, along with Democrats, held out the promise of "comprehensive" immigration policy reform. The US was celebrated as a nation of immigrants (from at least some regions of the world) and there were efforts to meet the recruitment needs of the larger corporations whilst also securing a quid pro quo that would accommodate those in the US unlawfully. On his final day in office, in January 1989, President Reagan had celebrated immigration as a cornerstone of Americanism: "We lead the world because, unique among nations, we draw our people – our strength – from every country and every corner of the world … If we ever closed the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost."[12] In a similar vein, in 2006–7, President George W. Bush promoted comprehensive immigration reforms that included pathways to legal status for many living in the US without documentation. Even in 2013, when it was apparent that Reagan and Bush's commitment to openness was becoming a minority viewpoint across the party's ranks, Republican Senators voted with Democrats to pass a comprehensive immigration reform plan that included a path to citizenship. That bill made no progress in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, and in summer 2015 Trump made his widely noted comments in announcing his candidacy: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best … They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."[13] In calling for a crackdown on undocumented immigration and by imposing a "family separation policy" at the US border,[14] Trump capitalized on deeply embedded anxieties and resentments among grassroots Republicans who were, in effect, weaponized against party elites. Indeed, immigration and the promise of mass deportations came to define his political personality and his relationship with his political base: "The more the courts, the Democrats, the political establishment, and even his own government resisted his efforts to crack down at the border, the starker his message became. The harder he fought, the more extreme his tactics, the more his supporters loved him."[15]

[12] Ronald, Reagan, remarks at the presentation ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 19 Jan. 1989, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum*, at www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-presentation-ceremony-presidential-medal-freedom-5.

[13] Time staff, "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech," *Time* magazine, 16 June 2016, at https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech.

[14] Caitlin Dickerson, "The Secret History of the U.S. Government's Family-Separation Policy", *The Atlantic*, Aug. 2022, at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/09/trump-administration-family-separation-policy-immigration/670604.

[15] Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael Shear, *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 392. See also Charlie Savage, Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, "Sweeping Raids, Giant Camps and Mass

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There was, furthermore, a fundamental shift in the character of the US Supreme Court. Whereas earlier Republican Presidents had nominated conservatives, a significant number had, once on the nine-person bench, bitterly disappointed the right through what were seen as equivocal rulings. Trump used his opportunity to nominate three members of Court to put forward committed conservative radicals each of whom had been "vetted" from within the conservative movement. Their appointments paved the way for the rollback of abortion as a Constitutional right in 2022. The future of other "implied" rights in the Constitution is now very much in doubt.

If we extend the discussion to include US foreign policy, it is initially tempting to note that some of Trump's more vituperative threats were not realized. Nonetheless, there were significant policy shifts. At the urging of the Christian right, the bond with the Israeli right was further solidified. The nuclear agreement with Iran negotiated by the Obama administration was ditched. China was deemed to be a strategic competitor and tensions mounted across the East Asian region, which was reconceptualized as the Indo-Pacific. India, and Narendra Modi, were enthusiastically courted. The disdain for established alliances and the commitment to crude personal transactionalism (seen most sharply in his negotiations with both Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un) did not destroy NATO or the bilateral alliances across East Asia but, insofar as power depends upon perceptions, the uncertainties that the Trump administration infused into the US's alliances necessarily weakened them and provoked particular anxieties within those states that directly faced potential adversaries.

Conclusion

Trump was depicted by his successor as an aberration and efforts were quickly made to mend fences with allies and partners. At times, the Biden administration seemed to be pursuing a radical economic agenda. Nonetheless, it can be credibly argued that Trump should not be dismissed as a historical footnote but instead, if Stephen Skowronek's typology is used, recognized as an at least partially transformative or "reconstructive" figure.[16] These concepts are generally employed to refer to figures such Franklin Roosevelt whose presidencies upended the existing political order and created a new cycle of political time. The Trump presidency did not, of course, do this. It did not herald a period of Republican Party hegemony and in some policy arenas both parties adhered stubbornly to their earlier orthodoxies. Nonetheless, the extent to which a policy shift endures tells us much. In both its domestic and foreign policies, the Biden administration has "articulated" trajectories that were established, albeit often in a dysfunctional and inchoate way, during the Trump years. The turn against China, the embrace of industrial policy, economic nationalism, and immigration restrictionism can all be cited. Furthermore, we should not necessarily expect a wholsesale, radical realignment and Skowronek has himself talked of a weakening or "waning of political time."[17] At the end of the day, some new and different logics have been put in place. In that sense at least, some of Trump's personal

Deportations: Inside Trump's 2025 Immigration Plans", *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 2023, at www.nytimes.com/2023/11/11/us/politics/trump-2025-immigration-agenda.html.

[16] Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

[17] Ibid., 442.

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boasts, and the acclaim he is given by his most committed supporters, may not be entirely misplaced.

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THE MAGA MANDATE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN 2024

In his famous tome on the French Revolution, sociologist John Markoff declared that "democracy is a moving target, not a static structure."[1] As a result, it inevitably undergoes a necessary amount of regeneration. This is achieved, in part at least, by social movements. History demonstrates that these may be peaceful, but even when they are not, they can be necessary. Writing two centuries earlier, Thomas Jefferson opined in a letter to James Madison that "a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical."[2] Not a fan of mass movements, Jefferson nonetheless acknowledged the need for periodic upheavals in order to refresh society. This observation continues to resonate in an era when Trumpism has revolutionized the Republican Party in a manner unparalleled since the Reagan era. The necessity or benefit of such regeneration is open to debate.

This essay will offer some brief reflections on the rather unique position that Donald Trump, the government and indeed the nation will face if the man from Mar-a-Lago makes his way back to the White House for a second but nonconsecutive term. Presidential transition plans as outlined respectively by the America First Policy Institute and the Heritage Foundation will be considered, with a view to how these think tanks envisage policy priorities and rollouts in a second Trump term.

In the light of his undignified departure from the Oval Office and the dangerous chaos of 6 January 2021, there was a broad hope, if not quite an assumption, that the forty-fifth President might maintain any political presence at a suitable distance from Washington. This was a best case of three post-Trump scenarios envisioned in 2019 by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. Their work posits that Trump was exhibiting clear authoritarian tendencies right from the start of his term in office. This included such traits as hostility towards law enforcement, intelligence agencies, ethics agencies and the courts. Back then the guardrails of democracy might have been rattled, but broadly speaking they remained in place. The chaos of Trump's presidential modus operandi and high-level staff turnover did not always smoothly facilitate the Make America Great Again (MAGA) agenda. On this basis, the nation would experience a relatively swift post-Trump democratic recovery. Levitsky and Ziblatt mapped a further two potential political futures for the US: their worst-case scenario, involving both a Trumpian and a GOP nationalist appeal

[1] John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

[2] "From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 30 January 1787," National Archives, *Founders Online*, at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-11-02-0095.

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and electoral victory, or a third, less dramatic and more likely, development involving a departure from unwritten democratic conventions.[3]

By summer 2023, however, it was clear that not only did the MAGA base remain motivated, but polling showed Donald Trump ahead of any other potential GOP contender. Even then, some polls suggested that he could beat Joe Biden in the general election.[4] Hence Levitsky and Ziblatt's best-case scenario started to look less likely as MAGA supporters showed few signs of abandoning their leader. The term "don't get mad, get organized" has long been attributed to a range of progressive voices.[5] By mid-2023, in a spirit akin to the energetic anger of 2009 Tea Party activists, Trumpists were mad *and* organized. Clearly, the unruly campaign playbook of 2016, so gleefully mocked by liberal pundits, was no more. In its place appeared a strategy not only to win again but to hit the ground on Inauguration Day 2025 with a comprehensive plan for civil service reform.

Trumpian plans to dismantle the "Deep State" were a vocal part of the narrative before and during his administration but the 2025 agenda has the benefit of time and experience. Extensive policy documents outline political priorities previously derided by opponents, including enhancing border security, stricter enforcement of immigration laws and robustly prioritizing national security.[6] International organizations and climate management continue to be held in low regard, with a direct pledge to "end the war on fossil fuels."[7]

In 2021, the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), a nonprofit 501(c)(3) think tank known as the "White House in waiting," was set up by former Trump staffers.[8] The AFPI has a staff of over 170, including eight former Cabinet secretaries and twenty other political appointees. On its website, it outlines plans to install branches in every US state.[9] It is not the only, nor is it the biggest, think tank preparing a policy agenda for Trump Term Two.

The Heritage Foundation also has a presidential transition plan, supported by AFPI, entitled Project 2025. It is led by Paul Dans, a lawyer who worked in the White House Office of Personnel Management during the Trump presidency. The Heritage Foundation has form in this regard as it played an integral part in making the Reagan Revolution happen and in 1981 provided the new Cabinet with a *Manual for Government. Now*. Heritage envisages an updated four-pronged version of this idea. More than 350 former officials and conservative policy wonks collated Pillar One, comprising a 950-page plan for government entitled *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*. Heritage drafted policies for every department

[3] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future* (London: Penguin, 2019).

[4] See, for example, Jennifer Agiesta and Ariel Edwards-Levy, "CNN Poll," 20 June 2023, at https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/20/politics/cnn-poll-trump-indictment-republicans-2024/index.html.

[5] The phrase is originally credited to Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realist Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

[6] See www.project2025.org.

[7] "How MAGA Republicans Plan to Make Donald Trump's Second Term Count," *The Economist*, 13 July 2023, at https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/07/13/how-maga-republicans-plan-to-make-donald-trumps-second-term-count.

[8] Meredith McGraw, "Trump Returns to DC This Week," *Politico*, 25 July 2022, at www.politico.com/news/2022/07/25/trump-america-first-policy-institute-think-tank-00047634.

[9] America First Policy Institute, at https://americafirstpolicy.com.

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and, crucially, built a list of potential recruits to serve in the second Trump administration. Pillar Two consists of a database described by Paul Dans as "akin to a conservative LinkedIn," with a view to amassing details of 20,000 suitable appointed federal personnel. Any former opponents or critics would be excluded from the plan. This includes those who voiced their condemnation of the 6 January violence or supported the impeachment of Donald Trump. Pillar Three envisages the strategy for a Presidential Administration Academy to train the new recruits on the operational aspects of governing. Pillar Four, the Playbook, is a compilation of executive orders and initiatives for the first 180 days of the administration.[10]

This is all notably different to Trump Term One, when there were no discernible plans or staffing preparation because, as conventional wisdom and polling suggested, few (including Team Trump) actually thought the Republican candidate would win. No such doubts remain. In a second Trump administration, thousands of loyalists would "deconstruct" the administrative state, which in practical terms is the several hundred federal offices that issue and interpret regulation. The US has a vast network of federal agencies tasked with implementing and enforcing laws and the size and scope of government has become a hot political issue. The first Trump administration reversed and rolled back a wealth of rules and regulations, but such efforts were reactive and not all were successful. The Trump Term Two plans are proactive and preemptive to an unprecedented extent.

A Trumpian defence of this vision may be based on the notion that the federal government has grown excessively large, impacting negatively on individual liberty and economic growth. Therefore a Term Two appointment plan would include the potential to dismiss thousands of civil service personnel via a route known as "Schedule F."[11] The National Federation of Federal Employees flags the Trumpian use of Executive Order as a means of politically manipulating the civil service. The proposed reforms would, according to the Brookings Institute, frustrate "the institutional design of checks and balances, especially weakening legislative power."[12]

There are a number of problems with the "anti-Deep State" line of argument. Whilst it may score political points with those who feel frustrated by the size and cost of the federal government, crises from climate to COVID have demonstrated that a functioning civil service is a core component of a stable democracy. The real dangers that accompany such plans are evidenced by Michael Lewis, who penned a vivid picture of civil service decimation on Trump's watch.[13] A further plan to hollow out this expertise and institutional knowledge would leave the US government, and the nation, dangerously vulnerable.

[10] Project 2025, Presidential Transition Project, at www.project2025.org.

[11] Donald P. Moynihan, "Public Management for Populists: Trump's Schedule F Executive Order and the Future of the Civil Service," *Public Administration Review*, 82, 1 (2021), at https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/puar.13433.

[12] "Stop Schedule F to Protect the Civil Service from Political Corruption," National Federation of Federal Employees (undated), at https://nffe.org/advocacy/issues-by-subject/federal-workforce/schedule-f; Donald Moynihan, "The Risk of Schedule F for Administrative Capacity and Government Accountability," 12 Dec. 2023, *Brookings Institute*, at www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-schedule-f-for-administrative-capacity-and-government-accountability.

[13] Michael Lewis, *The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy* (London: Penguin, 2019).

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American democracy has proved to be robust in the face of challenges throughout its often turbulent history. However, there is evidence to suggest that a second Trump Term would significantly strain the nation's democratic guardrails. If Republicans were to win both houses of Congress in November 2024, then, filibuster notwithstanding, there would be no meaningful opposition to President Trump and his Term Two agenda. It has become clear from memoirs, interviews and more that, in Trump Term One, concerned observers took comfort in the notion that there were "adults in the room," not all of whom were on board with the Trumpian view. It is reasonable to assume that in Trump Term Two none of those people or their equivalents would be present. Their successors would arguably not only be fully on board the Trump train, but willing to keep it on track beyond what would constitutionally be their leader's second and final term, should it occur. And well it may. The GOP's controversial candidate benefited from his opponent's damaging television debate performance on 27 June. Days later, the Supreme Court ruled along partisan lines to grant Trump broad immunity from criminal prosecution for his actions as President.[14] Even prior to these known unknowns, the *Economist*'s election forecast model was predicting a Trump win as the more likely November outcome.[15] Within weeks, the electoral tables turned somewhat in favour of his new opponent as Joe Biden was replaced by Vice President Kamala Harris as the 2024 Democrat nominee.[16]

With or without an election day victory, the Trumpian legacy has structure, strategy and staff to maintain it. Moreover, Trumpist components exist beyond what can be found in any single document or building. Win or lose, approximately half of the voting public will support a convicted felon on 5 November. Many elected Republicans have embraced Trumpism. The Supreme Court in its current form is a Trumpian creation, starkly demonstrated by the 6:3 partisan immunity ruling which very likely ensures that he will face no criminal trial before election day 2024. Hyper-partisanship, information degradation and cultural divisions abound. These are not beholden to the electoral fortunes of any single individual, even one as uniquely consequential as the forty-fifth President. Therefore, the moving target of democracy is currently in the crosshairs of those who do not cherish it. Should Trump Term Two roll out as envisaged by the AFPI and MAGA entities, a merging of Levitsky and Ziblatt's bad- and worst-case scenarios is a real possibility. Then the Trumpian appeal of nationalism, populism and protectionism triumphs. By any measure, this would be much more than a Jeffersonian "little rebellion" or a Tea Party-esque revolt. It would be a profound challenge to how the US government operates.

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[14] Stefania Palma, "US Supreme Court Says Donald Trump Immune for 'Official Acts' as President," *Financial Times*, 2 July 2024, at https://www.ft.com/content/3aee93fb-9bae-4783-be01-d471f99d16a6.

[15] Economist US Election Forecast Model, 12 June 2024, at www.economist.com/interactive/us-2024-election/prediction-model/president.

[16] Reuters/Ipsos poll, 23–5 Aug. 2024, at www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-edge-over-harris-economy-crime-slips-reutersipsos-poll-finds-2024-08-27.

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CONCLUSION: WHAT'S LEFT?

As the 2024 presidential election heated up, shortly before the withdrawal of Joe Biden from the race, I spent two months travelling across the United States. In eight weeks, I visited thirteen states – California, Colorado, Kentucky, North Carolina, Michigan, Ohio, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire – and the District of Columbia. I travelled by a mix of modes of transport – long- and short-distance trains, planes, and hire cars. I explored cities, where possible, on foot and public transport, and I spoke to as many Americans as I could along the way.

The ostensible reason for my visit was to conduct archival research on the busing controversy which gripped many American cities in 1960s and 1970s, when school districts found themselves under court orders for their failure to desegregate "with all deliberate speed."[1] But, unbeknownst to my funders, I had an ulterior motive. I had gone to test the political waters, to feel the temperature of the American political climate on my own skin. My travels and conversations were a modest form of what Richard Fenno called "soaking and poking."[2] The 2024 election was underway, and I wanted to "wallow in it."[3]

I met a range of curious individuals. Some stuck out more than others. At a church which preached liberation theology in San Francisco's Tenderloin, images of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Michelle Obama were projected on the worship screen. I found myself holding hands and hugging with strangers, some of whom testified to having experienced extreme poverty and police brutality. As my Amtrak Zephyr train trundled through the American West, I met a man from Wisconsin wearing a United Steelworkers union hat who explained why he and his union brothers (his term) supported Donald Trump (steel tariffs). A one-eyed homeless man in Louisville engaged me in a heated conversation over the merits of privatization and the free market (he was an enthusiast). A parishioner at a Methodist Church in Connecticut, with a Black Lives Matter banner and rainbow flag on its door, confessed that he had stopped speaking to erstwhile friends who had voted for Donald Trump. A bartender in Boston told me she hoped the National Guard arrested the pro-Palestine student protestors encamped at Harvard Yard and threw them in prison.

The above examples notwithstanding, an overall impression from my conversations across the country was how reticent many Americans were to discuss politics, certainly compared to my previous multi-month stay in the United States in the autumn of 2016. There was a fatigue, a weariness among my discussants. "Don't go there," "don't talk to me about politics," "It's all so polarized now," were regular refrains. I got the sense that the battle lines had been drawn long ago, and people knew in which camp they sat. They understood what they needed to do for their respective side, but the excitement that I had detected in similar conversations eight years ago (on both sides) was gone. There was almost an air of tragedy.

[1] Brian Daugherity and Charles Bolton, *With All Deliberate Speed: Implementing* Brown v Board of Education (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008).

[2] Richard Fenno, *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 249–95.

[3] Alan Rosenthal, "Soaking and Poking, and Just Wallowing in It," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 19, 4 (1986), 845–50.

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When in Denver, I walked past the Mile High Stadium, where in August 2008 I had been in the audience witnessing Barack Obama accept the Democratic nomination on the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It did not feel absurd, then, to draw a link between the two. I have a badge from the evening which depicts the two men with the caption, "A Dream Fulfilled." In spite of the atrocious economic conditions – Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were nationalized the following week – the sense of almost limitless political possibility was palpable. It was, to use a cliché, the best of times and the worst of times. It felt as though "we had everything before us."[4]

When Joe Biden, Obama's former vice president and nearly two decades his senior, was running for President, the mood was palpably different than in 2008 – grimmer and more hazardous. Now that Biden has been replaced (under some duress) by his own vice president as the Democratic nominee, the mood has somewhat lifted. Yet, even though he did not resign the presidency, Joe Biden feels curiously distant from the political discussion.

During my time in the United States, I was struck by just how much Donald Trump is the star of everyone's show. Of course, the right lionize him, but the left can't stop talking about him either. Virtually every evening when I switched on MSNBC or CNN, the main segment was focussed on Trump. Joe Biden felt like a bit player in the Trump drama.

The endless discussion about Trump's legal woes was, of course, not positive publicity for Trump, but it also had the effect of drowning out serious discussion about the substantive achievements (or otherwise) of the Biden administration. This is a problem for Joe Biden because he happens to be, by some measures, the most legislatively successful and consequential Democratic President since Lyndon Johnson. In spending terms, Biden has invested more in the American people than any President since Franklin Roosevelt, Biden's political hero.[5] Breaking with the precedent of every US President since Richard Nixon, Biden replaced George Washington's portrait above the Oval Office fireplace with one of FDR.

Similarly, as this roundtable shows, scholarly attention during the Biden administration has been directed much more to the previous American President and his party than to the incumbent. When I organized the Political Studies Association (PSA)'s American Politics Group (APG) conference at Queen Mary in January 2024, I was amazed by how many paper submissions I received about Trump compared to Biden. In the final programme, we had about a dozen papers on Trump and the Republicans. Just two people submitted papers on Biden – both on climate policy. When Barack Obama was President, there was a rich scholarly interest in the man himself, his policy programme, and the future of the American left. Now, all the attention is on the right, even though they are, for now, the opposition.

Joe Biden ran for President in 2020 promising calm amidst "fire and fury," but this has seemingly come at the expense of notice being taken of his highly significant domestic policy legacy.[6] Indeed, with the exception of Barack Obama's health care

[4] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1859), 1.

[5] Richard Johnson, "Joe Biden's Rooseveltian Ambitions," *Political Insight*, 12, 4 (2021), 28–32.

[6] Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

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reform, Joe Biden has arguably achieved more in domestic-policy terms in four years than Obama did in eight. In this roundtable on the American right, it is worth pausing to take stock of the American left. What has four years of a Democratic President actually delivered for the American people?

On the fiftieth day of his presidency, Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act, a stimulus bill which contained nearly $2 trillion in federal spending. It stretched the American welfare state far beyond its usual boundaries, providing all Americans with cash payments and enhanced levels of unemployment, disability, and child benefits. The package contained a wide range of business grants and funding for state and local government, health care, public-transport infrastructure, and digital-security projects.

Although far-reaching, most of these programmes were temporary. More durable investment came via the Infrastructure and Jobs Act, passed in November 2021, and the Inflation Reduction Act, passed in August 2022. The former was a package of $1.2 trillion for public infrastructure projects across the United States. The Inflation Reduction Act contained about $500 billion for climate-related projects, as well as on provisions to strengthen the Affordable Care Act and reduce the cost of prescription medication. Alongside these bills, Biden passed the CHIPS and Science Act in August 2022 which allocated $280 billion for domestic science research, the manufacturing of computer chips and semiconductors, and upskilling the US workforce.

Together, the four bills represented a level of public investment in the American social realm not seen since the days of Franklin Roosevelt. The total spend of the New Deal was about $800 billion in current US dollars.[7] In dollar terms, Biden has far outspent the New Deal, even adjusting for inflation (see Table 1). But a fairer comparison might be public spending as a share of gross domestic product (GDP). The Federal Reserve estimates that New Deal spending was equivalent to 40 percent of US GDP in the 1930s, whereas Biden's estimated spend for those four bills is about half that of the New Deal.[8]

Even with the filibuster still in place for other policy matters, Biden scored some bipartisan victories, attesting perhaps to one virtue of his long record as a US Senator. For example, with sixty-five votes in the Senate, Biden passed a modest gun control bill, the first in three decades. The legislation extends compulsory background checks for gun buyers under the age of twenty-one, provides funding for mental-health services, and bans people with a conviction for domestic violence from buying a gun for five years.

Although the Supreme Court severely undermined liberal policies, like abortion and affirmative action, during Biden's presidency, the President has attempted to shore up some key protections for minority groups. For example, Biden secured Congressional legislation confirming the legality of same-sex marriages. The Respect for Marriage Act of 2022 repealed the Defense Of Marriage Act (DOMA), a 1996 law which banned federal recognition of same-sex marriages. DOMA had been overturned in the Supreme Court case *US* v. *Windsor* (2013), but if the *Windsor* case were reversed in future, DOMA now no longer risks being reactivated, an important precaution.

[7] Price Fishback & Valetina Kachanovskaya, "The Multiplier for Federal Spending in the States During the Great Depression," *Journal of Economic History,* 75, 1 (2015), 125–162.

[8] See www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/third-quarter-2021/how-recent-fiscal-interventions-compare-new-deal.

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Table 1. Biden's major spending bills and total US GDP.

US GDP (2021)	$23,320,000,000,000
American Rescue Plan of 2021	$1,900,000,000,000
INFRASTRUCTURE Investment and Jobs Act of 2021	$1,200,000,000,000
Inflation Reduction Act of 2022	$780,000,000,000
CHIPS and Science Act of 2022	$280,000,000,000
Total	**$4,160,000,000,000**
Percentage of GDP	**17.8%**

https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/gross-domestic-product-fourth-quarter-and-year-2021-second-estimate
https://www.budget.senate.gov/download/american-rescue-plan-act-summary-updated
https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/consulting/cybersecurity-risk-regulatory/library/infrastructure-investment-jobs-act.html
https://www.brookings.edu/articles/economic-implications-of-the-climate-provisions-of-the-inflation-reduction-act/
https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/the-chips-and-science-act-heres-whats-in-it

After losing control of Congress in 2022, Joe Biden used his executive powers in profound ways. He cancelled or reduced tuition fee debt for millions of former university students. He granted "a full, complete, and unconditional pardon" to all US citizens convicted of cannabis possession under the Controlled Substances Act of 1971.

Yet the final two years of the first Biden term have been overtaken by foreign-policy events. Biden is keen for the US to be seen as a leader in resolving the tragic Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Palestine conflicts, but his failure to bring either to swift or just resolution projects an image of weakness abroad and at home. The fact that these conflicts have overshadowed Biden's many domestic-policy achievements is partly a failure of political communication from the White House, for which Biden must shoulder a great deal of blame. The added detail that neither was directly of the US's making, unlike so many other foreign-policy misadventures which have derailed American presidencies, further underscores the rhetorical torpidity of the Biden White House.

And so the American left finds itself in a curious place. Joe Biden achieved more in one presidential term than any other Democrat in over half a century, yet the public barely noticed. Unlike his hero, FDR, who stood for a fourth term having been diagnosed with heart failure in April 1944,[9] Biden nobly, if unhappily, withdrew from the contest. Kamala Harris's candidacy has only further overshadowed his presidency. The excitement caused by her candidacy was palpable (as was the relief). Her policy agenda was less clear. After the policy successes and political failures of the Biden presidency, the question moving forward is, what's next for the American left? Is it destined to operate within the political shadow of the right, even when in power, or can it boldly put its politics centre stage once more?

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[9] Jay Winik, *1944: FDR and the Year That Changed History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

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