Auditing U.S. Democracy

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The presidency of Donald Trump catapulted the topic of democracy to the forefront of political thought and discussion. This is for good reason: Throughout the past four years, we witnessed the creation of an immigration policy that is tantamount to ethnic cleansing; a president who used twitter and campaign rallies to stoke white nationalist hostility; the emergence of an authoritarian love triangle between the president, cops, and far-right vigilantes; displays of symbolic and literal violence against the press; and most recently a president who, with the support of GOP elites and much of the party's electorate, doubled down on claims of election fraud rather than concede, paving the way for a Biden presidency to be treated as illegitimate by an entire political party. The topic of American democracy deserves our attention today. However, the Trump years do not mark some abandonment of previously rich democratic politics. To the contrary, American democracy has always been weak, and currents of authoritarianism can be traced back to its founding. Ignoring these truths risks treating the Trump years as a one-off, obfuscating deeply problematic pathologies in our politics that require serious examination if we are to have any chance of manifesting a new politics defined by social solidarity.

This perspective becomes all the more pertinent now as we enter the Biden presidency. Centrist Democrats including former President Obama are already celebrating a "return to normal" in which we can go back to enjoying brunch. The "normal" they long for is one marked by perverse inequities. It is also based on the naïve assumption that our politics going forward will not be punctuated by the vicious ambitions of a Republican Party that has adopted authoritarianism as its modus operandi. Indeed, this is no time for brunch, and one of the main goals of this essay is to make that crystal clear.

We begin by briefly exploring the philosophy of classical liberalism, the philosophy upon which the United States was constructed. It is a political system that removes major economic decisions that have a profound impact on our lives from the purview of democratic control. We then take a deep dive into American politics pre-Trump, focusing on the roots of contemporary political culture. We discuss the multiple ways in which democracy has been undermined by a set of institutional arrangements that suppress political voice and preserve undemocratic social hierarchies. After presenting this baseline assessment of U.S. democracy, we review the specific challenges of the Trump years, zeroing in on what we see as the most troubling expressions of a deeply anti-democratic and acutely authoritarian politics that threatens to eviscerate what was an already frail democracy. Due to the timing of our writing, we incorporate into our analysis of the Trump years an assessment of the evolving political dynamics surrounding the presidential election, including the sustained efforts by Trump and GOP elites to undermine its legitimacy and the potential impact these efforts will have on a Biden presidency. We conclude the article with some hopeful comments based on the remarkable explosion in activism and organizing by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Democratic Socialists of America, and other groups seeking transformative change.

Classical Liberalism

An audit of U.S. democracy must wrestle with the philosophical framework that structures the relationship between the state, the economy, and the public. Classical liberalism, rooted in the work of eighteenth-century intellectuals including John Locke and Adam Smith, is embedded in the DNA of the American political project—it is the basis upon which the Constitution was drafted and has, throughout U.S. history, shaped the logic of governance. As an alternative to feudalism or otherwise monarchical government, classical liberalism is rightly viewed in a historical context as a revolutionary approach to political organization. In principle at least, a system of arbitrary lawmaking by self-fashioned descendants of God was replaced by a governing structure in which individual rights were guaranteed and the power of leaders to make laws was dependent upon the public granting them that power—though quite indirectly. The dominance of the state over virtually all social life was replaced by the idea of limited government. Coupled with the equally transformative system of capitalism that emerged alongside it, classical liberalism ushered in a new paradigm of political organization that remains with us to this day. This, however, does not discount the fact that, contrary to popular conceptions of the "Founding Fathers" as defenders of democratic republicanism, the original United States disenfranchised non-property owners, non-males, and non-whites. The achievements that we collectively refer to as liberal democracy did not occur in 1787, but are part of a two-century struggle of giving rights to white males without property, ending slavery, and giving women and then Blacks the right to vote.

However impressive and freedom-affirming classical liberalism was in the historical trajectory of governing arrangements, the form of democracy it engendered was severely limited. These limits were found not so much in the rights that it affirmed but rather in the narrow boundaries that it placed around areas of social life that were to be subjected to democratic decision-making. Central to classical liberalism was the establishment of a clear divide between "the political" and "the economic." On the one hand, this was to preserve individual property rights in a capitalist economy. On the other hand, it was to inoculate the state from becoming a Leviathan: the Hobbesian depiction of a state with power over all spheres of life, ultimately starving individuals of their freedom.

Born out of the experience of a world dominated by tyrannical kings and queens, these presumptions were understandable. Yet they largely have shaped the contours of political life in the United States and elsewhere in problematic ways. For although there has been some degree of state control over the economy, by and large economic decisions are delegated to private individuals and corporations.

While many accept this arrangement as both desirable and self-evident, accepting the assumptions of classical liberalism ignores what we see as two fundamental, interrelated truths that are well understood by socialists: 1) the profits of private actors are produced socially, first and foremost through the labor of workers but also with the publicly funded education that prepares these workers to enter the labor force, public investment in transportation systems to get goods to market, and so many other ways; and 2) the interests of private capital—a notably small segment of society—differ profoundly from those of ordinary people. Whereas ordinary people want affordable housing, accessible health care, jobs with livable wages, and a clean environment, capitalists, driven by the market imperative to maximize profit, drive up the cost of housing, insist upon health care as a commodity, outsource production, suppress wages at every turn, and fight to extract every ounce of fossil fuel regardless of impending climate catastrophe.

These contradictions lead to a third truth: Because the interests of capitalists are not only in contradiction with those of the majority of people but are also so utterly destructive, and because their profits are produced socially by the very people whose interests are neglected, it is both reasonable and democratic to bring the economy under democratic control. Any political system that denies the public control over what is done with the profits (as well as the conditions under which

those profits are made and the commodities that are produced and distributed) suffers from a serious deficit in democracy. And indeed, it is a deficit that goes beyond philosophical ruminations, as the impacts of this arrangement are on display for all to see in our grossly unequal and environmentally ruinous world.

American Democracy Before Trump

Beyond the constraints imposed by the reigning orthodoxy of classical liberalism, the United States, more so than many other bourgeois democracies including those of every other industrialized nation on earth, has a number of other features that undermine democracy.

To be sure, this is not new. Undemocratic—and in some instances outrightly authoritarian—policies and practices have plagued the American state from its inception. A casual reading of the U.S. Constitution illuminates regulations for the maintenance and marketing of chattel slavery; compromises that severely limit the representation of non-white, non-male, and non-property-owning humans; and the classification of indigenous peoples as undeserving of the ideal conception of humanity that undergirded the European Enlightenment. The most obvious example of this scourge was America's system of slavery, the eradication of which required a civil war. Out of its ashes grew the violent and repressive system of Jim Crow wherein Black Americans were again widely subjugated to forced labor through the clever use of the penal system by white supremacist policymakers. This forced labor was coupled with torture and extrajudicial killings; systematic segregation at the local, state, and federal levels; and political disenfranchisement, among other egregious violations, until notable victories by the Civil Rights Movement, with the passage of two key pieces of legislation—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The genocidal treatment of Native Americans is another gross example of the undemocratic and authoritarian impulses that thread together the red, white, and blue of our national flag. And beyond the very racialized expressions of these tendencies, we must also recall the treatment of women as second-class citizens, their disfranchisement, and lack of legal rights. Then too there were the persistent attacks against organized workers by the state, using the courts, injunctions, the police, the national guard, and the army—and when those failed, the use of paramilitary goons enlisted by private capital to quell workers' attempts to improve their lives and working conditions.

Across the timeline of contemporary American politics, which we date as beginning in the 1970s, it is clear that improvements have been made, especially if we concentrate on the most atrocious expressions of undemocratic and authoritarian politics. However, much remains problematic. Wealth and income inequality have steadily, if not exponentially, increased since the 1970s, as New Deal reforms were chiseled away by politicians more responsive to economic elites than their constituents. Women, politically enfranchised since 1920, continue to make far less money than their male counterparts and to have their reproductive health threatened at every turn. The LGBTQ+ community has in recent years been afforded the right to marry but continues to experience higher rates of violence from the police than the broader public. Workers, no longer threatened by frequent acts of violence, nevertheless have less power today than at any time since the 1930s: Labor unions are undermined by right-to-work laws, a bundle of federal legislation makes labor organizing and striking extremely difficult, and the National Labor Relations Board long ago lost its effectiveness as a shield for workers. And while Jim Crow was dismantled, its logic of racial terror continues to haunt Black, indigenous, and people of color Americans as they experience systematized segregation in housing and education, employment discrimination, predatory lending, carceral warehousing, and modern-day lynching by the police. These examples are among the most obvious expressions of an America that has remained deeply undemocratic and indeed authoritarian through the contemporary era. Many more cases can of course be listed; however, our goal in the remainder of this section is to explore what we see as some of the key undemocratic policies and institutional arrangements that enable these and other pathologies to persist.

Voting, Voter Access, and Corruption

The political left in the United States is understandably skeptical of voting. In a country where the level of responsiveness to the will of popular majorities and the needs of marginalized communities is low, disruptive protest is often seen as a far more practical approach to "getting the goods." However, elections still matter, as who occupies government can determine the likelihood of a movement's demands being met. Working from this assumption as well as from the basic principle that democracy requires a system of voting that is easily accessed, grants universal enfranchisement, and is free of corruption, beginning our assessment of U.S. democracy with a focus on voting is warranted.

The U.S. system of voting imposes a number of obstacles that interfere with the public's access to the ballot box. Rather than being automatic, voters are required to register to vote and to do so again and again each time they move to a different jurisdiction. This is especially problematic for lower-income voters who tend to be more transient than other income groups as a result of rising rents, often brought on by the process of gentrification. Not only are they forced to register to vote more frequently than others, they also face being "purged" from voter rolls, only to discover their voter status when entering the polls to cast a ballot. College students who live in dormitory housing, a sizable portion of youth voters, are often barred by state election law from using their dormitory address to register to vote. Instead, they are required far in advance of the election to apply for an absentee ballot. Many states also restrict access to early voting and the use of absentee ballots. This is especially problematic for people whose schedules do not permit them to easily vote on Election Day, which in the United States is a workday. Finally, states around the country have imposed voter ID laws despite the lack of any evidence of election fraud. While a small hurdle for some, for others—especially lower-income and elderly voters—it is quite significant. Obstacles such as these disincentivize and even bar people from participating in elections and therefore have a negative impact on political voice. But even when these barriers can be navigated, other more egregious voice suppression awaits.

Several million Americans are barred from voting each year due to living in a state that prohibits current and past felons from casting a ballot. In 2020 that number was estimated by the Sentencing Project to have been nearly 5.2 million (Wilkins, *Commondreams*, 10/14/20). Making the issue of felon enfranchisement even more muddy is the current situation in Florida. There, a 2018 referendum enfranchised ex-felons who completed their sentences. However, the Republican legislature then passed a law, upheld by the courts, requiring these ex-felons to pay all court fees and other fines before voting. Going into the 2020 election, who knows how many potential voters failed to cast a ballot, fearing they could face legal penalties (Mower & Taylor, *ProPublica*, 10/7/20). Voter caging is another widely deployed tactic by conservative fraudsters. They send certified mail to voters, and if no certification of receipt is received, those voters are purged from the voter roll. Across the country, these same voting groups have come to expect long lines at the polls due to the closure of voting locations by Republican officials.

The Electoral College, Congress, and the Court

No accounting of the country's issues with voting is complete without noting the role of the Electoral College. Two of the last three presidents, Bush Jr. and Trump, lost the popular vote but found themselves in power due to a system that privileges states' electors over popular majorities, and given the geographic breakdown of the electorate along partisan and racial/ethnic lines, the Electoral College privileges Republican voters over Democratic voters and whites over people of color.

Another feature of the U.S. political system that thwarts the people's will is gerrymandering, the

drawing of district lines for partisan advantage. While gerrymandering has been a consistent stain on American democracy, mapping software and big data have made it even easier for partisan officials to significantly reduce the voting power of entire electorates. Gerrymandering is among several corrupt tactics used to manufacture elections, and these schemes tend to target low-income and minority citizens.

Gerrymandering aside, the membership of the House of Representatives is based on proportional representation whereby the larger a state's population, the greater its number of representatives. In the Senate, on the other hand, each state, regardless of the size of its population, is granted two seats. This anti-majoritarian model can only be viewed as being democratically sound if we believe that states are living, thinking beings. Of course, they are not, but treating them as such is analogous to the equally convoluted logic of treating corporations as people. This is particularly problematic given the unequal distribution of Americans across the country and the degree to which people of color are largely concentrated in a handful of densely populated states.

Beyond this particular democratic deficit in the Senate, U.S. political institutions, or more appropriately those who inhabit them, are remarkably disconnected from the public they serve. This is not entirely due to the problems with voting, although the disproportionate silencing of poor people and people of color certainly factors in. Indeed, it doesn't help that the key personnel of U.S. institutions, including Congress, come almost exclusively from elite backgrounds, disconnecting them from the material and social experiences of ordinary people's lives. Nor does it help that in the United States elections are privately funded, affording the wealthy and corporate interests the ability to buy their way into the hearts and minds of elected officials. Political scientists Larry Bartels (*Unequal Democracy*, 2008) and Martin Gilens (*Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69[5], 2005) have performed a great service in their scholarship by revealing the extent to which the preferences of upper-income Americans are privileged by members of Congress. Those with lower incomes are virtually ignored unless their collective preference on an issue happens to align with those of higher-income Americans, and nearly as little representation is provided to middle-income voters (although Bartels shows that Democratic lawmakers grant slightly more representation to middle-income voters and slightly less to upper-income, despite wholly disregarding lower-income voters like their Republican counterparts). Given the ways in which class, race, gender, and even sexual orientation intersect in the United States, this arrangement preserves a social hierarchy that dates to the country's founding.

The U.S. Supreme Court is a reliably conservative and reactionary institution with a particular tilt toward elite interests. While Congress has the "power of the purse" and the Executive Branch has the "power of the sword," the Supreme Court has no mechanism to enforce its rulings. Therefore, adherence to its rulings depends upon the court's legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In other words, rulings are followed because, on the whole, the court is viewed as an honest, capable, nonpartisan, and apolitical legal body even if its rulings sometimes disappoint.

Throughout history, the Supreme Court has often been on the wrong side of an issue before it was on the right side. It was the Supreme Court that upheld slavery until it did not, and the same is true with any number of other issues including the most progressive components of the New Deal. Indeed, it has often been the case that justices who may prefer a particular outcome in a case ultimately bend when their preference misaligns with public norms. Thus, from a historical perspective, the court has often been conservative and reactionary but ultimately moves in the direction of social progress when enough normative power exists in the body politic. But in recent decades we have seen a changing dynamic unfold. All six conservative members of the court, including newly-appointed Justice Amy Coney Barrett, are members of the militantly conservative Federalist Society. While we can only speculate about how Barrett will adjudicate, we know from the other five justices that they hold a jurisprudential outlook marked by rigid social and economic

conservatism and a clear disregard for responding to widely held public norms and preferences. Notable examples include Citizens United (extending First Amendment rights to campaign donations), *Shelby v. Holder* (finding key aspects of the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional), and the upholding of Trump's "Muslim ban."

Trump, Democracy, and Authoritarianism

There has been a strain of thinking that suggests democracy in the United States was strong and robust right up to the point that Trump entered the White House. We hope that the previous pages dispel this line of thinking. Yet for as weak as American democracy has been throughout the country's history, we contend that the Trump years marked a critical juncture, whereby the country's worst anti-democratic and authoritarian tendencies were reawakened and placed on display both in the halls of government and throughout much of civil society. Going forward, we highlight the features of the Trump years that most acutely reflect this democratic backsliding.

Press Freedom

It is not uncommon for politicians to criticize the press. In fact, there is a long history dating back to the country's founding of presidents rhetorically attacking and even attempting to censor journalism. However, Trump escalated this tradition in several notable ways that were all the more troubling given the authoritarian mood that his administration injected into our current political moment. Trump frequently referred to the press as the "enemy of the people" and tweeted out cartoons of news outlets such as CNN being violently attacked. He also introduced the rhetorical frame of "fake news" into the conservative political lexicon, which was then adopted by authoritarian leaders across the globe. These actions cannot be viewed as innocuous. In addition to priming his supporters to disregard all reporting critical of him, this rhetoric birthed an environment in which real violence was carried out against the press. In May 2017, now Representative Greg Gianforte, a Republican from Montana, threw to the ground a reporter who had asked him about his health care plans. There was also an escalation in police violence against reporters, particularly during the BLM uprising of the last year. Rather than condemn these acts of violence, Trump offered his praise. At a rally in Gianforte's state shortly after the attack, Trump remarked, "Any guy that can do a body slam, he's my kind of guy" (Lach, *New Yorker*, 10/19/18). In response to police attacks against reporters, Trump described the attacks as "a beautiful sight" (Solendar, *Forbes*, 9/22/20). Sadly, Trump's embrace of authoritarian violence is not limited to the press but instead runs through the entirety of our current political culture.

Violence

Trump's immigration policy is a clear example of how his administration's embrace of violence was not limited to rhetoric. Family separations, the imprisonment of small children, and an enthusiasm for returning refugees to the places and situations from which they sought safety will forever be a stain on our country. That such practices continued during the COVID pandemic without any measurable attempt to prevent the rampant spread of the virus through immigrant detention centers speaks volumes to the administration's callous disregard for those whom they viewed as the underserving other.

In fact, the Trump administration's overall approach to the COVID-19 pandemic has been violent, eerily resembling the logic of eugenics. The climbing death toll that now exceeds 250,000 is downplayed, as we are told that we must simply live with a virus that preys disproportionately on the poor, the elderly, those with underlying health conditions, and the frontline workers who largely come from the Black and brown working classes, while celebrating the resiliency of the young and the strong.

Trump has, since his campaign in 2015-2016, encouraged violence against his detractors, even offering to pay the legal bills of rally attendees who fight anti-Trump protestors. He encouraged police officers to rough up criminal suspects and made open threats about having "the bikers" and other "tough" supporters take matters into their own hands. Viewing the law enforcement arm of the state as his own private army, he dispatched the tactical unit of the Customs and Border Protection agency to Portland, Oregon, to suppress anti-fascist activists. At an October campaign rally in North Carolina, Trump endorsed what appears to be the extrajudicial killing of an antifa activist by a U.S. Marshals task force, saying, "We sent in the U.S. Marshals. Took 15 minutes. It was over. Fifteen minutes, it was over. We got him. They knew who he was. They didn't want to arrest him. And 15 minutes, that ended" (Democracy Now, 10/16/20).

The Trump administration's embrace of violence has been adopted across large segments of civil society. Not since the 1960s have we seen such widespread violence wielded by the police against social justice protestors. BLM protestors and antifa activists have been subjected to a barrage of police violence. In fact, the New York Police Department is the focus of a recent report by the international rights organization Human Rights Watch (10/7/20) for their brutal treatment of BLM protestors in New York's South Bronx. This campaign of violence by the police is particularly concerning because it is politically motivated. Whereas cops have always been hostile toward protestors, the widespread support for Trump among police and the organizations that represent them, coupled with Trump's antagonistic and outright violent rhetoric aimed at BLM and antifa, signaled the emergence of a police state that threatened democracy to the core. Furthermore, it was coupled with an explosion of far-right vigilantism among private citizens reminiscent of countries in the advanced stages of democratic decline. It is now predictable that left-wing protests will be met with groups of far-right thugs, armed with assault rifles, military-grade chemical irritants, body armor, and Trump flags. But these vigilantes are not just flexing their muscles in a symbolic display of political masculinity. Since the Unite the Right white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, where social justice activist Heather Heyer was killed in a car attack, there have been more than 100 similar attacks carried out against the left across the country (Hauck, *USA Today*, 9/27/20). Kyle Rittenhouse gunned down three BLM activists in Kenosha, Wisconsin, killing two of them. In the immediate lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, members of a paramilitary organization planned to kidnap the Democratic governor of Michigan, a plan later celebrated by Trump and his supporters at Michigan campaign rallies, where chants of "lock her up," referring to that same governor, reverberated through the crowds (Fritze, *USA Today*, 10/18/20).

The violent actions and rhetoric of Trump and his administration, the fascistic tactics employed by police against BLM and antifa activists, and the reign of terror carried out by far-right vigilantes are reflective of an authoritarian gestalt that has poisoned our politics. Cops are clearly responding to Trump's rhetoric against leftist activists and his support for the police in the face of calls for their defunding and abolition. The Proud Boys and other paramilitary-style vigilante groups see in Trump a leader who speaks to their white nationalist fantasies and who views them as an arm of his political project. After all, why wouldn't they? When asked during the first 2020 presidential debate to denounce white supremacists, Trump instead told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." And whereas left-wing protestors are met with repression at every turn, the police have acquiesced and even coordinated with far-right thugs hell bent on doing Trump's dirty work. This authoritarian love triangle between Trump, cops, and vigilantes, not seen since the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan, marked a turning point in American politics, raising concerns about the state of our democracy. While it is yet to be seen if this dynamic will persist in a future free of Trump as president, forces such as these rarely fizzle out overnight.

Undermining Free and Fair Elections

Against the backdrop of partisan authoritarian violence was a presidential election that was mired in

manufactured scandal for more than a year. In the lead-up to the election, Trump frequently cast doubt on its legitimacy while refusing to commit to a peaceful transfer of power should he lose, insisting that Democrats were attempting to steal it through fraudulent absentee ballots. Regardless of how reckless and baseless the claim, it was echoed by GOP elites, the Justice Department, far-right paramilitary groups, and conservative news media. Adding fuel to the fire, Trump encouraged his own voters to cast in-person *and* absentee ballots to "test the system," and recruited an "army" of "able-bodied" poll watchers to secure the integrity of the election against nefarious Biden supporters—a surefire way to suppress votes beyond the level guaranteed by the tactics discussed earlier, as Biden supporters were forced to weigh the risk of potentially being killed against the benefit of voting Trump out of office. Thankfully, Trump's supporters did not appear to heed his call to action.

At the time of this writing, Biden has been declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election by all major news outlets. However, the fight by Trump and his allies against the outcome of the election persists. Trump refuses to concede while continuing to make bogus claims of election fraud on an hourly basis. A post-election poll conducted by Politico and Morning Consult suggests that 70 percent of Republicans do not trust the outcome of the election (Kim, *Politico*, 11/9/20). Groups of protestors, in some instances armed, converged on vote-counting centers across the country where absentee ballots were still being tabulated, protesting what they viewed as a fraudulent process. The count was disrupted in Philadelphia when bomb threats against the city's vote-counting center were received (*Independent*, 11/7/20), and calls to throw Biden in jail rang out at a pro-Trump rally outside of Georgia's Capitol (AP, 11/7/20).

Rather than work to uphold the norm of a peaceful transfer of power in which the outgoing party concedes the election results, Republican Party elites also doubled down on claims of election fraud. Those few GOP officials who criticized Trump's post-election tantrum were drowned out by a chorus of support for the president's refusal to concede, led by congressional party leaders Lindsey Graham and Mitch McConnell.

These actions by Trump and his supporters inside and outside of government initially led to widespread concerns over the possibility of a coup, even leading labor unions to plan for a general strike. Happily, these fears are no longer valid, in no small part because of a slew of losses by the administration in the courts and the lack of political will in state legislatures to disregard their state's popular vote and offer up a pro-Trump slate of Electoral College electors. But the fact that so many of us feared the very real possibility of a coup speaks volumes to how precarious U.S. democracy had become. And although this worst-case scenario has no chance of materializing, the Republican Party's commitment to delegitimizing the Biden presidency before it has even begun will have serious implications.

Politicizing the Bureaucracy

Institutionally speaking, Trump has proven to be remarkably adept at corrupting the federal bureaucracy, politicizing agencies that are designed to be free from partisan tampering. We have no doubt seen past presidents test the boundaries of executive overreach, as evidenced by the Bush administration's attempts to occasionally suppress the Environmental Protection Agency's climate science. However, Trump and his administration have gone far beyond the transgressions of past presidents. Trump has quite literally insisted that political appointees affirm their loyalty to him, and through executive order revamped the U.S. Office of Personnel Management by removing barriers to the firing of civil servants for failing to comply with the executive's political wishes.

Over the past year, the administration has also directed the sweeping dismissal of Inspectors General, whose sole job is to police government corruption. Putting the Bush administration to

shame, not only have references to climate change been forcibly removed from government websites and press releases, but EPA studies were also subjected to review by political appointees before their release to the public. As George Packer (*Atlantic*, 4/20) noted, there was a culture of fear that ran through the Justice Department as the office was transformed into the legal equivalent of a ministry of propaganda, whereby career lawyers were pressured to craft vague legal arguments that barely pass constitutional muster in order to facilitate the administration's attacks on marginalized groups including immigrants. Trump also pressured the Justice Department in recent months to investigate his political opponents. Throughout the investigation of his ties to Russia, Trump attacked the credibility of U.S. intelligence agencies and fired FBI Director James Comey, his successor Andrew McCabe, and then Attorney General Jeff Sessions for their complicity in continuing what he claimed was a witch-hunt. And in the midst of a global pandemic that Trump continually downplayed and even referred to as a "hoax," his administration interfered with the public messaging of the Centers for Disease Control and fast-tracked unproven COVID treatments. Just days after the 2020 presidential election, Trump fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who over the summer publicly denounced the president's call to send active-duty soldiers into American streets to suppress protests over the police killing of George Floyd. To date, several other high-ranking Pentagon personnel have been ousted and replaced with Trump loyalists. This politicization of the bureaucracy has served as a corrupting force that granted Trump unprecedented power. It has also undermined the legitimacy of bureaucratic agencies, as their activities, research, and public guidance, once believed to be the products of apolitical experts, are now viewed as tainted by partisan interests.

Party Transformation and Its Impact Going Forward

What is in our view most troubling about the Trump years was the widespread buy-in that the Trump administration's authoritarian political disposition received across the GOP electorate and among party elites. We have seen Republican elected officials consistently lend their public support to the Trump administration, defending executive actions, advancing Trump-led legislative packages, and outright endorsing or otherwise legitimizing Trump's overtly fascistic rhetoric. Even in those rare instances where party leaders first expressed reservation over a particular Trump policy, hostile tweet, or public embrace of white nationalism, tepidity was soon replaced with either overt support or efforts to verbally massage Trump's actions to make them appear in line with democratic norms. As noted above, we are now witnessing this same pattern of support for Trump's refusal to concede to Biden and his sustained claims of voter fraud.

Recent scholarship also reveals a Republican Party electorate that holds profoundly authoritarian viewpoints. A recent study by Larry Bartels (*Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.*, 117[37], 2020) is instructive here. Using a cross-sectional survey to gauge the views of self-identified Republicans and Republican-leaning independents, he found the following: A few more than half agree that "the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it"; more than 40 percent agree that "a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands"; nearly 50 percent agree that "strong leaders sometimes have to bend the rules in order to get things done"; and just under 75 percent agree that "it is hard to trust the results of elections when so many people will vote for anyone who offers a handout." Notably, the majority of respondents who did not "agree" said they were "unsure" rather than "disagree."

The combination of GOP elites lending consistent and strong support to an overtly authoritarian regime and a base within the electorate that widely embraces authoritarian tendencies including political violence and corruption suggests that our already weak democracy is in a deeply precarious state. Unfortunately, we lack historical data that can reliably indicate if these viewpoints are unique to the Trump years, but we do know that hostile attitudes toward immigrants and an "insider/outsider" viewpoint in which immigrants, Blacks, and Muslims are grouped in the "outsider"

category, were strong motivators behind a vote for Trump in 2016 (Richard C. Fording & Sanford F. Schram, “Why Trump Won: Outgroup Hostility as the New Ethnocentrism,” American Politics Workshop, CUNY Graduate Center, 2018). The important takeaway here is that U.S. politics is polluted by a deeply authoritarian mood that extends beyond the Trump White House.

It is reasonable to assume that the Republican Party will persist as a hotbed of authoritarianism following the end of the Trump presidency. Whether Trump remains as a political voice upon leaving office is largely irrelevant. The party’s electoral base is increasingly hostile toward democracy and deeply sympathetic to the principles of white nationalism. These views will continue to be nurtured by Republican elites who, with few exceptions, have adopted Trump’s style of politics, and by an ecosystem of far-right news media, social media, and web forums. We must anticipate how these forces will likely interact with a Biden presidency that they already view as illegitimate. Every Democratic Party-led policy initiative will be fought with vigor, making the special election in Georgia for the state’s two Senate seats a crucial focus in the weeks ahead. And protests by the left, aimed at pushing the Biden administration to advance the Green New Deal and progressive policies like Medicare for All, may very well be met with the same level of police repression and far-right vigilantism as we have witnessed throughout the Trump presidency. Especially troubling is what an ineffective Biden presidency could provoke. Should Democrats fail to gain a majority in the Senate, if even one of Georgia’s two open seats goes to a Republican, gridlock will define the next two years (or four if the Democrats fail to achieve majorities in both houses during the 2022 midterms). This scenario of a “do-nothing” Biden presidency could incite rage among Republican voters who will blame Democrats for their real or perceived unmitigated problems (think COVID relief, extension of unemployment benefits, and so on), paving the way for a more capable authoritarian presidential candidate than Trump in 2024. Thus, the left, and indeed anyone committed to democracy, must anticipate these scenarios and work to prevent them from coming to fruition as we continue to organize, protest, and engage in strategic electoral work.

A Reemerging Left

As believers in the words of the protest chant “We are unstoppable, another world is possible,” we would be remiss to conclude an essay on the extensive deficits in American democracy without also noting that a very different politics is achievable. Especially where political institutions are unresponsive to the wants and needs of ordinary people—workers, minority groups, women, the LBGTQ+ community, and other marginalized populations—social movements provide voice to the voiceless. The progressive victories of the past cannot be fully explained without noting the pivotal role that disruptive protest played in forcing them into reality. History also informs us that the strongest antidote to authoritarianism and the creeping threat of fascism is mass mobilization. In other words, protest matters … a lot. We are inspired today by the reemergence of a political left that is equally militant and politically sophisticated, unafraid to take to the streets and emboldened to run candidates who proudly call themselves socialists. Organizations like Democratic Socialists of America have become major political players across the country, and the BLM movement has been uncompromising both in terms of its tactics and its transformative demands, including the defunding and ultimate abolition of the police. These are but two examples of burgeoning revolutionary forces in the United States that have the potential to not just mitigate the country’s deeply embedded pathologies but also to usher in a socialist politics based on the principle of social solidarity. It is according to this assessment that we do not believe we should fall into despair nor become complacent under a Biden presidency, but organize!