

Turmoil in American Politics

February 16, 2024



American politics are in turmoil, all of politics in the broadest sense.

In the White House, in the Congress, in the courts, in state governments, in communities urban, suburban, and rural, in labor and social movements, and in the streets. There is constant controversy, much confusion, occasional conflict and alienation from political parties, as well as widespread agonizing, and a spreading cynicism. Since Donald Trump's campaign of 2016 and even before, far-right influencers on social media draw the disaffected and disoriented into the web of conspiracy theories, about vaccines that carry chips to take over your mind and pedophiles at the highest levels of government grooming our children for their perversions. Everywhere, fear spreads. And anger grows. Fueled by Trump's rhetoric, Fox News, and ultra-right social media, hate crimes—against Blacks as always, against Asians, Latinos, Jews, and Muslim—have increased, leading to violent attacks, including occasional murders. There is a lot of grief for these killings as well as for the more than 600 killed this year alone in senseless mass murders. We are haunted as well by rising temperatures, scenes of floods and forest fires killing hundreds in America, which as almost everyone knows results from burning coal and oil, that we seem unable to stop, and that therefore a planetary inferno seems inevitable.

On the positive side, there has been a wave of strikes, women are winning fights for abortion rights, and we have a new movement in solidarity with Palestinians. But this has been accompanied by a rise in Islamophobia and of antisemitism, and all of the other old racisms.

How can one orient oneself in this Category 5 Hurricane of increasingly bewildering and dangerous ideas and activities, an intellectual and political storm in which it becomes increasingly difficult to make out the horizon or to find shelter, much less engage in meaningful action? What does this turmoil mean for the future of the country and in particular for the left? How can we get our bearings and move forward?

For decades—at least until the Great Recession of 2008—American domestic politics had been pretty quiet. The two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, alternated in power every few years with only the occasional kerfuffle. Unions calmly declined in membership and seldom struck, their power atrophying. Reproductive rights had come to be taken for granted. LGBTQ people had made significant gains, though there was a growing backlash. Black people, as always were the least complacent. They could not afford to be because every economic crisis knocked them back, and racist police violence continued to target them at a higher rate than other groups.

With the coming of the 21st century things began to change. Every five or ten years there was a major outburst of some social movement: immigrants in 2006, Occupy Wall Street in 2010, the enormous 15 or 20 million participants in Black Lives Matter in 2020. But they soon faded away, usually without creating any on-going organization and certainly no new political party. There was also the occasional call-to-conscience, such as the Me Too awakening, which changed many minds but never became a movement.

At the same time, on the right, beginning in 2010 there were the racist protests against Obama as the right for the first time in years entered into public protest at congressional representatives' meetings in their districts, some of them wild disruptive affairs. Created by Republican politicians and wealthy business interests who financed this simulacrum of a movement, it was made up of middle-class conservatives and small, far-right groups who turned out carrying racist and anti-Communist signs to protest what came to be called Obamacare. Those protests became the Tea Party movement, then the Congressional caucus of the same name, and then the Freedom Caucus allied with Trump. At the same time there was a discreet and almost surreptitious Republican accumulation of influence in local politics and the courts, accompanied by seemingly random outbursts of rowdy armed men in camouflage, who had been training in the woods for some coming battle, and now appeared at conservative rallies, words of revolution on their lips and pistols on their hips, waving "Don't Tread on Me" flags from the American Revolution of 1776.

So, things are no longer quiet. Since the 2008 economic crisis and especially since Trump's campaign for president in 2016, we no longer stand on solid ground. The earth is moving, now at about magnitude six on the Richter scale, but many fear that a magnitude eight or nine earthquake is coming.

What is giving rise to the pervasive fear in society? Part of the fear gripping people comes from concerns about the economy, perhaps because of the devastating experiences of many in the 2008 recession and the economic impact of the 2020-22 COVID pandemic.

Things have gotten somewhat better. Though in the last year over three million jobs were created, though job growth has slowed some, so the current (Nov. 2023) unemployment rate, while historically low, is up slightly to 3.9 percent. Rising prices are another major concern of working people, but the inflation rate has moderated and is now at 3.2 percent and gas prices, always a big consumer concern, have fallen significantly. Wage gains were generally canceled by inflation, but wages did not decline. High interest rates remain a big problem because of their effect on housing. The current mortgage rate for houses is 7.5 percent, making home ownership impossible for many younger families. Rents have been very high and most apartment dwellers spend 30 percent of their incomes on rent, while low-income renters may spend an even higher percentage, but for the moment rents have stopped rising. Some 82 percent of Americans have a credit card and total debt is now at a record one trillion dollars, largely due to COVID, but people are generally paying down their debt. Looking to the near future, many economists now predict there will be no recession or only a slight recession in 2024 and interest rates are expected to decline.

Biden and the Democrats addressed the economic fallout from the COVID crisis, first with the American Rescue Plan that provided economic support to businesses and financial assistance to workers. Then turning to long-term economic issues Biden and Congress passed the Chips Act to ensure that the United States, rather than relying on Taiwan, could produce sufficient chips for the computer, semiconductor and electronic device industries, the bipartisan infrastructure deal, and the Inflation Reduction Act, all aimed at shoring up and building up the U.S. industrial economy on a more environmentally friendly basis. All of this taken together is called Bidenomics, but most of these are long-term, large-scale projects that have so far had little direct impact on the economy.

Yet the most recent Gallup poll on the issue of the economy (Sept. 2023) shows public pessimism, reporting that only 22 percent of the population think things are excellent, while 32 percent think they're only fair, and 48 percent think they're poor. These gloomy attitudes might seem irrational, except that working people know that there's always a downturn every few years and a real crisis every decade or so and that they're the ones who lose their jobs and their homes. And for a good part of the population, the rosy economic figures mean little, because they have low-wage jobs, work part time, or are unemployed. Some 12.4 percent of Americans lived in poverty in 2022, up from 7.4 percent from 2021; and child poverty doubled from 5.2 percent to 12.4 percent. In any case, people are aware of a growing economic inequality and of the possibilities of hard times to come, and this contributes to the sense of fear in society.

It seems likely, however, that another quite important factor in the public's fears regarding the economy comes from the rightwing mass media and the social media's conspiracy theories, the attacks on Biden and the Democrats, on the deep state, and the predictions of a coming social catastrophe, race war, civil war, or Q-Anon's promised "storm," all of which undermine confidence in government, the economy, and everything else.

Let's take a look at what's happening now in the political arena, starting on the right and then turning to the left. We should keep in mind that the current situation began in 2020, when Trump denied that Biden had been elected and generated a complex scheme to fabricate new state electoral delegations and to have Vice-President Pence refuse to accept Biden's victory. And to put pressure on his second-in-command, Trump called a rally in Washington attended by as many as 80,000 people, then directed them to the Capitol where groups like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers led more than 2,000 in an insurrection, invading the building in an attempted coup intended to put Trump in office. Since Pence refused to obey Trump by sabotaging Biden's election, the boss denounced Pence, the mob chanted, "Hang Mike Pence," and Trump, watching the erection of a gallows, agreed that he should be hanged. Subsequently, over 500 were arrested and hundreds pled guilty or were convicted of misdemeanors and felonies. Several who were charged with insurrection have gone to prison for years. Trump calls them heroes and promises to pardon them. This is a major source of the rightwing movement that we face today.

Following the 2020 election, Trump and his followers launched an attack on election officials and poll workers, accusing them of stealing the elections for the Democrats. Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani began by demonizing Wandra "Shaye" Moss and her mother Ruby Freeman, two Black women poll workers whom he accused of putting fake ballots in the ballot boxes. Rightwing media made their lives miserable. Despite the failure of his many court cases seeking to prove the election was stolen from him, Trump argued (as he continues to do) that he won the election and urged his followers to challenge the electoral system.

And so they did. Around the country, election officials and poll workers began to receive harassing calls and letters, threats, sometimes death threats, which led hundreds of election officials to resign. Many poll workers, who volunteer or receive a day's pay for their work, became reluctant to continue their election-day duties, fearing threats or violence. The point of all this rightwing intimidation is to both erode public trust in the election process and to make that process as difficult and unworkable as possible.

At the higher level of local and state government, Republican politicians around the country worked to remove voters from the election rolls, passing laws or making regulations that made it harder for the elderly, college students, Black and Hispanic voters, and ex-felons to vote, because they vote disproportionately for Democrats. Republican legislators have also worked to gerrymander election districts to advantage Republicans over Democrats. The Republicans' racist cartography threatens to undo important gains made by the civil rights movement through the passage of the Voting Rights

Act of 1965. The act itself is the target of lawsuits in several states intended to eviscerate it and thereby weaken the rights of minority voters.

The most active and visible right-wing grassroots movement of the last couple of years has been Moms for Liberty. Founded in Florida in 2021, the group initially opposed mask and vaccine mandates in schools but became a national organization principally focused on opposing “critical race theory” and LGBTQ and especially Trans rights. In cities and towns around the country, the group mobilized its members and other parents and local residents to attend and disrupt local school and library board meetings, demanding an end to race and sex education in school curricula and the removal of books dealing with Black history and LGBTQ issues. Moms for Liberty worked to create a frenzied atmosphere, disrupting meeting agendas, and sometimes provoking violent incidents. All of these encouraged threats of violence against teachers and librarians who were accused of “grooming” children to become gay or trans, and so we have also had a wave of teacher resignations. Interestingly, Moms for Liberty candidates in local school and library board elections generally lost to moderates in the off-year 2023 election – a good sign for Democrats.

While middle-class Moms shrieked at school boards for having classes on the history of racism and their hubbies got into shoving matches with defenders of books about gender at the library board, the more militant and menacing far right also continued to organize, the neo-Nazi white supremacist group Patriot Front, active in 40 states, focused recently on disrupting LGBTQ events. Wearing their uniform of white caps and masks and displaying fascist symbols, they shout “reclaim America,” meaning for the white race.

All of this, of course, builds toward the Trump presidential campaign of 2024. The Donald is facing four indictments for a total of 91 felonies, ranging from falsifying business records, to election interference, to fomenting insurrection. The trials for these will keep him busy so that rather than ranting at his rallies and dancing to the gay anthem “YMCA” for much of the campaign season he’ll be sitting in court. But that is not likely to impede his campaign; from the courthouse he will portray himself as the victim of what he claims is the Democrats’ persecution. Remarkably, these criminal accusations have not cut into his loyal base, but have contributed to his fundraising. He has felt no need to debate given that he leads the closest Republican challengers Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley by 30 to 40 points in the polls. The latest polls, as this is being written, show Trump ahead of Biden. The ex-president and his team are preparing their comeback.

Trump and his advisors like Jeffrey Clark, Steve Bannon, Roger Stone, and Mike Flynn are making big plans for a second term that involve using the Justice Department to persecute his enemies. His “Project 2025,” being worked on by advisors and rightwing think-tanks, would go after his former disloyal staff and officials such as chief of staff, John F. Kelly, attorney general William P. Barr, attorney Ty Cobb, and Joint Chiefs of Staff chair Gen. Mark A. Milley, and members of the Justice Department and FBI, as well as Joe Biden and his family.

In his desire to destroy the deep state, Trump may also revive his former executive order known as Schedule F that would reclassify tens of thousands of civil service employees as at-will employees, who could then be fired.

He is also contemplating invoking the Insurrection Act of 1871, which would allow him to mobilize the military for domestic policing. He has said he regretted not having done so to deal with the Black Lives Matter movement. So we could face martial law on a national scale.

Trump and former aide Stephen Miller are also making big second term plans on immigration policy. They say they will use not only ICE officers, but also police and the National Guard to carry out

massive raids, rounding up undocumented immigrants, putting them in camps, holding hearings that ignore due process, and deporting them by the millions each year. All of this will end up in front of the conservative Supreme Court, and what can we hope for there? Deportations will be accompanied by a revived Muslim ban to keep out immigrants from certain nations. And Trump would try to end constitutional birth-right citizenship for babies born in the United States.

These plans of Trump and Miller speak to the Republican base, the core of which is made up of middle-class people who fear that the white Christian majority that has ruled America for 250 years is being overwhelmed by immigrants who will take their jobs, their schools, their neighborhoods, their country. In fact, demographers predict that the non-Hispanic white majority will end by 2045; people of color will outnumber them. The fear and increasingly the hatred of these others is the glue that unites the Republican Party. Trump is many bad things, but racism forms the core of his dangerous politics.

We now have a cottage industry that produces news stories, TV programs, and books that openly discuss Trump's fascist politics. The late Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, suggested as much in her book *Fascism: A Warning*. Republican political consultant Stuart Stevens's new book, *The Conspiracy to End America*, explicitly describes Trump as a fascist. Former congressperson and "Morning Joe" host Joe Scarborough labeled Trump a fascist. And night-time comedian Stephen Colbert dedicated a November 2023 opening monologue to a discussion of whether or not Trump was a fascist, and while there were some jokes it was mostly serious, and he concluded that indeed he was. We now, all of us in America, are talking about the possibility that our next president could be a fascist whom commentators and authors compare to Adolf Hitler.

The fascism of the 1920s and 30s in Europe was generally a reaction to the growing threat of labor and the left; fascism created mass movements and political parties financed by the bourgeoisie. Today the threat from the left does not seem great enough to warrant a fascist response, and the American capitalist class is divided in its attitude toward Trump. As the AP reported in 2020, "On Nov. 6, more than two dozen CEOs of major U.S. corporations took part in a video conference to discuss what to do if Trump refuses to leave office or takes other steps to stay in power beyond the scheduled Jan. 20 inauguration of former Vice President Joe Biden." The CEOs pledged to pressure the GOP if and when Trump engaged in illegal action and they stopped contributions to Trump and his supporters, but in January 2022 a report of the Citizens for Responsibility in Ethics found that, afraid of losing influence, "In addition to donations to the 147 members of the Sedition Caucus and the GOP's party committees, corporations have resumed giving to the state attorneys general challenging the election results in four battleground states." Americans for Prosperity, backed by billionaire businessman and rightwing libertarian Charles Koch, has put up \$70 million to defeat Trump in 2024 and has endorsed his rival Nikki Haley. But Koch also put up big bucks to stop Trump in 2016 and failed. So don't count on the capitalist class to come to the rescue.

So now, let's turn to the left, beginning at the bottom and working our way up. Workers and their unions, now facing not only all the old problems but also a new cybernetic revolution, awoke with a start this year and walked out of classrooms, coffee shops, hospitals, warehouses, movie studios, and auto plants in the largest strike wave since the 1980s. Led by outspoken leaders who talked about challenging the billionaire class, like Shawn Fain of the Autoworkers and Fran Drescher of SAG AFTRA, the actors union, tens of thousands of workers struck and in most of these labor conflicts won significant improvements in wages and benefits and new clauses protecting them from the threats of technological displacement, whether by electric cars in the auto industry or by artificial intelligence in the movie business. There are new organizing drives: the Teamsters are working to organize Amazon, and the United Auto Workers are planning to unionize Tesla—both very big challenges facing militantly anti-union employers.

Some of these movements, such as those among teachers and autoworkers, were inspired in part by rank-and-file caucuses fighting for more democratic and militant unions. Though they represent only scores of activists, the Democratic Socialist of America (DSA) has been involved in these developments, as has the educational center Labor Notes. The left is present, if not yet leading.

While this is the biggest strike wave in many years, it comes nowhere near the historic strikes of the 1930s and 40s or 1970. But for the first time in decades, the working class is in motion. Is this merely a brief outburst or a turning point for labor? Are workers, their unions, and their leaders prepared to mount a class-wide assault on non-union employers? Only time will tell, but it seems like there is now a militant minority in the unions prepared to fight.

Biden, in a first in presidential history, appeared at workers' picket lines, as did Bernie Sanders, and both expressed support for the strikers, and later congratulated them on their victory. Democrats hope these workers will return the favor by voting for Biden and his party in November. In 2020 most union voters supported Biden, but most white non-college voters supported Trump, so we'll only know in November who wins working class votes this time.

Women and their allies have also been on the move in the fight for abortion rights, principally through the ballot box. The Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which had provided federal protections for abortion, led to the rise of a new generation of feminist fighters for abortion rights who after a spate of protest demonstrations turned toward electoral action. In the November 2022 mid-term elections, voters approved measures to protect abortion rights in California, Michigan, and Vermont, while those in Kentucky and Montana resisted further restrictions. And in the off-year elections in November 2023, voters in Ohio put abortion rights in the state constitution, while in Kentucky and Virginia they voted against anti-abortion candidates. Women are working to get abortion rights on state ballots in Arizona, Florida, Nevada, Colorado, South Dakota, and other states.

Biden and the Democrats believe, no doubt correctly, that the abortion issue will help them to draw women and young voters to the polls. In the meantime, the recent abortion rights victories inhibit the Republicans from advocating that Congress pass a national abortion ban.

Suddenly, since October 7, 2023, we have a new movement precipitated by the Israel-Hamas War. Israel's war on Hamas, which began in retaliation for Hamas' invasion of Israel and heinous murder of civilians including children, then was transformed by Israel into a war of revenge against the long-suffering Palestinian people, mass murder that has killed thousands of civilians and among them thousands of children. The destruction and slaughter in Gaza has provoked a mass movement of sympathy for and solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The movement has been led by Jewish groups like Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and If Not Now, and Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and American Muslims for Palestine, as well as other organizations championing Palestinian rights. There have been hundreds of protests with tens of thousands of participants in cities and on college campuses across the United States demanding a ceasefire and an end to funding of Israel. The multiracial and religiously diverse demonstrations have been dominated by young people. Many of the protests have involved civil disobedience, blocked highways and bridges, taking over Grand Central Station and the Statue of Liberty in Manhattan and a government office building in Washington, D.C., in all of which over a thousand people have been arrested. SJP and other groups have organized protests on college campuses, though several university administrations banned the organization and cancelled its activities, which then led to new protests demanding the right to discuss and debate these issues. Several labor unions, particularly teachers unions, passed resolutions in support of Palestinians leading to condemnation by Jewish groups. What will happen to this new movement over the next

several months as the war is resolved one way or another but the Israel/Palestine situation—occupation, apartheid, land seizures, and abuse—continues?

The conflict in the Middle East has given rise to an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents. Most seriously, a Palestinian child in the Chicago area was murdered and three Palestinian college students were shot in Vermont. Rightwing antisemites have been flourishing on social media. Israel supporters were quick to label any criticism of Israel as antisemitic – the Anti-Defamation League, for example, considers support for the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement to be inherently antisemitic. Unfortunately, however, not all allegations of antisemitism within the pro-Palestine movement have been bogus. Some of this is attributable to the fact that while the movement's core activists have thought deeply about these problems the thousands of newer participants have not, or they have been educated in DSA, or perhaps the Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSL) in a politics that led them to automatically support any Palestinian action. DSA initially supported a rally organized by Hamas supporters. Some DSA affiliates and members have avoided criticizing Hamas for its murders of civilians. Some on the left have even suggested that October 7 proved that Hamas was the vanguard of the Palestinian liberation movement, apparently unaware or dismissive of its religious, rightwing ideology, its authoritarianism, and its long history of attacks on civilians. Unfortunately, these politics mesh with the campist left groups like Workers World Party and the PSL, who view as allies states like China, Russia, and Iran because they oppose the United States.

Biden's and the Democrats' virtually unconditional support for Israel and their refusal over more than a month to call for a ceasefire appears to have cost them dearly among young voters. In 2020, almost 60 percent of young voters, 18 to 29, supported Biden over Trump. At present, Biden's popularity among young voters is collapsing. He is popular with only 25 percent of voters under 35. Yet not all young voters are prepared to sit out the election. As Eva Borgwardt, a spokesperson for JVP, told Amy Goodman on "Democracy Now,"

I worked for President Biden in Arizona in the 2020 election. Let's be clear: I am terrified of Donald Trump and the white supremacist, antisemitic movement that's behind him. And I feel immense stake in the Democratic Party winning in November 2024. And frankly, again, I am deeply terrified and angry at Democratic leadership for ignoring the calls from the majority of their base for a ceasefire, a hostage exchange, and a de-escalation, and creating a lack of faith in the Democratic Party that I am very concerned will hurt Democrats' chances in November.

Whatever young voters do, Biden might also lose Muslim and Arab voters, and this could be very serious. Biden won Michigan by 150,000 votes, but the state has 200,000 Muslims and 20,000 Arab Americans. Tens of thousands of Arab Americans also live in the states of Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Arizona, that Biden won by anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000 votes. Losing these voters could be disastrous for Biden and might lead to the election of Trump.

The coming election has gotten pretty complicated. In addition to what looks like a Trump-Biden rematch, barring any unforeseen development, there are also several other real or possible candidates, left, right, and center. In the Democratic Primary, Marianne Williamson, the crystal age spiritual advisor and author has little following, and Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota will receive few if any convention votes. Neither represents any sort of threat to Biden. The Democratic Socialists of America, the country's largest left organization, backed Bernie Sanders in the last two elections, though after he lost in 2020, most of its members then voted for Biden. Whether officially or more likely unofficially, DSA members will probably work for Biden.

A little further left, African-American professor and major progressive public intellectual Cornel West created a brief sensation with his plans to run for president first on the Peoples Party ticket,

then on the Green Party line, but finally, apparently as an independent, though he currently doesn't appear on the ballot in any state. The less well-known Jill Stein of the Green Party, the physician who was her party's candidate for president in 2012 and 2016 and for governor of Massachusetts in 2002 and 2010, is running again for president. In her last campaign she received 1.1 percent of the national vote. While both espouse progressive positions, neither West nor Stein has supported Ukraine's fight for independence and its right to get arms from the EU countries and the United States, and their Ukraine talking points often seem taken from Vladimir Putin. There is no chance that West or Stein could be elected, though Stein whose Green Party is on the ballot in many states might win enough votes from newly disaffected Democrats, students, Muslims and Arabs, to cost Biden the election.

In the Center, we may see Joe Manchin run as the candidate of the No Labels Party. Manchin, a stockholder in coal mines and a conservative Democrat from West Virginia, is retiring from his Senate seat and flirting with the No Labels Party. Firmly planted in the center-right, he might as the No Labels candidate gain momentum and draw votes from both Trump and Biden. And then on the right we have Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., scion of the famous, wealthy, and politically connected Kennedy clan, all Democratic Party liberals, who was once an environmental activist and still holds some liberal opinions, but has now become a peddler of conspiracy theories about COVID vaccines targeting whites and Blacks and passing over Jews and Chinese, and about prescription drugs causing mass shootings. With his famous Kennedy name, he could win votes from Democrats though his kooky theories place him nearer the Trump followers. None of these campaigns, left, right, or center, seems capable of doing much except functioning as spoilers, mostly for Joe Biden.

There is no doubt that we are living in threatening times. Yet our society of economic inequality has also set many working people in motion and political crises open some opportunities. All of the left will be involved in the revitalized labor unions, in women's fights for abortion rights, in the Palestine solidarity movement, and in Black and Latino movements when they revive. And we will all work to build a more powerful movement not only against climate change but for system change. Many on the left will argue that it is important to build a left party alternative to Biden and Trump, a proposition with which virtually everyone on the left agrees. The question is, given Trump and the fascist movement, and the fact that minor parties will take votes from the one candidate who has proven he can beat Trump, whether now is the time to try to build a left party.

Thanks to my friends Stephen R. Shalom and Rust Gilbert for their helpful comments on this article and to Tom Harrison for editing it.