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#### **We'll miss it when it's gone: The assault on –and the fight to save– democracy in the United States today**

La echaremos de menos cuando desaparezca: El asalto a la democracia en los Estados Unidos hoy y la lucha para salvarla

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# We'll miss it when it's gone: The assault on –and the fight to save– democracy in the United States today

La echaremos de menos cuando desaparezca:  
El asalto a la democracia en los Estados Unidos hoy  
y la lucha para salvarla

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**Summary:** 1. A fulcrum of simmering tensions. 2. Democratic decay and the Orbanization of America. 3. Permanent Trumpism and the mainstreaming of the far-right fringe. 4. Conservative media stoke the fire. 5. Chronicle of a coup foretold: building an apparatus of election theft. 6. Theorizing Trumpism: continuity vs. rupture. 7. Organizing to defend democracy. 8. We'll miss it when it's gone. References.

**Abstract:** This article examines the sweeping assault on democratic rights in the United States today, the far-reaching impact of Donald Trump's presidency and development of «permanent Trumpism» on American political culture, and the activist mobilization against these forces. The authors discuss the growing alarm among scholars of democracy about the increasing «autocratization» of US politics and the «Orbanization» of the Republican Party. They examine how these dynamics are playing out at the local level, with a focus on the «swing» state of Michigan. They look at the growth of armed White Power groups and the turn to political violence in the US. They

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analyze the proliferation of conspiratorial claims (such as the assertion that the 2020 election was stolen) and the mainstreaming of far-right ideas (such as the «Great Replacement») via a right-wing media ecosystem that increasingly sustains a parallel epistemic universe. The authors map out the apparatus of election theft that is setting the stage for another coup attempt, and various measures designed to make it more difficult to vote. They review the scholarly debate about the nature of Trumpism. Finally, they discuss the growing resistance to Trumpism and various forms of organizing to defend democracy and defeat authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Democratic rights, *Trumpism*, autocracy, post-fascism, social mobilization, non-state armed groups, fake news.

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina el asalto sistemático a los derechos y estructuras democráticas en los Estados Unidos hoy en día, el impacto continuo y de largo alcance de la presidencia de Donald Trump y el desarrollo del «trumpismo permanente» en la cultura política estadounidense, y la movilización de activistas para detener la marea de estas fuerzas. Los autores discuten la creciente alarma entre politólogos, teóricos democráticos y estudiosos de la guerra civil sobre la creciente «autocratización» de la política estadounidense y la «orbanización» del Partido Republicano en particular. Examinan cómo se desarrollan estas dinámicas a nivel local, con un enfoque en el estado «oscilante» de Michigan. Observan el crecimiento de los grupos armados del Poder Blanco y el giro hacia la violencia política en los Estados Unidos, y analizan la proliferación de teorías conspirativas (como la «Gran Mentira» o afirmación de que se robaron las elecciones de 2020) y la incorporación de ideas marginales de extrema derecha (como la «Teoría del Gran Reemplazo») a través de un ecosistema de medios que sostiene un universo epistémico paralelo de «posverdad» y «hechos alternativos». Los autores describen el aparato de robo electoral que está preparando el escenario para otro intento de golpe y varias medidas diseñadas para dificultar el voto (especialmente para los afroamericanos). Revisan el debate académico sobre la naturaleza del *trumpismo*. Finalmente, analizan la creciente resistencia al *trumpismo* en los EE. UU. y varias formas de organización como un medio crítico para defender los derechos democráticos y derrotar el autoritarismo.

**Palabras clave:** Derechos democráticos, Trumpismo, autocracia, post-fascismo, movilización social, grupos armados no estatales, noticias falsas.

## 1. A fulcrum of simmering tensions

Wearing blue jeans and his trademark aviator sunglasses, his brown hair slicked back, his wife and their four children at his side, Republican Allendale County Commissioner Ryan Kelley spoke to a crowd gathered at a rally organized by the right-wing group American Patriot Council in Allendale, Michigan shortly before the 2020 US presidential election.

The lyrics of Lee Greenwood's song «Proud to be an American,» a staple at pro-Trump rallies, hung in the late October air. Many people in the crowd of about 100 people sported red Trump hats, and a number of Trump flags billowed in the fall breeze. Their group's purpose: to express their unwavering support for then-President Donald Trump.

Kelley extolled the interrelated virtues of country, family, guns, and the constitution. Militia men wearing camouflage gear and toting rifles stood in front and on either side of him. After he and the other speakers concluded their remarks, the group began a slow march past a Confederate statue and toward Lake Michigan Avenue, where a Justice for Black Lives rally had been taking place at the same time on the other side of the park. Holding signs portraying Kelley as a Führer, attendees mingled chants and calls for the commissioner's resignation with broader calls for justice. A group of armed Native Americans guarded the multiracial group.

The American Patriot Council marchers turned the corner and started walking toward the protesters. Some American Patriot Council members belligerently chanted, «USA! USA! USA!» Local policemen stood in between the groups, their physical presence a reminder of the need to separate them and their likely ineffectiveness should the very real prospect of violence materialize.

After what seemed like a long moment, the marchers walked past each other. The American Patriot Council members walked roughly another quarter mile before retracing their steps to the rally's starting place. The Justice for Blacks Lives group returned to where they had been and began to gradually disperse.

On the one hand, the moment could be seen as a triumph of democracy –two actively engaged, passionate groups exercising their constitutionally– guaranteed rights of expression, assembly, and bearing arms on the eve of a highly consequential presidential election. As occurred throughout the United States in 2020, Michigan had record turnout numbers and the highest percentage voter turnout in half a century.

Two years later, the fabric of democracy in Michigan has sustained a series of blows.

Kelley, who attended the January 6, 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, was one of five declared candidates for the Republican gubernatorial nomination to face Whitmer in November 2022 (Oosting 2022). Kristina Karamo, an advocate of the discredited conspiracy theory that the 2020 election was stolen, received the Republican Party's strong endorsement to serve as Michigan's Secretary of State. And Republican U.S. Rep. Peter Meijer, who voted in one of his initial decisions as congressman to impeach Trump following the January 6 insurrection, lost to Trump-backed political commentator and former Housing and Urban Development official John Gibbs.

Yet this is not just the story of an ambitious county commissioner, two groups of bitterly opposed, heavily armed marchers, and a congressional primary. Rather, Michigan is a fulcrum of simmering tensions within the nation as a whole –both a lens into the national landscape and a geographic unit of analysis that illuminates the development of a potentially permanent Trumpism.

Despite his myriad legal challenges, Trump remains the dominant figure in the Republican Party. Polls show that he will be the overwhelming favorite to win the party's presidential nomination in 2024. Yet even if Trump were to leave American public life permanently, the threat that Trumpism presents to American democracy would persist in a more diffuse, and, arguably, more dangerous form. Although Trump is no longer in the White House, Trumpism is now «in the American bloodstream», as Freedland (2021) has put it. And while defeating Trump himself is of paramount importance, the ongoing, multi-pronged and relentless attack on the democratic fabric of American society poses a long-term threat –one that must be recognized and countered through concerted and strategic organizing.

## 2. Democratic decay and the Orbanization of America

The showdown in Michigan described above provides a microcosmic look into an ominous pattern to which many political scientists, democratic theorists, and scholars of civil war have recently turned their attention. Consider the following.

The polity score, compiled by the Polity Project at the Center for Systemic Peace, aims to measure how democratic or autocratic states are on a 21-point scale ranging from –10 (most autocratic) to +10 (most democratic), with «anocracies» falling in the middle zone: «neither full autocracies nor democracies but something in between» (Walter 2022, 11). On January 6, 2021, the Polity Project downgraded the US to an

anocracy, assigning the country its lowest polity score ever (+5). «Let that sink in,» Walter writes, the US is «no longer the world's oldest continuous democracy. That honor is now held by Switzerland, followed by New Zealand, and then Canada» (Walter 2022, 138).

In 2020, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute at the University of Gothenburg released a major comparative study based on research conducted by several hundred political scientists around the world examining the adherence of political parties to democratic norms since 1970. The study, the largest ever of its kind, found that the US has undergone «substantial autocratization» and that the Republican Party has taken a decidedly authoritarian turn in recent years such that it now closely resembles the illiberal ruling parties of Hungary, India, and Turkey (Lührmann *et al.* 2020). Lührmann has characterized this transformation of a major political party as «certainly the most dramatic shift in an established democracy» (quoted in Borger 2020).

Rather than shun this comparison with Hungary's authoritarian-populist Fidesz party, US Republicans openly embrace it. In May 2022 the American Conservative Union held its flagship event, the Conservative Political Action Conference, in Budapest. Viktor Orbán delivered the opening remarks at the gathering. US conservatives take inspiration from Orbán's rule (Marantz 2022). On the most-watched show on American cable news (on the right-wing Fox News Channel) host Tucker Carlson effuses over the Hungarian leader's hostility to immigration and fear-mongering about «demographic» perils.

«To right-wingers in the United States, steeped in anti-liberal grievance, Hungary offers a glimpse of culture war victory and a template for action», notes Tharoor (2022) in the first of a series of articles chronicling the «Orbanization of America». One prominent Republican admirer of the Hungarian prime minister is Vance, who was elected to the U.S. Senate in the November 2022 midterm elections. Vance gives unfiltered expression to the impulses of Orbánism, advocating «seiz[ing] the institutions of the left» and purging disloyal civil servants: «Fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people», he urges (Quoted in Pogue 2022).

### 3. Permanent Trumpism and the mainstreaming of the far-right fringe

The siege of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 served as a rude awakening –for anyone who needed one– of (1) the anti-democratic lengths to which Trump himself was willing to go to hold on to

power and (2) the intensity and ferociousness of the Trump mob (a not insignificant swath of the US population) who are unwilling to accept their beloved leader's defeat and are prepared to use (or at least support the use of) violence to thwart the democratic process. One is reminded of the slogan that hardcore supporters of the Assad regime menacingly invoked as popular protests broke out across Syria in 2011: «Assad or we burn the country.»

Walter, a leading authority on political violence and civil wars, warns that the US has «entered very dangerous territory» and is now «closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe». The country is «quickly approaching» what scholars of civil wars call the «open insurgency phase» of conflict and January 6 could prove to be merely «the first of a series of organized attacks» in that stage. «America's extremists are becoming more organized, more dangerous, and more determined, and they are not going away» (Walter 2022, 135, 159-60).

Belew (2022) argues that January 6 «was meant as a recruitment and radicalization action –an attempt to raise awareness about the militant right and bring people into the fold». The strategy seems to have worked. The armed White Power group the Proud Boys saw no fewer than 29 new chapters form in the year following the attack on the Capitol (Sunshine 2022).

But while these far-right militant groups played a vanguard role in the siege of the Capitol, the participants in the events of that day represented a cross-section of conservative America. A recent study conducted by the Project on Security and Threats, a research center at the University of Chicago, suggests that the January 6 insurrectionists were a mainstream bunch. Of those arrested or charged for storming the Capitol, «more than half are business owners, including CEOs, or from white-collar occupations, including doctors, lawyers, architects, and accountants» (Pape 2022).

Hayden, who investigates far-right hate groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center, emphasizes this growing convergence between ordinary Republicans and far-right militants. «Those soft barriers that held the extreme fringe far-right at bay really broke down on January 6», he notes (Arsenault 2022). The Fall 2021 American Political Violence Survey, which found staunch mainstream Republican support for violence to restore Trump to power, bolsters this point (Chicago Project on Security and Threats 2022). Pape, Director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats, puts it this way: «[W]hat we're seeing in our surveys [...] is 21 million people in the United States who are essentially a mass of kindling or a mass of dry wood that, if married to a spark, could in fact ignite» (Quoted in Gellman 2021).

In late October 2022, a right-wing fanatic broke into the San Francisco home of the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and assaulted her husband with a hammer, fracturing his skull<sup>3</sup>. This disquieting episode did not take place in a vacuum: the assailant was drenched in far-right conspiracy theories (Arango *et al.* 2022) and the Republican Party has spent years demonizing Pelosi (Parker *et al.* 2022).

Threats against elected officials in the U.S. have dramatically increased in recent years, and more political violence is likely on the way. Lowndes (quoted in Lehmann 2022) notes: «We're at a moment when Republican elected officials can use the language of violence openly and demonize opponents as enemies in a way that's as harsh as it gets. [T]he needle has moved on the legitimacy of political violence on the right. Not only is more of it allowed, but the very logic of it has shifted, as the GOP has become a far-right party of the European variety.»

#### 4. Conservative media stoke the fire

Conservative television and radio outlets have played a significant role in drying the wood that Pape evokes. A variety of comparatively mainstream media outlets reinforce Trump's Big Lie on a regular basis. They place that falsehood at the center of a worldview that, like Trump's rhetoric, is at once inclusive, local, and uniting for those who agree with him and dark, discriminatory, and conspiratorial for those who hold different views. Fox News is at the center of a constellation of conservative news sources that also included the late radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh. At Fox, and perhaps throughout the country, no one earns higher ratings or is more influential than Tucker Carlson.

In the spring of 2022, the *New York Times* published a three-part series on Carlson. The product of painstaking research that involved watching and coding 1,150 episodes of Carlson's show from 2017 to 2021, the series described the «they-you» framing and repetition of key ideas that Carlson advanced during hundreds upon hundreds of segments (Confessore 2022). The most frequent trope Carlson invokes is the «ruling class», which he tells his audience over and over again, «want to destroy you». Another core theme for Carlson is «replacement», the narrative that white Americans face an

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<sup>3</sup> Speaker Pelosi, the target of the attack, was not home at the time.



«invasion» by migrants from other countries, that the white majority is demographically threatened by higher birth rates among minorities –and that this is not by chance but rather a scheme, promoted by liberals, «globalists» and «enemies» of «the people», to undermine white America. Great Replacement Theory is an explicitly fascist doctrine that has gone mainstream in American conservative circles (Rose 2022, Serwer 2022). This is largely the work of Carlson, who has sanitized this racist, conspiratorial narrative to his millions of viewers.

In 2021, Carlson adapted his focus to first normalize and later valorize the January 6 insurrection, eventually casting it as a latter-day Lost Cause and a centerpiece of white victimhood. «He puts quotes around ‘insurrection’, baselessly casting the riot as a ‘false flag’ operation instigated by federal officials to persecute conservatives,» Confessore (2022) notes. «He asserts that they are punishing the mostly white crowd at the Capitol more harshly than the Black Lives Matter protesters who marched in the summer of 2020. Those rallies were largely peaceful».

The right-wing information ecosystem does not just exist on media channels like Fox, but also on the radio airwaves, where a dedicated group of personalities continually reinforce the falsehood of a Trump 2020 election victory, and encase election fraud as a prime example of the same kind of deep state/ruling class activity that Carlson constantly advances. Dan Bongino, a former Obama-era White House security guard turned conspiracy theory radio host, is one of the leading examples of this phenomenon –a pattern that has attracted scant attention from liberals opposed to Bongino’s anti-democratic message:

A year after Trump supporters laid siege to the U.S. Capitol, some of his most influential champions are preparing the ground for his return, and they dominate a media terrain that attracts little attention from their opponents. As liberals argue over the algorithm at Facebook and ponder the disruptive influence of TikTok, radio remains a colossus; for every hour that Americans listened to podcasts in 2021, they listened to six and a half hours of AM/FM radio, according to Edison Research, a market-research and polling firm. Talk radio has often provided more reliable hints of the political future than think tanks and elected officials have. (Osnos 2021)

Osnos (2021) goes on to describe the reinforcing role Bongino plays in amplifying and fortifying Trump’s message as «the daily work of sustaining the faithful.» He also quotes Mercieca, a scholar of rhetoric who has analyzed the information warfare of the Trump era, as calling Bongino «an important node» in the amplification of propaganda. Other

broadcasters indebted to Trump for cultivating their power are doing the same kind of work, according to Osnos, naming men like former White House aide Gorka and Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA. But Bongino is distinctive in also using his money and his influence to foster technology startups, such as Parler, Rumble, and AlignPay, that are friendly to right-wing views. Osnos adds that these companies are «intended to withstand traditional pressure campaigns, including advertising boycotts like the one that Media Matters prompted in 2019, based on old radio interviews in which Carlson described women as 'extremely primitive' and Iraqis as 'monkeys'.»

Alt-right social media personalities have worked for years to drum up enough attention online that mainstream media outlets that might hesitate at first to cover a topic will later feel compelled to do so. Marantz described how alt-right social media personality, political commentator and conspiracy theorist Cernovich acted on his desire to bring stories that could hurt then-Democratic presidential standard bearer Hillary Clinton into the mainstream. Marantz reports that Cernovich received a tip in late 2016 that, in 2014, a Reddit user had asked for help removing a «VERY VIP» e-mail address «from a bunch of archived e-mail.» The tipster claimed that the Reddit user was one of Hillary Clinton's I.T. staffers, he wrote. From there, Cernovich used a live video streaming app to dialogue with his followers around a hashtag he could use against Clinton. After settling on «Hillaryshacker,» he promoted it on Twitter, where more than 42,000 tweets with the hashtag were posted by day's end, according to Marantz. The social media activity had tangible and immediate influence. By the next morning, Vice and New York had covered the Reddit story and a congressman had asked prosecutors in Washington, D.C., to look into it (Marantz 2019, 194).

Rather than a centrally coordinated effort, these disparate sources of information and outlets lead almost inexorably toward reinforcing the us/them Trumpian view of the world. The repetition and absorption of these ideas and the perspective that underpins them have profound real-world consequences, according to political theorist Ronald Aronson. He notes that the Big Lie that Carlson, Bongino, Cernovich and others endlessly repeat is a falsehood based on the central conviction that the community –the «us», representing more than 74 million voters– have been heinously wronged and cheated. This has both «become a governing idea» that some promote and many believe, and many are willing to act on it (Aronson 2022).

Aronson describes this widespread embrace of demonstrably false claims and conspiratorial narratives –from the Big Lie about the 2020

election to the Great Replacement Theory and the phantasmagorical QAnon movement (Rothschild 2021)– as a process of «becoming crazy on purpose». He stresses that while adherents to these views are exposed to an enormous amount of right-wing propaganda, they aren't passive dupes: they actively choose to inhabit what is in effect a parallel universe:

If they are delusional, it is not because they somehow «lose» contact with reality, but because they break it off, intentionally. They have become incapable of recognizing reality because for some reason they have made themselves unwilling or unable to do so –by organizing themselves around something else, loyalty to the leader. Factual information doesn't matter, evidence doesn't matter. Truth stems from loyalty to Trump (Aronson 2022).

Mazzarella also emphasizes the centrality of emotions to understanding the phenomenon of Trumpism, with particular attention to the *enjoyment* factor for his supporters –what Mazzarella (2019, 127) calls «the raw, jaded fun of knowingly cultivated outrage, the more cynical the better». Serwer (2021) concisely captures the sadistic impulses at the core of Trumpism with his felicitous formulation «the cruelty is the point».

The cultivation of hatred and the politics of cruelty are hardly unique to Trumpism. They are the stock-in-trade of authoritarian populist demagogues across the world, from Orbán in Hungary, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, and Modi in India, among others. Pankaj Mishra's description of Modi's *modus operandi* perfectly captures the political logic at work:

to titillate a fearful and angry population with the scapegoating of minorities, refugees, leftists, liberals and others while accelerating predatory forms of capitalism. ... [H]e has emancipated the darkest of emotions; he has licensed his supporters to explicitly hate a range of people from perfidious Pakistanis and Indian Muslims to their «anti-national» Indian appeasers. Intoxicating voters with the seductive passion of vengeance, and grandiose fantasies of power and domination, [he has] pioneered the politics of enmity (Mishra 2019).

In the American case, race is a through-line connecting the conspiratorial narratives, the cultivated outrage, and the pleasures of cruelty. Indeed, Mark Danner sees the claim about the 2020 election being «stolen» as «a perfect microcosm of Trump's politics of resentment». He explains the shape of this narrative as follows:

With the help of minorities and illegal immigrants, the swamp and the Deep State rule. Beneath the elaborate façade constructed with endless inventive mendacity by the mainstream media lies a tangle of political and sexual conspiracies that account for the mystifying collapse during the last three or four decades of the world of the white working and lower-middle classes: the stagnation of wages, the emptying out of midwestern manufacturing, the outsourcing of jobs to China and elsewhere, the financial and housing collapse of 2008, the opioid crisis, the rise of the tech and Wall Street billionaires (Danner 2022).

## 5. Chronicle of a coup foretold: building an apparatus of election theft

The hearings of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (known informally as the January 6 hearings), Risen (2022) argues, «don't just offer a look back at what happened in the 2020 election, but also a glimpse of what is likely to happen in 2024». Gellman bracingly reports that the next coup is already underway, and the threat this time around is larger. Since Trump's defeat, and «with tacit and explicit support from their party's national leaders»:

state Republican operatives have been building an apparatus of election theft. Elected officials in Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and other states have studied Donald Trump's crusade to overturn the 2020 election. They have noted the points of failure and have taken concrete steps to avoid failure next time. Some of them have rewritten statutes to seize partisan control of decisions about which ballots to count and which to discard, which results to certify and which to reject. They are driving out or stripping power from election officials who refused to go along with the plot last November, aiming to replace them with exponents of the Big Lie. They are fine-tuning a legal argument that purports to allow state legislators to override the choice of the voters. (Gellman 2021)

Esosa Osa, Deputy Executive Director of the voting rights organization Fair Fight, says we are seeing «the most prolific passage of voting restrictions [in the US] since Jim Crow» and a concomitant «slide toward anti-democratic government, writ large» (Brennan Center for Justice 2022b). The Brennan Center for Justice (2021), an NGO that defends democratic rights in the US, has documented a «tidal wave» of

state-level legislation designed to impose restrictions on voting rights – a pattern that represents an «alarming and unprecedented attack on our democracy». The center defines provisions as restrictive if they would make it harder for Americans to register, stay on the rolls, and/or vote as compared to existing state law. The center started documenting assaults on democracy starting in 2011, finding that the process has accelerated in the two years since the November 2020 election. In its 2021 year-end voting laws round up, the center wrote that 19 states had passed restrictive legislation, making it harder to vote:

These numbers are extraordinary: state legislatures enacted far more restrictive voting laws in 2021 than in any year since the Brennan Center began tracking voting legislation in 2011. More than a third of all restrictive voting laws enacted since then were passed this year. (Brennan Center for Justice. 2021)

Initial evidence shows that the new laws are suppressing voters' ability to exercise the franchise, arguably the most fundamental right in a democracy. The *Texas Tribune* reported in March 2022 that after the implementation of new voter restrictions, close to 20,000 mailed ballots were rejected in 16 of the state's most 2020 populous counties during that month's primary elections (Ramsey 2022). After a survey of 187 of the state's 254 counties, 22,898 mail ballots –13% of the total– were rejected in the same elections (Weber and Coronado 2022). The normal rate of rejection is 2%. In the 2020 presidential election, the rejection rate was under 1%. The Brennan Center further detailed the negative impact similar laws would have on voters of color in swing and other Republican-dominated states across the country like Arizona, Georgia, Florida, and Montana (Morris *et al.* 2022).

In addition to the voting restrictions, the center noted that in 2021 legislators across the country introduced bills to allow partisan actors to interfere with election processes or even reject election results entirely. «Election interference laws do two primary things,» the center wrote. «They open the door to partisan interference in elections, or they threaten the people and processes that make elections work. In many cases, these efforts are being justified as measures to combat baseless claims of widespread voter fraud and a stolen 2020 election.»

This aspect of the assault on voting rights has continued in 2022. In a May 2022 voting rights round up, the center noted that six state legislatures –Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma– have passed nine election interference laws (Brennan Center for Justice 2022a). All but Kentucky are in states

where Republicans hold the governor's office and majorities in both legislatures. As of May 4, the center reported, «at least 17 such bills introduced this year are still moving through five state legislatures. In total, lawmakers in 27 states have proposed at least 148 election interference bills» (Brennan Center for Justice 2022a).

In addition to the legislative measures, Republicans ran Big Lie adherents for key local, county, and state elections positions in swing states across the country that narrowly went for Biden in 2020. In addition to Karamo in Michigan, there was Pennsylvania Republican gubernatorial nominee Doug Mastriano. Although both candidates lost to their Democratic opponents, each garnered 42 percent of all votes cast. A *Guardian* investigation revealed that at least eight county election officials are promoters of the falsehood across the key swing state of Georgia. «All have substantial power over the administration of local, state and national elections in their counties, often with little oversight beyond scantily attended public meetings and small-town newspapers» (Glawe 2022).

There may be even less oversight in the future if the Supreme Court rules in favor of the «independent state legislature» theory in *Moore v. Harper*, a North Carolina case. Kasen, Director of the Safeguarding Democracy Project at the UCLA School of Law, notes that the case has the potential to «fundamentally rework the relationship between state legislatures and state courts in protecting voting rights in federal elections. It also could provide the path for election subversion in congressional and presidential elections» (Kasen 2022).

Kasen explains that the theory in its extreme form is that the state constitution as interpreted by the state supreme court is not a limit on legislative power. This position would essentially neuter the development of any laws protecting voters more broadly than the federal Constitution based on voting rights provisions in state constitutions. The theory could also potentially restrain state and local agencies and governors implementing rules for running elections. From there, it's a short path to fomenting election subversion:

How so? Suppose a state agency interprets state rules to allow for the counting of certain ballots, and doing so favors one candidate. If the leaders of the legislature are from the other party, and they say that the interpretation does not follow the views of the legislature, it's impermissible and the results need to flip (Kasen 2022).

Journalist Millhiser has broken down the likely votes on the case, suggesting that the three liberal justices, along with Chief Justice John

Roberts, would vote against the theory, while Justices Alito, Thomas, Gorsuch, and Kavanaugh have all endorsed some version of it. «That most likely leaves the fate of American democracy in the hands of Justice Amy Coney Barrett, a Trump appointee who typically votes with Republicans in election cases» (Millhiser 2021).

Dispiriting as these legislative and court maneuvers may be, they are legal. But the running of fake electors is patently illegal. The *Iowa Capitol Dispatch* reports that the 84 people who signed bogus documents claiming that Donald Trump won the 2020 election include dozens of local Republican Party leaders, four current candidates for public office, six current office holders and at least five previous state and federal office holders. «Groups from Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin all allegedly met in December 2020 and sent lists of so-called alternate electors to the National Archives after the 2020 election», the newspaper reports, adding that the scheme is reportedly under investigation by the FBI and the Department of Justice, which have issued subpoenas to several of the people involved (Lerner 2022).

At least as troubling is the statement of Rusty Bowers, the Arizona Republican House speaker who made national headlines describing his refusal to help Donald Trump overturn the 2020 election. Bowers rejected a proposal Trump's attorney Rudy Giuliani advanced during a conversation in November 2020 with Giuliani and the former president in which Giuliani proposed replacing Arizona's Biden electors by having the state's legislature instead choose those committed to voting for Trump. Bowers refused, saying the scheme was illegal and unconstitutional (Christie 2022).

In addition to receiving tens of thousands of voicemails and texts at work, Bowers kept a journal at the time describing the harassment he and his family endured: «At home [...] it is the new pattern to worry what will happen on Saturdays, because we have had various groups come by and they have had video-paneled trucks [...] proclaiming me to be a pedophile and a pervert and a corrupt politician and blaring loudspeakers in my neighborhood and leaving literature on my property and arguing and threatening neighbors and myself» (Pengelly 2022).

## 6. Theorizing Trumpism: continuity vs. rupture

This is where dynamics that are specific to Trumpism, whose adherents are «prone to conspiracy thinking, embrace violence, and reject democratic defeat» (Gellman 2021), and more traditional tactics from the Republican playbook that predate Trumpism –especially racially-

driven voter suppression— converge. This not to say that conspiracism, violence, and a rejection of democratic defeat are entirely new or unique to Trumpism. As numerous scholars and commentators have pointed out, this toxic brew has a long history in the US: during the backlash against Reconstruction in the US South, (white) mob violence was routinely mobilized to overturn undesirable election results, often «successfully» (Cobb 2020, Downs and Masur 2021, MacLean 2022, Hayes 2022). Yet while anti-democratic schemes and motifs have deep roots in US history, they are currently seeing a sharp rise as the Republican Party turns to an explicitly minoritarian strategy (Ludwig 2022, Berman 2021).

Is Trumpism merely an extension of such long-standing historical patterns in American conservatism or is it a departure from that history, one that represents a new and uniquely dangerous threat? This has been the subject of contentious debate among scholars, particularly on the American left, since Trump launched his presidential campaign in 2015. That debate has serious and far-reaching consequences, both intellectual and concrete, political ones.

On one side of the divide are those scholars who regard Trumpism as a form of fascism, neo-fascism, post-fascism, or something very close to fascism. Among the more prominent voices in this camp are Stanley (2018, 2021a, 2021b and Stanley *et al.* 2020), Traverso (2019), and Ganz (Ganz 2021, 2022a, 2022b).

On the other side are scholars who see Trumpism as continuous with the history of American conservatism and reject the fascism analogy/ characterization. They regard the former camp's threat assessment of Trump as overblown and its focus on Trumpism as a distraction from more important structural issues. The most prominent representatives of this camp are Robin (2018) and Moyn (2020a, 2020b, 2021; Moyn and Priestland 2017).

In Stanley's eyes, the core elements of Trumpism are straight out of the fascist playbook. Fascism, at its core, is «a cult of the leader who promises national restoration in the face of supposed humiliation by immigrants, minorities, and leftists» and Trump, he notes, «is creating a fascist social and political movement with himself as the leader» (quoted in Illing 2021). Ganz, who has made a powerful case for seeing Trumpism as related to fascism, formulates the issue as follows:

[T]he question of fascism and Trump is really a question whether or not Trumpism represents a merely quantitative or an actually qualitative change in right-wing politics. The term «fascism» in this light stands for a qualitative shift to another, more aggressive, and more openly violent and repressive form of political action. (Ganz 2022a)



While acknowledging Trump's bombastic rhetorical style and temperamental excesses, Robin (2017) sees more through-lines than divergences between the 45th president and the *longue durée* of American conservatism –and conservatism more broadly. We don't need European reference points to make sense of Trump, who is a quintessentially American figure, Robin contends. Moreover, Robin worries that the liberal focus on the peculiar pathologies and dangers of Trumpism serves to let the status quo ante off the hook: if only we could remove the cancer of Trump and Trumpism, in this narrative, we could go back to «normal» politics –but the «normal» politics of the pre-Trump era were deeply problematic and generated the conditions for Trump's rise. While Robin makes some important points, his argument tends to flatten out the contradictions at hand (Hayes 2018).

Moyn (2020a) not only rejects the fascism analogy but accuses the anti-Trump intelligentsia of wildly exaggerating the threat Trump posed. Those in the anti-Trump camp suffer from «tyrannophobia», which Moyn and Priestland define as «the belief that the overwhelmingly important political issue is the threat to our liberal freedoms and institutions» (Moyn and Priestland 2017). Moyn maintains that liberals developed a perverse fixation on Trump, who he came to inhabit «every crevice of his audience's consciousness, pursuing them even in their nightmares» (Moyn 2020b). Moyn calls this Trump's «most extraordinary victory». Among the myriad problems with Moyn's polemical fusillade is that he dismissively paints all of Trump's opponents as «liberals» –a convenient foil– while ignoring leftist and socialist arguments for understanding Trumpism as a form of fascism, or in any case a reactionary, toxic force that must be defeated<sup>4</sup>.

Traverso, an historian of European fascism, concedes that that fascism analogy doesn't work perfectly but rather than end the argument there, he suggests an alternative formulation. He views Trump and Trumpism as part of a «postfascist constellation» (Traverso 2019, 25) that includes reactionary authoritarian figures and movements on the rise globally. His concept of «postfascism» implies «both continuity and transformation» vis-à-vis «classical» fascism (Traverso 2019, 4). Postfascism, he argues, «belongs to a particular regime of historicity –the beginning of the twenty-first century– which explains its erratic, unstable, and often contradictory ideological content, in which antinomic political philosophies mix together» (Traverso 2019, 7).

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<sup>4</sup> For a forceful critique of Moyn's writings on these themes, see Isaac (2020).

Wherever one comes down on the fascism debate, and whatever terminology one uses to describe the nature of Trumpism, the reality remains that democracy is under serious assault in the country and the stakes are ominously high. «The democratic emergency is already here», Hasen warns. «We face a serious risk that American democracy as we know it will come to an end in 2024» (quoted in Gellman 2021). Robin, Moyn, and others on the Left dismiss this as a form of liberal alarmism and a distraction from the more important battle against the savage economic inequalities generated by neoliberalism. But if democracy –even in its attenuated, *bourgeois* form, corrupted as it is under capitalism– is destroyed, that would spell disaster for the struggle for economic equality and social justice. The title of (socialist) writer and activist Astra Taylor's (2019) most recent book poignantly speaks to this point: «Democracy may not exist, but we'll miss it when it's gone».

This is why so many progressives across the nation see the battle against Trumpism as their own –and defeating Trumpism as a precondition for achieving their longer-term goals.

## 7. Organizing to defend democracy

The 2022 anthology edited by Burnham *et al.* (2022) brings together compelling case studies and analysis of the nuts-and-bolts work that organizers in key states such as Arizona, Michigan, Georgia and Pennsylvania did to defeat Trump in 2020 despite receiving little help from the national Democratic Party. Their techniques can provide inspiration, concrete guidance and a roadmap for action during a period of sustained challenges under a multi-front attack –even with the further disfigurements to the political landscape resulting from Republican state and national machinations since the November 2020 election.

In a chapter on Arizona, for example, Mendoza depicts a 10-year struggle led by the organization Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA) against the state's draconian anti-immigrant law SB 1070, their campaign against the racist Sheriff Joe Arpaio, and the eventual transformation of Arizona from a solidly red (Republican) state into a blue (Democratic) one for the first time in nearly a quarter century. Mendoza also discusses how various groups representing voters of color and workers exerted extraordinary energy and commitment in 2020 to getting «low propensity voters» to the polls to stave off a second Trump term and garner meaningful down-ballot successes.

One of the key tactics highlighted throughout *Power concedes nothing* is «deep canvassing» with local people: in-depth conversations carried out in person with the objective of building long-term relationships of trust in the service of a transformative (if not clearly articulated) social vision. Jon Liss, co-founder and co-executive director of the organization New Virginia Majority, discusses how COVID forced people to adjust from their usual methods of identifying «a walkable universe of potential voters, find those with aligned politics, and then talk to them repeatedly to develop a 'political' relationship and win them over to voting in the upcoming election». (Burnham *et al.* 2022, 63)

Deepak Pateriya, former managing director of Community Change and Community Change Action (CC/CCA), discusses «relational organizing» through effective use of technology, by which he means to «provide a mechanism for thousands of volunteers, members and staff of our organizations to link their own personal contacts (friends and family) with the detailed data on the voter file, communicate systematically and convincingly with those friends and family (over text, social media, email, etc.) and track and measure their impact within the voter universe for our election program.» (Burnham *et al.* 2022, 378)

States where Trump won in 2020 garner attention, too. In her chapter, Andrea Cristina Mercado, co-executive director of the group Florida Rising, examines why and how the state's progressive forces fared worse in the 2020 presidential contest (Trump won the state by 3%, as compared with just 1%). She also digs into the ingredients that led to flipping Duval and Seminole County blue for the first time in at least four decades, as well as down-ballot victories like Daniela Levine Cava's becoming the first woman and Jewish person to win the mayor's office in Miami-Dade County and in sending Michelle Raynor as the first black queer woman to the statehouse (Burnham *et al.* 2022, 79). Mercado includes these races to give a full accounting of the election and to explain the success of adapting canvassing, expanding the electorate through voter registration, and effective messaging.

These results notwithstanding, the razor-thin margins in each of the battleground states is cause for concern, if not alarm, in the 2024 presidential election. A recurring theme throughout the collection is frustration with the national Democratic Party and its alienation from many progressive activists who belong to and represent the states, demographic groups, and workers who played a critical role in Biden's victory. While only the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) went so far as to sit out the 2020 election—a decision on which longtime DSA leader David Duhalde offers self-critical reflections in his chapter—contributor after contributor writes in pointed terms

about the party's misguided emphasis on white suburban voters, their writing off of poor white or other «low-propensity» voters in rural areas, low levels of resources dedicated to state-level organizing, and their blithe assumption and insufficient resources dedicated to the Latino community. Mitchell, National Director of the progressive Working Families Party, characterizes the election of Biden and Harris as a «door, not a destination», asserting that the dominant motivating force was to fend off a second Trump term, rather than to back a first Biden one.

A major challenge facing Democrats in upcoming election cycles is the increased presence of Big Lie supporters among the ranks of election officials and Secretary of State candidates. This list includes Michigan, where Benson, who has received national recognition from many progressives for her valiant defense of democracy, faced opposition from the aforementioned Karamo (Gibbons 2022). Karamo's election-denying, anti-science positions illustrate what may constitute one of the most formidable challenges Democrats –and democracy– face in subsequent elections: the shift away from the multiple crises represented by Trump the individual, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the May 2020 murder in Minneapolis by George Floyd, to a direct confrontation with the anti-democratic, truth-assaulting forces Trump has unleashed throughout the country.

In the final chapter of *Power concedes nothing*, Black Lives Matter founder Garza talks about the importance of stories during an age of disinformation in reaching beyond the convinced voters and toward those who might be willing to join the progressive cause: «Our stories must move beyond reliance on facts and figures-particularly in a world of disinformation and misinformation... Our stories must reach farther than they do now-beyond the already converted to those who are longing but haven't yet found a home for their longing... We tell stories about what we don't have and what's wrong, but we don't tell stories about what we do have and what we get right when we come together and fight for what's ours» (Burnham *et al.* 2022, 400).

Remnick (2022) offers one such story when writing about Michigan State Senator Mallory McMorrow. He describes how McMorrow responded to attacks by political opponents to her opposition to the call for a crackdown on teachers making any mention in the classroom of slavery, racism, or homosexuality false statements and smears. Remnick wrote that McMorrow responded by giving «a fierce and eloquent speech» in the Senate chamber that made a compelling case for decency and integrity in politics: 'I want every child in this state to feel seen, heard, and supported, not marginalized and targeted

because they are not straight, white, and Christian. We cannot let hateful people tell you otherwise, to scapegoat and deflect from the fact that they are not doing anything to fix the real issues that impact people's lives. And I know that hate will only win if people like me stand by and let it happen'» (Remnick 2022).

For months it appeared possible that McMorrow could serve under Ryan Kelley as Michigan's governor in January 2023. In June 2022 Kelley became the first person running for elected office in a major state or federal race to be charged in connection with the Jan. 6 riots (Aleem 2022). For some, the action represented a forceful statement of federal authority in the face of an historic insurrection and the first step in Kelley's potentially facing serious legal consequences for his participation in the event. But others suggested that Kelley's struggling campaign might receive a boost from the arrest due to a sympathy factor from having to go through the ordeal of being arrested by a federal agency<sup>5</sup>.

Kelley's loss aside, the country needs more than an aggregation of individual actions like the ones by McMorrow in the face of personal attacks and in the defense of truth, decency, and democracy, which Remnick labels heroic. Rather, the times call for a concerted, organized and urgent movement that both fends off the escalating attacks on democracy and articulates a compelling, truth-based vision of what the country can be.

Art Reyes III and Eli Day of We the People Michigan, an organization that played a significant role in Biden's 2020 victory, strike a balance between a sense of possibility based on the 2020 successes and a clear-eyed recognition of the unprecedented, multi-pronged and coordinated assault being carried out on the airwaves of Fox News, in the murky regions of the Internet, and at the county and state level with the Republican Party's. Reyes and Day write in their chapter in *Power concedes nothing* that multiracial organizing against authoritarian forces is possible even in one of the most segregated states only if organizers are «intentional about campaign structure, deliberate about state strategy, explicit about race, diligent in preparing more than the right, and clear that we must build trust early before the stakes are high».

«These and other lessons from our effort will be important for anyone looking to stave off future attacks on our fragile democracy, and those building movements to expand and deepen it,» they conclude.

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<sup>5</sup> In August 2022 he lost in the primary to Tudor Dixon, a Trump-backed candidate who defended Kelley's presence at the January 6 Capitol insurrection and has said the 2020 election was stolen. Democratic incumbent Gretchen Whitmer defeated Dixon by more than 10% in the November 2022 midterm elections.

## 8. We'll miss it when it's gone

Despite the myriad horrors unleashed by Trump's presidency –and the larger phenomenon of Trumpism– Donald Trump came perilously close to being reelected president in 2020. Consider this fact: he received more votes in 2020 than he did in 2016. Indeed, in 2020 he received the second-highest total of votes of any presidential candidate in US history (second only to Joe Biden in 2020). Not only is Trumpism very much alive in the US today, as we have endeavored to show, but Trump himself is likely to be the Republican presidential nominee in 2024. Despite the recent talk of his political star fading, polls show him ahead of all other probable contenders for the nomination. And as unfathomable as it might be, he could possibly even win the general election and reclaim the presidency.

Defenders of American democracy breathed a collective sigh of relief as the results of the November 2022 midterm elections came in. Trump-endorsed candidates who denied the outcome of the 2020 presidential election –purveyors of the Big Lie– performed poorly overall, losing key races for federal and state offices (Bedekovics and Maciolek 2022). While there were encouraging signs, it is much too soon to pronounce Trump –let alone Trumpism– dead. Isaac has warned that «American democracy is still under assault» and that «Trumpism is alive and well.» Republicans retained control of multiple state governments, «where they will reinforce legislation that restricts voting and subjects election counting to partisan influence» (Isaac 2022). Cobb likewise cautions against prematurely eulogizing Trumpism, writing that «the drive to curate the electorate via voter suppression has lost none of its resonance on the right.» He notes that the closeness of many of the midterm races «point to the outsized effect that suppressing even a sliver of specific electorates can yield.» (Cobb 2022).

Indeed, the last two US presidential elections were determined by tiny margins, coming down to just a handful of «swing» states (Bowerman 2016; Swasey and Hanzhang 2020). The widespread subterfuge discussed in this article –what Danner (2022) calls the «slow-motion coup» underway– makes a Trump victory that much more likely. «[A] single election denier in a single state could throw our elections into chaos [and] put our democracy at risk,» Joanna Lydgate of States United Action –an organization that tracks election-denying candidates running for governor, attorney general and secretary of state across the US– has warned (quoted in Parks 2022).

A second Trump term would likely be even more disastrous than the first. Baker (quoted in Woodruff 2022) observes:

[I]n a second term, a lot of things that held [Trump] back, that constrained him in the first term wouldn't be there. ... He wouldn't be captive to the people who are slow-walking him or resisting him. He would be much more aggressive and certain of his own ability. And he wouldn't have a reelection to worry about, to think about. He could do what he thought was the right thing or the thing he wanted to do most, without being constrained.

Wiley similarly predicts that a second Trump term would be «even more deadly» to American democracy. Steele, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, predicts that if Trump returns to the White House, he would be «consumed with revenge [and] retribution against those who, in his view, wronged him» and would «corrupt the various institutions that would be required to execute his revenge». The specter extends to the foreign policy realm as well: political scientist Drezner foresees a «wholesale purge of civil servants in national security bureaucracies» in a second Trump administration (Segers and Strauss 2022).

This would be nothing less than a catastrophe that must be averted at all costs. Defeating Trumpism is a long-term battle: a marathon, not a sprint. But defeating Trump in 2024 is a political emergency, a paramount task with a circumscribed timetable. The struggle is multi-pronged and formidable, especially given the coup-in-progress and assault on voting rights detailed above. The stakes couldn't be higher. This is a battle to save democracy itself from a frontal attack on it led by a racist, conspiratorial, deeply authoritarian, and increasingly violent movement, whatever we call it (fascist, neo-fascist, post-fascist, or something else).

This is by no means an argument for shelving or postponing bigger political goals, like the fight for economic, racial, and climate justice. Indeed, some authors argue forcefully that they are critical elements in fending off the attacks on American democracy and building a more just society (Burnham *et al.* 2022). It has become fashionable in some quarters of the U.S. left to dismiss the focus on democratic rights as an elite concern detached from «material» issues. This is a false binary. Far from being a merely «procedural» concern, the struggle for democracy is decidedly a racial justice issue (insofar as the assault on voting rights is an explicit attempt to suppress the votes of people of color) and a class issue (insofar as the assault on voting rights is an explicit attempt to suppress the votes of poor people). Defeating Trump in the short

term and Trumpism in the long term are necessary conditions for those absolutely vital struggles to have a chance.

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