

## Democracy, Division, and an Attempted Coup

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On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, a mob stormed the US Capitol, incited by the recently defeated President. Inside, a majority of Republican representatives plotted to overturn legitimate election results.

Of course, the attempted coup was partly theater. Few of its protagonists expected to take power at one blow. Some saw this as more an expression of their anger and perceived rights than an instrumental tactic. Others saw it as part of a longer struggle.

The subversion of democracy has been underway for years. It did not originate with Donald Trump, nor is it limited to his attempt to cling to power. It is a project of White Christian Nationalists, neo-Nazis, and a broader range of racists and Republicans seeking power even at the expense of legitimacy. It has moved from the margins to center stage because of broader and deeper degenerations of democracy.

For fifty years inequality has grown more extreme, social solidarity has eroded, and institutions have been undermined. Citizens have laid claims to their essential freedom all the more vehemently as they have felt disempowered and vulnerable. Local communities have been disrupted; America's once-rich fabric of voluntary associations has deteriorated. Shared political identity has faded and fractured along with the idea of sharing in a public good more than the sum of private benefits. The polarization of politics has been intensified by social divisions, dysfunctional parties, and media easily manipulated and split into silos. But only when Trump tried to cling to power after losing an election was there an attempted coup.

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Arguably the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were not sudden or secret enough to be called a coup. But using the word highlights what is at stake. A coup d'état is a "great change in the government carried out violently or illegally by the ruling power" (Oxford English Dictionary 2021). It would indeed be a great change for the loser of a presidential election to be maintained in power by any combination of mob violence and legislative manipulation.

This coup came in two parts. One was attempted by men (overwhelmingly) in business suits and backed by money and official status. The other came from an anti-elitist crowd. Both failed in the short term, but the larger insurrection continues.

First, a soft coup was attempted by Republican legislators voting in line with Trump to disqualify the duly certified electors of several US states. Trump's claims that the election was stolen from him involved delusions, of course, but not just private delusions on the part of the wounded narcissist in the Oval Office. The delusions were widespread, given viral circulation in social media, supported by alleged eyewitness accounts and claims of specific violations turned into ostensible facts by repetition and the precision of their formulation. Trump picked up and repeated many of these specious claims. When he called on January 2 to bully the Georgia Secretary of State into changing the official vote tally, he offered a range of examples: "it's 4,502 who voted, but they weren't on the voter registration roll," he claimed. Or again, "you had 18,325 vacant address voters" (Gardner and Firozi 2021). Neither was true but both very concrete.

Trump claimed throughout the election that efforts were underway to rig it or steal it. He repeatedly attacked use of postal ballots despite the Covid pandemic. He questioned the hours polls were open, what identification was required, the ways electors were chosen. Trump's charges were reviewed by state officials, many of them Republicans, and found lacking in merit and involving insufficient votes to change the outcome. They were litigated in dozens of courts, with lawsuits so meretricious that many were thrown out and none succeeded. The charges were raised in state legislatures; debates were sometimes raucous, but in all cases electors confirmed in line with officially reported electoral results. Yet, despite their oaths to uphold the US Constitution, 147 Republicans persisted in an attempt to reverse the election results in order to change the outcome.

Then a hard coup was attempted when a mob stormed the US Capitol. The mob broke off from a larger rally Trump had announced as soon as it became clear he would not win the normal, official vote. He drummed up enthusiasm in speeches and in a barrage of tweets: "Be there, will be wild!" (Holland, Mason, and Landay 2021) Trump's loyalists fanned enthusiasm through 'alt.right' websites, subreddit threads, the social networking platform Parler, and a range of chat apps.

Behind the rally lay years of building far right networks, months of drumming up anger, weeks of claiming the 2020 election was stolen. The history goes back to the Southern struggle against Reconstruction and racial justice and more recently the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. There is a direct line from the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville – with its deadly violence and defense of the Confederacy. Trump refused to condemn that event or any of the ensuing unruly rallies, mobilizations of armed militia members, attacks on peaceful protestors, or even the attempt to kidnap the Governor of Michigan. Yet Trump's "Save America" rally also drew thousands who barely knew that history and proclaimed they were fighting just for Trump and America.

Trump fans came from around the country. Some may have thought their calls to 'stop the steal' could actually keep Trump in office. Some wanted simply to express their devotion to him, their patriotism, or their anger at what they understood to be happening in America. But many were mobilized through networks of white supremacists, highly politicized Evangelical

Christians, Proud Boys, and followers of QAnon (the bizarre conspiracy theory that Democratic leaders are part of a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles). These have longer-term agendas.

Trump began his speech by telling the crowd that it was big, hundreds of thousands he claimed, though “media will not show the magnitude of this crowd” (AP 2021) Still smarting over published pictures of the less than huge crowd at his inauguration, he demanded that this time participants take their own photos and post them to prove the scale of the protest. He thanked his fans. He stoked their fury, and he told the crowd to march to the Capitol. “Stop the steal,” he said, and demanded that the “weak” and “pathetic” Republicans in Congress show more courage and boldness by voting to keep him president. You are smarter and stronger than they are, he said, but “if you don’t fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (Ibid).

The crowd was at once belligerent and jubilant. It was not tightly managed, but there was planning. One group erected gallows. Some chanted “Hang Mike Pence,” in reference to the Vice-President’s indication that he could not unilaterally reverse the election result. Some prayed to Jesus Christ. Some shouted “We love the Proud Boys!” Some of those Proud Boys called out “storm the Capitol! (Weigel 2021)” And the crowd became more clearly a mob.

Hundreds pushed their way into the Capitol, many wearing protective gear and some armed. They broke windows, knocked down doors, looted art, fatally hit one policeman over the head, and ransacked offices. One was shot, part of a larger group breaking into the House Chamber, but for the most part police offered only token resistance. The 2000 officers of the Capitol police were at best unprepared. Some were brave; some cowered; others helped older protestors on the stairs. Most avoided confrontation.

During 2020, more peaceful Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were met with vastly more force. Trump and his followers were quick to claim BLM protests amounted to lawless anarchy and Trump sent federal troops into cities against the will of mayors and local law enforcement. Marchers were pre-emptively ‘kettled’, tear-gassed, shot with rubber bullets and sometimes live ammunition. More effort was made to guard the Portland federal courthouse from minor vandalism in July than to guard the US Capitol from being stormed in January.

Despite recurrent violence from Trump crowds, despite a fight between Proud Boys and police just the night before, despite published threats of violence, despite statements of concern from law enforcement experts, there seems to have been little serious preparation for dealing with the Trump crowd. The Capitol Police asked for the National Guard to be on standby and were refused. This may result from simple incompetence; it may reflect sympathy or tacit bias; there may have been complicity or political interference.

The mob included people committed to White Christian Nationalism and other ideologies, people just looking for a confrontation, people caught up in various conspiracy theories, and Trump fans aggrieved on his behalf. There were off-duty cops, veterans, and others in military

costume; aggressive masculinity was a prominent theme. Others seemed simply caught up in performing the role of 'the people' and taking pleasure in being insurgents.

After storming the Capitol, protestors posted selfies, sat in the chairs of dignitaries like the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and threw about papers ransacked from files. Many tried to take souvenirs, like a grinning man photographed making off with the House Speaker's lectern. Some shouted "1776!" and seemed to see a revolution underway. What that meant to them was unclear. Consider Elizabeth from Knoxville, Tennessee, filmed during the attack with tears in her eyes. "We're storming the Capitol," she proclaimed, "it's a revolution!" But she complained with obvious shock and hurt feelings that when she "made it like a foot inside," the police "pushed me out and they maced me! (@kirkwrites79 2021)."

Others were engaged in street theater, but with a sinister edge. Jake Angeli, a far-right conspiracy theorist from Arizona appeared, as he often does, bare-chested with a fur-headdress; sporting red, white, and blue face paint; and carrying a six-foot spear with an American flag. Styled the "QAnon shaman," he also has a record as an agent provocateur seeking to incite violence at BLM protests.

This was not a cross-section of Americans who voted for Trump, nor even of those who wore red MAGA hats and shouted "lock her up" at his rallies. Trump had mobilized much larger masses, including workers who lost out to deindustrialization, suburbanites nervous to defend their property, men feeling loss of status, and people who felt simply that the long-dominant political elites didn't care much about them. But he also gave license to extremists. The mass of his supporters sought not to subvert democracy but to claim it. Still, they felt enough common cause to rally behind those engaged in sedition.

Trump himself tried to combine inciting seditious extremists with speaking for a broader, less radical majority. For a long time after the storming of the Capitol started, he said nothing. Then, late in the day he sent a video telling protestors he loved them, but they should go home in peace. His refusal to condemn the mob action alarmed some of his erstwhile allies. Over the next two days White House staff and Cabinet members began to resign. It's not clear how many were really concerned about the state of American democracy and how many simply saw Trump's ship sinking and didn't want to go down with it. A week after the coup attempt, on January 13<sup>th</sup>, Trump was impeached by Congress for "incitement of insurrection". Only then did he issue a statement that violence and breaking laws was wrong.

Trump has not abandoned his charge that the election was stolen. As I write on 14 January, his followers plan protests at state capitols to coincide with the Biden inauguration and upheavals and confrontations are not likely to end then. Groups that helped turn the Trump protest into a mob storming the Capitol will continue to fight for white supremacy, fascism, neo-Medieval Christianity, or their other particular causes. And protagonists of the 'soft' attempted coup vow to continue their overlapping fights in Congress and state legislatures. They may dress in suits and ties and keep their distance from outright violence, but they are no less dangerous.

As President, Joe Biden promises to “bring Americans together,” to unify the country. The goal is worthy. It is wrong to dismiss it as inevitably meaning only repression of differences or papering over of divides. It is wrong to think the US does not need unity and solidarity if it is to rebuild democracy and confront its many practical challenges. But it is right to worry the new administration will not pursue changes deep enough to overcome the sources of division and disunity. These are not mere quirks of the terrible Trump era. They will not be addressed simply by decency, moderation, and centrism.

Undermining elections, for example, has a long history in the US, especially in securing white rule of the post-Reconstruction South. Sowing doubt about the legitimacy of results is just one tactic of voter suppression, complemented by gerrymandering, mass challenges to voter registration, reducing the number of polling places, requiring more and different identification documents, and blocking the restoration of ex-prisoners’ voting rights. At times, these tactics of voter suppression have been combined with others including outright violence.

Ending voter suppression was a major purpose of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As the US Supreme Court became more conservative, it gutted this in 2013. This encouraged renewal of voter suppression tactics, especially by state-level Republican parties. Democratic response was uneven. In Georgia, however, Stacey Abrams led a campaign so successful that on the very morning before the Capitol was stormed, it was confirmed that Georgia had elected two Democratic Senators, heirs to the great Civil Rights tradition: a celebrated Black preacher, and a Jewish journalist and liberal political activist. Democrats will have control of the Senate, however tenuous, only because historical injustice was confronted not ignored. There is no moderate middle ground on voter suppression. It must be ended.

Racism remains a basic issue in the US. In 2020, graphic evidence of police violence brought tens of thousands into the streets to assert that “Black Lives Matter”. The protests were impressively multiracial. But they too were harnessed into political polarization. For many on the right, they were evidence of a break-down in law and order. Some protestors took up the ill-chosen slogan “defund the police,” making it easier for Trump to fan suburban fears.

Fear of Blacks was entangled with fear of a nebulous force called “Antifa”. This took the rhetorical place Communism had occupied in American politics during the Cold War, a threat from within as well as abroad. Right wing demagogues skilled in manipulating conspiracy theories vastly exaggerated the organization behind that name. A brief wave of paranoia followed among residents of suburbs and small towns around the country who were sure that Antifa was coming to attack their communities next.

Of course, Donald Trump stoked the fear. But the incidents reveal a pervasive sense of anxiety as well as specific manipulations and delusions. America was and is on edge, worried about the future because the present is so unsettled. And America is a divided country. Both anxiety and

social divisions have been politicized. This is part of the meaning of extreme polarization – not just that parties and ideological positions are far apart, but that every bit of news is interpreted in terms of partisan division.

Media ecology reinforces this. Sources have multiplied. The “mainstream”, with its common denominators and fact-checking, has weakened. The label ‘post-truth’ is misleading, though there has been erosion in capacities for collective judgment. But this doesn’t issue in relativism. Rather, citizens confront each other convinced of competing truths. Claiming factual bases remains rhetorically basic. Trump repeatedly asserts a claim to have won the election “by a landslide” that he says was “borne out by the facts”. Summoning followers to the “Save America” rally, he tweeted “Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election” (Holland, Mason, and Landay 2021). Conspiracy theories are sustained by people who think of themselves as actively “doing their research” by consulting multiple websites like enthusiasts for a particular diet or vitamin supplement or players in a complex online game (see discussion in Thompson 2020). Americans do not just disagree; they live in different realities.

In both the 2016 and 2020 presidential election, the vote split almost equally. This happened again in the Georgia Senate runoffs two days before the Capitol was stormed. Conspiracy theories circulate partly because the races were so close. Moreover, the American population has been sorted by geography, class, race, and religion into different residential neighborhoods, workplaces, and social networks. Most people have only weak connections to those in a different political camp. Some are genuinely surprised and perplexed when it seems the overwhelming majority in their social field is a minority nationally. This is true not only of ‘populists’ on the right but of liberals who for decades before the 2016 election largely forgot that American included people like those populists.

This is a central meaning to the much discussed rural/urban split in voting behavior. That label can be misleading. Many lined-up on the rural side have no engagement with farming, but rather drive trucks, install air conditioners in suburbs, or run small businesses. The split is also cosmopolitan from local, professional elites from workers in other occupations, those who benefit from asset appreciation and those who suffer stagnant incomes and difficulty ever buying a house. Different circumstances encourage some to see globalization, technological innovation and cultural change with a sense of optimism others do not share.

But economics and occupations are hardly the whole story. Self-identified women voted very differently from men, but part of the division is over the very idea that one should say ‘self-identified’ about a category some see as natural and obvious. Trans identities are but one of many unsettling cultural changes. But change can also obscure continuity in sexism. Women still earn less than men, still do more unpaid labor. And assertions of women’s equal rights have made men anxious.

Covid has increased anxiety, but the pandemic has been so easily politicized because the country was already polarized. This will not be overcome by argument, persuasion or evidence. The underlying social reality needs to change. We cannot have the solidarity we need without

drastically reducing inequality, for example, without increasing employment and improving working conditions. Without ending racist police violence. Without universal healthcare and greater educational opportunity. These all have costs and opponents.

Democracy is not dead in the US. For all the divisions, the elections also demonstrated a remarkable enthusiasm for voting, with record turnouts, and citizens willing to wait in line. But for democracy to thrive will take social transformation, not just new policies and technical fixes. This demands an enormous amount of work – and working together. It is not clear that enough people are committed to either. But it is possible.

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