

Opinion **US politics & policy**

The strange death of American democracy

A constitutional crisis looms as Trump tightens his grip on the Republicans ahead of 2024

MARTIN WOLF

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Martin Wolf YESTERDAY

“An American ‘Caesarism’ has now become flesh.” I wrote this [in March 2016](#), even before Donald Trump had become the Republican nominee for the presidency. Today, the transformation of the democratic republic into an autocracy has advanced. By 2024, it might be irreversible. If this does indeed happen, it will change almost everything in the world.

Nobody has outlined the danger more compellingly than [Robert Kagan](#). His argument can be reduced to two main elements. First, the Republican party is defined not by ideology, but by its loyalty to Trump. Second, the amateurish “stop the steal” movement of the last election has now morphed into a well-advanced project. One part of this project is to remove officials who stopped Trump’s effort to reverse the results in 2020. But its main aim is to shift responsibility for deciding electoral outcomes to Republican-controlled legislatures.

Thus, health permitting, Trump will be the next Republican candidate. He will be backed by a party that is now his tool. Most important, in the words of [David Frum](#), erstwhile speechwriter for George W Bush, “what the United States did not have before 2020 was a large national movement willing to justify mob violence to claim political power. Now it does.” It does so because its members believe their opponents [are not “real” Americans](#). A liberal democracy cannot long endure if a major party believes defeat is illegitimate and must be rendered impossible.

Here is a political leader who has [ousted anybody who opposes him from positions of influence in his party](#). He believes himself unjustly persecuted, defines reality for his followers and insists that a legitimate election is one he wins. A constitutional crisis looms. The 2024 election, warns Kagan, could bring “chaos. Imagine weeks of competing mass protests across multiple states as lawmakers from both parties claim victory and charge the other with unconstitutional efforts to take power.”

Americans have become profoundly sceptical about their democracy

% of respondents

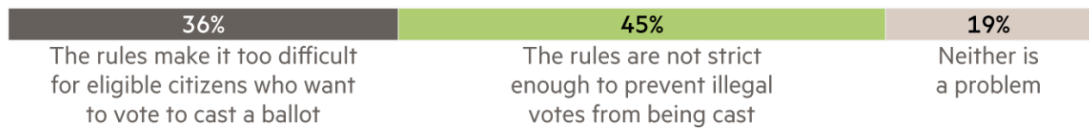
Which best describes your view of democracy in the US today?



How confident are you that elections in America today reflect the will of the people?



Which is a bigger problem with elections in the US?



Which comes closer to your view about the changes in voting laws being put into place in states where the government is mostly controlled by:

Republicans



Democrats



How likely is it that, in the next few years, some elected officials will successfully overturn the results of an election in the US because their party did not win?



Did Joe Biden legitimately win enough votes to win the 2020 presidential election, or not?



Surveys were obtained Aug 3-Sep 7, 2021 with a representative sample of 2,119 US adult respondents.

'No opinion' responses not shown

Source: SSRS for CNN

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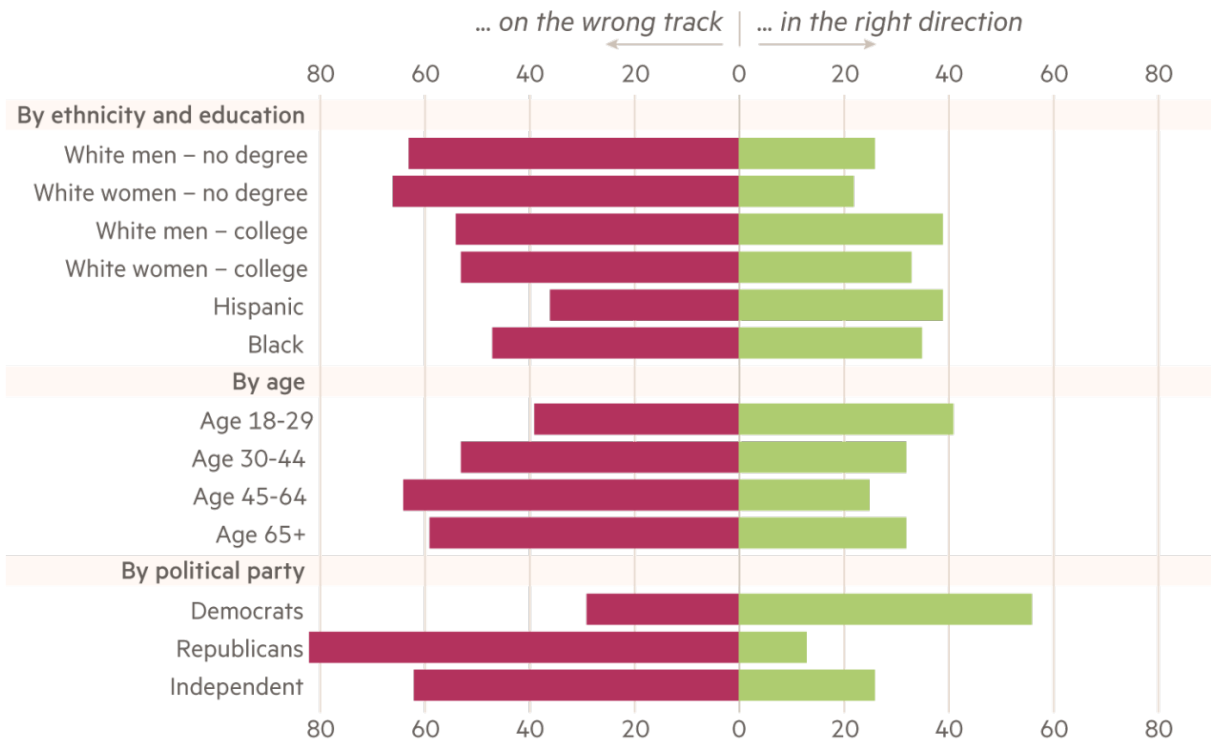
Assume that Trump is re-elected, legitimately or by manipulation. One must assume that his naive and incompetent approach to the wielding of power in his first term will not be repeated. He must now understand that he will need devoted loyalists, of whom there will be plenty, to run the departments responsible for justice, homeland security, internal revenue, espionage and defence. He will surely put officers personally loyal to himself in charge of the armed forces. Not least, he will get his loyal Republican party, as it will be, to confirm the people he chooses, if it holds the needed Senate majority, as is highly likely to be the case.

Equally surely, he will use the pressure that he can then exert on the wealthy and influential to bring them into line. Crony capitalism is among the probabilities. Ask the Hungarians who live in an “illiberal democracy” under a [man admired by US rightwing pundits](#).

“Americans — and all but a handful of politicians — have refused to take this possibility seriously enough to try to prevent it”, notes Kagan. “As has so often been the case in other countries where fascist leaders arise, their would-be opponents are paralysed in confusion and amazement at this charismatic authoritarian.”

A country divided and despondent

% of respondents who think the country is heading ...

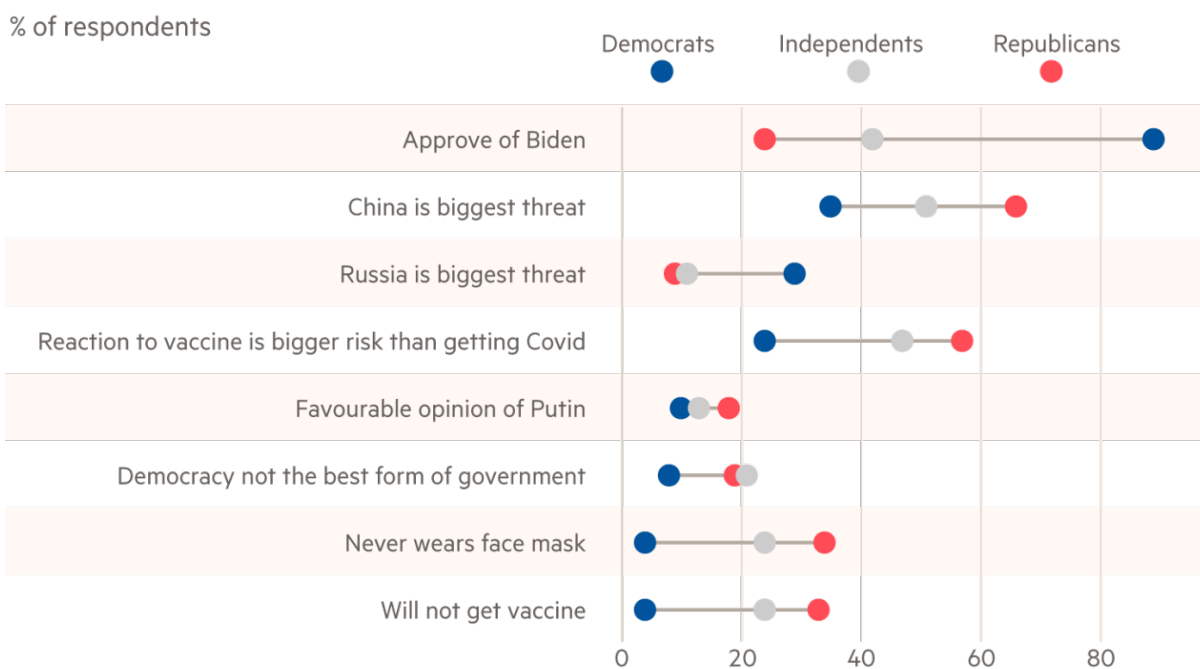


Source: YouGov (Sep 2021)
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Just consider what happened during Trump’s intended coup against the 2020 election and how Republican legislators and supporters have since rallied round in order to prevent anybody important, above all Trump himself, from being held accountable. The only significant players who have been punished are those who resisted or condemned the coup. The Republicans have crossed their Rubicon already.

Why has this happened? The answer is a mix of greed, ambition and anger in a country that has grown increasingly diverse and an economy that has failed to give secure prosperity to a large proportion of the population. This has created a familiar coalition built on “othering” outsiders, glorifying the nation, protecting the wealthy and worshipping a great leader. Fifty seven per cent of Republicans consider a bad reaction to the vaccine riskier than Covid-19 itself. This is a measure of tribalism.

Americans show deep partisan divisions



Source: YouGov (Sep 2021)
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Can a collapse of liberal democracy in the US still be prevented?

Possibly. But it will not be as easy as many suppose from the failure of Trump's attempt to overturn the outcome of the 2020 election. He is in full control of his party. Should the normal cycle of politics give the Republicans control of the House and Senate, he will be both protected and served by Congress from 2022. He holds, in principle, a big majority in the Supreme Court. Republicans also [control all branches of government in 23 states, while the Democrats control only 15](#). Kagan pins his hopes on a decision by a sufficiently large number of Republican senators to pass voting rights legislation and on the refusal of the judiciary to overturn such legislation. Yet even those who loathe Trump remain loyal to the party. And, as the debt ceiling debate shows, they are determined to make Biden fail.

Suppose Trump comes back to power in 2024, determined to exact vengeance on his foes, backed by Congress and the Supreme Court. Yes, even this might be just an interlude. Trump is old: his passing might be the end of the authoritarian moment. But neither the electoral system nor the Republican party will go back to what it was. The latter is now a radical party with a reactionary agenda.

The US is the sole democratic superpower. Its ongoing political transformation has deep implications for liberal democracies everywhere, as well as for the world's ability to co-operate on vital tasks, such as managing climate risks. In 2016, one could ignore these dangers. Today, one must be blind to do so.

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