

United States: Trumpism Will Endure

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Donald Trump is gone. But the conditions that gave rise to his brand of noxious politics aren't going away anytime soon.

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Donald Trump lost the 2020 election. But he generated a Trumpist movement that is likely to survive him. During his four years in power, Donald Trump introduced a new way of doing politics on the Right that has been openly authoritarian, racist, xenophobic, and opposed to science. This politics has been supported by an electoral coalition comprising at least 40 percent of the electorate. Should he be able to maintain this support, he could run for president again in 2024 at the ripe age of seventy-eight. Whether he does so will depend on a number of factors, including whether he will continue to control the Republican Party.

Any Republican challenge to his control faces a steep uphill struggle, having to overcome the fact that he received 47 percent of the vote in a record turnout election. And he leaves with a Republican Party emboldened by its strengthened presence in the legislative branch as a result of the reduced Democratic majority in the House of Representatives. Whether Republicans lose control of the Senate after the runoff elections in Georgia in January, the Republican presence will remain quite powerful, with the help of conservative Democrats like Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

Especially important for Trump's party is its success in defeating the Democrats' attempts to make inroads in the state legislatures that will preside over legislative reapportionment based on the results of the 2020 US Census. In carrying out the decennial redrawing of the boundaries of state legislative and congressional seats, Republicans will continue their gerrymandering practices to the detriment not only of the Democratic Party but also of the representation of black and other minority populations (aided, surely, by Trump's recent decisions to shorten the time allowed to carry out the census, which will surely undercount minorities and the urban population, the principal stronghold of the Democratic Party).

To ensure these policies' durability, Trump appointed new conservative federal judges to approximately 25 percent of all federal seats and transformed the Supreme Court into a solidly conservative bastion that will remain so for years. Trump has already curtailed many rights on matters like abortion, immigration, and the environment — actions that may have gained him the dedicated support of Evangelicals who, even while acknowledging Trump's un-Christian philandering and disrespect for women, massively supported him in the 2020 election.

In the end, however, he and his party ended up paying a high price for his politics and his behavior.

Unlike all recent presidents, he never reached the 50 percent approval rate of the overall American public that former presidents obtained at the height of their popularity, and provoked the anger and indignation of tens of millions of Americans that eventually resulted in his defeat.

Trump and Trumpism

Trump's vulgarity, brazen lies, out-of-control narcissism, explicit racism, misogyny, and anti-immigrant sentiment have played an important role in building up his image as an outsider in the elite political establishment's corrupt swamp. This has functioned as an effective screen to conceal his conservative economic and political agenda and his ties with important sections of big capital.

Neither Trump nor most Trump supporters are fascists. But one important similarity between Trumpism and German Fascism, whose National Socialist demagoguery, antisemitism, and thuggery ostensibly aimed at upholding the interests of the German *Volk*, is that both effectively hid its fundamental conservative ties with big capital. (It was no accident that the wing of the Nazi Party that took seriously its "socialist" pretensions ended up being bloodily purged by Adolf Hitler the year after he took power in the infamous Night of the Long Knives from June 30 to July 2, 1934.) Trump's political style has avoided the Republican platitudes about the free market and free trade that have not mobilized mass political support. This is one reason why Trumpism may be more enduring than the Tea Party movement of a decade ago that focused on the more traditional right-wing issues of opposition to taxes and "big government."

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That is how Trump was able to pursue a strict neoliberal line regarding key aspects of the economy, with the exception of his pursuit of protectionism, which along with his regulatory policies in the areas of labor and workplace policy, health care, education, environment, and consumer protections have clearly harmed many of his own, mostly white, supporters in the middle and working class. He has also run slipshod over any ethical notion of conflict of interest appointing businesspeople and management lobbyists to administer the very public agencies supposed to oversee and supervise the private companies they came from.

The case of the Department of Education under Betsy DeVos is particularly shocking. All her policies have benefited shady endeavors such as the private trade schools disguised as colleges and universities that depend totally on government money and have very poor records of completion and placing their graduates in actual jobs.

The Trump administration has also promoted even more blatantly [lumpen capitalist](#) elements engaging in business activities that in fact have endangered people's lives. Mike Davis has [singled out](#) the case of Forrest L. Preston, a stalwart Trump supporter, who owns the Life Care chain of nursing homes where numerous patients and staff died as a result of the profit-seeking malfeasance of its owners and managers during the pandemic. The Trump administration and Republican state governments have aggressively shielded the chain from prosecution, and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has insisted that any COVID-19-related stimulus economic bill must provide blanket immunity to nursing homes.

But Trump's violations of established norms and conventions did not directly touch the workings of American capital, but were rather aimed at the cultural conventions governing the running of the "swamp" of the political establishment, particularly those reinforcing the ideological legitimacy and

stability of the political system. This is especially important regarding those conventions that the system adopted not only to ensure a peaceful transition of political power, but to signal to the people that they should peacefully accept that transition.

Compare his refusal to concede to Biden with Al Gore's decision to not pursue his legitimate dispute against George W. Bush over the Florida ballots in the 2000 elections, and to concede and congratulate Bush on his election. Gore's actions were based on his political decision to not destabilize the system. Trump couldn't care less about that. His goading his supporters to scream "lock her up" at Hillary Clinton and his very public demeaning of government functionaries, ranging from former attorney general Jeff Sessions to Dr Anthony Fauci, are further examples of his absolute lack of concern for the legitimacy of public institutions and functionaries.

Whatever the fate of Donald Trump in the coming years, Trumpism as a political mood and state of mind, and even as a movement, is more likely to endure than Trump himself. Trumpism has a real social base. His supporters are an important part of the 47 percent of the voters in the 2020 election who voted for him.

Exit polls indicate that close to half of white college-educated people voted for Trump in 2020; the same was true of 63 percent of white people "without college education." Since the latter category represents 41 percent of the total vote, that 63 percent who voted for him represents approximately twenty-seven million voters (although a significant proportion of them were not necessarily Trumpists but people desperate to return to work in the face of the COVID-19 layoffs that Trump claimed to oppose).

Public opinion polls and the media have assumed that the lack of college education is an indicator of working-class status. In fact, about half of the people who lack a college education are not members of the working class, like shopkeepers, independent salespeople, supervisors, and lower managers in fields like retail. An important part of Trump's base involves sectors of the white working class (less than commonly assumed, but nevertheless in worrisome numbers) and sectors of the white middle class. Although concentrated in the non-college-educated category, Trump's support also comes from groups further up the socioeconomic scale, as he also obtained large contributions from important sections of the capitalist class.

Perhaps the most useful way to understand Trumpism is as a right-wing response to the objective conditions of economic decay and a perceived moral decay that emerged from a coalition of important sectors of the white working class and middle class with the predominantly white Evangelical churches and with traditional white anti-government conservatives.

However, Trumpism was to a great extent shaped by Trump's personal politics. He *is* not a typical conservative. For example, he supported abortion rights for a long time before he considered running for president. But what was always central for him were the overlapping politics of racism and xenophobia.

Trump is unique among recent American presidents in having been directly involved in notorious racist incidents before his 2016 election. In 1973, he and his father were [sued by Nixon's Justice Department](#) for discriminating against blacks in the apartment buildings they owned and operated in Queens. In 1989, he single-handedly demanded, in paid newspaper advertisements, the death penalty for the five young black men falsely accused of attacking a twenty-eight-year-old white woman in Central Park, rekindling the hoary stereotype of the black male attacking white women. The five men spent years in prison until the real culprit confessed to the attack. And, for years, he conducted the "birther" campaign claiming that Barack Obama was not born in the United States but in Kenya, a black African country.

It is true that Trump has participated in the occasional effort to appear to be inclusive, as in the case of the 2020 Republican Party National Convention, most likely under the pressure of the Republican Party leadership's efforts to appeal to uncommitted voters. But these symbolic gestures did not change his overall appeal to white supremacist groups (asking the Proud Boys to "stand by") and to exploit racial fears. A recent and transparent example was [his recent public vow](#) on July 2020 to protect suburbanites from low-income housing being built in their neighborhoods, warning them of their coming under siege and being ravaged by crime. Former Republican candidates for president have also resorted to racial fears as an electoral tactic. But Trump took that to a qualitatively different level by systematically exploiting those fears to mobilize white support.

Trump's politics found a strong echo in the politics of white resentment rooted in the absolute lack of empathy — a trait personalized in and legitimized by Trump — that many white Americans have for those with whom they share grievances regarding lack of health care and unemployment, but whom they define as different from them. In sociologist Arlie Hochschild's interviews with white people struggling to get by for her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, she found that interviewees saw affirmative action programs as allowing blacks and other minorities to get ahead by unfairly "cutting" in the line where they, the white Americans, have been standing waiting for their turn. This is a resentment totally impervious to the fact that those blacks and Latinos have been "standing in line" for centuries and kept back by systematic racial discrimination.

Unable or unwilling to empathize with these minorities' grievances, the white Trumpists disregard the latter's vocal public protests and struggles as self-serving and illegitimate and see them as coddled by the mainstream "fake" media. Their resentment extends to the struggles of other white working people fighting to expand their rights and benefits on the job.

This politics of resentment is associated with a profound sense of impotence and is hostile to the collective struggle of workers and oppressed groups, because those struggles undermine the self-justification for the status quo. This resentment is directed at those similarly situated in the socioeconomic scale and those situated below them.

Much of Trump's political strength comes from his recognition of this resentment, his exploiting and magnifying it, and from having articulated it and given it a public face. He has skillfully exploited his image as the shrewd billionaire, widely accepted as endowing him with the required know-how to successfully shepherd the country's economy. His has been a remarkable feat, especially when considering his history as a "lumpen capitalist," debt-ridden, frequently bankrupt, unscrupulous in his dealings, and enmeshed in corrupt associations with corrupt lawyers like Michael Cohen and Roy Cohn, his mentor, and convicted tricksters like Roger Stone.

The Emergence of Trump and Trumpism

There were several factors immediately associated with the 2016 presidential election that led to Trump's rise to power. Besides having won, by razor-thin margins, the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, which gave him the winning edge in the number of electoral votes, he greatly benefitted from having a weak opponent in Hillary Clinton. The right-wing establishment and its supporters hated her with a passion, as did many on the Left or even largely apolitical voters. Trump was also aided by the crucial fact that while candidates in the Democratic primaries selected delegates to their party's convention in proportion to their votes, that was not generally the case in the Republican primaries, allowing Trump to win Republican primaries with a smaller proportion of the votes than would have been the case in the Democratic primaries.

Besides those immediate factors, there were a series of long-term structural changes in American

society that opened the space for his rise to power and a right-wing Trumpian movement. These included the white backlash to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the sixties and seventies, the politicization of white Evangelicals as a response to the cultural revolution of the sixties and to the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973, and the nativist and racist reaction to the demographic changes that have taken place since the sixties that have significantly reduced the size of the white majority.

All of these social and political developments converged and reinforced each other in the context of the American economy's relative decline since the seventies. This was accompanied by an economic restructuring that greatly affected working people by lowering real wages and union density, and shrinking industrial jobs which were, when unionized, an important avenue of social mobility for black and white working-class families.

The rising international competition that became evident by the 1960s with countries like Japan and Germany brought to an end the unchallenged postwar supremacy of American capitalism and the bountiful prosperity it had created. As part of that boom, by far the biggest in US history, American workers experienced substantial increases in real wages. That included black workers, whose incomes rose during that period in absolute terms (though those wages never achieved parity with their white counterparts). That boom also permitted an extension of the American welfare state with the establishment of Medicare and food stamps. This came about in response to the great rebellions of that decade, dominated by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and by the militant mass movement against the war in Vietnam. Those movements fueled in turn others, like the women's and gay rights movements.

At that time, however, the national economy was slowing down and entered a period of restructuring. As Kim Moody pointed out in *An Injury to All*, during the second half of the 1960s, the American capitalist class began to experience a decline in the rate of profit, and average annual growth rates began to decline. In this new economic climate, capitalists dug their heels in against granting rises and improvements in working-class wages and working conditions. The bureaucratized US unions [failed to organize](#) a response to the hardening of American capitalism, unionize the then expanding service sectors, and respond to the growth of nonunion sectors within traditional union strongholds like meatpacking and the automobile industry. By 1979, the era of union concessions began at Chrysler and soon spread throughout the whole economy.

Meanwhile, a process of deindustrialization was triggered, to a great extent, by a substantial growth in industrial productivity (fewer workers needed to produce the same amount of goods in fewer locations), particularly in heavy industry like steel and auto. Part of this deindustrialization involved the outsourcing overseas of goods production, as in the case of garments and electronics. By the mid-seventies, what the French call the "thirty glorious years" had come to an end in the United States. Real wages froze and remained that way, except for a brief period in the nineties.

Since then, most American workers were able to more or less maintain their standard of living through the massive incorporation of women into the wage-earning labor force. Working-class families had to [work many more hours](#) to maintain and update their standard of living. The massive production of inexpensive commodities in Asia that started in the eighties also contributed to maintaining the American standard of living.

Even so, the restructuring of the American economy, together with the ossification of the US labor bureaucracy, led to a continual decline in the proportion of workers organized in unions, which currently represent a meager 6.2 percent of workers in the private sector and 33.6 percent in the far smaller public sector. Instead of the industrial workers of yore, public school teachers and workers in the "essential" service industries like transportation and distribution are at the front of the

working class's more militant sectors.

Meanwhile, there is a huge unorganized multiracial working-class laboring without any kind of protection on the job or unemployed. It has been [virtually abandoned by the Democratic Party](#) now in the pursuit of [educated, middle-class professionals](#) and businesspeople. As Democratic Senate leader Charles Schumer so clearly put it in 2016: "For every blue-collar Democrat we lose in Western Pennsylvania, we will pick up two moderate Republicans in the suburbs in Philadelphia, and you can repeat that in Ohio and Illinois and Wisconsin." The shrinkage of union power in the United States parallels in some important ways the decline of the social-democratic and communist parties in Europe in terms of having left behind a dangerous social and political vacuum, which, like Marine Le Pen in France, is now being filled in the United States by right-wing demagogues like Trump.

Right-Wing Backlash

By the late sixties, a white backlash was developing in response to the black revolt, most particularly to [affirmative action](#). But the best organized right-wing backlash came from the conservative politicization and organization of white American Evangelical churches.

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Previously uninvolved in politics, Evangelicals entered the political arena in reaction to what they saw as the immorality of the sixties culture and to the legalization of abortion. On that basis, they joined the Republican Party in an implicit electoral alliance with major sectors of big business pursuing their own conservative agenda to respond to the new economic order of international competition and restructuring. In exchange for their support, Evangelicals sought and achieved legislation, such as limiting abortion rights and extending government support for religious education.

But his coalition has become somewhat strained. While Evangelicals overwhelmingly support Trump, their Republican business allies have become more divided and ambivalent about theirs. Although they have been awarded substantial tax reductions and significant reductions in government regulations (two of their longtime goals), many of their business executives, especially the most farsighted and class-conscious, are unsettled by Trump's politically unpredictable, unreliable conduct and disturbed by his ties to the far right. An important sector is also opposed to Trump's immigration policies, regarding highly skilled workers in Silicon Valley and the pharmaceutical industry and low-skilled workers in labor-intensive agricultural crops.

Reflecting the conflicting forces affecting capitalists' political behavior is their divided support for Republican and Democratic candidates. While in 2016, the majority of capitalists supported Hillary Clinton, the benefits of incumbency and the relatively good economy prior to COVID-19 benefited Trump. Yet most of big capital's contributions to the 2020 presidential campaign went to Biden.

Those supporting Biden came from capitalists in finance, insurance, real estate, communications and electronics, and defense. Those contributions coming from the energy, agribusiness, transportation, and construction sectors preferred Trump. Further evidence of the division of the capitalist class is that a significant number of capitalists had given up, according to media reports on Trump and presidential politics, and decided to instead financially support Republican candidates for the Senate, which may help to explain why Republicans did better there than was expected.

Population Changes and Trumpism

Another long-term structural change paving the way toward Trumpism has been the pervasive growth of anti-immigrant politics. A long-standing feature in American history, it began to acquire a new life as a response to a series of changes that began in the sixties. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act abolished the old quota system established in 1924 that discriminated against immigrants from areas other than Northern Europe. This led to substantial immigration into the United States from Southern and Eastern European countries and most of Asia.

More important was the growing wave of immigration from Mexico, particularly evident since the 1980s — a result of the massive displacement of agricultural workers that took place in that country with the introduction of less labor-intensive capitalist agriculture there (sometimes involving US investment). Mexican immigration, initially concentrated in Southwest cities and California's agricultural regions and other Western states, expanded to the big cities elsewhere and eventually spread throughout the United States in search of employment, including remote areas far from metropolitan centers.

For several decades, the number of mostly undocumented Mexican and other Latin American immigrants continued to grow. This changed, however, as the Hispanic birth rate in the United States fell 31 percent from 2007 to 2017. In recent years, Mexican and Latin American immigration to the United States has been surpassed by Asian immigration.

These migration waves of the last fifty years have led to a series of demographic changes showing, according to the Current Population Reports of the US Census Bureau, the proportion of nonwhites began to rise in 1970, by 1990 almost one in five people were nonwhite, and the proportion continued to rise to one in four people over the next decades. The same report has projected that the proportion of nonwhites will grow even further to one in three Americans belonging to a race other than white by 2060.

This is the background to the growth of the anti-immigrant sentiment that blames immigrants, particularly poor immigrants of color, for many of the American economy's ongoing problems such as job scarcity, a scarcity that resulted in great part from a deindustrialization for which immigrants bear no responsibility. This anti-immigrant sentiment, along with the long-standing efforts to reduce the number of black voters by Trump as well as by previous Republican administrations, has played a key role in the gerrymandering of congressional, state, and local districts, in order to prevent African Americans and naturalized immigrants from electing Democrats. That has been the motive behind the aggressive gerrymandering that has been carried out particularly in the states of North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

That same motive animates Trump's politicizing of the census to prevent an accurate count of immigrants and racial minorities and to exclude, in violation of the Constitution, undocumented immigrants from the census count. The same racist, anti-immigrant politics animates the current and past Republican administrations' repeated and blatant efforts to exclude, or at least to make it more difficult for African Americans and for poor immigrants of color to vote. This was clearly expressed by Donald Trump while on *Fox & Friends* in March of 2020, where he accused Democrats of wanting a "level of voting that, if you ever agreed to it, you'd never have a Republican elected in this country again."

Trumpism and America's Slowing Economic Growth

Essentially, Trumpism is a conservative authoritarian response to the Democratic Party's continual neglect of the legitimate grievances of large sectors of the white voters who ended up supporting Trump. By doing so, these white voters hoped that he would reverse the socioeconomic and political decay resulting from neoliberal policies that the Democrats themselves established under Clinton and Obama and will most likely continue under Biden.

Abandoned to the fate of deindustrialization and structural unemployment, white America continues to suffer from the ills of despair sunk in the widespread consumption of opioids and rising rates of suicide.

It is true that the economy of the United States continues making material strides in fields including high technology, communications, medical science, and entertainment. But in overall terms, this material progress is not as large or evenly distributed as that of previous historical periods. As Northwestern University economist Robert J. Gordon argued in two influential papers published in 2000 and 2018, since the early seventies, the American economy has been experiencing a continuous decline in the rate of increase of productivity, except for a temporary revival from 1996 to 2006, thereby reducing the rate of economic growth. According to Gordon, the major growth of productivity in the United States occurred in the half-century between World War I and the early seventies.

For Gordon, that period of ever-growing productivity is over. The decline of the rate of growth of productivity has had a negative effect on the rate of profit, which has contributed to the capitalists' efforts to extract greater production from workers and other attacks on workers' demands. It may also be a key reason why between 1980 and 2020, the US real GDP-per-person growth has averaged less than 3 percent a year and has been slowing down regularly.

The capitalist attack on workers' demands has increased the uneven and skewed distribution of wealth and strengthened the capitalist opposition to the taxation required for a substantial improvement in the access to services like education and health care. Education for the majority of the people has continued to deteriorate, and notwithstanding advances in medical science, so has health care. Along with the entirely inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the destruction of the environment by the decision-makers, Republican and Democrat, these are all powerful expressions of capitalist decay. They reveal the systemic inability of a social system to assure its long-term survival, to provide a meaningful alternative and solution to the ecological, economic, and social crises that considerably increase the likelihood of pandemics, and to enact an effective and egalitarian public health response to those pandemics.

Abandoned to the fate of deindustrialization and structural unemployment, white America continues to suffer from the [ills of despair](#) sunk in the widespread consumption of opioids and rising rates of suicide. African Americans continue being victimized by police brutality and a highly unstable labor and housing market that has increased the precariousness of its recently expanding middle class, while the black majority continues to be poor as a black minority rises into the managerial and executive ranks. In the last decade, student debt has become an increasing burden for college students who like their noncollege peers do not expect to live as well as their parents' generation. The increasing number of young people who have to work at McDonald's and their retail equivalents are not exactly encouraged to feel optimistic about their futures when they are plagued not only by low wages, but are expected to be available for sudden changes in work schedules that wreak havoc over their lives especially if they have young children. These are the concrete expressions of the long-standing rise of inequality in the United States, the country with the most unequal distribution

of both personal wealth and income among the G7 economies.

Material prosperity has been indispensable to the maintenance of social cohesion and peace in a highly individualistic American society where historically the solidarity based on class and community ties has been comparatively weak. As this prosperity recedes, the great question remains: What social forces will emerge to struggle for a progressive democratic and socialist alternative from below to right-wing reaction, whether Trumpian or not?

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 01.03.2021:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/01/donald-trump-white-working-class-trumpism>

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