

Where is America going? - One year after the storming of the Capitol

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On the anniversary of the storming of the Capitol in Washington, Neil Faulkner assesses the strength of the authoritarian right in the United States.

Contents

- [What has the Republican \(...\)](#)
- [Bridges to fascism](#)
- [Voter suppression](#)
- [Anti-abortion](#)
- [Can the right be defeated?](#)

No-one should be in any doubt that it was a coup attempt. It may have been botched, but the storming of the Capitol and the invasion of Congress by a fascist mob of thousands on 6 January last year was a deliberate attempt to overturn the result of a democratic election.

Trump mobilised the mob and then, on the day, urged it on. He did so with significant backing from other Republican politicians, 147 of whom voted on the following day against ratification of the election result, and from Republican voters, more than half of whom believe the election was fraudulent, and almost half of whom believe the storming of the Capitol was justified.

Other forces were also in accord. Given the wide publicity around the fascist mobilisation in the days beforehand, the lack of police protection for Congress on 6 January is unequivocal evidence that parts of the state apparatus were in sympathy with the coup attempt. There is no other way of reading the simple fact that the mob was able to break in, stream through the building, vandalise the place, and put politicians and staff in fear of their lives.

Nor does this grotesque violation of parliamentary democracy appear to have done Trump any substantive political harm. Let us recall that 74 million Americans voted for him in 2020, ten million more than in 2016, despite the accumulated evidence over four years that he is a charlatan, a narcissist, a dum-wit, and a vicious racist, misogynist, and homophobe.

What the polls are now showing is that Trump is leading his nearest rival for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024 by 54% to 11%. They also show him with a 5% lead over Biden (compared with Biden's 4.4% lead over him in 2020).

What has the Republican Party become?

The US Republican Party (GOP) was founded as the progressive party of the Northern bourgeoisie shortly before the American Civil War. The Lincoln presidency, the Union victory in the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Radical Reconstruction (of the South) after the Civil War were

all Republican Party achievements. At the time, the Democratic Party was the party of Southern Dixiecrats and pro-slavery racism.

The GOP (Grand Old Party) remained politically dominant for two generations after the Civil War, but it became increasingly conservative. In this it reflected the evolution of US capitalism. The Northern bourgeoisie transitioned from a radical-abolitionist class at the time of the Civil War (1861-65) and Reconstruction (1865-77) into a plutocratic elite during the Gilded Age (c.1870s-1900). The party that had once put 200,000 former slaves into uniform to fight for abolition became a party deeply hostile to all popular movements as a threat to the wealth and power of the US capitalist class.

The Democratic Party also changed. Originally dominant in the South, it widened its base by supporting some radical causes and progressive reforms. This switchover in mainstream US politics became enduring during the Great Depression with the election of a Democratic president (Franklin D Roosevelt) and the implementation of the New Deal. It was deepened during the 1960s when another Democratic president (Lyndon B Johnson) drove the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act through Congress.

The Republican Party has continued to evolve. A mainstream conservative party for most of the 20th century, it made a sharp turn to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. Like the Thatcher premiership in Britain, the Reagan presidency represented a break with the post-war welfare consensus and the beginning of a full-scale counter-offensive by the ruling class to drive down wages and increase the rate of profit.

This counter-offensive was a massive success. Union membership in the States has halved since the 1970s, and the real value of wages has been static. Instead, wealth has been hoovered upwards. One recent study estimated that the bottom 90% of Americans have lost \$50 trillion to the richest 1% in the last four decades.

This kind of aggressive class war is unsustainable in the framework of liberal politics. This has been especially so since 2008, with the financial crash, bailouts for the rich, and doubled-down austerity for the rest. The whole system comes to look like a racket in which ordinary folk get screwed so the rich can feed their greed.

So the Republican Party has made another turn – to authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, misogyny, racism, and other kinds of scapegoat politics.

This is not an aberration. It is a global trend driven by neoliberal capitalism's crisis of legitimacy. Unable to provide real solutions to real problems – unable, above all, to address growing social inequality and consequent discontent – the right is forced to adopt the politics of fascism. It has nowhere else to go.

The Republican Party has become a party of the authoritarian right, which means a party projecting essentially fascist ideas and fostering the growth of fascist organisation. The attempted coup on 6 January 2021 was a perfect illustration of this. It involved several thousand fascists on the streets in Washington (including the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, and other militias), but, if the polling is accurate, it had the passive support of around 30-35 million Republican voters.

It is this grassroots fascism that emboldens so many Republican politicians to obstruct the Congressional investigation into the events of 6 January and FBI prosecutions of the rioters. Over the last year, the proportion of Republicans who believe there should be legal redress has fallen dramatically. Some Republican Representatives have described the detention of offenders awaiting

trial as victims of 'Marxism and totalitarianism'.

Bridges to fascism

Feeding the growth of the authoritarian right is a pandemic of irrationalism and online conspiracy theory. Around 60% of Republicans believe at least some of the claims of online QAnon conspiracy theory, about 40% are opposed to Covid vaccination, and as few as 30% believe the scientific evidence for global warming.

This historic collapse of the collective human intelligence – this mass rejection of science, reason, and evidence-based thinking – is, of course, pathological. It is a form of mass psychosis. How could it not be?

I argue in *Mind Fuck: the mass psychology of creeping fascism* (forthcoming soon) that creeping fascism is rooted in the culture of competitive individualism and materialism fostered by neoliberalism and in the emergence of a distinctive narcissistic-authoritarian personality type.

I have spent much of the last five years arguing with people who are in denial about creeping fascism. This has now reached the point where liberal commentators are more likely to use the F-word than many left commentators. Some seem to think fascism can be reduced to marching paramilitaries and swastika flags.

Four points must be made. First, fascism is a process, not a thing. Second, fascism infects the entire social order as it grows. Third, mainstream parties can evolve towards fascism. Fourth, the existing bourgeois state is the primary instrument of fascist repression.

Interwar fascism had all these characteristics. There is nothing exceptional about what is happening to the US Republican Party. It is evolving towards fascism in the same way as, say, Miklos Horthy's regime in Hungary between 1920 and 1944. Horthy banned the openly fascist Arrow Cross Party, but passed anti-semitic laws, fought alongside Hitler in the Second World War, and eventually sent half a million Jews to the extermination camps.

I have also had arguments with people about phenomena like the anti-vaxx movement. Informed by online conspiracy theory and supported by organised fascists, the anti-vaxx movement is an eruption of irrationalism, narcissistic selfishness, and mass psychosis. As such, it was one of many bridges to fascism – the political epicentre of reaction as the world descends deeper into crisis.

Voter suppression

It is no exaggeration to say that if Trump wins the presidential election in 2024, we may see a qualitative shift in the form of US government – a breakdown of liberal parliamentary democracy, a lurch towards a gerrymandered elective dictatorship of the authoritarian right, and full-on repression of progressive forces by state police and fascist militias.

Something like this was in preparation within months of Biden's inauguration. No less than 360 bills had been introduced in state legislatures aiming at voter suppression as soon as April last year. Measures proposed included: limiting mail-in voting; requiring voter IDs; reducing early voting; eliminating automatic and same-day voter registration; curbing the use of ballot drop-boxes; purging voter rolls; banning the provision of food and water to people waiting in line to vote; and allowing partisan observers to record people voting. All these measures – and others proposed – are designed

to exclude the poor and disadvantaged – that is, those more likely to vote Democrat.

The US has a long history of voter suppression. It was on a massive scale across the South in the Jim Crow era (1877-1965). Some two million Black Americans were not registered to vote in 1965. In Alabama, it was 80% of eligible Black voters. In Dallas County, only 333 out of 15,000 voting-age Blacks had the vote.

Segregationists controlled the local municipalities and they had many ways of making registration well-nigh impossible: few offices, limited opening hours, long queues, time-consuming procedures, excessive qualification requirements, and so on. And behind the official façade lurked the raw power of organised white supremacy – employers who could hire and fire at will, and racist cops and Klansmen who threatened anyone who challenged the established order with retributive violence.

Needless to say, it is Black and Latino Americans, and other disadvantaged groups, who will be disproportionately affected by the voter-suppression drive now underway in Republican-controlled states.

Anti-abortion

The Republican counter-revolution is waging a culture war on numerous fronts, but one predominates right now. If the US Supreme Court – now conservative-dominated – overturns or guts the landmark 1973 Roe vs Wade decision on abortion rights, it is likely that no less than 26 Republican-controlled states will impose bans or severe restrictions on a woman's right to choose.

As Susan Pashkoff explains in another article on this site:

"Travelling to a state where abortion remains legal will be expensive. In the Mid-West, abortion will be banned everywhere except for Illinois and Minnesota, and in the South from Florida to Texas."

Many women are unable to take sick days or holidays off work (in the US, part-time jobs do not guarantee sick days and holidays), and there is the obvious stigma if people find out what you have done. So exercising your right to bodily autonomy where your state does not recognise it will not be easy."

Polls show an almost 50:50 split on the question of abortion in the US. But whereas only around 25% of Democrat voters are anti-abortion, the proportion is around 75% among Republicans. Approximately 60 million Americans (in a population of 330 million) are white evangelicals (Christian fundamentalists). They are deeply reactionary on a host of social issues, including abortion. An estimated 80% of them voted for Trump in 2020.

This huge right-wing bloc is being energised around the Republican assault on women's rights. An essential component of creeping fascism – which, to repeat, is an organic process infecting the entire social order – is this kind of culture war, in which primitive impulses from the sewers of capitalist society and the human psyche are organised into a reactionary political force.

In the case of abortion, these impulses involve patriarchy, sexism, and psychotic hatred of women, especially feminists and other independent women. The attack on women's reproductive rights is an attempt to put women 'back in their place'. In the same way, various minorities – Blacks, Latinos, LGBTQI+ people, and others – are also to be put 'back in their place'. It is in this sense that the anti-abortion offensive in the US – in the context of the world capitalist crisis and the rise of the authoritarian right – is a bridge to fascism.

Can the right be defeated?

Yes, of course. But it will not be easy.

Fascism cannot be defeated by simply labelling the enemy as such. Fascism grows in a seed-bed of social crisis and mass alienation. It grows where there is unemployment, rotten housing, crumbling infrastructure, and decaying public services. It grows when people know their lives are getting worse and cannot see them ever getting better. Fascism, as Trotsky put it, is the party of counter-revolutionary despair.

Modern fascism combines four elements. It hypercharges the traditional reactionary cocktail of nationalism, militarism, racism, misogyny, and so on. It mixes this with ultra-neoliberalism and libertarianism. It draws upon and fosters a culture of extreme, competitive, materialist, narcissistic individualism. And it relies upon the evidence-free realm of cyberspace to disseminate its irrationalism, its conspiracy theories, and its psychopathic hatreds.

What it does not do, on the other hand, is address any of the real issues confronting humanity. The authoritarian right has nothing intelligent to say about the climate crisis, the pandemic, corporate power, social inequality, the migrant crisis, or anything else that matters. What it offers is what has been called 'sado-populism', or what George Orwell in Nineteen-Eighty Four described as 'a boot stamping on a human face forever'. It channels social discontent into a futile psychotic rage directed at scapegoats, minorities, victims, the powerless, the wretched of the earth.

The left could offer a real alternative: red-green revolution to overthrow a corrupt political elite and the corporate billionaires they serve, to redistribute wealth on a global scale, to institute a system of real democracy from below, and to build a new world based on equality, solidarity, sustainability, and peace.

Growing numbers of young activists, deeply aware of the seriousness of the crisis of humanity and the planet, are open to the idea of revolution. But embryonic revolutionary consciousness has to be organised to become a political force.

The central task for socialists in the United States and across the world is to build a network for red-green revolution. Stalinism is dead. Social Democracy is dead. Only the real socialist tradition - socialism from below, the socialism of popular assemblies, of mass participatory democracy - offers a way out. We need to say it, say it loud, and build mass revolutionary organisation to achieve it.

The choice, as it was in the interwar years, is fascism or revolution.

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P.S.

• Anti*capitalist Resistance. 06 Jan 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/where-is-america-going/>