

Politics

United States - Constitutional Collapse

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For constitutional lawyers, Trump's return to power has been a vertiginous experience. The systematic violation of legal process and longstanding constitutional norms has proceeded faster than one can keep up with, resulting in over a hundred lawsuits and counting.

Trump has issued a flood of executive orders that explicitly violate congressional law as well as the written text of the Constitution, on everything from the denial of birthright citizenship, to crackdowns on efforts at racial, gender and sexual orientation-based inclusion, to the destruction of legislatively authorized government agencies. At the same time, Elon Musk has boasted that he is pursuing a 'corporate takeover' of the federal government, aiming - through mass firing, the selling off of government assets (including '443 federal properties', potentially along with countless works of public art) and the dismantling of vital services - to privatize 'anything that can reasonably be privatized': all in violation of congressional and constitutional prohibitions on private citizens, unconfirmed by the Senate, carrying out the work of senior government officials.

These developments have led some [commentators](#) to draw analogies between the American experience and that of post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s. That period entailed the Russian state's near complete privatization and a massive redistribution of wealth into the hands of a small number of kleptocrats, exempt from any sanctions except those that their rivalries could impose on each other. But there is perhaps a deeper connection to Russian history: the US constitutional project in the twentieth century was forged through and gained meaning from its antagonism with the Soviet Union. The basic American terms - linking racial liberalism to a limited social welfare state - were consolidated over the course of three critical decades, from the 1930s New Deal to World War II, the Cold War and the civil rights revolution of the 1960s.

Today, the Soviet Union is long gone. And now Trump (an elected billionaire), Musk (an unelected and far wealthier billionaire), and a small coterie of loyalists are pursuing a collapse of that competing American constitutional model. Their effort does not clarify what is to come. But it fundamentally alters the terrain on which the US left operates, and will require a type of oppositional politics the country has not seen since the years that ushered FDR into power.

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To understand what is unfolding, it is necessary to grasp the content of the US constitutional [order](#). This includes a series of ideological and institutional components, in line with what Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in 1944 famously labelled the 'American creed' - the idea that the United States stood for the promise of equal liberty for all. At a time of global rivalry with the Soviet Union over a decolonizing world, national elites explicitly rallied to this creedal constitutional frame. Its constitutive elements included a reading of the Constitution as committed to the steady amelioration of racial inequality grounded in principles of anti-discrimination; an anti-totalitarian account of civil liberty and speech rights; a defence of market capitalism, partially hedged by a constitutionally

entrenched regulatory and social welfare state; an embrace of institutional checks and balances, with the federal courts, particularly the Supreme Court, as the ultimate arbiter of the law; and a commitment to US global primacy organized through robust presidential power.

This iteration of American constitutionalism had both a domestic and international face. Domestically, it created a set of shared institutional and cultural practices. Republicans and Democrats understood themselves as jointly stewarding an American hegemonic project against the Soviet Union. Officials could toast their electoral foes across the partisan aisle, because whatever their internal differences, politicians and judges both had drunk deeply from the well of American exceptionalism. Whatever the election outcome, both sides were bound, above all, by a common national narrative. This narrative - deepened by suffering and victory during World War II and tested through ongoing rivalry with the Soviets - assumed the genius of the constitutional founders, the near-ideal quality of American institutions, and the unfolding internal progress of American society.

Internationally, this narrative also allowed the US to project authority on the global stage - propagating the mythology that its constitutional commitments to equal liberty were interests shared by everyone around the world. The result was an American postwar order marked by two interconnected features - a focus on rules-based legality, alongside the continual American defection from those rules, whether in Vietnam or Gaza today. National elites saw US-generated multilateral institutions as an expression of underlying American constitutional values, and therefore critical to uphold. But they also viewed global security as requiring the US to serve as an international backstop. In effect, this created an endless balancing act between promoting the rule of law and disobeying it through military actions and interventions, covert and overt. Resulting violations were justified as necessary to preserve collective stability - no matter that things looked very different for those in the crosshairs, especially in the previously colonized world.

That a distinct twentieth-century US constitutional order emerged in parallel with the Soviet Union is often elided, thanks in part to the peculiar features associated with American institutions and its national narrative. For starters, the US Constitution is notorious for being perhaps the [hardest](#) in the world to amend. Constitutional change does not typically occur through formal alterations to the 1787 document, let alone through its wholesale replacement, but through shifts in court-based interpretations of the existing text along with the implementation of landmark pieces of legislation that establish new terms for collective life. Indeed, the present order was consolidated through the passage of key mid-century bills - the Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, the Medicare Act - in conjunction with Supreme Court rulings that upheld their constitutionality. Together, Congress and the courts broke substantially from the preceding racial and economic order. Yet, crucially, this meant that there was no rewritten twentieth-century Constitution separate from an earlier one.

At the same time, the shared story about these legal shifts was that they represented the fulfilment of an inherently liberal national essence. In truth, the consolidation of this order had been a contingent product of domestic and global mid-twentieth-century developments, diverging markedly from the long-established structures of explicit white-settler supremacy in the United States. But that reality did not fit with the emerging national narrative - which presented the US as committed, from its founding, to the egalitarian principles of the Declaration of Independence, and thus on an ineluctable path to this new model.

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During his first two months back in office, Trump has placed existential pressure on every element of this twentieth-century compact. While his attacks on 'diversity, equity and inclusion' (DEI) use the

official language of anti-discrimination, his executive orders and Justice Department threats go further than merely presenting white majorities as the real groups in need of protection. They repudiate the Cold War liberal premise of racial inclusion as a constitutional cornerstone. This repudiation of non-white presence itself is what is at stake culturally and legally when Black senior officials are fired, universities and companies are attacked for their efforts at effective desegregation, and even government websites are scrubbed of references to women and racial minorities.

Since the 1960s, racial liberalism has been perhaps the central legitimating component of American constitutional life. For many Americans, white and non-white, the legal uprooting of segregation was definitive proof of the country's underlying egalitarian promise. Decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared 'separate but equal' inherently unequal in 1954, convinced elites and publics alike that US institutions, the Supreme Court chief among them, could steer the ship in the direction of progress. Abroad, these same changes were used to underscore the difference between American hegemony and old European racial domination, and thus the worthiness of US leadership over a largely non-white world. Trump's attack on USAID is telling in this context, because the agency was a critical Cold War institution, founded in 1961, which linked the internal American story of racial progress to a global one of US-led material prosperity for all. Its destruction, alongside the threat of withdrawal from multilateral bodies that the US itself established, is a direct challenge to the global face of the American constitutional project.

All of this makes clear that it is not just racial liberalism under assault. Trump officials are unleashing presidential power in ways that use the order's internal tensions to collapse core constitutional arrangements. We can see this with Trump's efforts to withhold funds, remove security clearances, ban 'pro-diversity' speech, or deport and potentially prosecute individuals for protest. Of course, the mid-twentieth-century order itself was always marked by McCarthyite tactics and the failure to live up to inclusive ideals - whether through Japanese internment or the rights abuses during the 'War on Terror'. Yet after the winding down of the 1950s Red Scare, McCarthyism - as a project of stoking generalized fear - was treated by political elites as essentially 'un-American' and unconstitutional.

Such repressive practices never disappeared, but they were typically restricted to relatively contained disfavoured groups, such as Black radicals or Arab and Muslim critics of US foreign policy ([particularly](#) those of Palestinian origin). In this way, Biden's own support for crackdowns on protest against the war on Gaza was of a piece with this chequered post-Red Scare history. By contrast, Trump's administration, aided by dormant McCarthy-era and even 1790s security provisions, has begun using Palestine-related activism to pursue a sweeping suppression of noncitizen speech. It is also treating that activism, as well as campus curricula and institutional practices around 'DEI', as pretexts for an unprecedented assault on the internal self-governance and academic freedom of universities. This assault is part of an emerging attack on the broader organizational life of the American centre and left - now targeting Democratic-aligned law firms and potentially soon to include civil society groups and fundraising platforms.

Trump officials' deployment of unilateral presidential power to dismantle the administrative state, potentially along with the major social welfare achievements of the mid-twentieth century, operates in a similar manner. It pushes on instabilities in the established constitutional relationship between capitalism and regulation, presidential and judicial power, in ways that make it increasingly impossible for the old order to hold. American constitutional statecraft has always displayed a classic dualism. The mid-century compact was defined by both an imperial Supreme Court *and* an imperial presidency. In effect, the shared elite commitment to American global dominance meant that the courts deferred to the president on matters of national security, allowing presidents to enjoy remarkably coercive authority overseas or at the border and to operate in the foreign domain as an

almost unchecked lawmaker.

Such deference was the product of a series of court decisions dating from World War II and the Cold War in which the judges largely refrained from interrogating security practices, such as communist deportations or the initiation of the Vietnam War. This did not mean that the courts never checked executive action in foreign affairs, but it did mean that those moments of constraint operated against a backdrop of general permissiveness. This deference 'over there' was combined with the courts' exercising extensive controls on issues considered domestic, to the extent that the federal judiciary effectively served as a policymaking body whose final decisions vis-à-vis the other branches were accepted without question. This balance persisted because both courts and presidents largely accepted that basic foreign/domestic division.

But as the US federal judiciary grew increasingly conservative, the relationship between the presidency and the judiciary took on a new dimension. Courts in the domestic arena began using that extensive policymaking authority to chip away at economic regulation, and they did so by expanding presidential power even at home. For decades, conservative lawyers developed legal arguments about why legislatively created agencies were a threat to a 'unitary executive' - the internal authority of the president to decide what happens within the executive branch, regardless of legislative directive. Recent court decisions may not have dismantled the established agencies. But they did two things at once: they gave judges more authority over agency processes and determinations, undercutting longstanding regulatory achievements. And they challenged whether New Deal-style legislation could limit unilateral presidential say-so over the civil service. In effect, conservative jurisprudence was quietly undermining the foundations of the mid-century administrative state, giving right-wing judges greater power to undercut agencies and future right-wing presidents greater power to do the same.

And so, much as in other domains, Trump's executive orders - unilaterally dismantling federal institutions regardless of congressional law or court injunctions - exploit instabilities present in the constitutional system. As those around Trump understand all too well, once agencies are shuttered, the staff are fired and the buildings sold off, it will be extremely difficult to reconstitute the previous administrative framework. Recent years may have been marked by small-bore conservative judicial attacks on federal agencies, aided by the piece-meal application of theories of executive power. Now, Trump and his team are running with those theories, applying the sledgehammer of an unconstrained imperial president - familiar from overseas interventions - to the routine operation of domestic statecraft. This is global authoritarianism come home.

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How did the US get here? First of all, it is vital to appreciate that American legal-political institutions are infamously undemocratic. They are organized around a state-based system that assigns representation geographically rather than to actual people, and entails extensive veto points that fragment the power of the vote. This fragmentation is achieved through the Electoral College, the Senate, the structure and appointments process of the federal judiciary, and the capacity of the states to gerrymander districts, limit voting rights, or otherwise thwart popular national agendas. As we have seen, it was only under the extraordinary circumstances of the mid-twentieth century that the New Deal's limited welfare state and racial liberalism were constitutionalized. It required a remarkably high degree of labour organizing and power against the backdrop of the Great Depression. And later, it relied upon the spectre of the Soviet Union, so that political elites were willing to pursue cross-party compromise on behalf of racial reforms, understood by centre-left and centre-right alike as a national security imperative.

But as the Cold War conflict retreated and, especially once the Soviet Union collapsed, there was

less pressure on an increasingly emboldened right to remain committed to the mid-century constitutional compact. This compact had always been stridently opposed by American ethno-nationalism - a powerful and persistent force in collective life, which did not simply disappear following the civil rights achievements of the 1960s. While we tend to focus on how the Cold War entailed the violent suppression in the US of socialists and other left activists, the perceived need to rally against the Soviet Union also induced right-wing national politicians to contain the far right, in particular by engaging in a delicate dance with American white nationalism - using 'dog whistles' to signal affinity while still excluding certain explicit ideological positions.

Yet once the USSR was gone, we therefore witnessed the gradual emergence of a reactionary right willing to defect systematically from the existing economic and racial compact. Strategically, the right became focused on using the instruments of minority rule in the existing constitutional order to project power, regardless of whether it represented a popular majority. Over time, institutional advantages in state-based representation meant that it could capture the Supreme Court, the Senate and even the presidency twice, despite losing the popular vote. More profoundly, it built a culture within Republican Party officialdom and its voting base that saw multi-racial democracy as an almost existential threat.

At the same time, the constitutional order was suffering under the weight of its own ideological and institutional limitations. The last two decades were marked by a series of social crises - chief among them the financial meltdown and its rippling after-effects - which called for constitutional renewal. Yet the politicians of the 2000s and 2010s, whether Bush and McCain or Obama, the Clintons and Biden, were beholden to the old compact - centred on the genius of American institutions, faith in market liberalism, the moral value of global interventionism and the need for only minor racial reforms. The issue of course was that these commitments had helped to generate many of the country's endemic problems and they certainly could not resolve them now.

Meanwhile, the sclerotic nature of the constitutional system meant that even when Democrats enjoyed control over the levers of government, it became nearly impossible to address such matters. Without the popular support of the New Deal era or the bipartisan commitments to racial liberalism, virtually any significant Democratic initiative was dead on arrival. Even if it passed the House of Representatives, getting through a Senate with a filibuster required 60 out of 100 votes. But the Senate, due to the overrepresentation of rural areas and small population centres was already massively tipped in favour of the Republican minority. For Democrats getting 60 votes therefore meant winning a supermajority on top of a supermajority. The tools that forged the creedal constitutional compact were no longer operative, and the resulting stalemate intensified the widespread political disaffection.

The result was a near-ideal set of circumstances for the rise and now the return of Trump. The preservation of a rigid twentieth-century constitutional order, long past the historical moment that spawned it, not only undermined necessary reforms and stoked frustration with presidential incumbents; it also allowed Trump to gain office in 2016 without winning the popular vote and then to reconstruct the Supreme Court along lines that were wildly out of step with public opinion. When Trump tried to overturn the election result in 2020, the existing institutions made it exceedingly difficult to impose any sanctions on him, whether through impeachment, prosecution or removal from future ballots. In reality, the institutions themselves had never done the central work of facilitating reform or of heading off succession crises; they had always depended on a high degree of elite cultural cohesion - whether during the early republic or the Cold War civil rights era. And now that cohesion was entirely gone.

The failures of the Supreme Court - which mid-century elites had envisioned as inculcating shared values and containing conflict - drive home the point. The Court, almost nakedly partisan, instead

played a crucial role in this breakdown, from unleashing right-wing vote suppression to giving Trump near-blanket immunity for his efforts to overthrow the 2020 election. And even before that, its decisions opened the electoral floodgates to corporate money. The result today is that someone like Musk can use his unlimited wealth to single-handedly alter the electoral incentives of politicians, especially within the Republican Party, since his primary campaign spending can knock out targeted enemies at will.

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Trump is thus well-situated to attempt a dismantling of the US's constitutional order. Unlike perhaps any politician in modern American history, including 1930s FDR, he enjoys a remarkable ability to impose party discipline on Republican politicians - a power Musk's pocketbook only intensifies. Trump may not be able to get an endorsed candidate elected, but his connection to his electoral base means that disfavoured candidates will almost certainly be cast out. In addition, he seems driven by petty grievances and a personal desire for revenge; hence the focus on pardoning his supporters and targeting anyone that previously attempted to sanction him. This has enshrined the value of personal loyalty and ensured that his most zealous supporters enjoy significant policy influence. The upshot is a second term dominated by far-right ideologues like Russell Vought of Project 2025, or Ed Martin now at the Justice Department, who are far less motivated by electoral calculations than the typical Republican official.

Similarly, Musk seems devoted to the accumulation of personal power and self-enrichment, and driven by the related aim of eliminating the US administrative state's constraints on private business. His attempts to fire federal employees *en masse* is noteworthy in this sense. While the New Deal never systematically contained 'at will' employment in the private sphere, it initiated federal employment protections that restricted the forms of employer domination experienced elsewhere. Musk's aim is to end that constraint and reduce all employment, public or private, to employer diktat. Although these are clearly long-standing right-wing goals, Musk too is operating in ways only tangentially driven by electoral calculations. The party for Musk seems mostly a useful tool for freeing business from democratic oversight.

This confluence of factors has produced a willingness to push far beyond the typical barriers that have restrained Republicans in the past. Yet the administration is nonetheless facing serious headwinds. For starters, despite Trump's talk of a mandate, he remains historically unpopular, failing to reach 50% support in the November election. His victory was essentially by default - a rejection of the incumbent in a vote with lower turnout than in 2020. And despite the rhetoric from Republicans that Trump is making good on his electoral promises, in truth he denied that he was pursuing key elements of this constitutional rupture when running for office - declaring on the debate stage that 'I have nothing to do with Project 2025'. For many voters, Trump was seen in 2024 as a [moderate](#) and not particularly ideologically committed - a perception that aided his campaign.

While he may have a powerful base, it still remains a minority of Americans. There is nothing even approaching majority support for this far-right project. Indeed, the last decade has seen the deregulatory vision of the neoliberal age fall increasingly out of favour. Implementing an extreme version of it is only viable in the short term because of the discipline Trump and Musk can impose on the party.

But the clock is ticking, both because of Trump's age and because of the two-term limit (the president's narcissism means he seems to have no interest in a succession plan). Indeed, a likely medium-term outcome of the Trumpist assault is Democratic success in the 2026 midterms and a return to presidential power in 2028, given the prevalence of anti-incumbent sentiment. As long as the United States has more-or-less competitive elections, there is no clear pathway for Trump,

Vought, Musk, Martin and others to consolidate a new constitutional order that replaces the old one. This is perhaps one reason why Trumpists are ramping up the machinery of the state to attack the institutional infrastructure of the Democratic Party - its lawyers, its get-out-the-vote capacity and its NGO networks. Along with punishing Trump opponents, one aim may be to restrict Democratic electoral strength in ways that 2010s voter suppression efforts were ultimately limited in achieving. While it is too early to predict how this will play out, it is clear that the Trumpist base is not remotely large enough to authorize and re-authorize such actions through competitive elections.

This is not, however, to deny the potential effects of the ongoing attack on the existing constitutional order. If Vought and Musk succeed in dismantling large parts of the state's regulatory and social welfare apparatus, it will likely be impossible to reconstitute in its previous form. Given the Trumpist control of the Supreme Court, one can therefore imagine a mixed outcome, in which some of the administration's actions are ultimately deemed unconstitutional while others are allowed to stand. Although this result may be enough to satisfy centrists that the old order remains, the situation on the ground will nonetheless be that of decimated regulatory capacity plus the further gutting of racial reforms and basic rights for noncitizens. Crucially, whereas core tenets of racial liberalism and civil liberty had once been part of a shared elite compact, they may now well stand or fall with each election season.

Such an outcome speaks to how the Trumpist constitutional assault is at root a cultural assault on the basic creedal assumptions forged during the twentieth century. Far right politics in the US embraces a vision of explicit and Christian ethno-nationalism alongside an intense, acquisitive individualism. Normalizing such views is a critical part of the overall politics. One can see it in White House made or promoted videos that revel in cruelty toward immigrants or that turn the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians into a joke about Trump Towers in Gaza.

Indeed, the concrete attacks on the administrative state and on the universities are very much of a piece with this aim to reconstitute collective life on far-right terms. Even after extensive privatization, the Trumpist state would still have a role to play, but as a site of coercive power against perceived enemies and outsiders, and as fount for the corrupt subsidization of kleptocratic insiders. The Trumpist university would also have its function, but as an even more extreme neoliberal engine of return on investment and tied to the cultural promotion of 'Western civilization'.

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What are the implications for the left? A common response to Trump's actions has been to rally around the Constitution and even around faith that the courts will save the country. One sees this in the assertion that by refusing to abide by court orders Trump has sparked a 'constitutional crisis' or 'constitutional stress test' - the implication is that everything could still revert to normal so long as the officials listen to the judges. Against this notion, we must reaffirm the fact that the constitutional system is what set the stage for Trump's rise, return and current assault. Given the degree to which the federal bench is now shaped by the right, any revival of faith in judges has more than a whiff of the establishment Democratic desire to convince enough good Republicans to follow their better natures and to defect from Trump - a project which has failed repeatedly.

The reason to oppose Trump's violation of court orders is not out of a general faith in judges or constitutional norms. The paralyzed nature of the constitutional system, complete with an unworkable amendment process, meant that many of the country's democratic achievements - from Reconstruction to the New Deal - themselves required some degree of norm-breaking. The great social movements of the past, from abolition to civil rights, labour to women's suffrage, famously called for the defiance of unjust court judgments that sustained slavery, segregation and disenfranchisement, or criminalized union organizing. Considering the current right-wing control

over the courts, the left may find itself in a similar place in the coming years, calling for civil disobedience of judicial authority.

The left should nonetheless strongly back litigation efforts and condemn Trump's defiance of the courts, but on different grounds. These efforts are one tool, albeit limited, to protect the most disenfranchised from unchecked violence. And more broadly, Trumpian defiance evinces the administration's general commitment to impunity - whether in seeking to overthrow elections, engage in massive graft, fire workers at will or target political enemies. No democratic system, liberal or socialist, can operate if a powerful clique can systematically exempt itself from the law while using the machinery of the state to spread fear and intimidation.

The example of the New Deal also underscores the necessity for the American left to build the type of mass base that can authorize significant shifts in the constitutional order. Even before Trump's current assault, that order had failed as a mechanism for addressing the interlocked crises of our era: economic, ecological, racial. Any real prospect of positive change will require a durable majority - even if it falls short of the supermajorities we saw in the first half of the twentieth century. This is an essential prerequisite for norm-breaking from the left, but on behalf of democracy.

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It is certainly possible that Democratic weakness will lead to another Republican victory at the next election. Yet if the Democrats do find themselves back in power, their victory may prove as hollow as Trump's: a win by default, for the non-incumbent. While they may arrest the worst elements of the American far right in the short term, without any genuine transformations within the party itself they will simply replay the cycle of disaffection and anti-incumbency.

Unfortunately, there is nothing about today's Democratic Party that suggests it understands the task ahead, or that it is capable of operating as an organized and integrated opposition. The recent defection of Chuck Schumer, the Senate Minority leader, from the efforts across the party's elected leadership to refuse to aid Trump in passing a budget, speaks to a lack of internal coherence and fortitude. The Democratic establishment seems to make decisions based on its immediate electoral horizons, regardless of the wider political context. Whereas Trump and his loyalists act like a vanguard, Democratic officialdom has been so conditioned by the strictures of the old constitutional compact that they appear signally incapable of deviating from it.

This creates a potential opening for the American left. While centrist Democrats try in vain to uphold the old constitutional order, and the far right fails to replace it with anything beyond predation and xenophobia, the role of democratic-socialist forces could be to advance a viable alternative. Such an effort must take many forms. It requires defending those especially vulnerable to Trumpist assault - noncitizens, transpersons and activists on behalf of Palestinian rights, among others. Centrist politicians and commentators have been notably willing to cast aside all these groups - in part out of genuine ideological suspicion, in part out of sheer electoral opportunism. But a longstanding lesson of political opposition under authoritarian conditions - whether in the segregation-era American South or outside the United States - is that a critical means for building cross-group trust and solidarity, including for election season, is a willingness to stand on principle. This means taking risks even when it is not in your immediate self-interest. And the failure of many Democrats to do just that is its own opening for leftwing formations.

Secondly, the left must pursue the kind of institution-building that can lay the basis for transformative changes, to the Constitution and to society at large. This entails protecting and expanding meaning-making institutions - labour and tenant unions, party formations of all kinds, those sites in universities of academic freedom and worker empowerment, to name just few - which

incorporate values of democracy and solidarity into everyday life. We can take party politics as an example. Parties, both in the American past and in various parts of the world, have long acted as social communities – providing a range of services and programmes, and integrating individuals into their broader social settings. But in the US, the party is not a genuine membership organization, let alone a social community. It is exclusively a vehicle for elites connected to the official apparatus to run for and hold office. Americans rarely interact with the party except during election season, when vast sums are spent for the benefit of prospective office-holders.

Kamala Harris managed to raise over [one billion dollars](#) in defeat. Imagine if a party instead employed its vast resources to build institutions at the local level. There are obviously US federal election rules, aimed at limiting the direct buying of votes – although these rules have made it exceedingly easy for corporations and billionaires effectively to do the same. But one could still think creatively about the broader communal infrastructure in which a party operates. The Black Panthers no doubt made numerous strategic and even ethical errors, but they understood themselves as an oppositional formation rooted in civil society. Among their most lasting concrete achievements were the provision of services to some of the country’s most marginalized members (through children’s breakfasts, health care clinics, ambulances, clothing, busing, prisoner support and education centres). These were responses to actual social need, as part of an attempt to integrate constituents on the ground into the institutional framework of the party. They sought to create, in the words of the historian of populism Lawrence Goodwyn, a parallel [‘movement culture’](#) in opposition to the received one.

It is a lesson that the left might heed, given the far-right’s parallel attempts to hegemonize an oppositional culture. If Trump’s electoral success is due in part to the far right’s ability to create a lifeworld shaped around his persona, the left must pursue a countervailing project. Its aim should be to transform the world people organically experience through mediating institutions: at work, at school, in their neighbourhoods. They should be contesting reality on this basic level.

The problem, of course, is that the current political terrain – shaped by the long-term containment of labour and the wealth and power of the billionaire class – is highly inhospitable. Left activists inside and outside the Democratic Party also face constant attacks from their more powerful and coordinated centrist opponents, from the manoeuvres to defeat Sanders’s presidential campaigns to the repression of campus protests over Gaza. The battle is an uphill one. But the fact remains that neither the centre nor the far right can offer a pathway out of America’s institutional decay. A left cultural world has been built before, in the US and elsewhere, and there is no alternative to building it again.

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• Sidecar. NLR. 21 March 2025:
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