

## Your guide to a disrupted world

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Opinion **US politics & policy**

### A second Trump term would imperil the republic

What would rule by an 'America-first' nationalist mean for the residual credibility of the west's political and economic systems?

**MARTIN WOLF**



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**Martin Wolf** YESTERDAY

Last week the US took another step on its journey towards autocracy, as [Liz Cheney](#) lost the Republican primary for her Wyoming district. Her father is former vice-president Dick Cheney, who masterminded the Iraq war under George W Bush. She is also unimpeachably conservative. Yet she has become anathema to Republicans. Her crime? She believes that accepting the outcome of fair elections is a higher duty than promoting the lies of their “great leader”. (See charts.)

The Republican party has adopted the [Führerprinzip](#) (“leadership principle”) of the Germans in the 1930s. This is the notion that loyalty to a leader who defines what is true and right is the overriding obligation. The Republicans’ embrace of Trump’s Big Lie that he won the last presidential election is a perfect instance of this principle. Here, moreover, it is directly set against a core value of liberal democracy, that of fair elections. Ten years ago, most of us would have thought such a development inconceivable in the US. But with the ascent of Donald Trump it became [likely](#). Now, the reaction not so much of Trump to his defeat as of his party to his lies provides another decisive moment.

As Harvard’s Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue in their splendid book, [How Democracies Die](#), it is not hard to subvert a democracy. It has [happened many times, in both the past and more recently](#). First, subvert the electoral system. Second, capture the referees (the judiciary, tax authorities, intelligence agencies and law

enforcement). Third, sideline or eliminate political opponents and, above all, the media. Supporting all such assaults will be a fierce insistence on the illegitimacy of the opposition and the “fakeness” of information that does not align with the lies the leader finds most useful today.

## Cheney is very conservative on any measure

US Representatives by DW-NOMINATE ideology score (-1 = liberal, +1 = conservative). Cheney highlighted

Party Democrat Republican



Source: UCLA, [Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database](#), Keith Poole & Howard Rosenthal • Scores based on Congressional votes

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In his first term, Trump made much progress with establishing his lies as the truth for his supporters. But neither he nor his subordinates had yet worked out how to re-engineer the electoral system or the government, partly because he did not yet have the “right” — that is fanatical, competent and devoted — assistants. He was surrounded by people now judged “disloyal”, namely those who had at least some principles.

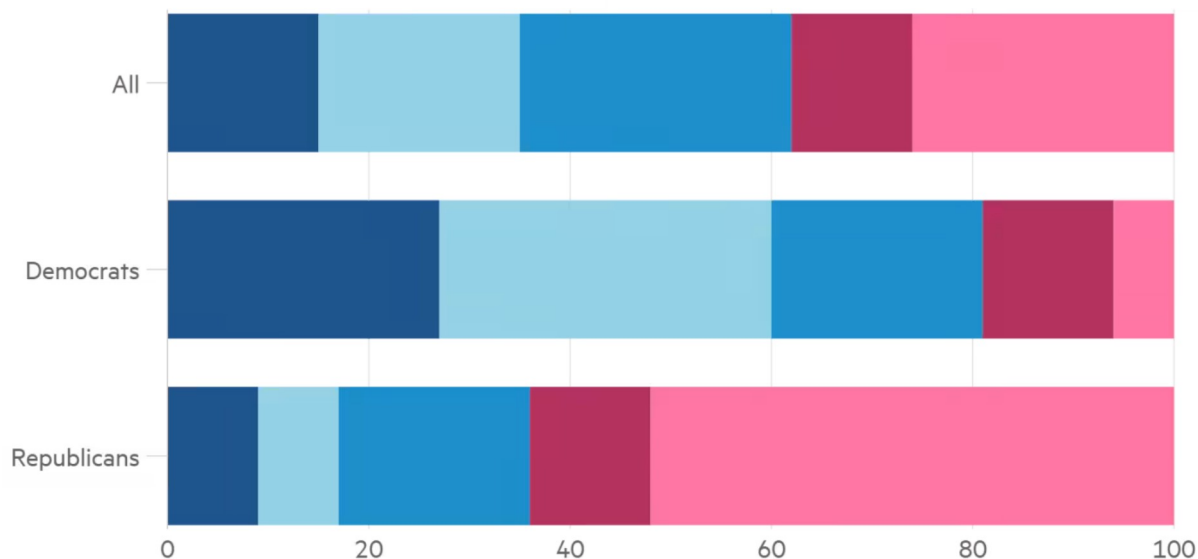
This has changed. He has now made the party largely his own. Cheney’s defenestration is proof of that. As important is the widely shared conviction among Republicans that he is above accountability for his behaviour to the law or, for that

matter, Congress. He and his party have, [as Robert Kagan](#) has argued, also exploited the lies about the “steal” to justify the subversion of US elections, on which much progress is being made.

### Liz Cheney is popular with Democrats

Latest opinion (%)

Very favourable    Somewhat favourable    Don't know  
 Somewhat unfavourable    Very unfavourable



Source: YouGov Aug 13-16  
 © FT

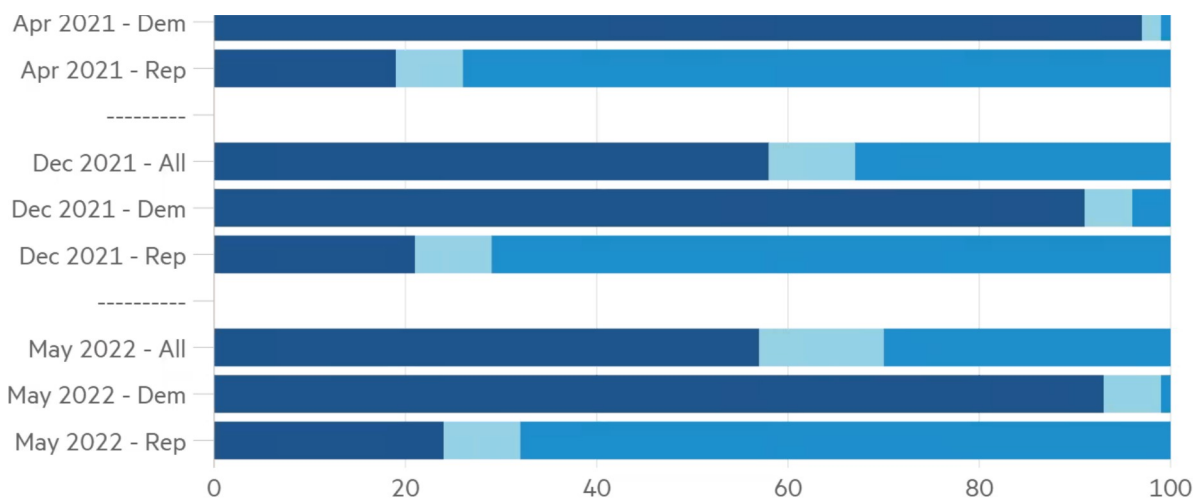
The crucial next stage for Trumpism is the replacement of the leaders and staff of core institutions of the state by people loyal to him personally. For that to happen, he must first become president. This is why progress in subverting elections is important, as is keeping him out of prison. But in two [recent articles](#), Jonathan Swan of Axios has described something else that would be vital: a plan to ensure that the government will be staffed by true loyalists from top to bottom. A crucial aspect of this, he suggests, is to replace the permanent staff of agencies of the government with carefully vetted loyalists. If the Republicans managed to control Congress, this may become not that hard to imagine.

### Most Republicans still think the 2020 election was 'stolen'

Views on outcome of the 2020 presidential election, by party (%)

Biden's victory legitimate    Don't know/not sure  
 Biden's victory not legitimate



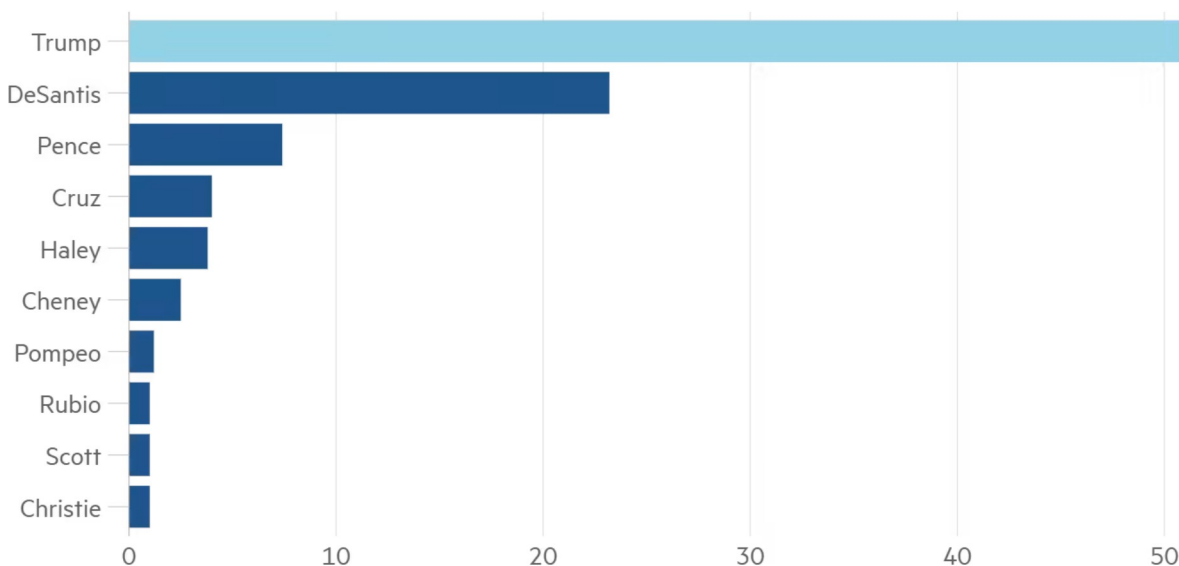


Source: University of Massachusetts National UMass/Amherst polls © FT

Suppose then that Trump loyalists headed and staffed the FBI, CIA and Internal Revenue Service. Suppose loyalists were also placed in all senior military positions under a devoted secretary of defence. Suppose loyalists were put on the board of the Federal Reserve and all significant regulatory agencies. Imagine what this would mean for the rule of law and civil rights. Imagine, too, the pressure such agencies could put on independent businesses, notably including those of the media.

### The 2024 nomination is very much still Trump's to lose

Republican voters' preferred candidate for the 2024 presidential election (average of five polls, Jun-Aug 2022, %)



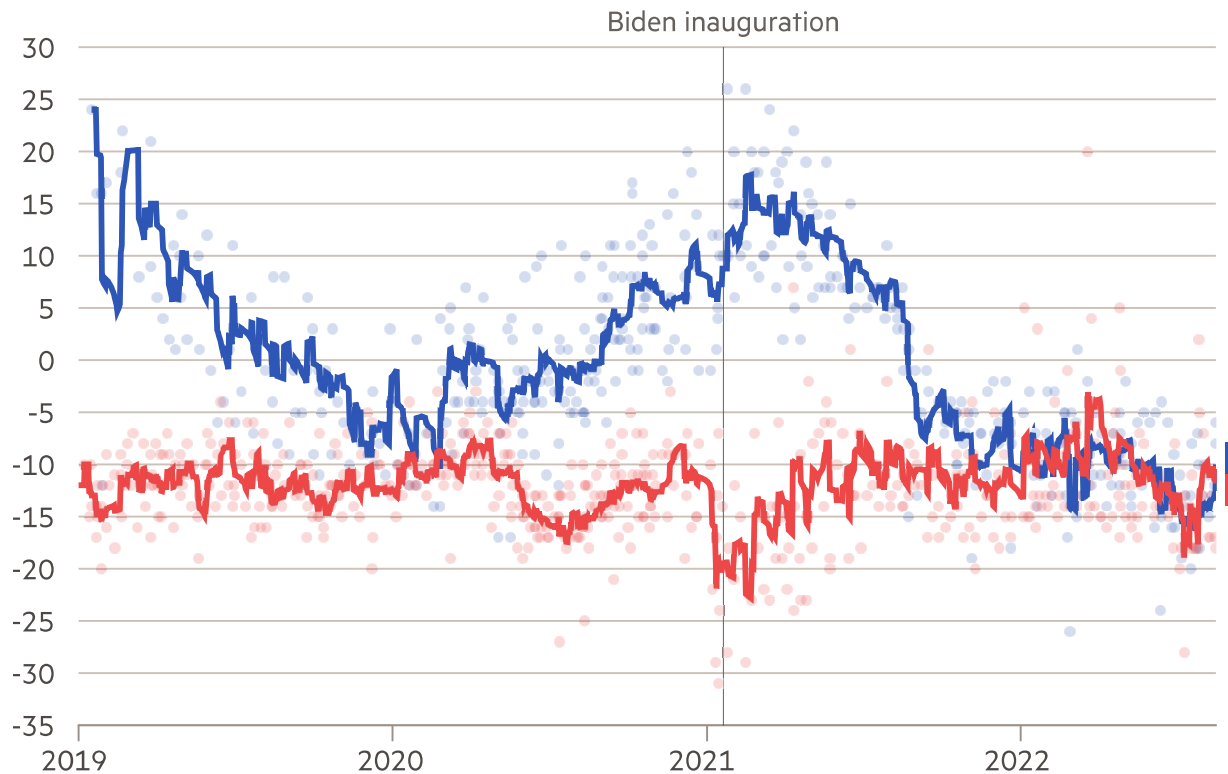
Source: Real Clear Politics © FT

The logic of the market under autocracy is one of crony capitalism. Would the US be so very different? Maybe the federal system and judiciary would protect personal independence. Yet if people whose only principle is loyalty to the leader were to staff the federal government, his will would be hard to resist.

Despotism means unaccountable rule. It does not mean competent or intrusive rule. It is possible that the despotism would be incompetent and lazy. There are countless examples of this. But it would be despotism, all the same.

## Trump is still unpopular, but so now is Biden

Net favourability, FT poll-of-polls (%)



Source: RealClearPolitics ([Trump](#), [Biden](#)) • Latest poll Aug 16

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What would a second Trump administration of such a kind mean for the world? What would it mean above all for its allies? What would rule by an “America-first” nationalist with the sort of administration described above mean for the residual credibility of the liberal international economic system? What would it mean for global co-operation? “Nothing good” is the answer to all these questions. The end of “American exceptionalism” is likely to mean the formation of distinct spheres of

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interest as the basis of global order. Some might like that. But it would also be a transformation — a catastrophic one, in my view — towards a world of despotism.

In 27BC, the Roman republic transformed into the military dictatorship we call the Roman empire. It is not impossible that a similar transformation is under way in the US. That may still seem inconceivable to most people. I hope that is so. Trump is old, after all. He may have no suitable replacement. Yet every day he is exploiting and so displaying the demoralisation of the American republic. American conservatism has become a radical nationalist movement loyal to the truths invented by one man and dedicated to the overthrow of the “Deep State”, by which is meant their own government. [Dick Cheney](#) says that Donald Trump is the “greatest ever threat to our Republic”. On this we should believe Cheney: he is.

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