

Opinion **US politics & policy**

## It's not too late to reverse America's political decay

When a society's institutions fail to adapt to changing circumstances, sclerosis follows

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According to the non-profit Freedom House, there has been a steady decline in the quantity and quality of liberal democracies around the world for the past 18 years. Among the backsliders, there is no case more serious than that of the United States.

American institutions have been decaying steadily for some time, and are now at a major crisis point. Nearly a third of the electorate believes the falsehood that President Joe Biden stole the 2020 election. Polls suggest that voters would be prepared to re-elect Donald Trump, the former president who propagated this lie among supporters, resulting in an assault on the Capitol on January 6 2021 in a bid to keep him in power. That same Trump refuses to support Ukraine and recently invited Russia to attack any Nato ally that did not pay an imaginary debt for US protection. With five primary victories under his belt, and more to come on Super Tuesday next week, he is poised to be the Republican candidate. The consequences

that would flow from his November re-election will affect every part of the globe.

Political decay occurs when a society's institutions fail to adapt to changing circumstances. This has been going on for a generation, and is now culminating in an enormous crisis that will play out over the next eight months. The US system is built around a complex set of check-and-balance institutions that make it easy for minorities in politics to thwart the will of majorities. When these institutions are combined with extreme political polarisation, they create governmental paralysis and an inability to perform basic functions like passing a yearly budget.

Some of these rigidities are built into the US constitution. The electoral college dramatically over-represents inhabitants of smaller states while the Senate is a huge source of unequal representation. Wyoming, with a population of less than a million, gets two senators, as does California with almost 40 million residents. Routine legislation requires supermajorities to pass, meaning that 40 out of 100 senators can block anything they don't like.

What is particularly infuriating about the deadlock over funding for Ukraine, for example, is that a majority of members of both the House and Senate, as well as a large part of the public, favour such a measure. They cannot get a bill passed, however, because a diehard conservative faction within the Republican House membership is steadfastly opposed – not just to Ukraine funding but to any bipartisan deal involving Democrats.

In today's polarised America, Maga Republicans are inclined to veto simply for the sake of undermining the other side. They have been pushing for stronger security measures on the southern border for months. Biden essentially gave in to their demands in order to get funding for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan through, at which point Trump, still only a candidate, intervened to veto the deal because he didn't want the president to get any credit.

Several other aspects of the American political order have contributed to polarisation. Presidentialism locks in the winner for an unalterable four-year term, and that person can be turned out only through impeachment, which is an extraordinarily difficult process. One of Trump's biggest advantages today is Biden's age and general unpopularity. In a parliamentary system, the party elite could move to replace a failing leader with someone more electable, but this can't happen in the US.

This is related in turn to America's agonisingly long process for selecting party candidates. The first-past-the-post voting system, when combined with popular

primaries, favours candidates at either extreme. Due to a Supreme Court ruling that equates campaign spending with free speech, money makes an inordinate difference in US elections.

All of these problems could be solved through reform. States could require electoral votes be allocated on a proportional basis. Plurality voting could be replaced by rank-choice voting that would require voters to specify second- and third-place preferences and facilitate the emergence of third parties. The country could place stronger restrictions on campaign finance, and the requirement for 60-vote supermajorities in the Senate could be abolished. This list doesn't even touch on major constitutional reforms, such as abolition of the electoral college or changes to the power of the Senate. For now, these lie in the realm of fantasy.

Frustrating as these problems are, they are only the tip of a much larger iceberg. While Trump has been an extraordinarily skilful demagogue, what is driving this turn to the hard right are the voters themselves. There are many "normal" Republican leaders who understand why populist policies are bad for the country, but they nonetheless support them because they live in fear of their own base.

Any democracy depends on an electorate that is well-informed and supportive of the norms on which the system rests. But an astonishing number of Americans have bought into bizarre conspiracy theories and alternative realities. Polls show that 17 per cent support QAnon, whose narratives include Democrats drinking the blood of children in hidden tunnels under Washington. Over half of Republicans believe that vaccines are more harmful than helpful, while many evangelicals think that church closures during the pandemic were the first shot in a campaign by liberals to close their churches permanently.

One of the biggest transformations that has occurred in US society over the past decade has been a revolution in the moral evaluation of the country itself. For most of the country's history, its people believed in some version of American exceptionalism according to which the country would be an inspiration to oppressed peoples around the world.

This used to be particularly true for conservatives, but today Maga Republicans believe that their country is pervaded by moral corruption. Belief in US democracy has been replaced by admiration for strong men and authoritarian governments overseas. Trump praises China's Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jong Un for ruling their people with an iron hand.

The Republican party has returned to its pre-1941 isolationism, but it is isolationism with a difference. Back then, isolationists believed that America was pure and shouldn't be tainted by association with foreign countries. Today, they believe their own country needs purification.

Needless to say, this migration of anti-Americanism from left to right has huge implications for world order. A victory for Trump in November will mean a decisive end to US support for Ukraine. In time, we may have to witness the fall of Kyiv to Russian forces. But Vladimir Putin will not stop there and Trump has made clear he has no intention of fighting to protect Nato allies. In his interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin said he would not attack Poland or Lithuania, but he didn't mention Estonia, which like Ukraine hosts a Russian-speaking minority. It will be next on the chopping block.

A similar logic would apply to Asian allies such as South Korea and Japan. Anyone who thinks that Trump would defend Taiwan against a Chinese invasion needs to think again.



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It is not too late to reverse this process of decay, however. Most Americans don't understand the depth of the fundamental threat that Trump poses to their democracy, but regard him as a normal politician with somewhat different policy preferences. Anyone who imagines that a second Trump term will simply reprise the first hasn't been paying attention to what he has been saying and doing.

The Democrats have a lot of work to do to wake people up to the magnitude of the challenge the country faces. If that happens, there is a possibility that, rather than eking out another narrow victory, they will win decisively. If that happens, they

can begin to think about reforms that will reverse the process of decay. Believers in a classically liberal America need to reduce the ability of political minorities to stymie majorities, and streamline our impossibly complex processes and procedures to make government more effective. But first, they need to win.

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