

Opinion **US presidential election 2024**

The appeal of an American Caesar

A well-organised cabal of rightwing intellectuals is assembling an authoritarian playbook for Donald Trump

EDWARD LUCE



Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Las Vegas this month. Democrats would do well to spell out the plutocratic effects of the former president's tax plans © John Locher/AP

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

One side of America or the other is going to win, says Samuel Alito, the conservative US Supreme Court justice. “Don’t get angry, get even,” says his wife, Martha-Ann Alito. By unorthodox means, the couple have become unlikely mascots of US authoritarianism. Some, like the Alitos, want their country restored to godliness. Others want to derail America’s “woke” elite. All put faith in Donald Trump as their cause’s imperfect vessel.

If Trump wins in November, it will not be because there is a groundswell for autocracy. A Trump victory would more likely happen for mundane reasons, such as inflation. But history is forged by the well-organised few. Trump would resume office as an American Caesar with a ready-made toolkit of executive actions. The details are there in the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 plan. It contains some libertarian strands. No 920-page document can be fully consistent. But for those with reading stamina, Project 2025 is the *War and Peace* of authoritarian planning.

A minority of Americans are fully on board with Trump’s will to power. Democracy Fund [surveys](#) show that more than a fifth of US voters want a “strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with Congress and elections”. All surveys show that the younger the American, the less likely they are to value democracy. Against expectations, Joe Biden’s support among older Americans has held firm. It is [among](#)

expectations, Joe Biden's support among older Americans has held firm. It is [among under-30s](#), and particularly young men, where Trump is making the largest inroads. These include Black and Hispanic voters.

My colleague John Burn-Murdoch recently laid bare the growing ideological split between young women, who are trending liberal, and young men, who are leaning conservative. This is true of America. No one has put their finger on exactly why but Trump clearly appeals to a macho strain in various non-white communities. He can also weaponise fears among younger men of all colours that their gender is losing ground.

One theory is that young men felt particularly scarred by Covid-era restrictions. Much of their resentment is directed at college and teacher unions, which kept millions of students online for months longer than needed (if it was necessary at all). The pettiness of many pandemic-era restrictions was exacerbated by how often they kept changing. Federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health, were also to blame.

Either way, women are increasingly the winners of today's higher education system. Sixty-five per cent of Americans getting graduate degrees are now female. Since growing numbers of men believe they are shut out by a feminised American elite, why not spin the Trumpian roulette wheel? Pro-authoritarian thinkers believe they are the true defenders of liberty. Sixty years ago, the Republican Barry Goldwater said "extremism in defence of liberty is no vice". He lost but was ahead of his time. If you are convinced that you are the real victim of tyranny, it makes sense to adopt your enemy's methods. Each side comes to see an election as an all-or-nothing proposition since it could be their last shot.

That Trump, not Biden, is the one with authoritarian impulses is undeniable. Trump's rhetoric is about retribution, mostly driven by his own legal troubles. If he wins, he will target the prosecutors who have indicted him. Biden talks about healing, even when the topic is his son. This week Hunter Biden was found guilty on three counts related to having an illegal firearm. To equate the two is preposterous. Biden says he will respect the judicial process. Trump is expected to try to pardon himself.

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But politics is about figuring out what is in the minds of persuadable voters. Even were Biden still vigorous, he would find it hard to dent the hostility so many young Americans feel towards the system he represents. He would do well to spell out the plutocratic



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effects of Trump's tax plans. They will not do much for struggling young men of any colour. Simple economics has to be at the core of Biden's pitch.

But he should recognise the alienation that some younger Americans feel. Many of their elders have been working for years on plans to bulldoze the system. Allies of Heritage such as the Federalist Society, which churns out judicial authoritarians such as Alito, and the Claremont Institute, which champions American Caesarism, prettify their views with references to Thomas Jefferson and Friedrich Nietzsche. But their goals are not pretty.

The original Julius Caesar, and his adopted son, Augustus, used the Roman mob against patrician elites to appoint themselves dictators. The mob wanted more for themselves; the Caesars took it all. The way to defeat Caesar is to speak to those in his audience with valid complaints. A slice would be enough.

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