

Opinion **Donald Trump**

Trump's threat to US liberal democracy

We must hope that the American people will not lightly abandon the enlightenment traditions of their country

MARTIN WOLF



© James Ferguson

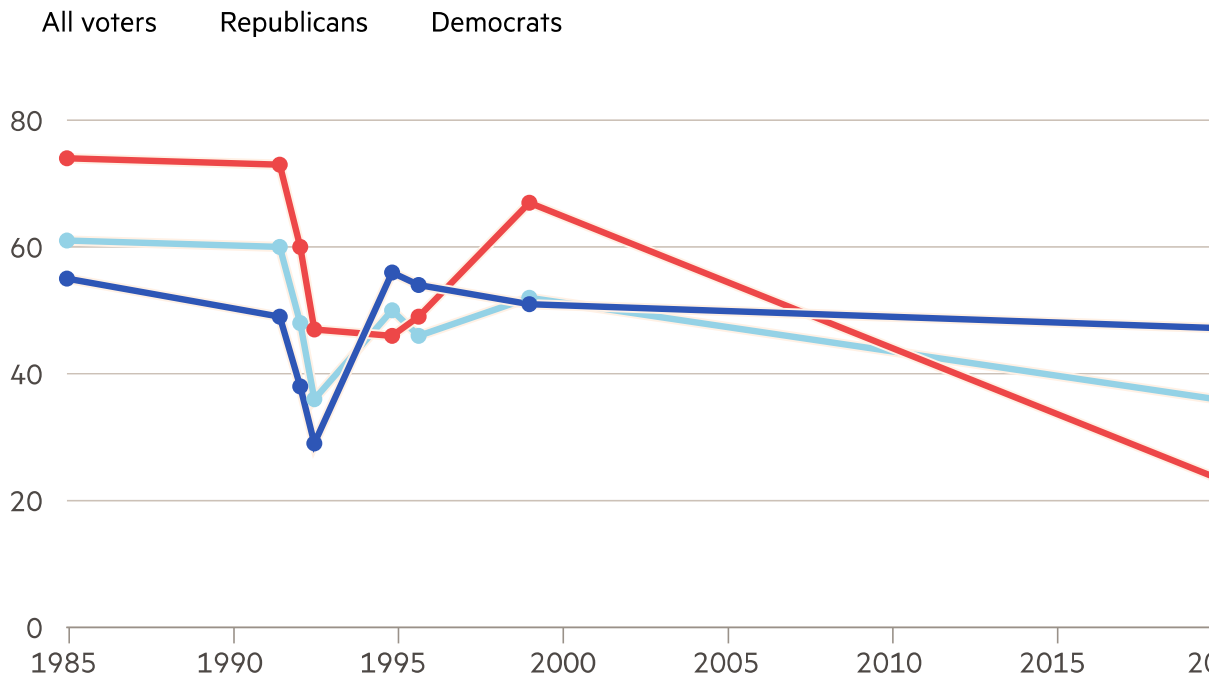
Martin Wolf YESTERDAY

Will US democracy survive Donald Trump's second presidency? This is not a theoretical question. It is evident that Trump is following a known playbook for turning a liberal democracy into an illiberal one. The latter is a label for a dictatorship — a regime in which decisions rest on the will of one person largely unaccountable to anybody else.

In [*The Spirit of Democracy*](#), Larry Diamond of Stanford argued that a liberal democracy consists of free and fair elections, protection of the civil and human rights of all citizens equally, and a rule of law that binds all citizens equally. These then are the “rules of the game”. But the effectiveness of those rules depends on constraints on those who temporarily control the state. The most important such constraints are the judiciary, political parties, bureaucracies and the media. The question is whether these will hold, first while Trump is president and then in the longer term.

Republicans have shown a relatively severe decline in satisfaction with democracy

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in this country? (% satisfied)



In a recent discussion in [The New Republic](#), Harvard's Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of [How Democracies Die](#), note that the classic process of “collective abdication” or “institutional suicide” in the face of an authoritarian takeover has already gone a long way. Trump has taken over the Republican party. His control over its electoral base has persuaded it to endorse the “big lie” [that he won the 2020 election](#). The Supreme Court has decided that a president is immune from criminal prosecution for his “official acts”, a doctrine that the British jurist Lord [Jonathan Sumption](#) insists puts the president above the law, and so in effect more like a king than a citizen. Not least, we already see powerful individuals, such as [Mark Zuckerberg](#), kneeling before their new ruler.

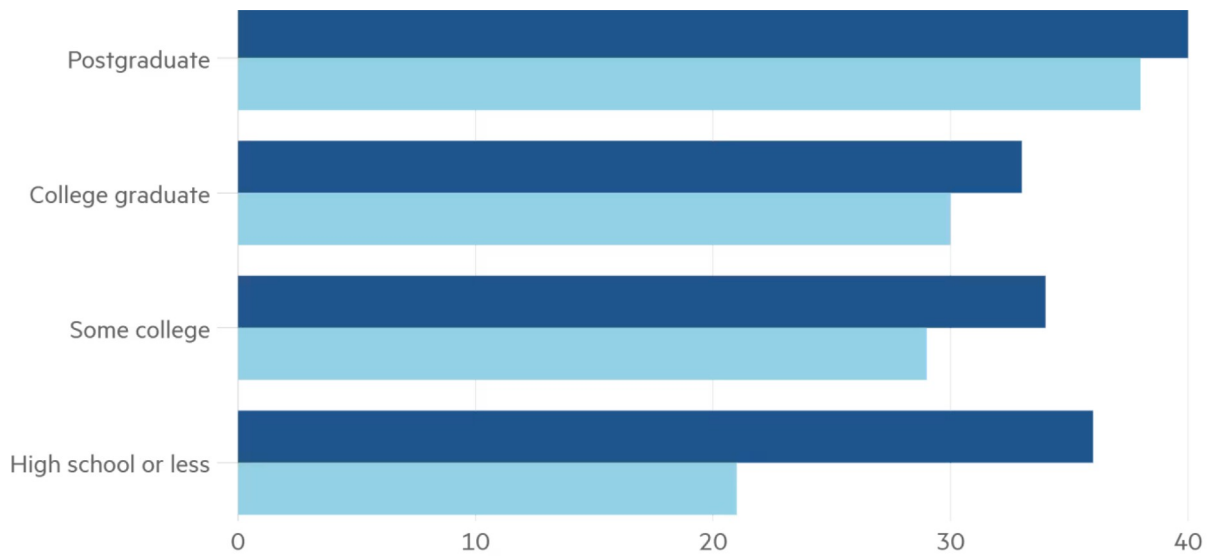
What are they frightened of? That the president will weaponise the machinery of the state against them. That is what he and the people around him intend to do. His nominations strongly suggest that. So, too, do plans for replacing bureaucrats with people loyal to Trump outlined in the Heritage Foundation's [“Project 2025”](#). Such loyalty would be a powerful weapon of autocracy. It would make the bureaucracy obedient to the president rather than to the laws they are required to implement.

Less-educated Americans have become disenchanted with US democracy

Satisfaction with US democracy by educational attainment (% satisfied)

■ 2021 ■ 2023



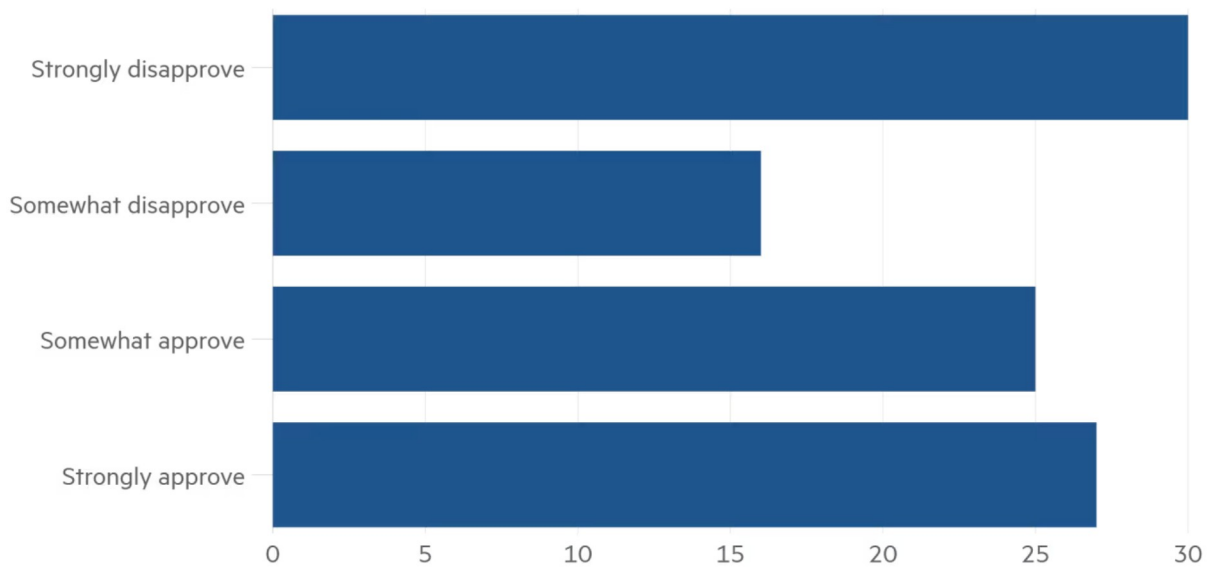


Source: Gallup

Timothy Snyder of Yale, an expert on 20th-century European totalitarianism, describes the nominations to head the health, justice and defence departments, as well as to head the intelligence services, [as a “decapitation strike”](#). This is partly because their likely incompetence and malevolence would do grave harm to the functioning of the state. It is also because the threat of politicising the federal government, including the law, against the [“enemy from within”](#) would do severe damage to democracy.

The US electorate is deeply divided over Trump's plans

Voters' opinion on the president-elect's policies and plans (%)



Survey on Nov 12-17 2024
Source: Pew Research Center

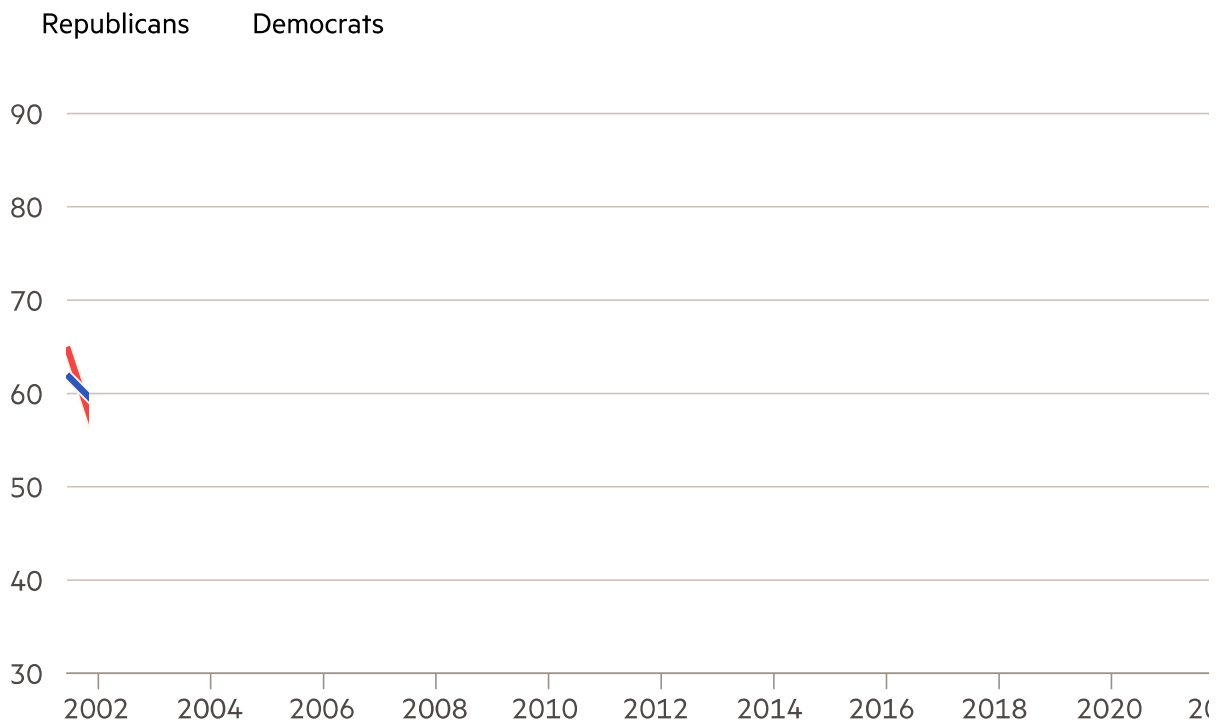
All these, add Levitsky and Ziblatt, are classic behaviours of would-be autocrats. They

come under the broad headings of “capturing referees” and “sidelining players”. Among the former would be further changes in the judiciary at all levels. Among the latter would be attacks of various kinds on independent media organisations, journalists, academic institutions and publishers.

Apart from all this, remember the central project of removing undocumented immigrants. This seems likely to bring many elements of the new approach together into one. Removing many millions of people would require a huge military operation, vast intrusions into state and local jurisdictions, the creation of large detention camps, suppression of protests and, not least, finding countries in which to dump displaced people.

Attitudes on immigration have diverged sharply over time

Support for immigration, by party affiliation (% saying immigration is a good thing)



FINANCIAL TIMES

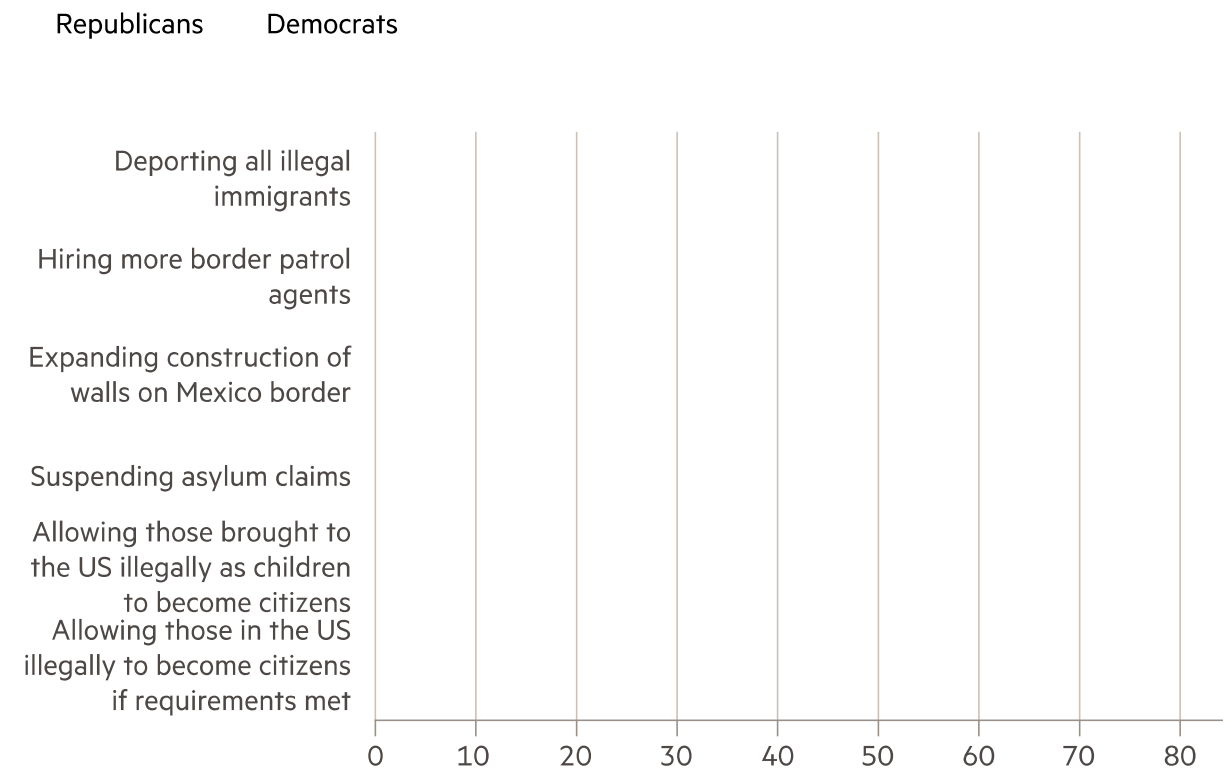
Source: Gallup

Could all this really happen? Maybe. But the combination of such disruption with what is also likely to be substantial economic turmoil could turn public opinion strongly against Trump, who has a [vote margin of only 1.5 percentage points](#) and has never been very popular. While he has passionate supporters, he also has passionate opponents. Moreover, if the constitution holds, he has only this term. In all, his hold

on public opinion and his party is likely to weaken from now. Trump's abilities as a populist demagogue are exceptional: it is likely that the party will find it impossible to discover a sufficiently charismatic replacement in 2028. His coalition is also showing signs of crumbling: Christian nationalists and nativists [are not natural bedfellows](#) of "tech plutocrats", such as Elon Musk.

There are huge divisions over immigration policies

Support for immigration policies, by party identification (%)



FINANCIAL TIMES

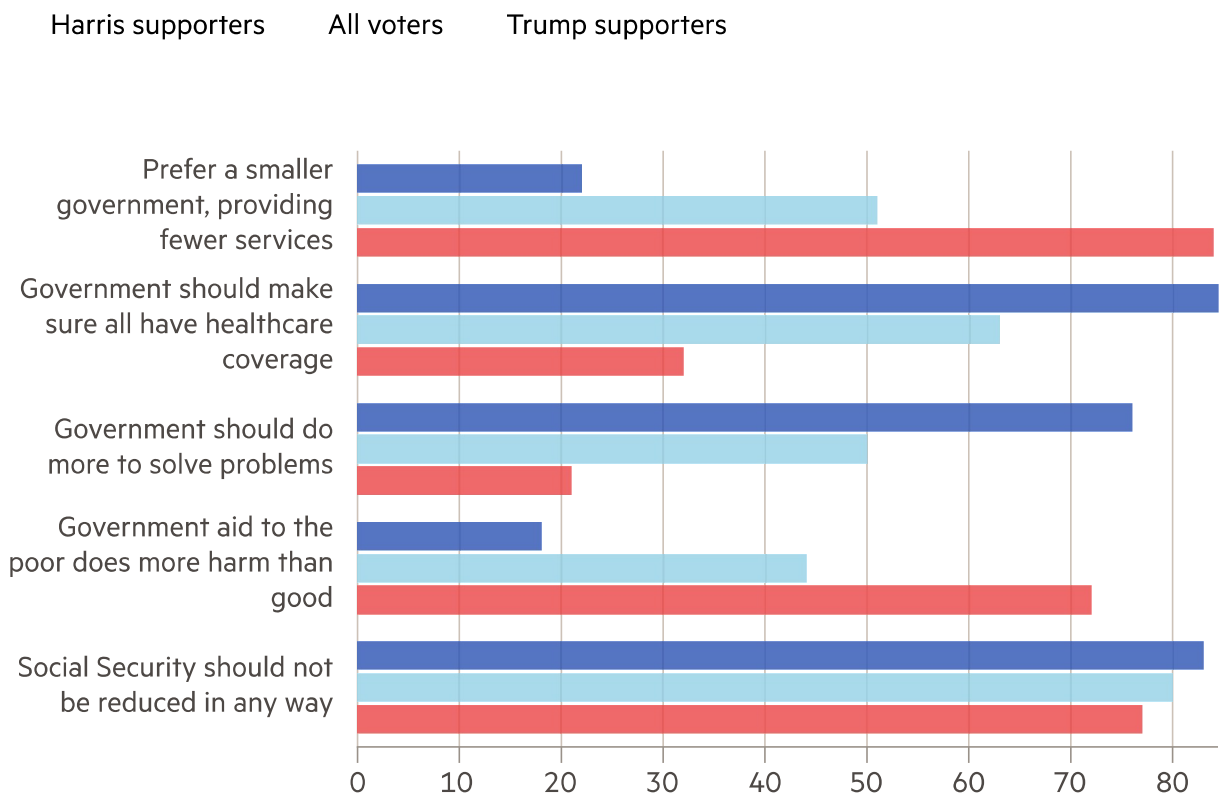
Source: Gallup • Survey in Jun 2024

It is quite possible then that any autocratic push by Trump will over-reach and create a powerful backlash, even among ordinary people. After all, the latter have not yet been affected by it. It will take courage for people to mobilise. But we must hope that the American people will not lightly abandon the liberal and enlightenment traditions of their country before the assaults of today's authoritarian and reactionary opponents. Yet it is now a deeply divided country, in which polls show that many Americans have already abandoned belief in their democracy. If that cannot be rectified, democracy itself may fail. (See charts.)

A crucial question now is how far the institutions of liberal democracy, in particular those governing elections, will survive. Many of Trump's henchmen, as well as Trump himself, will fear retribution for the "retribution" they seek to inflict. This gives them a huge incentive to rig the electoral rules of the game, with the assistance of the judiciary.

Social security is untouchable in American politics

% of registered voters who agree that



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: Pew Research Center • Pew surveys conducted Apr & Aug 2024

If they were to succeed in subverting US national elections, it might even be "game over". The global consequences of that would be devastating. Without the active engagement of a democratic US, the health of liberal democracy in the world would be in great peril.

[Benjamin Franklin famously](#) said that the US had "a republic if you can keep it". We might find out quite soon if it can.

martin.wolf@ft.com

Follow Martin Wolf with [myFT](#) and on [X](#)

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.
