

The US Republic, Trump and the Authoritarian Fear Mongering Club

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It's an oxymoron with a long history: American democracy. In referring to the United States, it does not exist. Nor does it take a follower of refrigerated communism to note the obvious point that democracy plays a small part in the processes of the US political system. It is a republic, with all the glorious, problematic and deep seated problems that term implies. Factions are held in check; neither must get too powerful. To ensure political, propertied stability, the worst side of human nature is to be guarded against. One way lies the rule of the mob; the other, the tyrant.

The conservative Heritage Foundation, in a [report](#) published in June 2020, reiterates the point. "America is a republic." It was never meant to be a "pure democracy". Issue is taken with various non-republican solutions which are becoming popular: Congressional-term limits; abandoning the Senatorial filibuster; inflating the number of Supreme Court justices; "developing more effective and immediate ways to express the will of the majority".

One initiative intended to shore up the democratic deficit has come in the proposal to circumvent or abolish the Electoral College, an idea that captured the imaginations of Senators Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii), Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y) in April last year. The Electoral College damns numerical voting majorities in favour of overly weighted college votes. The US republic has witnessed five instances when the popular vote did not carry the day: 2016, 2000, 1888, 1876 and 1824.

In introducing a constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College system, Senator Schatz [suggested](#) that "the person who gets the most votes should win. It's that simple." For Senator Durbin, "the Electoral College is a relic from a shameful period in our nation's history, and allows some votes to carry greater weight than others."

The issue of making elections more direct to popular voice is a debate worth having. But it is hard to imagine these senators being as enthusiastic to such reform had Hillary Clinton won the 2016 election for their party.

The creation of the US republic – by white, privileged land owners fearful of either a return to monarchy or the usurpation of democratic impulse – suggested the need for containment, neutralisation, the levelling out of factional interest. Extol the virtues of human nature; but ensure that such nature be contained by such doctrines as the separation of power. As James Madison wrote in the [tenth essay](#) of the *Federalist Papers* (1787), "Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction."

Such a background is instructive in debunking the false option available to US voters on November 3. One recurring theme here is that of democracy versus Trump. This was always a false opposition, and continues the libel against his supporters perpetrated with disastrous import by Hillary Clinton. (Never forget “the basket of deplorables”.) In the initial days after the 2016 presidential election, there were voices to be heard in San Francisco’s Castro District calling, not for more democracy but less: the disenfranchisement of ignorant voters who could let such a man have the keys to the White House. Early on, the seeds of the Russia canard was also sown, an attempt by a traumatised establishment to suggest that the man in the White House was nothing more than a puppet of the Kremlin. All of this served, at least for the Democrats and Trump’s critics, to distract from the weaknesses and problems that had imperilled their own political position. Losses can always be explained away by exogenous cause, a method of deflection Trump knows all too well.

During Trump’s time in office, the spectre of tyranny has not been realised. It was predicted by some conservatives and those of more progressive bent in the initial days of the presidency. Yes, the president has fiddled and courted external powers to assist his political efforts; attacked the fourth estate; mocked science and its high priests as a pandemic rages; embraced the odd conspiracy theory on the way; tampered with appointments. He has brought Twitter and Fox News into the White House. Reality television has become staple in a presidency that has, at times, resembled a grotesque caricature of power rather than power itself. But for all that, the optimistic might have much to say that the Republic, despite ailing, still has some fight in it.

This has not stopped commentary from the presidium of talking heads warning about Trump as the anti-democratic, even totalitarian figure, suggesting that a vote for Joe Biden is somehow more democratic, more decent and enlightened. On the eve of the US election, we have scholars of authoritarianism and fascism [signing a letter](#) with a less than subtle allusion to the president that democracy “is either withering or in full-scale collapse globally”. The scholars lament the passing of a golden era “in the years following the end of the Cold War,” when “democracy appeared to be flourishing everywhere”.

It does not make much time for the signers of the letter to get to the president. “Whether Donald J. Trump is a fascist, post-fascist populist, an autocrat, or just a bumbling opportunist, the danger to democracy did not arrive with his presidency and goes well beyond November 3rd, 2020.” It is admirable for the signatories to take the long view, though such language can come across as silly. For one, the scholars, having been so caught up with seeing authoritarianism everywhere, have probably neglected to identify the content of democracy with any precision. There is also surely a vast difference between terms such as “fascist” and a “bumbling opportunist” but labels in the academe can start to clot the mix of reason after a time.

In such cases, it becomes easy to adopt a didactic tone of warning. Mark Kenny of the Australian National University’s Australian Studies Institute [does just that](#), taking aim at the US voter. “A decisive rejection of Trumpism offers national redemption. His re-election, the opposite. In 2020, there will be no innocence and no buyer’s remorse.” The problem, as always with such assessments of Trump, is that this president was not responsible for the US republic’s banishment from Eden. There was never any innocence to take in the first place.

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