

What Lies Ahead? The Political Crisis for Post-Trump America

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The 2024 US presidential election has been billed as a fight for American democracy. It is an unwelcome rematch, a harbinger that American politics has been commandeered by the spectre of the populist right. The American political struggle of today is mirrored in Europe, in the recent tensions around the European Parliament elections and France's snap legislative elections called by Macron in their wake. The US election is, then, one of multiple ongoing struggles between populists seeking to disrupt the status quo, and establishment politics seeking to maintain institutional equilibrium. This is axiomatic of democratic politics in the 2020s.

Why American politics has succumbed to febrile partisanship seems part of a longer-term decline in the promise of its social contract, the mythologised American dream. The question is whether American democracy itself has become a wedge issue.^[1] This, it appears, is a casualty of social inequality and globalisation's impact on national identity and working incomes in the West.

The main contention in our roundtable is the red elephant in the room: namely, Donald Trump, the Republicans, the election's potential outcome and the fate of American democracy. The core debate among our authors is how far Trump is an aberration who is fundamentally changing America, through culture, voter expectation, changing policy norms and views of democracy itself, and whether his legacy will last.

But while attention is fixed on a potential Trump comeback, the next political crisis for America will be where to head after Trump. For this first contribution, I want to consider how political styles and vision will recover in the vacuum that Trump will leave. Both parties have become consumed by Trump, one eaten by Trumpism and

the other fated to fight against it. As for all of our contributions, discussing America's future after November is a task akin to reading tea leaves. My intervention here is less a prediction of American apocalypse and more one of a crisis of direction for America. Trump has disrupted the unified norms of the American public and has made questionable what the shape of its politics will be within the decade. Where America goes after Trump — whether the clock starts now or in four years' time — is an equivocal, blank space. This is in part precisely because Trump has consumed American public life, its airtime saturated by his image and imitable mannerisms, making the days of Obama a distant memory. This crisis in American political identity is part of a seminal shift, perhaps contingent on Trump but symptomatic of a wider crisis of Western liberal democracy. The recovery after Trump, whether now or in the future, will be the next crucial question for America.

Trumpism as a Political Project

Trump is a parody of Republicanism and George W. Bush's red meat pro-Americanism that has occurred first as farce and then as tragedy, to twist Marx. Trump is simply so American, embodying in a way stranger than fiction, the cultural phenotype of America. Perhaps this is why he commands an almost religious following, with internet memes caricaturing Trump as a muscle-ripped Captain America. However, to consider him Sarah Palin-plus confuses her red meat Tea Party Republicanism, which is protectionist and reactionary, with the iconoclasm of Trumpism. Trump is a mutation of Republicanism. His is a change in Republican vision and style, with a darker view of a tarnished American dream, which we glimpsed in Trump's dystopian 2017 inauguration speech.

Trump's rise is a crisis in American democracy. This is clear, whether you are his supporter or opponent. Love him or hate him, Trump arose because of a problem in American democracy, however much the left and right disagree whether he is rectifying or worsening that problem. Notwithstanding Democrats' bitterness about Comey's last-minute intervention about Clinton's emails in 2016 which, they argue, disadvantaged her in the election, they as well as Republicans acknowledge that discontent among a sufficient number of voters elected Trump and his politics.^[2] He is, as he puts it, "[their] voice." Trump is in this sense an agent of revolution. This is at the heart of the Trump political project, as an instinctive ideology comprising a vision of America based on abrasive exceptionalism and cultural anti-elitism. While his movement is in a sense a retaking of American democracy, it is simultaneously, in this way, a crisis.

This crisis manifests in, among other things, a Trumpist political style and vision, characteristic of the populist shift that is happening internationally. His rhetoric of a broken America and widespread disenchantment with the wealth divide in postindustrial America seems to resonate, in particular with the former industrial middle class. Trump is symptomatic of a populist movement creating a realignment in Western politics, where the character of politics has shifted to an anti-

establishment ethos. This simultaneous norm-disruption in Western liberal democracies within just a few years is a puzzle that all of us must continue to address. It suggests a structural shift in economic relations and social life due to technology, globalisation and migratory flows. There is also an unmistakable class warfare sublimated within the culturally-right, economically-left (at least in rhetoric) populism of 2016 onwards. We may well see not the end of this politics but its entrenchment into a less incipient form in Europe. Whether this is the beginning or end for Trumpism, as an American version of a global populism, is unclear. It seems, more acutely, a crisis within Western liberal democracy.

A key question for the post-Trump era will be the direction parties take after him, to rehabilitate or embed his vision. For Trump, communication and vision is the point, his cosmetic branding and communication having outsize importance, pointing in a direction of travel like a giant foam finger. The medium, as it were, is the message. From anti-immigration to trade protectionism, Trump's rhetoric is the end for speaker and audience alike. Trumpism is a cultural movement. It is for this reason Trump's egoism resonates with the public. He is, while mystifying to MSNBC pundits and BBC commentators, likeable to many in red state America, and even the UK.^[3]

How the two parties establish their political projects beyond opposing or supporting Trump will be the next challenge. As a measure of how great Trump's impact on American politics has been, consider how the Obama years seem distant, its polarisation tame by comparison. Where this leaves the parties' evolution is uncertain. It is clear they cannot go back. The American right will remain with a diluted brand of Trumpist populism, which took to the GOP host in 2016, or revitalise themselves by jettisoning Trumpist cultural politics around race and immigration. Whether American politics rehabilitates itself, or whether this is an epochal shift, a reconfiguration of the right-left divide, will be answered in the coming years, whether in November 2024 or 2028.

A lot has happened since the Trump trials. The prospects of a Trump victory are now significantly less favourable than they were in early 2024. Trump's conviction on 34 counts, with sentencing pending at the time of writing^[4], is an unknown quantity, likely to garner sympathy in some quarters but deter floating voters, including the famous Obama-Trump voter. Most significantly, Biden's exit has created an unexpected momentum for Harris and the Democrats. Contrary to Democrats' disquiet, Biden's departure has strengthened the party's position, having been behind in the polls in June 2024 and become an increasing political liability for the Democrats.^[5] Harris' "brat summer" shows an ability to reach young voters, while Walz may draw out rustbelt voters. Following Harris' entry in the race, Trump fatigue may have finally started to set in. That said, her reach to voters beyond progressive voters may be limited. By contrast, Trump has an endless relevance to America, and appeal to voters' imaginations and hungry news cycles alike. Should Harris win, Trump is likely to stick around and continue to dominate

American politics. Another presidential run may be less likely, as Trump's legal woes give the GOP's anti-Trump wing the opportunity to eject him on grounds of unelectability, which will be more effective than the moral grounds of Never Trumpers. Not only that, Trump is likely to be a casualty of his own celebrity, stuck in the entertainment news lifecycle in which celebrity brands inevitably have a shelf-life and are prone to infamy and irrelevance in a relatively short period. Regardless of the manner or point of its end, there will be a post-Trump America. The question is what it will look like and what the challenge will be for the parties in the medium-term.

The Next Crisis after Trump: An Unclear Direction for the Parties

The post-Trump political challenge to both parties will be to renew their political projects. To go back, as it were, they must go forward. While both parties may breathe a sigh of relief at Trump's departure, his politics is likely to remain in play, at least for a segment of the electorate in swing seats. In each case, the Democratic and Republican parties are left with the suboptimal scenario of dictating the other's fortunes more than they would like, not least since Trump has dictated the fortunes of them both. This may complicate their mid-term planning, ideologically, in policy and stylistically. Both the Democrats and GOP are left with a rhetorical and philosophical vacuum created by Trump. His absorption of US politics into his style and vision has meant meaningful political development of a vision outside of Trump has stalled since 2016. The crisis for the parties will be how to reorient themselves and whether to treat populism with a kind or harsh eye when Trump departs the political stage.

How the GOP rehabilitates itself is the first question. Having been captured by Trumpism, the GOP will have a difficult road out of it, unable to feed the Trumpist appetite in the party base without a candidate Trump, but with difficulties rehabilitating it due to the support Trumpism has gained in the base and sections of Congress. Trump has found and reinforced new consistencies on the social right, and taken the social right more seriously than predecessors, providing them with the red meat of the Dobbs ruling. Trump may continue running as long as he is able, and an ideological split within the GOP is likely. Republicans stuck with Trump for as long as Trump was a voter winner; without this, he is in peril, both in terms of his hegemony over the GOP and his personal fortunes. Liz Cheney, by contrast, has set up a viable stall for a future run as president, and, after Kamala Harris, is the most likely first Madame President of the United States.

Will Trump's brand of populism be resuscitated by the GOP after Trump? He has developed a populist style which has become a familiar flavour to voters. The success of any future populist is likely to be limited, as it requires a peculiar skill set, as we saw with the failed DeSantis bid for the GOP presidential nomination. Attempts to imitate Trump's political style show he is an unusual communicator and,

to this extent, perhaps an aberration, with another populist less likely to succeed on his scale.

The Democratic Party is also stuck in a cul de sac, pushed by the Trumpist threat to plan short-term and, in so doing, failing to rejuvenate the party post-Obama. The media speculation about Biden's decreasing fitness was a symptom of this failure for effective mid-term planning and his botched plan to hand over after one term. The Biden era has been a sticking plaster solution to the problem of Trumpism, proof of which was found in Biden's increasingly low credibility. Obama's coalition has effectively fallen apart, with Trump himself a wedge issue. A new political project that provides an optimistic vision for America is lacking after the attrition of the Trump years. What is more, 'hope and change' is less saleable today. Public appetites may be set in the 'half empty' politics of populism, an anti-elitism that simply elects new elites, with a rudderless class politics in the mix that bears some resemblance to a classic left-wing economics but which gave its blessing to a tax cut for Americans with top incomes under Trump in 2017, and which seems to reject social egalitarianism.

How the Democrats renew their project with a new political leader, vision and style is uncertain. The equivalent of a new Obama revolution is unlikely, with low trust in the 2024 political ecosystem compared to that of 2008, even during a financial crisis. Paradoxically, what the Trump voter wants is a kind of socialist revolution laced with red meat social conservatism that advances nationalism and opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. Such a new political alliance is found across the Western democracies and may herald a political realignment that may not evaporate with the end of Trump's political career. This might be why the direction for the GOP especially is unclear. The Bernie Trump voter is a phenomenon. Both the left and right-wing voter bases are rethinking American capitalism and neoconservatism. The Bush Doctrine, post-hanging chad 2000-era America seems gone. We are, in this sense, in a new political epoch.

The challenges for both parties in this polarising environment is that both want to pull in opposite directions economically and socially, when a more counterintuitive combination appeals to a segment of the electorate. The direction of travel for the Democrats is toward a socially and economically progressive position that appeals to the young but alienates older voters, while Trumpism rhetorically advocates a New Deal era economic protectionism for the working class mixed with the politics of corpocracy. Both mythologise the Rooseveltian era and manage the problems of labour, lost confidence and nostalgia for a more stable time in different ways.

Worsening polarisation may continue. Whether the GOP reorients its position on immigration and race will depend on whether it is attracted to expand its voter base in pastures new. For now, in presidential elections, key battleground and red states with healthy electoral college votes remain in play for the Republican candidate. Such red states may turn purple in some years' time (particularly Texas, which will

move from 38 electoral college votes in 2020 to 40 in the 2024 and 2028 presidential races, based on allocations for the 2020 census^[6]). If the economic and social conditions that produced Trump continue and exacerbate the populist internal damage to democracies, with a worst-case scenario of backsliding, this politics may continue to attract supporters. How the right and left political projects renew themselves with respect to populism and its ethos of anti-institutional, anti-elite politics will be contingent on this.

The Trump saga is a wider story about the pressure that Western democracy is coming under, seen widely to have broken the social contract and unable to deliver the efficiency that rising Eastern authoritarianisms claim to. Such a trajectory is concerning for the social health of American society – and is a bellwether of an international shift among voters against a centrist, neoliberal, technocratic approach to democracy that has let the market determine social equality, in favour of an emotional, iconoclastic revolt that combines a desire for unreconstructed proletarian revolution with the ersatz comfort of social conservatism. It is likely we are living through a democratic crisis and it will be necessary to respond to this petition for change productively, to rearticulate a vision for democracy and the social contract in a globalising world. In short, to address the concerns that led to Trump, where this is reasonable and possible.

Heading into a post-Trump America, we will be left with the question of whether it will inherit a new, reconstituted America, whether Trump has remade the GOP and American politicians, and whether American democracy will survive, decline or be renewed post-Trump.

Not with a Bang but with a Whimper: The Vacuum of Post-Trump America

This is how the Trump era is likely to end: by presenting a challenge about America's political direction. The most likely risk is not the perceived Armageddon of a second Trump term but the mid-term crises in both parties and the longer-term disillusionment and populist house style that Trump has cultivated. There is a wider crisis implicated in this, about how populism will continue to impact American politics and democracies around the world. The United States is experiencing an interregnum characterised by a crisis of identity and uncertain direction for both the Democrats and Republicans, symptomatic of this wider change.

Trumpism has torn asunder prior political visions for America. This will be the next challenge for political projects of the parties. This is the longer term impact of Trump. A second Trump term may create institutional rot. Even notwithstanding this possibility, he has reprogrammed the American electorate on his terms, to be receptive to his manner of politics. The GOP will continue to be mired in Trumpism for some time, while the Democratic Party will be freed of its anti-Trump *raison d'être* but could be stuck in a purgatory, having focused on opposing Trumpism and consequently failing to rejuvenate itself after Obama. While Harris has partially filled

that vacuum and while she is attracting new support among the young, her longevity remains to be seen and her candidacy is ostensibly an effort to rebuild the Obama and Clinton programmes. This may be insufficient to revitalise the party and country in the 2020s. We may see a vacuum in both parties, and the general cultural fractiousness of the Trump years continue. While it could be a close call for the American polity, it is likely that the Trump story will end in an underwhelming and ambivalent place. There will be a need for a meaningful political project to address the causes of Trump – namely, democratic disillusionment, its origins in the broken social contract and the sense of a collapsed American dream. This is the same project European liberal capitalist democracies are facing, with the latest populist upsurge by Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National in France and the far-right parties in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups in the European parliamentary elections in summer 2024. This is part of a broader challenge for liberal democracy, and its ability to cope with globalisation, digitisation and their social externalities.

An immediate crisis has been averted by Biden's departure. The emergence of Kamala Harris has added a newfound optimism to a progressive bloc that seemed palled in pessimism prior to her arrival. Should Harris be elected, this may create a renewal of a kind. This optimism, however, may be superficial and in its rudiments perhaps unable to address the causes of Trumpism. It remains unclear how far Harris is associated in floating voters' minds with the corporate Clinton style that apparently cost her the election in 2016. Most tellingly, Harris' progressivism remains fixed in an anti-Trump space and seems to lack a larger vision. The question of the lifespan and appeal of Trump-style populism, with its characteristics of reactionary social conservatism, distrust in institutions and an apparent flirting interest in authoritarian solutions, remains undiminished. More seriously, the problems that catalysed his politics remain. What Trump has also catalysed is an explicit opposition to deindustrialisation among the American working class, although refracted through reactionary cultural politics and lacking a meaningful pragmatic agenda. The problem may continue if Democrats fight the Trumpist symptom in a way that perpetuates the problem; if, in other words, anti-Trumpism becomes the Democrat cause and addressing the causes of polarisation and the populist swing are neglected. That anti-Trumpism among Democrats has in many ways become the panacea for progressive unity. While it has prompted younger progressives into action on social justice, it has paradoxically diminished its wider programme, which has stalled since the end of the Obama administration. Should Kamala Harris triumph, she will certainly alter American politics forever. The historical trends around democratic discontent, however, must not be underestimated. Whether the Democrats have begun their reincarnation, or will maintain a kind of stasis, is still up for debate.

Trump has changed American democracy. Its contours going forward are hard to determine, beyond an immediate existential crisis. The future after November could be one caught between an unsatisfactory stasis and a period of turbulent transition

into renewal for both parties. The story is, in this sense, not over with Trump. The question remains whether we are in a longer-term crisis for democracy, no longer the system associated with wealth and power. America's handling of their iteration of this crisis is a forerunner in that wider story.

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[1] With Trump and many in the Republican Party challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election result and evidence of the Trump base's increasing distrust in a system that both parties historically imbued with sacred significance in its nation's Constitution.

[2] James Comey announced his decision to re-open the FBI's investigation of Hilary Clinton's emails eleven days prior to the US presidential election day in 2016.

[3] With Nigel Farage, now leader of Reform UK, pledging his support to Trump's campaign before reversing that decision to pursue the parliamentary seat for Clacton in the UK general election in July 2024.

[4] Orden, E. (2024). 'Trump's sentencing in New York delayed until Sept. 18', Politico (2 July), < <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/07/02/trump-sentencing-delayed-new-york-00166303>> [last accessed 8 September 2024].

[5] FiveThirtyEight, 'Who's ahead in the national polls?', <<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/2024/national/>> [last accessed 15 June 2024].

[6] 'Electoral College', National Archives <<https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/allocation>> [last accessed 8 September 2024]. For historical trends in electoral college vote allocations, see also 'State Electoral Vote History', 270 to Win <<https://www.270twin.com/state-electoral-vote-history/>> [last accessed 8 September 2024].