

America's Crisis of Democracy

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THE UNITED STATES HAS LONG BEEN a beacon of democracy for the entire world. But whether that will continue in future years—indeed, whether it is even true now—is very much in question. The nation has entered a treacherous new era in its history, one that threatens the system of self-government that for more than 200 years has defined who we are as a country and as a people.

The most visible embodiment of this threat is Donald Trump. His surprise victory in 2016 was a watershed in American history, vesting the presidency in a populist demagogue whose authoritarian inclinations and disdain for the rule of law signaled that serious troubles lay ahead. Those signals have been borne out. As president, he used—and abused—the vast powers of his office to attack the nation's institutions, violate its democratic norms, and act as a strongman leader unconstrained by law and convention. His two separate impeachments by the House of Representatives were damning formal rebukes that he richly deserved.

Yet Trump himself is not the main reason America faces such troubled times. He is a symptom of powerful socioeconomic forces unleashed by modernity—forces that have disrupted lives and politics throughout the developed West and generated an upsurge in support for right-wing

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populist leaders, whose rhetoric is all about “the people” but whose actions are often antidemocratic. In the United States, these social forces were at work but little appreciated before Trump’s electoral victory in 2016. They will still be powerful—and deeply threatening—after his defeat in 2020, even if his Democratic successor manages to restore a sense of normalcy.

The fact is, no matter which party holds the presidency, these are not normal times. They are populist times, antidemocratic times. And a sense of normalcy, should it take hold with the election of a new president, stands to be little more than an exercise in denial, offering temporary relief from the recent populist turmoil but leaving the causes of that turmoil unaddressed and the potential for continued democratic backsliding firmly in place.

If American democracy is to be preserved, two things need to happen. First, the nation needs to see this crisis for what it is and understand why it came about and what its trajectory is likely to be. Second, it needs to use this understanding as a foundation for figuring out what can be done to defuse the populist threat through targeted reforms and policies.

Our analysis is directed at both these imperatives. It is an effort to understand America’s crisis of democracy, and it is an effort to determine what can be done to resolve it. We don’t claim to have all the answers. But we do think that by cutting through the fog of complexities surrounding this time of crisis, we can clarify what is actually going on and connect the dots in a way that highlights the fundamentals.

A POPULIST CAPTURES THE PRESIDENCY

Let’s begin by asking how a populist demagogue got himself elected president of the United States.

A big part of the answer is that, since the 1970s or so, the world has been disrupted by relentless forces of globalization, technological change, and immigration—along with, in advanced Western economies, a prolonged period of slow economic growth, low productivity, and government austerity. In the United States, these developments have been accompanied by a sharp decline in manufacturing jobs, a hollowing out of the middle class, a stagnation in family income, a steep rise in inequality, growing social and racial diversity, and a surge in the number of undocumented residents. As the 2016 election approached, the effects on many Americans were accumulating, and they were gaining in political salience.

Those most affected were less-educated working-class whites, often rural and particularly men: people who had previously been relatively satisfied with their status and opportunities in American society but who no longer felt that way. They were angry with a system that seemed stacked against them. They were angry with the establishment that ran it—from the elites in both parties to the experts who claimed to know everything to the financial wizards on Wall Street. And they were anxious about the impending loss of their privilege and culture as American society became more diverse, urban, cosmopolitan, and secular—an anxiety that only intensified during the eight-year term of America's first black president. Donald Trump tapped into this cauldron of anger and anxiety and presented himself as the agent of their discontent.¹

Trump won over these “forgotten” Americans by campaigning as a populist demagogue. He portrayed the nation as a dark and fearful place from which only he, as the antisystem strongman, could offer deliverance. He played upon racial and ethnic prejudices. He trafficked in conspiracy theories. He demonized immigrants, Muslims, and the nation's black sitting president. He blamed other countries for America's economic woes. He blasted the political and economic establishment as illegitimate. He praised Vladimir Putin and other autocrats. He belittled and threatened the media, ridiculing all sources of information he didn't like. He demanded that his opponent, Hillary Clinton, be thrown in jail and made that a rallying cry among his supporters (“Lock her up, lock her up!”).²

Among U.S. presidents, Trump's style of leadership was unique. But in larger context, there was nothing unique about it. Populists have come to power in many countries, and their style of leadership is familiar and well

¹On the socioeconomic forces driving populism and Trump's victory, see William Galston, *Antipluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Clash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Diana Mutz, “Status, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (2018): E4330–E4339; Will Wilkinson, *The Density Divide: Urbanization, Polarization, and Populist Backlash* (Washington, DC: Niskanen Center, 2019); and David Autor, David Dorn, Gordon Hanson, and Kaveh Majlesi, “A Note on the Effect of Rising Trade Exposure on the 2016 Presidential Election” (working paper, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, revised January 2017), accessed at <https://economics.mit.edu/files/12418>, 22 December 2020.

²David Frum, *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (New York: Harper, 2018); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Clash*; and Eric A. Posner, *The Demagogue's Playbook: The Battle for American Democracy from the Founders to Trump* (New York: All Points Books, 2020).

tested. Trump followed in the footsteps of Argentina's Juan Perón, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, and many other populist demagogues around the world—including, in the United States, Huey Long and George Wallace. There is a common political logic to how all these populists behave, the nature of their public appeals, and the demeaning, offensive, and threatening things they say. Trump simply did what the others have done. He followed a formula that works.³

As we've said, Trump's political ascendance is partly explained by socioeconomic forces that have proved culturally threatening and economically harmful to a large swath of the American population. But the explanation has a second part that is just as important: as these forces relentlessly took their toll on the lives and emotions of struggling Americans over a period of decades, *the government didn't have an effective response*. It had plenty of time. It had genuine options. Rather than taking concerted action to deal with the increasingly severe problems of modern American society, however, the government let the desperation and the anger fester.

Millions of distressed people would have benefited or felt more secure had the government committed itself to reforming and controlling immigration, reducing economic inequality, opening up new job opportunities, enhancing training in higher-level skills, providing health insurance, supplementing incomes, subsidizing child care, and much more, in order to address the cultural anxieties and economic needs of a large sector of society desperate for help. But the government did not step up to meet the challenge.

This is not to say it did nothing. The government has countless agencies, programs, subsidies, and tax mechanisms that, on the surface, might seem to address the issues we just mentioned. These efforts, however, have typically been weak and ineffective. As a result, the problems have intensified, people have grown angry, and populist appeals have found a receptive audience.

³On populist demagogues, see Posner, *The Demagogue's Playbook*; Michael Signer, *Demagogue: The Fight to Save Democracy from Its Worst Enemies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016); Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); and Karsten Grabow and Florian Hartleb, eds., *Exposing the Demagogues: Right-Wing and National Populist Parties in Europe* (Brussels: Center for European Studies, 2013).

THE PROBLEM OF INEFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

Why did the government fail to meet the challenges of modernity? It isn't just that policy makers didn't grasp what was going on, or that they didn't dedicate themselves to finding the right policies, or that they were too polarized to agree on a course of action, or that money corrupted American politics. There is truth to each of these notions, and they help to explain the government's failure. But there is also a deeper explanation of great consequence.

The deeper explanation is that American government is profoundly ineffective across virtually all realms of public policy, not just those we're talking about here,⁴ and that these problems of governance are built into the very structure of the system itself. As we've argued at length in our recent book, *Relic*, they trace back to the Constitution and are a product of the Framers' original design.⁵

Upon reflection, this shouldn't be too surprising. The Framers crafted a government some 230 years ago for a simple, isolated agrarian society of fewer than four million people, nearly all of them farmers. Government was not expected to do much, and the Framers purposely designed one that couldn't do much, dividing authority across the branches and creating veto points, rules, and procedures that made coherent policy action exceedingly difficult. Compounding matters, they put a bicameral Congress at the center of the lawmaking process, and they designed it in such a way that legislators would be electorally tied to their local jurisdictions and highly responsive to special interests. As a result, Congress is simply not wired to solve national problems in the national interest. It is wired to allow hundreds of entrepreneurial legislators to promote their own political welfare through special-interest politics, which is what they regularly do (when they do anything at all).

This approach to governance may have been fine for the late 1700s. But it is incapable of dealing with the vexing problems that weigh upon the nation today: the job loss and displacement caused by automation, unmanaged immigration, terrorism, inadequate health care, pollution and climate change, inequality, poverty, crumbling infrastructure, the

⁴For extensive documentary evidence on the ineffectiveness of American government—not just currently but throughout its history—see Peter H. Schuck, *Why Government Fails So Often: And How It Can Do Better* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). See also Clifford Winston, *Government Failure versus Market Failure: Microeconomic Policy Research and Government Performance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006); Jonathan Rauch, *Government's End: Why Washington Stopped Working* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 1999); and Derek Bok, *The Trouble with Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁵William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, *Relic: How the Constitution Undermines Effective Government—and Why We Need a More Powerful Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

opioid crisis, the decimation of communities, and the recent coronavirus pandemic. What modern America needs—and what most Americans demand—is a government that can meet the challenges of the modern world. But because generations of politicians have failed to reform and update our antiquated institutions, what it has is a government designed for a primitive world nothing like our own.

If the United States had a government that was institutionally well equipped to deal with the problems of modern times, Donald Trump would never have been elected president, and our historical course would have evolved in a far more positive way. For decades, however, as powerful new socioeconomic forces disrupted our society, government failed to meet the challenge, and many Americans—particularly less-educated whites—grew increasingly alienated from a government that didn't meet their needs or even seem to care. Government became a hulking object of derision and distrust, and for many Donald Trump delivered a long-overdue repudiation. His rise to the presidency was fueled by the ineffectiveness of American government and all the anger, anxiety, and resentment left in its wake.

Again, what happened here is not unique. The historical rise to power of Juan Perón, Hugo Chávez, and almost every other populist demagogue was propelled by public grievances about governmental systems that failed to address poverty, inequality, corruption, and other very real social ailments. These are the basic conditions that allow demagogues to seek power as defiant strongmen who would forge direct links to the people, circumvent existing institutions, and reject the encumbrances of democracy's laws, norms, and procedures.⁶

Populists don't just feed on socioeconomic discontent. They feed on ineffective government—and their great appeal is that they claim to replace it with a government that *is* effective through their own autocratic power. This generic formula was precisely what Trump followed in the 2016 election.

POPULISM

In everyday language, populism is often associated with leaders or movements that speak for society's least well-off. Populists stand up for the little guy. Populists want to tax the rich. Populists want to redistribute income to the poor. Populists want to provide a vast array of social services to those in need. Populists fight for social equality. From this perspective, then, populism resonates with people whose ideologies

⁶Judis, *Populist Explosion*; and Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*.

are left of center, and it captures much of what the Democrats claimed to champion for most of the postwar era, when social class was such a powerful determinant of partisanship and voting.

This is a familiar way of thinking about populism,⁷ but it doesn't square with recent scholarship on the subject. There is a growing research literature on populism, and it's fair to say that while scholars don't precisely agree on a single definition (no surprise), they do substantially agree on certain core elements that make populism what it is.⁸ These elements are dangerous and antidemocratic. The history and real-world experience of populism isn't about noble struggles to bring about a more equitable democratic society. It's about power and disruption—and often, about bringing democracy down.⁹

Populism is as old as democracy itself. In ancient Athens, thinkers of the age recognized that their novel system of democratic self-governance lived in constant danger—because by its very nature, in allowing the masses to freely choose their own leaders, it contained the seeds of its own destruction. Particularly in times of stressful social conditions that governments struggled to manage, the voting masses were vulnerable to rabble-rousing, power-seeking demagogues who claimed to speak for “the people” against established elites and institutions. And those populist demagogues, once elected, were inclined to concentrate power in their own hands and subvert the democratic rules and rights that invariably obstructed their exercise of power. They would use democracy to destroy democracy. Such destructive chains of events, moreover, were not just theoretical possibilities. They actually happened, multiple times, as demagogues emerged—Cleon being the most notorious—to stir up the masses against the existing system and bring Athenian democracy to its knees.

With the proliferation of democracies around the world, the past century has furnished ample evidence that the Athenians were right to see the problem as endemic. Democracy does contain the seeds of its own destruction. And its destruction has happened, or come close to happening, again and again. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini were demagogues who rose to power within democratic systems based on populist

⁷See, for example, Paul Krugman, “Why Isn’t Trump a Real Populist?” *New York Times*, 17 June 2019.

⁸For a nice review, see Nadia Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (May 2019): 111–127. See also Posner, *The Demagogue’s Playbook*; Judis, *Populist Explosion*; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*; Muller, *What Is Populism?*; and Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Clash*.

⁹Here and throughout this section, see Signer, *Demagogue*; Galston, *Anti-pluralism*; Judis, *Populist Explosion*; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*; Muller, *What Is Populism?*; Mounk, *People vs. Democracy*; and Grabow and Hartleb, *Exposing the Demagogues*.

appeals and overthrew their democracies to establish fascist states. The nations of Latin America, struggling to establish stable democracies, have suffered from countless populist leaders over the decades who promised to address the critical needs of “the people” but, upon election, used their positions to amass power, feather their own nests, and undermine democracy. In the decades after World War II, the advanced democracies of the West seemed to be immune to the threat of populism—until they suddenly weren’t, as the powerful socioeconomic changes of the late twentieth century generated massive social disruptions, and populist leaders emerged to head dangerous movements of discontent and anger. Donald Trump is just one of these antidemocratic leaders. What is happening, historically and worldwide, is much bigger than his capturing of the American presidency.

As Yascha Mounk has noted, “while populists tailor the identity of the betrayed majority and the despised minority to the needs of their local context, the basic rhetorical structure is strikingly similar everywhere in the world.”¹⁰ The essence of populism is a rhetorical framing of democratic politics as an apocalyptic battle of “the people” against “the system.” “The people”—which consists not of everyone, but of an angry segment of the population anointed by its populist leader as the embodiment of the nation’s heritage and identity (e.g., white Christians)—is upheld as the sole legitimate source of political authority, with the leader channeling and innately knowing its interests and demands. “The system” is essentially the entire status quo: its democratic institutions, the elected representatives and bureaucrats and experts in charge, the established political parties, and the mainstream media—all of which are castigated as corrupt, unresponsive, morally reprehensible, and democratically illegitimate.

Different populist leaders brand themselves in different ways. Left-wing populists champion the interests of the poor and excoriate the corruption and injustices perpetrated by the rich. Right-wing populists uphold the “true” paragons of a nation’s character and heritage and condemn immigrants, professional elites, deviants from traditional sexual morality, and the liberal intelligentsia. It’s important, though, not to dwell too much on these distinctions. No matter their political orientation, all populists assume a decidedly oppositional stance against an existing political system that, in their view, has betrayed its people. In the most sweeping terms, all populists decry the rot and corruption of con-

¹⁰Mounk, *People vs. Democracy*.

temporary democratic politics and the injustices perpetrated by those in power. All populists derive sustenance and meaning less from advancing a constructive agenda of problem-solving programs and institution building, and more from channeling the anger and outrage of a people against a failed political order.

To its very core, then, populism is on a mission of mobilization, assault, and destruction. It has no positive agenda, no ideology of either the Left or the Right that points to a coherent set of policies for meeting citizens' needs or reinvigorating democracy. Its leaders do not need to believe in anything at all except winning and wielding power, and their *modus operandi* is much the same everywhere. They whip up mass support through emotional appeals and scapegoating, by demonizing the "other" (here in the United States: nonwhites, non-Christians, immigrants), and through strategies designed to foment fear, insecurity, outrage, and anger. Their single greatest enemy is "the system," and they do everything they can to weaken and delegitimize existing institutions and established elites.

Note that while Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren are populists in the common-language sense of the term, they are not populists as we use the term here. Certain features of their politics do fit the bill; both, for example, focus on neglected Americans, offer deep critiques of the existing political order, and favor upending aspects of public policy. But Sanders and Warren have positive, well-defined policy platforms aimed at solving social problems and building new programs. And they are active defenders of democratic norms and procedures, the press, the judiciary, and individual rights.

We should also emphasize that authoritarianism is not the same as populism. Russia's Vladimir Putin is an authoritarian, not a populist. So is China's Xi Jinping. That said, authoritarian values are all too prevalent among the citizens of democratic nations, including the United States, and these values fuel support for populist movements. Populism thrives on heavy doses of authoritarianism, and it is no accident that a key feature of populist leadership is autocratic rule. The rhetoric of populism is all about democracy and "the people." But while populist leaders use the masses to win elected power, they often exercise power as strongmen, cheered on by a populist base that applauds their every attack on the existing political order and the democratic institutions that define it.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart make the point well: "The populist words of parties such as the French National Front, the Swedish Democrats, or Poland's Law and Justice—and leaders such as Orbán,

Berlusconi, and Trump—are the external patina disguising authoritarian practices. It is the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric which we regard as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy.”¹¹

INEFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT AS A PROBLEM IGNORED

What can be done to safeguard American democracy? The brute fact is that the socioeconomic forces now pounding the modern era and driving the populist rage are not destined to evaporate, and they cannot be stopped. Trump and other populists promise a return to the more sequestered, more homogeneous, and presumptively calmer conditions that prevailed many decades ago. Their promise is false. Nothing can be done to halt globalization or technological innovation or to undo cultural diversity. The past they imagine is gone. The forces of disruption will continue.

If the populist threat is to be defused, then, the focus needs to be on the other key condition that has fueled its rise: ineffective government. American democracy *can* be saved and made more secure, but the challenge of making that happen is the challenge of building a more effective government. Going forward, institutional reform is the key challenge of our times, and the nation’s success at meeting it will determine our future as a democratic nation.

As things now stand, the work of building a more effective government is nowhere on the public agenda. Nor is it a matter of serious public discussion. Scholars, meanwhile, have paid little attention to it. The dawning of the Trump era in the United States, along with the surge of populism in other Western democracies, has yielded a lively body of scholarship that illuminates and clarifies the tumultuous new politics of our times. Already, much has been learned—about populism, about its cultural and economic drivers, about white identity and rural resentment, about authoritarian values, about “how democracies die,” and much more.¹² But this new literature is a work in progress, and its various

¹¹Norris and Inglehart, *Clash*, 316.

¹²See our earlier citations on populism. See also Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*; Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); David Bateman, *Disenfranchising Democracy: Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman, *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2020); Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Mathew Graham and Milan Svolic, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114 (May 2020): 392–409; Robert Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, “Democratic Decline in the United

contributions grapple with wide-ranging issues so numerous and complex that, here too, attention has not centered on the pivotal importance of effective government—and thus the need for developing an institutional capacity for effective performance—in combating the populist threat to democracy.

MAKING AMERICAN GOVERNMENT MORE EFFECTIVE

If the nation's historic crisis is to be overcome, the connection between populism and ineffective government must be appreciated, and something must be done about it. What is a sensible path forward? The United States clearly isn't going to adopt a parliamentary system or any other radically different mode of governance. So the question is, How might our existing institutional arrangements be modified to yield a government with a greater capacity for effective performance?

The nation's experience with Donald Trump might seem to point to an obvious answer: what America needs, above all else, is more protection against presidential power. Trump has brazenly abused the formal powers of the presidency in ways that endanger democracy and the rule of law. If institutional reforms are to be pursued, it might seem that the first order of business is to insist on additional formal constraints on the presidency—constraints that weaken presidential power—to make sure that rogue presidents cannot advance autocratic aims.

The Framers of the Constitution designed their architecture of checks and balances to ensure that autocracy would be prevented. For more than 200 years, their design seemed to work well, and so did the democratic norms that emerged over time to bolster the formal operation of the system. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, for example, spotlight norms prescribing tolerance of political opponents and forbearance from pushing formal powers to the hilt.¹³ Dennis Thompson highlights “sensitivity to the basic rights of citizenship, a respect for due process in the broadest sense, the sense of responsibility, tolerance of

States: What Can We Learn from Middle- Income Backsliding?,” *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (June 2019): 417–432; Amanda Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism,” *Vox*, 1 March 2016, accessed at <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>, 22 December 2020; Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹³On the fundamental role in democracies of the norms of tolerance and forbearance, see Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

opposition, willingness to justify decisions, and above all the commitment to candor.”¹⁴

With polarization between Democrats and Republicans rising, these and related norms have been breaking down. And with Trump’s storming of the presidency, there is good reason to think that the formal checks and balances the nation has relied on for so long are simply not enough. In the interests of better government, and in the interests of saving democracy, something extra needs to be done to protect the public against rogue presidents. Further constraints are warranted—among them, in our view, insulation of the Department of Justice and the intelligence agencies from direct presidential control, a dramatic reduction in the number of presidential appointees, stricter limits on the president’s emergency powers, laws mitigating the president’s conflicts of interest, and a constitutional amendment eliminating the president’s pardon power.¹⁵

It is important, however, not to be fixated on Trump and the fear of presidential power. To do that is to think in a very one-sided and narrow way about the challenge of building a more effective government. Unless the constraints are selective and carefully considered, they may well yield a presidency that is tied up in formal knots—and a government that is even less effective than the one we have now. Trump’s many opponents were delighted when Congress’s manifest perversities made it difficult for him to govern. The last thing they wanted was for his right-wing agenda to become the law of the land. Yet it is a mistake to embrace the ineffectiveness of American government as a means of fighting back. That same ineffectiveness is what gave rise to Trump in the first place, and it will continue to propel populism well into the future unless something is done about it.

We want to be clear: those who see Trump as a danger to democracy are right to harbor a healthy fear of presidential power. But they also need to look beyond the fear to see the bigger picture, which is that populism can be defused only when the public’s genuine needs are met by a government capable of effective action. Ineffective government may be a short-term ally against Trump and others like him, but effective government is the long-term solution.

That goal can’t be achieved by simply heaping new constraints on the presidency. As we’ve argued, the most fundamental causes of ineffective government are rooted in the Constitution, and particularly its design of

¹⁴Dennis F. Thompson, “Constitutional Character: Virtues and Vices in Presidential Leadership,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40 (January 2010): 23–37.

¹⁵For a more detailed discussion of what these reforms might entail, see William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), chap. 4.

Congress, which is wired to be a bastion of special-interest politics and is incapable of crafting coherent, well-designed policies that solve national problems. The nation isn't going to get a more effective government by relying on Congress. Indeed, a good argument can be made that in some areas of governance—particularly in the legislative process, where Congress dominates and its pathologies are disabling—effective government involves reforms that take greater advantage of presidents and endow them with more power.¹⁶

Put Trump aside for the moment. What have we learned from more than two centuries of political history about the character of presidential leadership? It is this: presidents are wired very differently than Congress is. Quite unlike most legislators, presidents are institutionally predisposed to think in national terms about national problems, and their overriding concern for their historical legacies drives them to seek durable policy solutions to pressing national problems. More than any other elected officials, presidents are champions of effective government. Needless to say, they are not always right or successful. And many of us, on the losing end of elections, may strongly disagree with a given president's agenda. But regardless of their differing approaches, all presidents aspire to be the nation's problem-solvers-in-chief. So other things being equal—an important caveat—shifting power in their direction and away from Congress, at least in carefully selected realms, can improve the prospects for effective government.

An especially productive way to do that, in our view, is through a reform what would grant presidents universal fast-track authority. For some 40 years the nation has used the fast-track model with great success for international trade agreements,¹⁷ and the same model could now be applied to *all* legislation (including appointments). If this were done, presidents would craft policy proposals that would likely be far more coherent, well integrated, and effective than anything Congress would design. Congress would then be required to vote up or down on those proposals without changing them, and to vote on a majoritarian basis (no filibusters) within a specified period (say, 90 days). Although this reform would still allow Congress to pass its own bills—and presidents to veto them—universal fast track would streamline the legislative process, enhance the effectiveness of policy design, and ensure that important matters actually get voted on. No longer could a Mitch McConnell

¹⁶Here and below, for a more detailed discussion of Congress's pathologies and why presidents are (normally) the champions of effective government, see Howell and Moe, *Relic*.

¹⁷See, for example, Douglas Irwin, *Clashing over Commerce: A History of US Trade Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

block a president from having a Supreme Court nominee considered on the Senate floor. No longer could a John Boehner refuse to bring an immigration reform package to the House floor despite the presence of enough votes to pass it.¹⁸

This is but one way that reformers might seek to take advantage of the promise of presidential power to promote effective government. There is a reason that presidents, particularly in the past 100 years or so, have grown increasingly powerful relative to Congress. Presidents are driven to govern in a coherent, effective way while Congress is an institutional mess, mired in special-interest politics and collective action problems. Our system of separation of powers is inherently unwieldy and in great need of coherent governance—and presidents offer our best hope. Yes, they need to be feared. If too much power is vested in the executive, rogue presidents can undermine the rule of law and destroy our democracy. But presidents also have great promise, arising from the national leadership they can provide and from their championing of effective government. As Scott James has wisely observed, the history of the American presidency has been one of tension between the promise and the fear of presidential power.¹⁹ The challenge before the nation, in seeking a well-run democracy, has been one of striking the right balance between the two. That has been true in the past, and it will continue to be true in the future.

The populist threat is not going to fade away of its own accord, even after Donald Trump exits our politics entirely. The socioeconomic disruptions that drive populist discontent will still be there, and they need to be dealt with through government responses. If democracy is to be saved, government must do its part, which can happen only if it has the institutional capacity for effective performance. The key to developing such a capacity rests with the presidency. Specifically, it rests with reforms that recraft the presidency for modern times and that strike the right balance between the promise and the fear.

POLITICS, REFORM, AND THE FUTURE

Can such reforms actually happen? There are modest reasons for hope. It is during times of crisis that challenges are most likely to be recognized and the political will to resolve them is most likely to take hold. The

¹⁸For a more extensive discussion of universal fast track, see Howell and Moe, *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy*, chap. 4; and Howell and Moe, *Relic*, chap. 4.

¹⁹Scott C. James, "The Evolution of the Presidency: Between the Promise and the Fear," in Joel D. Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson, eds., *The Executive Branch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–40.

contemporary American public, moreover, harbors a rising appetite for systemic, institutional change. And justifiably so. The nation needs a reform movement at least as powerful as the Progressive movement of the early 1900s or the New Deal of the 1930s, both of which were governmental responses to massive social disruptions that could easily have led to populist revolts and the downfall of democracy. For a reform movement on that scale to happen today and be successful, the first and most fundamental requisite is that its leaders understand the reckoning they now confront: what its essential problems are and how to deal with them. Our analysis is an effort to provide the basis for just such an understanding.²⁰

The obstacles to reform, however, are enormous. We can thank the Framers of the Constitution for much of that. They provided the nation with a byzantine government filled with veto points that impede major change, particularly when the stakes are high and the opposition is powerful. Unless reformers gain overwhelming control of government through massive electoral victories, they won't accomplish much.

Opposition to reform will come from various sources. The main source, and the most worrisome, is the Republican Party. We say this not out of partisan antipathy, but simply as a matter of fact. Over the past several decades, the party of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan has been transformed into something altogether different. To the discomfort of traditional Republican elites, it has become a political home for racists and authoritarians; and with the rise of Donald Trump and populism—which thrives, in part, on racism and authoritarianism—even its more orthodox officeholders are profoundly influenced by, and beholden to, its populist base. The Republican Party is now *the* organized means by which populism in America finds expression and exercises power. Though its members like to think of themselves as protectors of freedom and the Constitution, the party has become a danger to our democratic system.²¹

²⁰For other recent books that argue the need for major structural change (but follow a different logic than we do here), see Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Sanford Levinson and Jack Balkin, *Democracy and Dysfunction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Lawrence Lessig, *America Compromised* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith, *After Trump: Reconstructing the Presidency* (Washington, DC: Lawfare Institute, 2020).

²¹See, for example, Taub, "Rise of American Authoritarianism"; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*; Stuart Stevens, *It Was All a Lie: How the Republican Party Became Donald Trump* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020); and Tim Alberta, *American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019).

If populism is to be defused through appropriate reforms that enhance the effectiveness of our government, the challenge must be shouldered by Democrats. Whether Democrats have the means and the motive to take on this challenge is an open question. But even if they do, a dark cloud hangs over the entire reformist enterprise: reformers must operate within a governmental context that makes blocking relatively easy, and Republicans will do everything they can, with all the power they can muster, to block. The deck is stacked in their favor.

To the extent that Republicans succeed, the result will be more than some kind of stasis in which nothing happens. A lot will happen. The socioeconomic forces that have been ravaging and imposing unwanted change on an appreciable portion of American society will continue unabated year after year, decade after decade. With a gridlocked government incapable of responding, populist anger may well intensify and spread. In America's future politics, gridlock won't just be a source of frustration. It threatens to drive the decline of democracy.

The challenge for democracy's defenders is to steer our country clear of this fate. They need to win overwhelming electoral victories; and if and when they do, they need to follow through with the right programs and reforms—with presidents, and a recrafting of the presidency, at the forefront. Putting it all together will be very difficult, and we cannot be confident that the outcome will preserve American democracy. The crisis is real.

OUR ARGUMENT

As you can see, what we are offering is a simple logical argument that attempts to impose coherence—understanding—on what is by its nature a very complex set of political, social, and historical developments. Here, stripped to its bare bones, is the core of the argument:

- Populism is a threat to democracy across the Western world, driven by the disruptive socioeconomic forces of modernity and the ineffective responses of governments.
- In the United States, ineffective government has allowed anger and anxiety to grow, fueling political support for populist appeals. This ineffectiveness is not a simple oversight or mistake. It is deeply rooted in the architecture of the Constitution, which imposes an antiquated structure of government ill-suited to the demands of modern times.
- Donald Trump has risen to political power and led the populist assault on American democracy by spotlighting the failures of government,

stoking the fires of populist anger, and adopting a demagogic style of leadership that is right out of the populist playbook.

- The socioeconomic forces driving populism cannot be stopped, and they will continue long after Trump has left the scene. The only way to defuse the populist threat in America is by making government more effective, and thus by enacting reforms that enhance its institutional capacity for meeting the challenges of modern society.
- The key to effective government lies in the presidency, and in structural reforms that balance the promise and the fear of presidential power. If American democracy is to be saved, the presidency must be recrafted for modern times.
- Our antiquated system of government, together with the anti-democratic evolution of the Republican Party, ensures that the path to reform will be filled with major obstacles. It is therefore difficult to be optimistic that the populist threat will be defused and that the quality of American democracy can be preserved.

THE NEAR TERM: 2020 AND THE PERPETUATION OF CRISIS

The 2020 election was a pivotal moment in American history. The American people had to decide whether to reelect Donald Trump, which would have legitimized and accelerated his strongman attacks on our nation's democracy, or replace him with the Democratic challenger, Joe Biden, who embraced its norms, practices, and institutions. The voters chose Biden. Trump was shown the door. And democracy was saved, at least temporarily.

The defenders of democracy could rightfully claim a crucial victory. In the grander scheme of things, however, this victory was quite limited. The fact is, the rest of what happened during 2020 and the run-up to Biden's January inauguration vividly illustrates the troubling themes we've been arguing here—and just how treacherous the road ahead is likely to be.

The year started with a catastrophe. The coronavirus pandemic plunged the nation into its greatest health crisis of the last hundred years, and it sent the economy spiraling downward into near depression. In an election year, Trump suddenly confronted the acid test of his presidency: whether he could move beyond his politics of disruption, demonization, and grievance to exercise constructive leadership at a time of historic national need. Doing that would require harnessing the government's vast resources and expertise to systematically take on the coronavirus. And it would require that he use his bully pulpit—and his highly visible

personal example—to build the widespread trust and civic spiritedness so necessary for enlisting the public’s voluntary cooperation.

But constructive leadership wasn’t in his playbook. He actively *avoided* responsibility, denigrated and ignored his scientific experts, falsely claimed the virus was under control, made the non-wearing of masks a matter of Republican fealty, held public events that functioned as superspreaders, lambasted anyone who contradicted him, demanded that the country reopen as if nothing were wrong—and in general, took actions that were irresponsible and dangerous for the nation. As hundreds of thousands of Americans died, Trump’s all-consuming focus was on himself: on securing his own reelection and remaining in power. His performance stands as one of the most colossal failures of leadership in American history.²²

When bad things happen during a presidential administration, whether or not the incumbent is responsible for them, the incumbent usually takes a beating—think Herbert Hoover (the Great Depression), Jimmy Carter (a terrible economy, the Iran hostage crisis), and George H.W. Bush (an election-year recession), all of whom lost reelection and saw their party lose seats in Congress.²³ But here’s the sobering thing about 2020. Almost the entirety of Trump’s political base stuck with him and his party, and populist enthusiasm and turnout remained sky high. Despite his abject leadership failure, despite the collapse of the nation’s economy, and despite the many stains on his entire presidency—his 2019 impeachment, his countless attacks on democracy, his obstructions of justice, his appeals to racism, his incessant lies, and on and on—74 million Americans still voted for him. Moreover, Republicans in Congress—who, by turns, tolerated and lauded his abuses of power—lost far fewer Senate seats than expected and actually made gains in the House. All told, they suffered no real penalties for their antidemocratic behavior and their unwillingness to stand up for the rule of law.

How could this be? Part of the explanation is the extreme polarization of our politics: Republicans vote for Republicans (and Democrats for Democrats) no matter what. But America’s crisis of democracy is not solely driven by partisanship. It is also driven, and more fundamentally

²²For a descriptive account of Trump’s approach to the pandemic, see Michael D. Shear et al., “Inside Trump’s Failure: The Rush to Abandon Leadership Role on the Virus,” *New York Times*, 15 September 2020.

²³The modern classic on retrospective voting is Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981). For a broad discussion and assessment of retrospective voting, see Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

so, by populism—which is inherently antidemocratic and has become the beating heart of the Republican Party. Its populist constituents wanted a strongman who would wage war against “the system.” That’s what Trump gave them. And that’s what they continue to care about, democracy be damned. So yes, Trump lost the election. But his supporters—and their rage and disaffection—are not simply going away. They will continue to threaten and undermine the democratic politics of this nation going forward. And there are tens of millions of them.²⁴

This in itself is ominous enough, and it dovetails with what we said earlier: that the socioeconomic *sources* of populist, antisystem anger—namely, our government’s ineffective efforts to deal with modern problems—will continue to have powerful political consequences long after Trump leaves office. The year 2020, however, also brought with it another sign of the political dangers that lie ahead. This one came about precisely because Trump *did* lose the election. Predictably, he refused to face facts and concede defeat, and instead launched his most brazen attack on American democracy yet—attempting to overthrow the expressed will of the voters, savaging the electoral institutions that are the very bedrock of democracy itself, and encouraging a mob attack on Congress to keep himself in power.

Trump’s response to defeat can’t be chalked up to his narcissism or any other aspect of his bizarre personality. His behavior followed a well-conceived, premeditated, authoritarian strategy. Knowing he might lose with the pandemic raging and the economy in the tank, he laid the groundwork early on by endlessly repeating a blatantly false narrative: that the electoral system is riddled with massive fraud, that its endemic corruption would be magnified by the states’ reliance on mail-in ballots, and that, if he lost the election, it could only be because the system was rigged against him.²⁵ When he did indeed lose—decisively, by more than 7 million popular votes and 74 electoral college votes—Trump then weaponized this narrative to justify his refusal to concede. He insisted that the election had been stolen from him through systemic fraud—for which there was no evidence whatever—and took aggressive action to overturn the outcome by filing dozens of meritless court cases, de-

²⁴For evidence that the public is less likely to punish politicians for behaving in anti-democratically during periods of heightened partisan polarization, see Graham and Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States.” For more on the anti-democratic, authoritarian strains of populism, see our earlier citations on populism.

²⁵Note that he laid the same voter-fraud groundwork in 2016, claiming his loss would be due to a rigged election—except he won. On both elections, see Jim Rutenberg and Nick Corasaniti, “Behind Trump’s Yearslong Effort to Turn Losing into Winning,” *New York Times*, 23 November 2020.

manding multiple recounts, and applying intense pressure on state and local politicians, election administrators, members of Congress, and Vice President Mike Pence to intervene, invalidate legitimate votes, and declare him the winner. Meantime, as the pandemic was reaching tragic new heights in November, December, and January, with thousands of people dying every day, Trump remained singularly fixated on his own political fortunes. He abandoned all pretense of doing the job of president and devoted himself entirely to perpetuating conspiracy theories and concocting schemes to change the election outcome.²⁶

The system held, and Trump's schemes failed. But his false narrative lived on—with profoundly dangerous implications for American democracy. Polls weeks after the election revealed that some three-fourths of Republicans believed Trump's baseless claims about a fraudulent electoral system that robbed him—and them—of rightful victory.²⁷ These unfounded beliefs derived from Trump's months-long campaign of lies, of course. But they were reinforced by the propagandists at Fox, Newsmax, OneAmerica News, and other right-wing media who hammered away at the stolen-election theme and stoked outrage among Trump's supporters. And then there were the Republican members of Congress, almost all of whom—ever-supportive of Trump and the party's populist base—refused to acknowledge the simple truth of his loss, refused to speak out against his anti-democratic attempts to overturn a free and fair election, repeated and embraced his stolen election myth, and endorsed his authoritarian behavior.²⁸

These toxic ingredients set the stage for a national disaster—and a fitting end to Trump's harrowing presidency. With Congress scheduled to conduct a ceremonial count of the electoral votes on 6 January to finalize Biden's victory, Trump delivered a rabble-rousing speech to a huge crowd

²⁶On Trump's multifaceted attempts to overturn the 2020 election, see, for example, "Trump's Disgraceful Endgame," *National Review*, 30 November 2020; "Will Trump's Attempts to Overturn Election Results Work? Not a Chance, Experts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 November 2020; and David E. Sanger, "Trump's Attempts to Overturn the Election Are Unparalleled in U.S. History," *New York Times* 3 December 2020.

²⁷See, for instance, Domenico Montenegro, "Poll: Just a Quarter of Republicans Accept Election Outcome," National Public Radio, 9 December 2020, accessed at <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/09/944385798/poll-just-a-quarter-of-republicans-accept-election-outcome>, 22 December 2020; and Daniel Politi, "Poll: 82 Percent of Trump Voters Say Biden's Win Isn't Legitimate," *Slate*, 13 December 2020, accessed at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/12/poll-trump-voters-biden-win-not-legitimate.html>, 22 December 2020.

²⁸See, for example, Tiffany Hsu and Katy Robertson, "After Biden Win, Right-Wing Sites Still Push False Voter Fraud Claims," *New York Times*, 11 November 2020; Kristina Peterson and Lindsay Wise, "Top GOP Lawmakers Back Trump on Challenges to Election Result," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 November 2020; and Jonathan Chait, "The GOP's Future Leaders Are Endorsing Trump's Election Fraud Lie," *New York Magazine*, 9 November 2020.

of angry supporters, urging them to march on Congress to disrupt and overturn the counting of the votes. It was like tossing a match into a tinderbox. The mob descended on the Capitol building, overwhelmed its police, bashed through doors and windows, broke into offices, sent legislators and the vice president fleeing for their lives, and blew an ugly, gaping hole in American democracy.²⁹

Five people died. The nation was in shock. The real meaning and character of Trump's populist-authoritarian presidency had been laid bare—and it was horrifying. To its credit, Congress reassembled that evening to do its democratic duty and finish counting the electoral votes. But not everyone stood up for democracy. With their institution still reeling from a violent attack on our system of government, 139 House Republicans and 8 Republican Senators *still* publicly embraced the stolen-election lie and voted to disallow the state-certified Biden electors.³⁰ The mob was gone. The assault on democracy continued.

Trump paid a price for orchestrating this national nightmare. Within days, House Democrats crafted an article of impeachment charging him with “incitement of insurrection,” and on 13 January Trump was impeached for the second time in his presidency. The vote was 217-192, with every Democrat and 10 Republicans voting for impeachment. Yet 197 Republicans voted against impeachment, refusing to hold Trump accountable for his actions.³¹ And because Mitch McConnell opted not to initiate an immediate trial in the Senate, Trump remained in power to the bitter end of his term.

What are we to make of such a disastrous series of events? Given the argument we've developed here, none of this is surprising. It is precisely the sort of dangerous democratic backsliding we should expect from a populist president and his party enablers. As we write, events continue to evolve. New facts are emerging about the 6 January assault, new security threats are arising all around the country, businesses and organized interests are rethinking their relationship to the Republican Party, social media platforms are scrambling to shut down the massive flow of disinformation (almost all of it from right-wing sources), and plans for a

²⁹See, for example, Dan Barry, Mike McIntire, and Matthew Rosenberg, “Our President Wants Us Here’: The Mob that Stormed the Capitol,” *New York Times*, 9 January updated 13 January 2021; and Karoun Demirjian et al., “Inside the Capitol Siege: How Barricaded Lawmakers and Aides Sounded Urgent Pleas for Help as Police Lost Control,” *Washington Post*, 9 January 2021.

³⁰Karen Yourish, Larry Buchanan, and Denise Lu, “The 147 Republicans Who Voted to Overturn Election Results,” *New York Times*, 7 January 2021.

³¹Nicholas Fandos, “Trump Impeached for Inciting Insurrection,” *New York Times*, 13 January 2021.

Senate trial are still taking shape. Even so, the broad contours of this crisis of democracy are plain to see.

The upshot is that, while 2020 brought Joe Biden the presidency and saved America from a Trump second term, it also left Biden with a forbidding political terrain in which to govern. The Democrats held the barest of majorities in Congress, leaving Republicans in a position to block most anything Biden might want to do that requires major legislation. With Republicans in control of a majority of state governments and the nation's Supreme Court, the larger political context added to Biden's troubles. And Trump's term-ending attack on democracy made the situation even worse. A substantial portion of the population is now convinced that the election was stolen and Biden's presidency is illegitimate—a false belief that could well serve as a continuing litmus test of loyalty for Republican officeholders, as well as justification for even more aggressive attacks on the new administration, accelerated efforts to suppress the votes of minorities, and still more egregious violations of democratic norms and practices.³² Meanwhile, Trump remains intent on using his ardent following and his considerable money—hundreds of millions raised during the “stop the steal” fight alone³³—to maintain his control of the Republican Party, to continue juicing his base, and to undermine the Biden presidency and its agenda in every way he possibly can.

None of this bodes well for democracy. Biden can bring a much-needed measure of normalcy to the White House for the next four years. But that normalcy won't correct the dysfunction that lies just beneath the surface and infects all aspects of our politics. America is trapped in something of a catch-22. To defuse the populist threat, the defenders of democracy need to enact major new programs that address the nation's very real socioeconomic problems. And more fundamentally, they need to adopt institutional reforms that—through a recrafting of the presidency—protect against the excesses of presidential power while taking advantage of its great promise to provide the nation with a more effective government. Yet there may be no way to get there from here. The Republicans can be counted upon to oppose any major new programs, however beneficial they may be. They will oppose any new

³²See, for example, Paul Waldman, “How the ‘Stolen Election’ Myth Will Swallow the GOP,” *Washington Post*, 7 December 2020; and Jay Willis, “Trump's Voter Fraud Yarn Is Unraveling. But It Can Still Help the GOP,” *Washington Post*, 5 December 2020.

³³As we go to press, the exact amount of Trump's post-election fundraising remains unclear, but we can be sure that it well exceeds \$200 million. See Louis Jacobson, “What we know about Trump's fundraising off the false claim of election fraud,” *Politifact*, 8 January 2021; also Shane Goldmacher, “Trump Lost the Election. He Has Raised \$207.5 Million Since,” *New York Times*, 3 December 2020.

constraints on presidential power, even with Biden in office—favoring, as they do, a strongman presidency when one of their own is in office. And they will oppose any reforms of the presidency intended to promote effective government—because they are the antisystem party, and if government flounders their own support will likely grow.

The good news from 2020, then, was simply—and only—that Trump lost. There is little else to celebrate and much to fear. The populist threat is still there, as dangerous as ever. And the new administration, far short of an overwhelming electoral victory, is not in a position to dissipate that threat. There is the chance, of course, that the Democrats will see electoral gains in 2022, and perhaps again in 2024. But eventually that overwhelming victory must be won if reformers are to have the sheer power needed to meet this crisis. Our democracy hangs in the balance.*

*This article is an updated and expanded version of the introduction to the authors' recent book, *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020). Reprinted with permission from *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy* by William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe, published by the University of Chicago Press © 2020. All rights reserved.