



IDEAS

America's Self-Obsession Is Killing Its Democracy

The U.S. still has a chance to fix itself before 2024. But when democracies start dying—as ours already has—they usually don't recover.

By Brian Klaas



Stephen Voss / Redux

JULY 21, 2022

SHARE 

About the author: *Brian Klaas is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, and a global-politics professor at University College London. He is the author of Corruptible: Who Gets Power and How It Changes Us.*

In 2009, a violent mob stormed the presidential palace in Madagascar, a deeply impoverished red-earthed island off the coast of East Africa. They had been incited to violence by opportunistic politicians and media personalities, successfully triggering a coup. A few years later, I traveled to the island, to meet the new government's ringleaders, the same men who had unleashed the mob.

As we sipped our coffees and I asked them questions, one of the generals I was interviewing interrupted me.

“How can you Americans lecture us on democracy?” he asked. “Sometimes, the president who ends up in your White House isn’t even the person who got the most votes.”

“Our election system isn’t perfect,” I replied then. “But, with all due respect, our politicians don’t incite violent mobs to take over the government when they haven’t won an election.”

For decades, the United States has proclaimed itself a “shining city upon a hill,” a beacon of democracy that can lead broken nations out of their despotic darkness. That overconfidence has been instilled into its citizens, leading me a decade ago to the mistaken, naive belief that countries such as Madagascar have something to learn from the U.S. rather than also having wisdom to teach us.

During the Donald Trump presidency, the news covered a relentless barrage of “unprecedented” attacks on the norms and institutions of American democracy. But they weren’t unprecedented. Similar authoritarian attacks had happened plenty of times before. They were only unprecedented to us.

Read: UN secretary-general: American power is in decline, the world is 'in pieces'

I've spent the past 12 years studying the breakdown of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism around the world, in places such as Thailand, Tunisia, Belarus, and Zambia. I've shaken hands with many of the world's democracy killers.

My studies and experiences have taught me that democracies can die in many ways. In the past, most ended in a quick death. Assassinations can snuff out democracy in a split second, coups in an hour or two, and revolutions in a day. But in the 21st century, most democracies die like a chronic but terminal patient. The system weakens as the disease spreads. The agony persists over years. Early intervention increases the rate of survival, but the longer the disease festers, the more that miracles become the only hope.

American democracy is dying. There are plenty of medicines that would cure it. Unfortunately, our political dysfunction means we're choosing not to use them, and as time passes, fewer treatments become available to us, even though the disease is becoming terminal. No major prodemocracy reforms have passed Congress. No key political figures who tried to overturn an American election have faced real accountability. The president who orchestrated the greatest threat to our democracy in modern times is free to run for reelection, and may well return to office.

RECOMMENDED READING



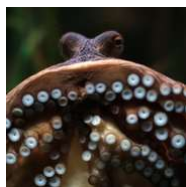
Dear Therapist: My Husband and I Never Have Sex, so I'm Having an Affair

LORI GOTTLIEB



Say Goodbye to Your Manager

ED ZITRON



Octopuses Do Something Really Strange to Their Genes

ED YONG

Our current situation started with a botched diagnosis. When Trump first rose to political prominence, much of the American political class reacted with amusement, seeing him as a sideshow. Even if he won, they thought, he'd tweet like a populist firebrand while governing like a Romney Republican, constrained by the system. But for those who had watched Trump-like authoritarian strongmen rise in Turkey, India, Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Venezuela, Trump was never entertaining. He was ominously familiar.

At issue was a classic frame-of-reference problem. America's political culture is astonishingly insular. Turn on cable news and it's all America, all the time. Other countries occasionally make cameos, but the story is still about us. (Poland is discussed if Air Force One goes to Warsaw; Iran flits into view only in relation to Washington's nuclear diplomacy; Madagascar appears only in cartoon form, mostly featuring talking animals that don't actually live there.) Our self-obsession means that whenever authoritarianism rises abroad, it's mentioned briefly, if at all. Have you ever spotted a breathless octobox of talking heads on CNN or Fox News debating the death of democracy in Turkey, Sri Lanka, or the Philippines?

That's why most American pundits and journalists used an "outsider comes to Washington" framework to process Trump's campaign and his presidency, when they should have been fitting every fresh fact into an "authoritarian populist" framework or a "democratic death spiral" framework. While debates raged over tax cuts and offensive tweets, the biggest story was often obscured: The system itself was at risk.

Even today, too many think of Trump more as Sarah Palin in 2012 rather than Viktor Orbán in 2022. They wrongly believe that the authoritarian threat is over and that January 6 was an isolated event from our past, rather than a mild preview of our future. That misreading is provoking an underreaction from the political establishment. And the worst may be yet to come.

The basic problem is that one of the two major parties in the U.S.—the Trumpified Republican Party—has become authoritarian to its core. Consequently, there are two main ways to protect American democracy. The first is to reform the GOP, so that it's again a conservative, but not authoritarian, party (à la John McCain's or Mitt Romney's Republican Party). The second is to perpetually block authoritarian Republicans from wielding power. But to do that, Democrats need to win *every* election. When you're facing off against an authoritarian political movement, each election is an existential threat to democracy. Eventually, the authoritarian party will win.

[From the October 2018 issue: Americans aren't practicing democracy anymore](#)

Erica Frantz, a political scientist and expert on authoritarianism at Michigan State University, told me she shares that concern: With Republicans out of the White House and in the congressional minority, “democratic deterioration in the U.S. has simply been put on pause.”

Frantz was more sanguine during much of the Trump era. “When Trump won office, I pushed back against forecasts that democracy in the U.S. was doomed,” she explained. After all, America has much more robust democratic institutions than Hungary, Poland, the Philippines, or Turkey. “Though the risk of democratic collapse was higher than it had been in recent memory,” Frantz said, “it still remained low, comparatively speaking.”

When democracies start to die, they usually don't recover. Instead, they end up as authoritarian states with zombified democratic institutions: rigged elections in place of legitimate ones, corrupt courts rather than independent judges, and propagandists replacing the press.

There are exceptions. Frantz pointed to Ecuador, Slovenia, and South Korea as recent examples. In all three cases, a political shock acted as a wake-up call, in which the would-be autocrat was removed and their political movement either destroyed or reformed. In South Korea, President Park Geun-hye was ousted from office and sent to prison. But more important, Frantz explained, "there was a cleaning of the house after Park's impeachment, with the new administration aggressively getting rid of those who had been complicit in the country's slide to authoritarianism."

Those examples once signaled a hopeful possibility for the United States. At some point, Trump's spell over the country and his party could break. He would go too far, or there would be a national calamity, and we'd all come to our democratic senses.

By early 2021, Trump had gone too far and there had been a national calamity. That's why, on January 6, 2021, as zealots and extremists attacked the Capitol, I felt an unusual emotion mixed in with the horror and sadness: a dark sense that there was a silver lining.

Finally, the symptoms were undeniable. After Trump stoked a bona fide insurrection, the threat to democracy would be impossible to ignore. As Lindsey Graham and Mitch McConnell denounced Trump on the Senate floor, it looked like Republicans might follow the South Korean path and America could finally take its medicine.

In reality, the denunciations were few and temporary. According to a [new poll](#) from the University of Monmouth, six in 10 Republican voters now believe that the attack on the Capitol was a form of "legitimate protest." Only one in 10 would use the word *insurrection* to describe January 6. And rather than cleaning house, the Republicans who dared to condemn Trump are now the party's biggest pariahs, while the January 6 apologists are rising stars.

The past 18 months portend a post-Trump GOP future that remains authoritarian: Trumpism without Trump.

“Democracies can’t depend on one of two major parties never holding power,” argues Brendan Nyhan, a government professor at Dartmouth College and a co-founder of Bright Line Watch, a group that monitors the erosion of American democracy. But that may be the necessary treatment for now, because Republican leaders “are defining a vision of a Trumpist GOP that could prove more durable than the man himself.”

From the December 2021 issue: The bad guys are winning

Frantz concurred: “What did surprise me and change my assessment was the Republican Party’s decision to continue to embrace Trump and stand by him. The period following the Capitol riots was a critical one, and the party’s response was a turning point.”

That leaves American democracy with a bleak prognosis. Barring an electoral wipeout of Republicans in 2022 (which looks extremely unlikely), the idea that the party will suddenly abandon its anti-democracy positioning is a delusion.

Prodemocracy voters now have only one way forward: Block the authoritarian party from power, elect prodemocracy politicians in sufficient numbers, and then insist that they produce lasting democratic reforms.

The wish list from several democracy experts I spoke with is long, and includes passing the Electoral Count Act, creating a constitutional right to vote, reforming districting so more elections are competitive, establishing a nonpartisan national election-management body, electing the president via popular vote, reducing the gap in representation between states like California and Wyoming, introducing some level of proportional representation or multimember districts, aggressively regulating campaign spending and the role of money in politics, and enforcing an upper age

limit for Supreme Court justices. But virtually all of those ideas are currently political fantasies.

The American system isn't just dysfunctional. It's dying. Nyhan believes there is now a "significant risk" that the 2024 election outcome will be illegitimate. Even Frantz, who has been more optimistic about America's democratic resilience in the past, doesn't have a particularly reassuring retort to the doom-mongers: "I don't think U.S. democracy will collapse, but just hover in a flawed manner for a while, as in Poland."

We may not be doomed. But we should be honest: The *optimistic* assessment from experts who study authoritarianism globally is that the United States will most likely settle into a dysfunctional equilibrium that mirrors a deep democratic breakdown. It's not yet too late to avoid that. But the longer we wait, the more the cancer of authoritarianism will spread. We don't have long before it's inoperable.
