

HOW AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS QUICKLY SLIPPING AWAY

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Periodically, the United States falls prey to the obsession with economic and geopolitical “decline,” that is, the fear of losing its position as the dominant economic and military superpower. The latest example is the militaristic and jingoist enthusiasm of the press for the conflict in Ukraine, a perfect chance to erase the memory of the precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan and “put Russia back in its place.” “Decline” was also at the heart of Donald Trump’s election campaign in 2016; in his campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” the emphasis was definitely on the word *again*. Trump’s promise was to halt and reverse the Midwest’s industrial decline, something that no president could really accomplish.

In the 1980s there had been the obsession with Japan and its brilliant economic performance; now the issue is if America has been economically caught up and economically overtaken by China and if its long hegemony over the world system is coming to an end.¹

However, this focus on the imperial status of the country has obscured a long and far more destructive process of political decay. If we put aside for a moment the dangerous role of a turbulent financial system, the United States’ weaknesses lie not in its economy but at the heart of its institutions, at the political level. For a number of reasons, some structural and

1. Beside the journalistic exposés and the books made for the large public, the question was seriously tackled by many scholars, preeminent among them the late Giovanni Arrighi in his books *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994) and *Adam Smith in Beijing* (London: Verso, 2007).

historical, some contingent, American democracy is a patient in critical condition (Klinenberg, Zaloom, and Marcus 2019). That is, the constitutional arrangements created in 1787 and successfully maintained for 235 years could collapse. If nothing else, the aborted coup organized by Donald Trump on January 6, 2021, is evidence enough.

Looking superficially at the characteristics of democratic regimes (regularity of elections, separation of powers, independence of judges) one often forgets that democracy is first and foremost a system in which there is a *peaceful transfer of power*. The losers are not afraid of being put in prison—or worse—by the winners. In the United States, once the results were known, the phone call from the losing presidential candidate to the winner has always been a powerful democratic ritual. No more.

Philip Roth published *The Plot Against America* in 2004. Sinclair Lewis wrote *It Can't Happen Here* in 1935. But it did happen: on January 6, 2021, a would-be dictator, elected in 2016 amid manipulation and foreign interference, tried to take over Congress to prevent the certification of Joe Biden's large electoral victory. However, it would be a serious mistake to attribute this coup attempt to Trump's megalomania alone: Republicans' contempt for democracy and the rule of law, the mobilization of violence and hate propaganda to divide society, and a long history of racism had paved the way for this. It was a long process of political radicalization, and its consequences on the functioning of institutions have been underestimated for too long (Hacker and Pierson 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2012).

For example, as early as November 2000, it was clear that many Republicans would not accept defeat in a presidential election: they were able to win the presidency for George W. Bush only because of mobs mobilized to stop the recount in Florida, aided by a partisan Supreme Court that intervened in a contested election on spurious grounds.²

In 2012, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, two respected political analysts, wrote, "The Republican Party has become . . . ideologically extreme, contemptuous of the inherited social and economic regime, of compromise,

2. The ruling was *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000). Justice John Paul Stevens commented in his dissent that the actual loser of that presidential election was "the Nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law."

unconvinced by the generally accepted understanding of facts, evidence, and science. Not to mention a disregard for the legitimacy of its political opposition” (2012). The Republican Party had turned into what they called a “foreign body” to representative democracy, a fascistoid organization. It uses at the same time legal and illegal tactics, and its only purpose is to maintain itself in power. As we shall see below, the radicalization of the Republicans, who are a minority in the country (they won the popular vote only once in the last seven presidential elections) has been greatly facilitated by an archaic and oligarchic structure of government.

The Trump presidency has shown that the line between xenophobic populism and fascism is very thin indeed. Immediately after the 2016 election, Judith Butler wrote:

The fascist moment comes when Trump arrogates to himself the power to deport millions of people or to put Hillary in jail after he assumes office (he has now taken that back), to break trade agreements at will, to insult the government of China, to call for the reintroduction of waterboarding and other modes of torture. When he speaks that way, he acts as if he has the sole power to decide foreign policy, to decide who goes to jail, to decide who will be deported, which trade agreements will be honored, which foreign policy will be made and broken. Many of us took his arrogance, his ridiculous self-importance, his racism, his misogyny, and his unpaid taxes to be self-defeating characteristics, but all of those were frankly thrilling for many who voted for him. No one is sure that he has read the Constitution or even cares about it. That arrogant indifference is what attracts people to him. And that is a fascist phenomenon. If he puts deeds to words, then we have a fascist government. (2017)

As it turned out on January 6, 2021, Trump and his cronies did put their fascist rhetoric into action. Desperate to retain power at any cost, Trump and his supporters attempted to subvert the results of an election that had seen Democratic candidate Joe Biden prevail by a large margin in

the popular vote.³ At first, the march on the Capitol appeared somewhat folkloric, with a pseudo shaman leading the charge, but later the investigations by the House Select Committee have shown that the coup attempt involved a large number of politicians and foot soldiers and that it could indeed have succeeded. January 6th was the result of the Republican Party's decade-long process of radicalization. Only this process could explain the support that Trump apparently continues to enjoy in his exile in Mar-a-Lago despite the many disastrous effects of his presidency, most importantly the catastrophic management of the pandemic.

Politicians and media focus on the superpower status of the country to the point of talking nonstop about the danger of Russia and China. But this is concealing the long and far more important process of political decay that is described in five points below.

1. The explosion of inequality and the role of money in politics

We mentioned the election of 2000, but our story begins much earlier: in 1973, the share of income going to the richest 1% of American taxpayers was about 9%, while the share of national income going to the poorest 90% was 68%. Sure, there was inequality, but nothing like what happened in the forty years that followed. By 2013, the national income share of the bottom 90% of taxpayers had fallen to 53%, fifteen percentage points lower than in 1973, while the share of the top 1% had doubled to 18%. The weakening of unionized labor, which began in the 1970s and has never been reversed, has been a major factor in this dynamic of rising income inequality (Bartels 2008). As Thomas Piketty has written, "it is these labor market mechanisms

3. Biden obtained more than 81 million votes and Trump more than 74 million. The Electoral College majority of 306 votes for Biden and 232 for Trump, however, was the result of rather narrow margins in the popular vote of four swing states: Arizona (Biden 10,000 more ballots), Georgia (Biden 11,000 more), Wisconsin (Biden 20,000 more), and Pennsylvania (Biden 80,000 more). These small differences were the basis for the Trump campaign's efforts to overturn the election because "finding" a few thousand Republican ballots in these states would have given Trump a majority in the Electoral College.

that mainly explain the increase in income inequality in a large number of countries since the 1980s, particularly in the United States” (Piketty 2016).

But let’s look at a more significant indicator: not yearly income but accumulated wealth. In 2021, the top 1% of taxpayers controlled an astonishing 32.3% of national wealth (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2022). This small group took over 90% of the fruits of US growth, while the rest of society became poorer (Formisano 2015), a dynamic accelerated by the pandemic, which saw the wealth of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and dozens of other billionaires explode. Indeed, in the first quarter of 2021, the poorest half of American households together held not more than 2% of the national wealth. Of course, this accelerated the end of the social contract that was the basis of the political regime between 1945 and 1975 (Denton and Voth 2017). Today there is a dangerously widespread loss of faith in the institutions that organize American society; only two institutions obtain the confidence of more than 50% of citizens: small business and the military. All other institutions are the object of mistrust (banks, the Supreme Court, the presidency) or open hostility: 74% of Americans do not trust large technology companies, 86% feel the same toward big business, and an astonishing 93% toward Congress (Jones 2022).

Five centuries ago, Thomas More (1516) perfectly understood this dynamic. Speaking about his home country of England, he said, “all the other governments that I see or know . . . are a conspiracy of the rich, who, on pretense of managing the public, only pursue their private ends.” Today, inequality and the staggering cost of political campaigns have made money the master of the political game (see section 3 below about the power of billionaires and hedge funds over the communications system).

From the 1970s onward, dollar donations to candidates and parties were subject to stricter regulation than before. The idea was to reduce corruption and limit the power of lobbies. The results have been disappointing: campaign finance rules have failed to control the tsunami of money that sweep through politics, in particular because of two Supreme Court rulings (*Buckley v. Valeo* [1976] and *Citizen United v. Federal Election Commission* [2010]). In both of these decisions, the justices ruled that financial contributions to political candidates are a form of “speech” protected by the First Amendment, which cannot be restricted except in special cases.

The new rules have diverted much funding to political action committees (PACs), the committees supporting individual candidates. While the parties once controlled the flow of money into politics, the number of donors with bottomless pockets, such as Rebekah Mercer, the Koch brothers, and the late Sheldon Adelson—all of whom support the far right—has multiplied since 2010 (Neiwert 2017). Today, the National Rifle Association is on the verge of bankruptcy, but for forty years it has blackmailed Republican politicians to advance its cause: guns everywhere, for everyone, of all kinds. The weakened parties were reduced to spectators of more and more brutal, and expensive, electoral competition among candidates supported by lobbies.

2. The weak American parties

Historically, the two main American parties had always been confederations of local organizations, having nothing to do with highly centralized parties such as the English Labour, the German SPD, or the Italian PCI, each of which had millions of card-carrying members. These European parties had well-defined social constituencies; they were hierarchical organizations, with strong ties to trade unions, women, and youth groups. They had plenty of permanent officers, had a strong party press, and organized political events year-round at the local and national level. In the United States, congressmen have always been more in touch with their constituents, and donors, than with the big guys in Washington.

In the last thirty years, primary elections have helped to make the two parties more ideologically homogeneous: over the years the Republicans have become increasingly conservative and then shifted to the far right while the Democrats became increasingly liberal. This happened for various reasons, but an important factor has been the low voter turnout at the primaries and caucuses (rarely more than 10%–15% of eligible voters go to the ballots), which favors radical candidates and highly motivated interest groups, to the detriment of moderate and less organized groups.

It should be remembered that congressional elections are single-round, based on a Winner-Take-All system in constituencies manipulated to the advantage of the locally dominant party by gerrymandering. This means that in many constituencies the Democratic or Republican candidate does not

have to worry at all about his or her political opponents. In 2020, Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was elected in the Bronx, in New York-14, with 71.6% of the vote, leaving her Republican opponent behind by almost 100,000 votes. On the other side of the aisle, Republican Robert Aderholt got 82.2% of the vote in Alabama-4. In the House of Representatives, only 34–58 seats out of 435 are considered truly competitive. In the others the outcome is almost always easily predictable, in a majority of cases absolutely certain.⁴

Thus, while party leaders in the past had an interest in encouraging more qualified centrist candidates, direct primaries now favor radical candidates, indifferent to the general interests of the country and concerned almost exclusively with their well-crafted public image, a must to win reelection. The Republican Party's traditional leadership has little ability to marginalize right-wing extremists who owe nothing to anyone, except their millionaire donors: the tools that parties and political professionals used to employ to ensure a certain political coherence have long since been lost, as it was clear when the *far right* Freedom Caucus in the House forced out Speaker John Boehner in 2015.

What's more, mainstream candidates are perpetually vulnerable to challenges from radicals through the primaries and thus dare not vote for perfectly reasonable measures like passing the federal budget without risking a government shutdown, with the associated paralysis of services and serious risks to the economy.

3. *Political communication in the age of Twitter*

The rise of the far right has been facilitated by the transformation of the communications infrastructure. American journalism was born partisan and combative in the nineteenth century, but, at least from 1945 onward, it had also been a powerful means of compromise. The pursuit of bipartisan consensus and the support of centrist voters had considerable influence on politicians, in part because of the first-past-the-post electoral system. This conformity was far from ideal (think of the press's attitude toward

4. "What Redistricting Looks Like in Every State," <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/redistricting-2022-maps/>, accessed July 20, 2022.

the Vietnam War), but it helped to strengthen the political centrist regime, and when outsiders like Joe McCarthy or George Wallace threatened the stability of the political regime, CBS or the *New York Times* were there to check the demagogues.⁵

All this began to change in the 1970s, with the creation of Fox News, a conservative and partisan television channel created by Roger Ailes on behalf of the Republican Party, and later with the success of talk radio, also close to the right. In 1995, the weekly *Time* magazine published a cover with the image of radio host Rush Limbaugh under the headline “Is Rush Limbaugh Good for America?” A quarter of a century later, the article’s subtitle appears almost prophetic: “Listener-friendly radio is just the beginning: electronic populism threatens to short-circuit representative democracy.” This is exactly what happened: long before Twitter and Facebook, radio stations with live calls from the audience slowly created the mass base of the radical right movement that found its charismatic leader in Donald Trump in 2016.

Already in the 1990s, mainstream journalism had changed its benchmarks and news selection criteria, trying to stay financially afloat amid declining sales or ratings. The disintermediation enabled by blogs and new platforms reshaped the information ecosystem, consolidating the infotainment market and plunging websites, national and local newspapers, magazines, radio, and television into a single online cauldron, where all players fiercely compete to provide the public with the last bit of gossip offered by the political show. Judith Butler pointed out that the presidency had become a “media phenomenon” (2017).⁶

Trump cleverly exploited the structural weaknesses of American journalism—in particular its obsession with politicians’ statements, the more

5. One may argue that an authoritarian streak has always been present in American politics (Red Scare in the 1920s, McCarthyism in the 1950s) and that it was strengthened by the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s, as shown by the short-lived successes of George Wallace in the Democratic primaries of 1968 and 1972.

6. Already in 2008, Obama had shown that a candidate capable of using Facebook and Twitter, aided by the enthusiasm of a few thousand young supporters, could largely dispense with party structures and big donors (Plouffe 2009). An outsider such as Bernie Sanders was able to run two campaigns for the Democratic nomination using the internet to reach millions of small donors without using the party’s traditional fundraising sources.

outrageous the better. Reporters and editors helped him spread nonsensical proposals (making Mexico pay for the construction of a wall on the border between the two countries) whose purpose simply was to capture the attention of the casual or marginally interested viewer while reinforcing his *macho* image. The media were hypnotized by Trump and, in a sense, still are.

Before the creation of Facebook and Twitter, the mainstream media were more or less able to perform their traditional role of gatekeepers, patrolling the borders of acceptable political discourse and behavior.⁷ In 2016, Donald Trump was able to reach millions of voters using these platforms, without having to go through journalists, the supposed guardians of objectivity, or spend a penny on television advertising. Facebook was instrumental in his win in 2016 and even more in spreading the big lie about the election of 2020: it hosted at least 650,000 posts “attacking the legitimacy of Joe Biden’s victory between Election Day and the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol, with many calling for executions or other political violence” (Silverman et al. 2022).

Not only do these platforms allow extremist fringes to have a voice, but they also function as powerful organizing tools: a loose network of far right groups such as the Proud Boys and the Three Percenters was able to connect and grow in the Trump years. The deep polarization of the American public permitted the rise of politicians such as Mo Brooks, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, and Matt Gaetz in “red” districts, adding to the confusion and radicalization of the American far right.

The failed coup on January 6, 2021, compelled Twitter and Facebook to adopt stricter rules to prevent violence and hate speech, notably canceling Donald Trump’s account that had about 80 million followers. Immediately Trump announced the creation of his own Twitter-like platform that was born a few months later, but without success. (A feature of winner-take-all markets is that it is next to impossible to compete with the dominant player in a given sector.)⁸ Besides evidencing the political power of billionaires,

7. This role of gatekeeping had already been weakened by the rise of talk radio, but the emergence first of blogs and later of Facebook and Twitter definitely put an end to it: today only 14% of Americans trust the newspapers and 11% the television news.

8. The concept was created by economists Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook in their book *The Winner-Take-All Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

Elon Musk's effort to buy Twitter, if successful, would have reopened the gates of hate speech and conspiracy theories in the platform.⁹

4. *Political paralysis*

The shift to the right of the Republicans, who are a minority in the country (they won the popular vote only once in the last thirty years) has been greatly facilitated by the archaic and oligarchic structure of government, basically unchanged since 1787. The men who gathered in Philadelphia to write the Constitution were obsessed by the danger of tyranny but also by the peril of popular rule (Amar 2006). The executive was therefore designed with limited and well-defined attributes of power, and the legislature was organized into two chambers, differing in power and manner of election, with a large power given to a clearly oligarchic Senate.

The Founding Fathers were concerned about the possibility of “demagogic excesses,” such as paper money or repudiation of debts. They, therefore, created various buffer structures between the citizens and the government. Only the House of Representatives would be directly elected. A radical trying to enter the Senate would have to go through his state's legislature, which appointed the senators. A usurper aspiring to the presidency would have to go through the Electoral College, an assembly of experienced politicians who had the task of choosing the president. As James Madison wrote, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (*Federalist*, no. 51).

The final text gave the people the power to change the form of government whenever necessary, as clearly reaffirmed by Alexander Hamilton during the ratification process in New York: “[A] fundamental principle of republican government . . . admits the right of the people to alter or abolish the established Constitution, whenever they find it inconsistent with their happiness” (*Federalist*, no. 78).

Article V set out the procedures: “The Congress, whenever two thirds of both Houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose Amendments to this Constitution, or, on the Application of the Legislatures of two thirds of the several States, shall call a Convention for proposing Amendments, which,

9. One should not forget Jeff Bezos's purchase of the *Washington Post*, on the opposite side of the political spectrum.

in either Case, shall be valid to all Intents and Purposes, as Part of this Constitution, when ratified by the Legislatures of three fourths of the several States, or by Conventions in three fourths thereof.”

However, things turned out differently: in recent times, the Constitution has been practically frozen (Stevens 2014). It is no coincidence that, of the twenty-seven amendments that have come into force to date, ten were passed almost immediately, in 1791, to strengthen the citizens’ rights. Three amendments were the result of the Civil War, and two dealt with prohibition. The other twelve amendments concerned technical matters, such as clarifying the procedures for electing the president and vice president (the XII) or trivialities, such as increasing the allowances for deputies and senators (the XXVII). With the exception of the latter, the most recent amendment dates back half a century: the XXVI, on voting for eighteen-year-olds, which was ratified in 1971. To find other amendments that really affected the functioning of the institutions, one has to go back to 1964 (XXIV, prohibition of making the right to vote conditional on the payment of a tax), 1920 (XIX, vote for women), or 1913 (XVII, direct election of senators).

The Constitution’s intent was to limit political excesses by forcing competing powers and groups to negotiate and compromise. The instrument for achieving this, however, was a baroque and paralysis-prone machinery of government: history has shown the need for broad cooperation in good faith between political actors to achieve anything. Today, not only does a law need to find a majority in the House, but it must also pass through the Senate without encountering filibuster. Otherwise it needs a 60% supermajority to be passed. Finally, it needs the president’s signature, without which the Constitution requires a two-thirds majority in both houses to override the veto. And after its entry into force, the judicial guerrilla in the federal courts begins, ending only after exhausting multiple appeals to the Supreme Court.

The reason of paralysis is therefore simple: after Ronald Reagan’s election, between 1981 and 2020, the two houses and the president have been controlled by the same party for only ten years: by the Republicans between 2003 and 2007 and then from 2017 to 2018; by the Democrats between 1993 and 1995 and again between 2009 and 2011. For the remaining thirty years, at least one of the two chambers has been in the hands of the party opposed to the president. Experts predict that the current control

of Congress by the Democrats will end with the mid-term elections in November 2022.

This long paralysis of Congress, now split exactly down the middle, has disgusted the American electorate, leading to great political volatility without changing the way the system works. Barack Obama was elected in 2008 on the basis of a promise to make the federal government work again, but his appeals to Republicans to reach agreements and pass legislation based on compromise were unsuccessful. His strategy failed because of the total opposition of the Republicans, intimidated by the Tea Party movement (Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Zernike 2010; Lepore 2010; Kabaservice 2012). Disappointment with Obama led in 2016 to the victory of Donald Trump, first in the primaries and then in the general election: Americans wanted change and kept looking for new faces to achieve it. In 2020, Joe Biden's victory confirmed this reality. Unfortunately, fundamental changes are not coming because the paralysis of the system persists, as the meager balance sheet of the first year and a half of Biden's administration has shown. In theory this administration is supported by control of Congress; in practice it is paralyzed by obstructionism in the Senate.

In 2022, Republicans have tried to play down the actions of the violent mob that invaded the Capitol and threatened to hang Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi on January 6, 2021. GOP congressmen and senators are still so fascinated (or terrified) by Trump and his followers that they carefully avoid distancing themselves from the former president, as seen in the vote on the second impeachment on February 13, 2021, when no fewer than forty-three out of fifty Republican senators voted to acquit him. In the House, a good example are Colorado congresswoman Lauren Boebert, who wants to enter Congress with a gun at her side, or Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, an anti-Semite and anti-Muslim QAnon follower. Taylor Greene endorsed the idea of "executing" Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader of the House, while her colleague Paul Gosar published a video in which he seemed to wish for the murder of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the most activist Democratic congresswoman.

Since February 2022, the media system has been overwhelmed by news and opinions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as it had been full of combative chatter about China in the Trump years. But the problem of the United States is neither Russia nor China; it is the creeping civil war, which

could become endemic. This is the result of the domination of money over the political process, of the candidate-centered politics, of the new information ecosystem created by social media, and, finally, of the constitutional paralysis described above.

The danger of a low-intensity civil war is not an exaggeration: about half (52%) of Trump voters are in favor of Republican states seceding from the Union (UVA Center for Politics 2021). This percentage rises to 66% in the eleven southern states, those that actually seceded in 1861, triggering the Civil War. Paradoxically, while in 1861 separation was geographically possible, today the countryside and small towns vote Republican while the cities vote Democratic, in both the North and the South. Therefore, a Trumpist-majority Texas would find itself with its metropolises (Dallas, Houston, Austin) as Democratic strongholds. The same would happen in Florida, where Miami is a Democratic bastion in a red state.

Therefore, the idea of a “regular” war with armies from the South against armies from the North or from the countryside against the cities remains far-fetched, but what is possible, indeed probable, is that political violence will increase (Marche 2022). Meetings in which Trump’s supporters ask when they will start “killing Democrats” are frequent. In 2020, after a tweet by the former president attacking Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer for her anti-COVID measures, a group of fanatics organized a kidnapping attempt, fortunately foiled by the FBI. Last but not least, in the crowd that stormed the Capitol, signs and slogans read “Hang Mike Pence,” the vice president, considered a traitor for his refusal to collaborate in the attempt to overturn Joe Biden’s electoral victory.

5. Populism here and there

According to Nadia Urbinati, “Populism is the name of a political phenomenon whose difficulty of definition is proverbial. It resists generalization and forces those who study it to become comparativists because the language and content of its message are immersed in the culture and values of the society in which it develops” (2020).

The Trump administration was far from isolated: numerous populist governments have been formed in recent years from India to Brazil, from Poland to the Philippines, while strong populist movements are also

present in Italy, France, and other European countries.¹⁰ A common feature is the role of authoritarian leaders: “Populism cannot exist without an organizational structure centered on an unquestioned leader” (Graziano 2018). “Most successful cases of populism involve a strong leader, regardless of the type of mobilization” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). This had already been demonstrated in many countries, from Erdoğan in Turkey to Orbán in Hungary, and is plain in the case of Trump, who never liked institutions that limited his power (the “Deep State”) and considered the government his own personal fiefdom.

Other common features are those that we had observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Trump administration’s basic approach was remarkably similar to that of Brazil and India:

- hostility toward experts and science, combined with unwarranted optimism about the health situation, often an outright refusal of the very existence of the danger;
- authoritarianism, quasi-religious cult of the leader, with corruption and institutional chaos;
- systematic use of lies and violent language against real or perceived “enemies,” coupled with a deep indifference to human suffering; and
- cynical use of religion to support authoritarian solutions.

This allows us to stress that when populism succeeds in conquering the government, it “can disfigure democratic principles, procedures, and institutions—the people, the majority, and representation—precisely because of its dependence on the strength of the leader and the factionalism that descends from celebrating one part of the people against all the

10. In Italy there was a short-lived populist government after the elections of 2018, supported by Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega. In France, the candidate of Rassemblement National, Marine Le Pen, obtained an impressive 41.5% of the valid ballots in the presidential elections of 2022.

rest. The unification of citizens through this logic of exclusion needs to be permanently corroborated by consensus, the only proof of legitimacy that populism seeks and claims, superior in authorizing value to the formal legitimacy that comes from institutional rules and norms” (Urbinati 2020). This, of course, is a recipe for institutional chaos and paralysis, or worse.

The lust for power of populism shows itself “to be intolerant of institutional limitations without overflowing into the revocation of free elections, the physical elimination of opponents and the repression of dissent” (Urbinati 2020). In the case of the United States, the election of Joe Biden and Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate in 2020 shows that antibodies against far right populism do exist, even if the Republicans could easily win back the government in 2022 and 2024.

The virus is still there, as we have seen in the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a violent suppression of women’s rights. The ink of the ruling had not yet dried when Texas, Oklahoma, Ohio, and other states put back on the books laws criminalizing abortion. In Ohio, a raped ten-year-old child became pregnant but had to travel to Indiana to obtain an abortion. The worst is yet to come: Republican lawmakers are busy with proposals to deter residents of a state from traveling to other states to seek abortions, basically jeopardizing the right of American citizens to travel.

When we read about “democracy” in political science manuals, we often forget that you can have elections, but the majority does not necessarily prevail. You can have Fourth of July fireworks but not necessarily fundamental rights.

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