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“This is the New Normal?”: Restoring or Restricting Democracy Today in America

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Introduction and Overview

This critique reexamines the return of Donald J. Trump to the White House as the 47th President of the United States. The second coming of the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement brings with it a more reactionary administration, which has, in turn, rebooted the “Trump 2.0” presidency as a grand cultural revolution against “the Deep State.” This imposing, but vaguely defined target essentially is “bloated bureaucracy,” “big government,” or “scientific offices.” They began to develop in larger numbers with evolving missions during the Progressive era in early 1900s under both Republican (Theodore Roosevelt) and Democratic (Woodrow Wilson) presidents, Trump’s political program is to cripple or demolish as much of the “progressive” administrative values, services and powers the federal government gained since the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901 (McGerr, 2003; Lears, 2009; and, Leonard, 2016).

As an avowed admirer of McKinley, and a doggedly antagonistic opponent to all “Progressivisms” (Flanagan, 2006), Trump and those around him currently aspire to return America to the tumultuous years of industrial dynamism, economic growth, and nationalist expansion the still growing nation experienced during the Gilded Age. This agenda constitutes a troubling threat to the quality of “democracy today” in America, given how heavily labor strife, political corruption, economic inequality, and social violence marked those years of struggle and success. The telling signs of this civic turn can be seen in Trump’s far more imperious executive style and erratic policy moves in 2025 than he displayed during his term as the 45th President of the United States with the original Trump 1.0 administration.

On his July 2017 trip to Paris, for example, President Trump fidgeted and squirmed with envy next to President Macron as they both viewed the traditional military parade that has been part of the French Bastille Day festivities since 1880. Awed by the spectacle of France’s military in parade dress, first organized under the resurgent Third Republic, the President repeatedly was blocked during his Trump 1.0 administration by the Pentagon from staging a US military parade in Washington, DC. The more compliant cabinet of the Trump 2.0 government eagerly agreed to spotlight America’s global might in 2025 with a military extravaganza. Featuring dozens of armored vehicles, columns of marching troops, flyovers by historic World War Two and contemporary military aircraft, this display was the largest such spectacle since the 1991 victory parade organized under President George H. W. Bush to mark America’s successful “defense of democracy” against Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War of 1990-1991.

On June 14, 2025, which also happened to be the 250th anniversary of the establishment of the United States Army, the 248th anniversary of the Stars and Stripes Flag of the United States, and, coincidentally, President Donald Trump’s own 79th birthday, this massive celebration unfolded during a drizzly Saturday afternoon in Washington, DC. Coming with a price of around \$45 million, it rolled down streets lined with 18 miles of anti-riot fencing to control the expected mass protests against President Trump’s widely

reviled anti-immigration, trade tariff, and foreign policies after barely five months in office. This Flag Day military parade, however, was also family-oriented, friendly, and festive. Afterwards, Trump personally berated Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, for mobilizing troops who were not as disciplined, grand or menacing as the mounted Republican Guard and French Foreign Legionnaires he beheld in the Republic of France on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées for Bastille Day during 2017. Still, for the Trump White House, this show of force underscored the strength and power of “American Democracy” as it begins a year of nationwide displays, memorials, and events to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the birth of the United States of America in 2026.

At the same time, this military parade typifies the “new normal” for America in 2025. President Trump brazenly celebrated the formation of the American army a year before the anniversary of the Founding Fathers from the Thirteen Colonies issuing the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. And, ironically, two years before the chartering of the Union through the Articles of Confederation for “a United States,” which was grudgingly endorsed by the Continental Congress in 1777, but not fully ratified until 1781.

Not surprisingly, one week later and without Congressional approval, Trump greatly enjoyed a cherished moment of omnipotent hauteur in another military spectacle, albeit a stealthier one. After a diplomatic feint in talks with Tehran, he dispatched seven of the nation’s 19 operational B-2 Spirit bombers to drop 14 MOP (Massive Ordnance Penetrator) 15-ton GPU-57 bombs on three key Iranian nuclear research and production sites in “Operation Midnight Hammer” to cripple, if not crush the Islamic Republic’s nuclear weapons development program as well as celebrate America’s sophisticated strategic airpower on the world stage. The military effectiveness of this strike is still in question, and it has angered many of his MAGA followers who believed the US would no longer engage in such military unilateralism in the Middle East. In the Trump White House, however, it has been touted as a bold and extraordinary operation, which ended Israel’s and Iran’s “The Twelve Day War” between Iran and Israel with this legendary strategic attack from America’s heartland.

The core meaning of “American democracy” as a symbolic ideal or an evolving practice has always been bundled in layers of confusing myths. From its purported founding in small colonial settlements at Jamestown, Plymouth, and Providence during the seventeenth century through many decades leading to the present, the idolized practices of popular experiments in self-government in the Thirteen Colonies have mostly become civic folk tales. Patched together in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as successive waves of new Eastern and Southern European immigrants from traditional monarchies flowed into the US, American elites felt such stories would be useful to discipline the newcomers, who were fleeing economic destitution, military conscription, or sectarian persecution abroad (Bowles and Gintis, 1977). Even then, they were rarely more welcome in the cities and towns of America than the millions of desperate souls trying to cross the nation’s southern border today from zones of misery around the world.

A few citizens question the myths -- due to enduring racial, gender, and class inequalities -- that keep many believing all Americans have enjoyed democratic governance since the 1600s. Still, these solemn “democratic principles” continue to be presented in church events, public school courses, or workplace civics lessons for decades. The optics of actually existing American “democracy,” at home and abroad, remain politically perplexing. More recently, it has only been the constant ideological contrast between the US and America’s more tyrannical and terroristic opponents abroad during the twentieth century (all typecast as evil polar opposites of the US), which made “democracy in America” seem more just, kind, and fair.

As Ithiel de Sola Pool, et al. (1952: 6-16) noted during the Korean War, the explicit, frequent, and intensive use of “democracy” as the definitive moral ideal in the nation’s political debate and collective rhetoric is, in fact, definitely not an inheritance from the 1600s. Widespread circulation of this idea began in earnest only during the years of the Progressive Era, leading up to, and then following World War I, into the twentieth century. This political brand then became deeply embedded in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s in America’s existential conflicts with totalitarian fascism and communism. “Self-government,” which the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution promised the citizens of the Thirteen Colonies, proved

important for declaring independence from the British monarchy. Yet, whenever actions exemplifying "democracy" (as the Federalist Founders feared from 1776 to 1800) sprang up in frontier uprisings, tax rebellions, local experiments, or regional mutinies across the Union, most Federalist "Founding Fathers" were shaken to the point of deploying federal troops or state militias to forcefully suppress such anti-constitutional outbreaks.

The Federalist Party's Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, for example, were aimed at curbing the Democratic-Republican Party's "democratic" excesses, which were seen as more threatening than vague enthusiasm for "self-government." Of the four acts, the Alien Enemies Act is still on the books today. And, in the opening days of Trump 2.0's "new normal," Stephen Miller -- White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy -- urged the President to invoke it on March 15, 2025, to deport thousands of Venezuelan refugees as "alien enemies" allegedly tied to the *Tren de Aragua* criminal organization and the Maduro regime. The Supreme Court blocked this action in May 2025, but Miller is ever-ready to cite it to justify arbitrary and authoritarian Trump 2.0 policy initiatives (Dawsey and Ballhaus, 2025: A1, A6).

Debates about the true meaning and significance of real "democracy" in the US, therefore, have waxed and waned for decades (de Tocqueville, 1835/2003; Dewey, 1927/1946; and Dahl, 1989). Before his death on July 17, 2020, Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) defined his sense of contemporary democracy should be, drawing on his experience in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Looking to the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who leveraged civil disobedience against the laws of Jim Crow America to reclaim civil rights and the political right to vote for all US citizens, Congressman Lewis asserted,

Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we call the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it (Lewis, 2020: A 23).

Unfortunately, as he pushed back against President Trump during his first administration, John Lewis realized how little his faith in such "Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself" is shared now in America. Moreover, such beliefs about "voting and participating in the democratic process" have become highly discordant in a political culture being reshaped by the MAGA movement's loyalty to Trumpism (Lewis, 2020: A 23).

Analytical Goals

This analysis of "Trump 2.0" has three goals in critically interpreting "the new normal" under Trump 2.0. First, after detailing the deepening divisions between the two major American political parties, it reconsiders key ideological and institutional mystifications of democracy that have been wrapped around the workings of US politics since 1776. The most salient one is too often forgotten, namely, the US as a nation-state is, in fact, *not* "a democracy" per se, and never has been. This is a decisively important point. It once was imparted in Civics 1 or Government 101 classes that are no longer valued, and increasingly not even taught effectively in every town, county, or city across the US. While it is an aspirational principle for "self-rule" in the United States of America, democracy is not reducible to only "self-rule." In everyday governance, order is valued more than democracy, as the last six months of aggressive arrests and deportations of allegedly illegal immigrants demonstrate every day (Giroux, 2025). The Union, as well as each of its 50 states, was never chartered as, and does not function as, an easy-going popular "democracy."

Second, many discussions of "democracy" in the US, since 1789, like the testament of John Lewis, have framed the importance of democracy in a conflicted fashion -- either in terms of popular

endangerment, instability, and rebellion or institutional experiment, inspiration, and revelation. Certainly, there are celebratory positive views of “American democracy,” which banally evoke national identity, military might and/or economic freedom in presidential rhetoric, public policy or academic debate. Yet, this trend is relatively recent.

It took hold pervasively only during the extra-partisan Progressive Era of the 1890s and 1900s. Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, asserted: “I believe in pure democracy... We Progressives believe that the people have the right, the power, and the duty to protect themselves and their own welfare; that human rights are supreme over all other rights; that wealth should be the servant, not the master, of the people” (Roosevelt, 1910). This hearty democratic rhetoric grew stronger only as the US assumed, or perhaps stumbled through, its new role as a “great power” on the world stage during the 1900s due to its tremendously productive new industrial economy. In practice, a little over three decades later, Teddy Roosevelt’s fifth-cousin, Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, issued Executive Order 9066 that forcibly dispossessed and incarcerated over 125,000 Japanese-American immigrants and native-born citizens as suspect enemy aliens in “relocation centers” from 1942 to 1945, underscoring how “national security” holds supremacy over “human rights.”

Third, the moral inspirations of “democracy” occlude how often the mechanisms of “self-government” in a constitutional republic have had to be hard-won repeatedly through intense “good trouble, necessary trouble” over several generations since 1787 by new shifting political coalitions, involving labor strikes, mass popular demonstrations, legal action, organized sectional struggles, and even the force of arms. And, at times, it was nearly lost. Today is no different. In its worst moments, constitutional self-governance ultimately had to be defended on the battlefields of the American Civil War under the aegis of the new Republican Party, whose leader — Abraham Lincoln of Illinois — often was reviled as a dictator in the North and South alike before being assassinated by a zealous Confederate supporter six days after General Robert E. Lee surrendered with the Army of Virginia at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. In turn, federal military units occupied the Southern states after 1865 to reintegrate them back into the Union, largely under the Presidency of General Ulysses S. Grant, who had masterminded the Confederacy’s military defeat.

The legitimacy of this “Reconstruction” has never been fully accepted, and its tensions ran roughshod over democracy in the corrupt “Compromise of 1877.” Ohio Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, who clearly had lost the national popular vote to New York Democrat Samuel J. Tilden in the 1876 presidential race, leveraged 20 contested Electoral College votes from Florida, Louisiana, Oregon, and South Carolina to his advantage. An elite-brokered “corrupt bargain” in the House of Representatives threw the election to Hayes in exchange for the GOP government of President Grant ending the last federal occupation efforts across the South. Once endorsed by President Hayes and accepted by Tilden, the Republican Party retained its hold on the White House for 35 years. This oligarchical settlement of the 1876 election, in turn, crushed the emerging post-1865 “democratic” political culture of the Reconstruction Era for blacks and poor whites and enflamed violent class, racial, and sectarian oppression that continued into the 1960s. These acts of “self-government” were accepted grudgingly as constitutional, but they were far from “democratic” (Sinha, 2024).

During these post-bellum decades, the poetry of Walt Whitman spoke sincerely about “democracy,” but American governments from the Gilded Age until today have typically been far from democratic. Coupled with the need to “Americanize” floods of new European migrants, suppress conquered Native American peoples, downplay the disenfranchisement of blacks, and disrupt the new urban working classes’ struggle for economic fairness through labor unions in most states, a repressive national mythography about economic, institutional, and political “democracy” took root during the oligarchic order behind the Gilded Age. It also animated a complicated disciplinary regimen for civic normalization, civil regulation, and constitutional stabilization. Rooted in Anglo-Saxon cultural supremacy and organized violence, this emergent system was tied, in large part, to affirming the ideals of “economic opportunity,” “democratic values” and “assertive Americanism,” which reduced “self-rule” to smaller, divisive struggles over the slow permissible workings of more electoral participation for new blocs of voters that John Lewis reminds all citizens “are not guaranteed.”

Such contorted patterns of raw power in the mixed constitution of the Republic always linger in its institutional and legal background (Moe and Howell, 2026). They are "the old normal" in the US, which must never be forgotten, particularly when facing "the new normal" of Trump 2.0. Indeed, Trump's infamous White House's January 2, 2021 call to Georgia Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, to "find 11,780 votes" in that state's already certified 2020 election results to shift its Electoral College count (along with similar calls to election officials in Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to change these states' electoral results) reaffirm John Lewis's warning about America's electoral democracy. With all of its flaws and limits, "The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it." Remembering that Trump 1.0 enjoined crowds on January 6, 2021, to march on the Capitol to reclaim "the stolen election" of 2020 is equally imperative. Seeing his *autogolpe* fail on television, and enduring a second impeachment for giving it a go, he and his Trump 2024 campaign put John Lewis's wisdom to work after his art of the deal could not close another "corrupt bargain" to control the White House during November and December 2020 (Luke, 2021: 2-10).

The Clash: Alternative Political Realities in 2024

These contradictions in the traditional vision of American democracy collided with the 2024 rhetoric of the Democratic and Republican parties. On the one hand, President Biden, in his March 7, 2024, State of the Union Address, confidently asserted, "I've always known what endures. I've known our North Star. The very idea of America is that we're all created equal, deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. We've never fully lived up to that idea, but we've never walked away from it either. And I won't walk away from it now. I'm optimistic.... To lead America, the land of possibilities, you need a vision for the future and what can and should be done. Tonight you've heard mine. I see a future where we're defending democracy; you don't diminish it. I see a future where we restore the right to choose and protect other freedoms, not take them away" (Biden, 2024). Despite growing doubts during 2024 in the Democratic Party about Biden's mental acuity and physical stamina, few questioned his commitment to these conventional democratic ideals.

On the other hand, two weeks earlier, during the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland, hordes of ultra-conservative GOP political activists convened what they touted as "the largest and most influential gathering of conservatives in the world." On a panel led by Steve Bannon, a social media influencer and Trump supporter, Jack Posobiec exclaimed, "Welcome to the end of democracy" when discussing the 2021 Capitol riots. "We are here to overthrow it completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it and replace it with this right here." Posobiec then raised his fist, adding: "All glory is not to government. All glory to God." <<https://www.newsweek.com/jack-posobiec-end-democracy-cpac-1872694>>.

Along the ragged edges of these two radically different visions for American government, the gaping cultural rifts of the US are on display. Even the secular cultural commonplaces of the banal American nationalism anchoring US citizenship, from celebrating Columbus Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Patriots Day, Statehood Day or Veterans' Day, which have been moments for professing a shared faith in The Constitution of the United States by most citizens, as President Biden claimed during his 2024 State of the Union address, are fragmenting and falling away.

Other psychosocial dynamics, however, have coiled up in the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement. Many Republican voters regard many secular beliefs, whether they are dressed up as liberalism or conservatism, as morally empty. Since the 1950s, more religious meanings have resurfaced in the interpretation of America's "Manifest Destiny." For numerous older, Christian, isolationist, rural, and white voters, like many in Posobiec's social media audience, it is time to embrace a "Christian nationalism" in open insurrection against secular "American democracy."

President and then Vice President Harris still carried the torch of Progressivism that Theodore Roosevelt praised. As the Democratic Party's candidates, they stuck to "Square Deal/New Deal/Fair

Deal/Great Society/Putting People First” rhetorical roads built during the twentieth century by leaders in both the Democratic and Republican Parties (Dahl, 1989). By putting “people first” in America’s New Deal and Great Society policies, however, the Democrats also were entrusting their governance to expert specialists working in the offices of Washington’s “Big Government.” These federal officials are crucial. They are turning the gears behind the regulatory procedures, transfer payments, tax policies, and social practices supposedly endorsed by “the people, who have endorsed them repeatedly in periodic “democratic” elections. For the Democratic Party after 1932, its presidents asked America to serve their country, stay optimistic, live up to American ideals, and trust the laws of the land, while accepting directions from Washington’s bureaucratic experts as “Fourth Branch of Government,” who put into action the nation’s constitutional regimen, which implicitly equaled their free “self-government” (Leonard, 2016).

While they were more friendly with Wall Street corporate elites and Main Street small business owners, Republican presidents from Calvin Coolidge to George W. Bush still worked to find bipartisan consensual solutions for running America’s government until the end of the Cold War and the decades of endless wars in and around the Middle East. 9/11, the Great Recession, and the election of President Barack Hussein Obama in 2008, however, shattered the fragile consensus held together by resisting the influence of the USSR abroad and at home for decades. One-time fringe elements in the Republican Party led by Pat Buchanan, Newt Gingrich, and other renegades, who had spent years fracturing Cold War bipartisan norms, realized their aspirations. From the 1994 “Contract with America” to the McCain/Palin GOP ticket’s defeat in 2008, the advent of Trump 1.0 in 2016 (Zeliser, 2021) did not take long to arrive.

Going back to the Tea Party’s protests during the 2010 mid-term elections, Trump saw his opportunity to move. Far more ordinary Americans openly decried how the nation’s laws were not being enforced fairly in government actions. Many voters who had once backed both Democrats and Republicans came to believe the historical traditions animating the Constitution had failed them. Working class, middle class, and upper class, these citizens felt ignored by government experts, even though those experts purportedly were there to put all of America’s 335 million people first (Rana, 2024). Bannon, Miller, Posobiec, and thousands of CPAC conservatives like them claimed they now wanted governance in an “originalist fashion.” The Constitution for them must be more than the workings of progressive-minded experts with meritocratic positions in federal bureaucracies (Balkin, 2024). As Posobiec first suggested on February 23, 2024, at CPAC, “We are always supportive of a constitutional republic,” referring to CPAC’s conservative membership. Yet, his second claim was more jarring, namely, “What we’re trying to do is return it to the original system. We’re not destroying all of democracy, just their [Democrats’] democracy,” <<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/jack-posobiec-jan-6-2024-cpac-rcna140225>>.

Still, the MAGA movement’s populist passions went largely unfulfilled during the Trump 1.0 administration. As POTUS 45, Trump had no coherent sense of why to “return [the US] to the original system” or how to not “destroy all of democracy, just their [Biden’s, Obama’s, Pelosi’s, Schumer’s] democracy,” once he ran for the presidency and won. President Trump expected to lose in 2016 to Hilary Clinton, and the Trump Organization had no coherent transition plans for 2017. And, as he prepared the field for coping with his defeat during 2020 by arguing any GOP loss had to result from “a stolen election,” Trump pushed these partisan passions by backing the violent protests in Washington on January 6, 2021 in Washington.

Ironically, these radical moves directly proved the merits of a classical view of “democracy,” as depicted by Aristotle, Polybius, or Aquinas. It is nothing more than a crass “mobocracy,” as the Federalist Founding Fathers agreed, whether one looked at the inner sanctum of the Trump 1.0 White House or the last alley hiding insurgent cadres from The Proud Boys. After surviving two impeachment trials as “POTUS 45,” moreover, Donald Trump relentlessly spent weeks after January 20, 2021 plotting his reelection as “POTUS 47” during 2024.

Unfazed by the GOP’s 2022 mid-term losses, he effectively purged most state and local Republican Party organizations of their “Never Trumper” members in addition to having his daughter-in-

law installed as the Chair of the Republican National Committee. These moves were fully on display at the vacuous Republican National Convention in Milwaukee. The emptiness of this traditional Grand Old Party gathering actually was all about the new movement of MAGA voters and Trump 2.0 rather than the Republican Party at large (Schlozman and Rosenfeld, 2024). Trump also had tighter transition plans to implement after his 2024 triumph on his first days in office in 2025, including promises to be a "dictator for a day." Along with his bold "revenge and retribution" agenda supported by 2024 Trump re-election committees, the Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025" laid out a comprehensive program for radical regime change, first through compiling a list of reliable, if bizarre, new appointees for the key positions named in "The Plum Book," and second, by drawing up a clear map for a "New 100 Days" program that eagerly flouted America's civic traditions. Many of those engaged in Project 25 sought to scrap and/or suspend key principles in the 1787 Constitution to destroy what they regard still as the "deep state" in Washington, DC, and welcome, as Posobiec wants, the end of "democracy" (and liberal constitutional government) in the US.

Trump claimed any electoral loss he might incur during the 2024 general election would be proof of a stolen election effort, like 2020. After sliding in opinion polls, he continued to gaslight the nation with rhetoric about electoral irregularities, lost ballots, and disloyal electors. Still, to gain victory, many embedded Washington interests, from the Heritage Foundation to MAGA legislators in both chambers of Congress, were preparing the ground for a Trump victory. One small, but crucial circle worked out of Mar-A-Lago. Its two co-managers are Susie Wiles, a one-time worker for Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign and a senior adviser for Trump's efforts during 2016 and 2020 in Florida, as well as a 57-year-old ex-Marine from the Gulf War, Chris LaCivita, who had built a career in political consulting. With Jason Miller as the media strategist and assisted by Steven Cheung, a former communications chief for the Ultimate Fighting Championship cage-fighting productions, Trump's campaign dominated the new social media systems of the twenty-first century. Brian Jack, who served in the White House as a political director under Trump, managed the outreach efforts to other GOP politicians to secure endorsements, while Dan Scavino oversaw social media. Scavino has worked for Trump since the 1990s, starting as a golf caddie for the then-rich-and-famous New York real estate magnate. Yet, he also stayed with the Trump team during his three campaigns for president as well as his 2017-2021 days in the White House <<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/inside-trumps-election-a-team-lean-mean-largely-unseen-2024-02-01/>>.

The ties between this action group and Stephen Miller's circle at the America First Legal organization, which had two dozen lawyers on staff with \$60 million from undisclosed Trump supporters backing its work, laid the foundation for Trump to remake American government into an oligarchic spoils system. To appear activist and decisive from the get-go, the Trump 2.0 administration runs essentially by issuing dictatorial executive orders, which stand until contested in court or confirmed by Congress. Miller brought hundreds of such draft orders with him from America First Legal, and he usually stands next to the President in the Oval Office or other sites when they are signed (Dawsey and Ballhaus, 2025: A 6). Additional guidance, in large part, has been drawn from scores of authors who contributed to The Heritage Foundation's "Project 2025: Presidential Transition Project," which was working fully out in the open during 2023 and 2024 for Trump (Dans and Roberts, 2024). Remembering the disorganization following the 2016 election, the Heritage Foundation's goals were stark:

It is not enough for conservatives to win elections. If we are going to rescue the country from the grip of the radical Left, we need both a governing agenda and the right people in place, ready to carry this agenda out on Day One of the next conservative Administration.

This is the goal of the 2025 Presidential Transition Project. < <https://www.project2025.org/>>. No matter how narrow a Trump victory was, the run-up to his inauguration and "First 100 Days" already was mapped out in book-length form by this established Washington think tank in the *2025 Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Dans and Roberts, 2024). Running 30 chapters, and written by an eclectic mix of governmental experts, the purpose behind its positions is clear: "This book is an

invitation for you, the reader --- Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith, and Ms. Smith --- to come to Washington or support those who can. Our goal is to assemble an army of aligned, vetted, trained, and prepared conservatives to go to work on Day One to deconstruct the Administrative State” <<https://www.project2025.org/policy/>>.

Indeed, its planners had already poured through “the Plum Book,” which is produced by “the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs alternately after each Presidential election. The Plum Book is used to identify Presidentially appointed and other positions within the Federal Government” <<https://www.gpo.gov/who-we-are/news-media/news-and-press-releases/gpo-releases-plum-book#:~:text=The%20Plum%20Book%20is%20published,positions%20within%20the%20Federal%20Government>>. Its origins are found in the first Eisenhower administration, but the 9,000 +/- special appointment positions it lists capture the key posts in the federal government that need to be filled during each presidential transition.

While this plan is presented in the same hopeful tones that characterized the 1979 Heritage Foundation’s 1981 *Mandate for Leadership* after the defeat of Jimmy Carter by Ronald Reagan, it did not foretell a second coming for “Morning Again in America” as it partially provided the blueprint for “The Reagan Revolution.” The Heritage Foundation had developed policy outlines for Trump during 2016 in its 2017 *Mandate for Leadership*, which it claimed President Trump implemented faster and more fully than President Reagan. The worth of such credit claiming often is in the eyes of the beholder, but the overall confusion of Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, The Trump Organization and a revolving door of Cabinet officials during the Trump 1.0 administration leads one to doubt this sunny view of how much the swamp was drained, the administrative state shrank or America’s enemies retreated on POTUS 45’s watch.

Still, Trump in 2024 dominated the Republican National Committee. His campaign focused on more revenge and retribution, as his personal 2024 appeal indicates to the Save America Joint Fundraising Committee:

The Left thinks that if they bury me with enough witch hunts and intimidate my family and associates, that I’ll eventually throw up my hands and give up on our America First movement. Let me be as clear as possible: I WILL NEVER STOP FIGHTING FOR YOU. As the never-ending witch hunts heat up, please make a contribution to defend the MAGA movement.

-Donald J. Trump
45th President of the United States
SAVE AMERICA!”

<https://secure.winred.com/save-america-joint-fundraising-committee/lp-djt-google-v1/?utm_medium=ads&utm_source=google_lp_kw&utm_campaign=20240227_dtrump_lowfunnel-generic_google_search_lp&utm_content=donate&utm_term=generic&gad_source=1&gclid=EAlaIQobChMI35voncT7hAMV23BHAR3yfQGIEAMYASAAEgKruvD_BwE&exitintent=true>

Casting himself as a martyr tortured by a nebulously defined, but essentially monolithic, force of “The Left,” Trump was free to caricature anyone who spoke against him as a hostile leftist dupe seeking to destroy him and the MAGA movement, who are always for America First.

Project 2025 laid out such complex transition plans for reconstructing the federal government and national policies in a radical fashion and with such immense scope that it is hard to maintain that it is truly “conservative.” Trump instead has been highly patrimonial in his style of rule after Elon Musk’s and Russell Vought’s efforts at DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) to begin demolishing “the Deep State.” As first proposed in his 2020 draft “Schedule F Executive Order” (Moynihan, 2021: 174-178), Trump has resurrected a personalized spoils system to shape a federal bureaucracy of appointees loyal only to President Trump’s vision to improve American government. Such “imagined improvements” include the eventual abolition of the Department of Education, modeling K-12 instruction around MAGA

movement cultural agendas, indicting and prosecuting President and his allies, rounding up and deporting all illegal aliens as he seals the nation's southern border, reconsidering the merits of remaining in NATO, revamping all federal civil (and military) service slots to assure their occupants' loyalty first to his MAGA agenda rather than the Constitution, reorganizing the Federal Election Commission to manage future electoral contests nation-wide, deploying the US military inside the country to enforce domestic order as needed, invading Mexico if needed to fight the drug and human trafficking cartels, rounding up the homeless population in America's cities by mobilizing the National Guard, banning abortion and women's right to choose nationally, ending climate change mitigation efforts, amping up fossil fuel use to attain US energy independence, imposing tariffs on most imported foreign goods, and a host of other measures he saw as suitable to sign at the fateful hour he promised to be "dictator for a day" (Jonathan Swan, Maggie Haberman and Charlie Savage, 2023: A 15).

More fancifully, to prove the US can compete with China, Trump also proposed building at least 10 entirely new "Freedom Cities," whose transportation needs will be centered on the use of flying cars, and America's population will be increased by dangling "Baby Bonuses" to trigger another "Baby Boom" as part of his "Agenda47: A New Quantum Leap to Revolutionize the American Standard of Living" <<https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-proposes-freedom-cities-flying-cars-new-campaign-video-2023-3>>. Not unlike "Spinner" technologies broadly depicted in various films -- *Bladerunner*, *Back to the Future*, *Star Wars*, or *The Fifth Element* and video games, this proposal is intriguing. On the one hand, it adds a futuristic *frisson* to the gloom and doom of POTUS 47's plans for the coming days of "America First." Yet, on the other hand, this call for a quantum leap based on "big dreams and daring projects" strangely echoes the aspirations and attainments of Albert Speer and Ferdinand Porsche in another time and place.

As yet another nexus for the fantasy and fanaticism of the MAGA movement's mythography for rebooting America, Agenda47 <<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/agenda47>> also affirmed the US is not a "democracy" in a series of Trump videos. Staged in front of his trademark echelons of crisply draped American flags, Donald Trump sounds like an American monarch- one man knowing how to discover and enact colossal changes across the varied terrains to satisfy the demos' many needs and wants. Strangely, these campaign clips called to mind Mencken (1990: 232). He drily observed in the twentieth century, "if you are against demagogues, then you are against democracy;" and, more importantly, "democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard."

Reflecting on how Trump, now as POTUS 47, has worked for six months from above at a rapid pace to get his voters what they want good and hard, Trump is making good on what he believes were his numerous pledges to most of the MAGA movement: prosecuting drug lords, creating a new American Academy to clean up the nation's allegedly corrupt universities, protecting all American students from "the Radical Left and Marxist Maniacs," rebuilding the American military, restoring the US automobile industry, condoning home schooling for all who seek it and taking on Big Pharma to reduce the cost of medicines. Again, the links, or frictions, between the Mar-a-Lago campaign managers, the Heritage Foundation, and Agenda47 have grown evident in 2025, but each of them has helped Trump remember and recite the MAGA movement-friendly party lines all the way to victory in the 2024 election.

America is a Republic, Not a Democracy

The architecture of power in *Project 25* strongly stresses that the US is "a republic." But the inherently anti-democratic bias in American election practices was there to see as the first waves of state party caucuses in Iowa and primaries in New Hampshire rolled up to the "Super Tuesday" events of March 5 and March 12, 2024, for the November presidential election. Despite the sanctity accorded to counting every last vote in the primary season, Joe Biden and Donald Trump both attained their overwhelming respective delegate counts -- once the outcomes of primary contests in Georgia, Mississippi, and Washington state were tallied up in the evening of March 12, 2024.

American civics instruction, like Congressman John Lewis, still maintains that every voter is

important; and her or his vote is important and will count equally. For those waiting to vote in the many later 2024 primaries, however, their ballots for Biden or Trump became irrelevant. Save for the last-minute substitution of Vice President Harris for Biden, the two parties had locked down their candidates, even though many states and territories did not even begin, much less complete, their electoral caucuses or primaries until later in March through June 2024. With the nation's "first past the post" electoral rules, voting is symbolic, but it still must be staged.

Even though Biden and Trump were the 2024 Democratic and Republican nominees for President of the United States, the regulation of population leading up to the polls was exercised to its fullest final degree. Everyone is still free to choose, and even expected to vote, but not all votes count the same. The disciplinary management of voters through such electoral rituals is cruelly ironic. Incessant fund-raising and political performance are absolutely necessary, but it also operationally needless at the same time outside of six or seven contested states.

To comprehend how long these and other more arcane structural biases in American party and election have discounted the voice of many voters, it is crucial to recognize that at root, America is not a "democracy." As Fradenburgh explained in his *American Civics: A Textbook for High Schools, Normal Schools and Academies* (1906: 8),

Democracy. — Democracy is government by the people. Democracies are of two kinds, pure democracies and republics.

1. In a pure democracy, the sovereign people express their will by means of a popular assembly. Many of the Greek city-states ruled themselves. The New England town meeting is an example of a pure democracy, in this case limited to local affairs. A pure democracy is, by its nature, possible only in small communities.
2. The people of a republic govern themselves through representatives of their own selection. In a republic, just as in a pure democracy, the people are sovereign.

On the day a republic's voters select their representatives, as Rousseau observes in *The Social Contract*, they are sovereign. As sovereign agents, their electoral power allows them to select their representatives. Once done, those representatives in republics like the US are granted authority to convey their preferences through the grids of divided and separated powers. Hence, comparative handfuls of citizens hold more electoral heft as voters than millions of others simply through their place of residence and timing of elections. As E. E. Schattschneider (1960) maintains, the embedded anti-democratic qualities of US political institutions and the Constitution itself have always made Americans a "semi-sovereign people."

Hence, during 2024, in light of the 2020 Census, Wyoming (population: 578,803), Rhode Island (population: 1,096,000), and Alaska (population: 723,673) are three equally sovereign states in the United States. At the same time, they also have as many senators in the US Senate as three other states with far more voters -- Texas (29.53 million), Florida (21.78 million), and California (39.24 million). The United States clearly is not a "pure democracy" today, and its "representative democracy" has been organized in various different lop-sided manners since 1787. All US states set their own rules for all elections, and the Fifteenth Amendment after 1870 prohibited them from using race to discriminate at the polls. Yet, after 1877, many measures embedded in each one of the Confederate States' Readmission Acts distorted democratic practices by disenfranchising most African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Women could not vote outside of a few western states until the Nineteenth Amendment permitted female suffrage in 1920. Until the Seventeenth Amendment came into force in the 1914 elections, the senators from all 48 states were not elected; state legislatures chose the two Senators sent to Washington, adding another buffer against the ordinary voter in favor of the elites of each state. Over many decades, then, the initial "electorate" of propertied, wealthy elite men gradually allowed once-

excluded voters to join them after hard struggles to broaden the rights of suffrage, but only to strengthen the Constitution and the limited liberty it had fostered.

This sense of "popular government" with no words wasted on "American democracy" is evident in President McKinley's "Fourth Annual Message to Congress" on December 3, 1900, in which he proclaims,

The Republic was never so strong, because never so strongly entrenched in the hearts of the people as now. The Constitution, with few amendments, exists as it left the hands of its authors. The additions which have been made to it proclaim larger freedom and more extended citizenship. Popular government has demonstrated in its one hundred and twenty-four years of trial here its stability and security, and its efficiency as the best instrument of national development and the best safeguard to human rights.

<<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-3-1900-fourth-annual-message>>

From unpropertied, less wealthy men, then women, then religious, ethnic, racial, and disabled minorities, the "people" granted self-government and liberty, as provided by the Constitution, were those individuals registered and certified with the right to vote with the "electorate." These "people," however, are not "The People" who actually cast ballots,

The electorate is only those individuals who turn out to vote -- legally before or on Election Day -- to exercise their right to cast a ballot, which is rarely everyone who is eligible to vote. As Menand (2022) observed about President Biden's victory, "In 2020, sixty-seven per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot for President. That was the highest turnout since 1900, a year when few, if any, women, people under twenty-one, Asian immigrants (who could not become citizens), Native Americans (who were treated as foreigners), or Black Americans living in the South (who were openly disenfranchised) could vote. Eighteen per cent of the total population voted in that election. In 2020, forty-eight per cent voted." Despite more diversity and democracy, oligarchic forces and practices continue to be at work to warp "American democracy."

What matters in the republic is not democracy. It is rather "the electorate" and their expertly managed electoral systems designed to dilute, defuse, and disable more open democratic practices. This force varies in size, but it is the majority plus minority of all eligible voters who actually turn out to vote for each contested office or issue in America's territories, states, and national district that rule over "the people." Once their votes are counted, however, they are deemed to be "the People who spoke through the vote," deciding who will rule -- after their ballots, say for the Presidency, are certified and counted by the appropriate jurisdictions and Electoral College. Over 120 years, more and more voters have been made eligible, but differences in electoral districting, state populations, turnout suppression, polling procedures, ballot processing, and voter credentialing have barely made a difference. With so many varied levels of electoral governance for candidates who are seeking different levels of offices, complex constitutional rules for buffering "democracy" matter far more than the mythos of "one person, one vote."

Simple counts of all votes added up together from across the nation in one mass reckoning perhaps should, but do not, in fact, decide who wins and loses the White House in America. The direct democratic preferences of the national electorate are easily checkmated by constitutional republican machinations. In turn, these provisos leave the magistrates and officials serving each local "electorate" whose amplified and integrated choices can be credited at will with great authority as local, regional, or national mandates. Moreover, these outcomes are present by design.

Despite what most learn in their school-day civics lessons, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, the Constitution of the United States (and even the Constitution for the Confederate States of America), which are all America's keystone civic documents, do not mention "democracy." Instead, they endorse liberty, individual rights, self-rule, and popular government in "order to form a more perfect Union." Hence, "democracy" is not mentioned once in any

of these foundational writs of civic life. Likewise, each of the Union's 50 state constitutions, even the five most recently admitted during the twentieth century -- Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, and Hawai'i--- never use the term "democracy" in their constitutions despite this term circulating widely in public and private discourses, since the 1770s.

In Article IV, section 4, however, the Constitution does stipulate that "The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion; and on Application of the Legislature, or of the Executive (when the Legislature cannot be convened) against domestic Violence" to uphold "the Union" and its final authority to maintain this republican order and aggressively police possible democratic excesses.

Abraham Lincoln might have used even fewer words in his Gettysburg Address by using the term "democracy," but he did not. It is apparent he, too, did not regard "government by the people, for people and of people" as necessarily equivalent to more contemporary visions of democratic governance developed since World War I. Instead, he celebrated, like the Pledge of Allegiance, a form of constitutional popular governance by "the Republic" as well as the solidarity of "the Union." Both he preserved by fighting a Civil War to uphold the values of liberty and justice for all in the Union for which, in large part, the war was waged.

These omissions are not accidental. Treating "democracy" as an official talking point, once again, arose out of the symbolic politics of Progressive-inspired executive branch bureaucrats facing off with the President against various foreign ruling autocrats allegedly first inspired by the "totalitarian democracy" of the Jacobins in the First French Republic, as well as radical socialists and communists who allegedly always favored this extreme example. From James Madison's (a.k.a. "Publius") analysis of democracy in *The Federalist*, No. 10 to Senator John C. Calhoun's 1837 address to the Senate "On the Bill for the Admission of Michigan" challenging simplistic state-wide mass democratic entreaties for admission into the Union to Samuel Huntington's assessment of the 1960s' and 1970s' mass political actions in the streets as a "democratic distemper" in *The Public Interest* during 1975 to Yascha Mounk's curious liberalism-democracy/illiberalism-dictatorship matrix in *The Journal of Democracy* during 2018, it is clear that Americans always have fretted over how much "democracy" should be tolerated when compared to trusted "non-democratic" designs for "popular self-government" in the 1787 Constitution for nearly 250 years. At the end of the day, **"AMERICAN DEMOCRACY ISN'T VERY SUCCESSFUL**, not despite being the world's oldest, but because of that fact. The Founding Fathers--primarily aristocrats, land speculators, and slaveholders--had noble aspirations but limited belief in true democracy. They distrusted agglomerations of power, whether in a monarch, political parties, or the people." (Dayden, 2024)

Conclusions

This consideration of "American democracy" today, as a constitutional gap and ideological mystification, has retraced the recurrent cultural clashes about this ideal since the early nineteenth century. Such intrinsic frictions must not be forgotten, because "the reconstruction" of the republic is, and has been, a continuously contested process since 1865 that is becoming more heated again. As the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee illustrated in July 2024, the conservative civic discourses and elitist social forces sustaining the MAGA movement's self-righteous faith in former President (45) Trump's destiny to become the next President (47) of the US were reawakened with the tremendous energies of mediagenic charisma.

After the failed assassination attempt on July 13, 2024, against him in Butler, Pennsylvania, Trump's campaign was recharged. In a manner not unlike the attempt on President Ronald Reagan's life on March 30, 1981 (after being in office barely over two months), a historic sense of apparent divinely-guided necessity has been played up by Trump, which worked for Reagan's scripts of "televisual democracy" (Luke, 1986-1987: 59-79) in 1984. Albeit, Trump is also running this vision of divine protection through the legacy media as well as the 5G world of social media, infotainment news, and corporate PR at the core of America's public sphere in 2024. That this rifle shot at Trump was taken at a rally of loyal

MAGA followers also made many feel like they, too, were part of a miracle broadcast "on live TV."

Trump's extended family is also one axis of a revitalized American oligarchy, spinning in glee about its popularity with rap artists, country music singers, and cage fighters shilling for Trump as POTUS 45/47. Here, illiberal ideologies, like Christian nationalism, nativism, constitutional originalism, patrimonialism, and autarkic economics (each with its own narrow degrees of permissible civic freedom) are constantly "on offer" in many Trump Organization activities. In turn, new voters across America embrace these MAGA-managed spectacles as "Republicanism."

On the other hand, Trump's attacks on Ivy League degrees, technocratic expertise, frequent military interventionism, economic globalism, serious DEI enforcement, ESG management, and "America as the World's Police Man" mythography with no-holds-barred cultural freedom firmly anchored "the pitch" against the Democratic candidacy of Vice President Harris in both Blue and Red States. Within this limited set of options, the voters' choices are essentially what is available on their ballots in America's highly organized, extremely expensive, and heavily scripted "electoral democracy," despite the latest promise of Elon Musk to form a new post-Democratic, anti-Republican "America Party" in July 2025.

In 2024, on the one hand, the contradictions between liberal critiques of demagoguery, like those advanced by Vice President Harris, who was pushed into the race after the Democratic Party's inner circle pressured Biden to withdraw from the electoral contest, were stark. Even after losing in 2016, the Democrats saw their mission as imposing more government services via the expansion of technocratic bureaucracies. Yet, on the other hand, the populist critiques of bureaucratic technocrats, like those made by Trump, advocate dismantling government agencies and cutting regulatory bodies -- even without considering how alternate mechanisms for expertise might guide the vital functions many bureaucracies perform -- resonated with the voters. The MAGA movement's populist program, however, lacks a credible design for providing valued institutional services beyond cutting "big government," which turns access to public services into games of chance tied to individual risk management, a new spoils system, quasi-corrupt access dealing, or intense MAGA loyalism.

Trump 2.0 is closely following the guidance advanced in Project 2025 and Agenda47. As putative blueprints to improve the existing "deep state," however, neither of these policy outlines is ever likely to curtail the expert administration and accelerating commodification of America's everyday life, even if their designs are fully implemented. The "experts" will continue to be recruited, but their educational backgrounds, professional careers, and political leanings will be very different than those recruited under the Biden or Obama administrations. Most importantly, some signal of allegiance to Trump and the MAGA agenda will be required to join the civil service, and recruits will be unlikely to stand in the way of new Executive Orders from the White House. Citizens can expect less government expert intrusion, not unlike the Environmental Protection Agency under its current Administrator, Lee Zeldin, to the American-made commodities blessed by POTUS 47. From more fossil fueled cars, official cryptocurrency, gas stoves or plastic drinking straws to new nuclear reactors, bigger showerheads, Greenland real estate or neo-revisionist museum displays, the EPA now is dedicated to "Powering the Great American Comeback" < <https://www.epa.gov/>>.

The Trump 2.0 administration will also strive to intensify its own regulations from above of all American elections, election funding, and registration of the electorate. Rather than restoring or restraining democracy in 2024, the current reconfiguration of the federal workforce opens the doors for Trump and his MAGA-leaning GOP to fundamentally reconstruct the workings of the Republic. By redefining citizenship, voting rights, and electoral participation in terms of originalist readings of the Constitution, sectarian national identity, and a postliberal public philosophy, the re-election of Donald J. Trump will continue to restrict opening up the nation for greater advances toward democracy. The support of the White House for an accelerated extraordinary redistricting by Texas of its Congressional districts in 2025 to add five safe Republican seats to the Red State GOP majority in the House is the most salient example of such oligarchical engineering at work within the republican designs of "self-rule" unfolding now.

Massive government agency reductions are restricting the opportunities of all citizens to engage

in public service, and Trump's March 25, 2025, executive order on "PRESERVING AND PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF AMERICAN ELECTIONS" will complicate and further regulate how the US conducts voting nationally. At this juncture, Trump's deconstruction of the administrative state and its underpinnings in liberal technocracy are restricting democracy by creating a new patrimonial order, thanks to the timidity of Congress and a sluggish inaction in the Supreme Court to check these developments. As the lead player in this theater of disruption, Trump and his family have also discovered numerous new ways "to monetize" his presidency for their personal gain. From signing new Trump hotel deals to selling Trump swag to Trump family cryptocurrency schemes, the net increase in these personal fortunes has already been calculated using available open sources to be at least \$3.4 billion (Kirkpatrick, 2025: 26-43).

Rooted in the MAGA movement's willingness to rearrange the private and public spheres of "self-government" in everyday American life, this regime gives free rein to President Trump's narrowly conformist, nationalist, and unilateralist policy inclinations that reduce good governance to devious deals. At the same time, the divisive MAGA cultural revolution is far from making "democracy today" the tenor of "the new normal" for the US and its citizens. More ominously, the Trump 2.0 administration is barely trying to guarantee a credible "republican form of government" for all of its citizens and states. Instead, his deployment of ICE agents to arrest undocumented immigrant workers across the country, National Guard troops to police Washington, DC, and B-2 bombers to strike Iran are controversial executive actions that make POTUS 47 appear all-powerful. Yet, these acts are dividing his MAGA base, frightening those wanting domestic tranquility and undermining "the Union" that POTUS 47 had sworn on January 20, 2025, in accord with The Constitution to "secure the blessings of liberty" for all.

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