

Rising Threats to U.S. Democracy

Roots and Responses

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ABSTRACT


This is the expanded written version of the James Madison Lecture delivered on September 6, 2024, at the APSA Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA. I grapple with the pressing question before us as social scientists and as citizens: How and why have US politics and governance arrived at the present juncture where long-standing constitutional practices and democratically responsive governance are very much at stake? My answer focuses on what I see as the prime driver of the current crisis: the recent radicalization of the Republican Party and its allies, as they have pursued two forms and phases of antidemocratic politics. The first version involves maximum use of legal hardball steps that stretch existing laws and rules to disadvantage partisan opponents (I also call this approach “McConnellism” in honor of its chief practitioner, outgoing GOP Senate Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky). The second approach targets political competitors and government operations with extralegal harassment, threats of violence, and even actual violence. Drawing on my own research with many collaborators, as well as from many excellent studies by colleagues in political science and beyond, I will dissect the elite and popular roots of recent Republican embrace of both forms of antidemocratic politics.

I am greatly honored by receipt of the James Madison Award and thankful for this opportunity to engage with so many thoughtful colleagues. From the moment I was notified, I realized that the award is not just a passive honor; it requires preparing a lecture to address pressing public challenges, in the proud tradition of previous honorees. I delayed my presentation from last year’s convention partly in the hope that the challenges facing US democracy—my subject—would clarify by now. Little did I realize how stark the clarifications would turn out to be—above all, once a partisan Supreme Court majority voted to overturn the antimonarchical core of the US Constitution (Shane 2024a), shortly before one of America’s two major political parties nominated an ethnonationalist, would-be authoritarian for president.

Today, I therefore grapple with the pressing question before us as social scientists and as citizens: **How and why have US politics and**

governance arrived at the present juncture where long-standing Constitutional practices and democratically responsive governance are very much at stake? My answer focuses on what I see as the prime driver of the current crisis: the recent radicalization of the Republican Party and its allies, as they have pursued two forms and phases of antidemocratic politics. The first version involves maximum use of *legal hardball* steps that stretch existing laws and rules to disadvantage partisan opponents (I also call this approach “McConnellism” in honor of its chief practitioner, outgoing GOP Senate Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky). The second approach targets political competitors and government operations with *extralegal* harassment, threats of violence, and even actual violence. Drawing on my own research with many collaborators, as well as from many excellent studies by colleagues in political science and beyond, I will dissect the elite and popular roots of recent Republican embrace of both forms of antidemocratic politics.

Let me note a caveat. Anyone hoping for 2024 election predictions will be disappointed. After I probe developments on the right of the US political spectrum, I will speak briefly about recent shifts in liberal and Democratic Party politics and look ahead at what may come next for American democracy. But I will not speculate about near-term electoral winners and losers. Especially at junctures

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of upheaval and change, political scientists are not good at soothsaying. My scholarly tribe, historical institutionalists, focuses instead on why crisis junctures emerge and considers alternative possible trajectories. That is what I plan to do today.

Tracking Republican Radicalization

To lay out the nature of contemporary Republican Party radicalization, let me direct your attention to the chart distributed for this presentation (Figure 1). Without delving into all the details, I can highlight what is included and the important trends I see.

The chart offers a chronology of important steps Republican-aligned actors have taken since 2000 to weaken US democratic elections and accountable governance. In deciding what to include, I deliberately set aside mere partisan policy choices such as GOP votes against legislation, forced government budget impasses, and even votes by most GOP Senators against presidential impeachment charges. I include only “extralegal” and “legal hardball” measures that deliberately reduce majority citizen voice or disadvantage partisan opponents. Extralegal steps include pervasive harassment, violence, and threats of violence targeting partisan opponents, public officials, and election workers, as well as public GOP encouragement of such activities. Legal hardball developments include partisan-targeted changes in rules about voting, ballot access, and procedures for counting ballots or certifying elections. This category also encompasses targeted efforts to undercut the organizational capacities of partisan opponents (such as those intended to disable labor unions) or to remove long-standing powers of a public office (for instance, laws taking powers from a newly elected governor of the other party). I also include steps taken to move policy decisions from electorally accountable to nonelectoral venues (for instance, by shifting final say to courts controlled by copartisans).

Several patterns and trends stand out in this chart:

- The overall chronology suggests that the twenty-first-century US Republican Party and groups in its orbit have undertaken antidemocratic efforts over many years but have recently accelerated such efforts.
- During the entire period chronicled here, we see an evolution within the legal hardball category, as GOP officials and allies moved from implementing new rules (often enacted by states) to restrict voter access toward attempts to empower copartisans in venues beyond majority decision making (as in the filibuster-controlled US Senate) or outside the reach of any electoral accountability at all (as happens when courts take over final say on policy issues previously left to elected executives and legislatures).
- Legal hardball tactics have been used throughout the twenty-first century by elected Republicans, party leaders, and groups in the GOP orbit. However, use or acceptance of extralegal tactics has accelerated in the wake of the spectacular efforts made by defeated President Donald Trump and his allies to overthrow the 2020 election results.
- Last, and to me most telling, GOP groups and officials have recently added extralegal harassment and actual or threatened violence to their antidemocratic repertoire, *even though Republicans have continued to win many elections within the established US constitutional rules of the game—and even though Republicans have gained extra electoral and governing leverage from the accelerated use of legal hardball tactics.*

This last pattern is so striking because many observers regard contemporary GOP radicalization as primarily defensive—that is, as a set of tactics pursued to ward off supposedly demographically inexorable Democratic electoral gains.¹ But is this really the whole story? After all, during the 24 years since 2000, Republicans have controlled the presidency half the time, led the House of Representatives three-quarters of the time, and limited most of what the Senate could accomplish virtually all of the time either through majority control or by constantly invoking filibuster rules to block majority acceptance of bills sponsored by Democrats or even bipartisan majorities. The GOP has also gained control of more than half of US state governments. Clearly, if we are talking about the existing US electoral system, Republicans have not lacked competitive appeal or favorable prospects. Nevertheless, the party and its allies have turned to more and more radical tactics. Along with a number of other political scientists quoted in Tom Edsall’s August 2024 *New York Times* roundup of assessments of continuing authoritarian threats from Donald Trump, I see clear evidence that GOP-aligned authoritarians are on offense, not just playing defense.

This Madison lecture cannot settle the question of whether twenty-first century GOP radicalization is primarily defensive or offensive. But the possibility of a turn from hardball defense to authoritarian offense is certainly plausible, not just because empirical signs point that way but also because the payoffs for today’s Trump-directed GOP and its plutocratic and ethnonationalist allies could be enormous. If Republicans could free themselves from the repeated need to contest elections they might lose (even in a geographically conditioned system where current Republican-aligned constituencies have outsized leverage), they would enjoy prerogatives they have publicly announced they want. Sitting atop an authoritarian system where elections were at most ineffectual decorations, Trump Republicans could divert public revenues into patronage for themselves, their families, and wealthy allies while also deploying government authority to refocus American culture on Christian ethnonationalist values. Ironically, previous legal hardball victories—especially McConnellist manipulations of Senate filibusters to install a hard-right Supreme Court majority—may have set the stage for Republicans and allied groups to go for it all, provided they can just eke out one more round of electoral victories in the Electoral College, the Senate, and gerrymandered House districts.

Where My Explanatory Approach Fits In

How can we explain contemporary dual Republican radicalization and the possible shift toward authoritarian offense? Certainly, I am not the only one to tackle these pressing issues. After Donald Trump burst on the national political scene, analysts at first focused on the colorful maneuvers of the man himself. But before long, scholars and serious journalists turned their attention to underlying societal, institutional, and organizational transformations that have enabled this bizarre, erratic man to orchestrate such grievous threats to US constitutional democracy. This lecture is not the place to go into a long review of the many weighty studies I use and cite, but I can very briefly situate my approach relative to prominent alternatives.

Various scholars, including Christopher Parker and Matt Barretto (2014, 2022), Lilliana Mason and Nathan Kalmoe (2022), Katherine Cramer (2016), and Trevor Brown and Suzanne Mettler

Figure 1
Contemporary Republican Party Radicalization

TIMELINE OF MAJOR REPUBLICAN STEPS TO UNDERCUT U.S. ELECTIONS AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE			
Includes election manipulations, steps to disempower opponents -- but NOT policy choices or refusal to convict impeached president			
Legal hardball = stretching established laws or procedures			
Extralegal = actual or threatened violence AND/OR official endorsement or public acceptance thereof			
	TACTICS	DEVELOPMENT	GOP-ALIGNED ACTORS
2000 (December)	Legal hardball	U.S. Supreme Court grants request of GOP campaign to stop Florida count, awarding presidency to George W. Bush	GOP-appointed 5 to 4 Supreme Court majority
2001ff	Legal hardball	Voting rules changes targeted to hinder votes from Democratic constituencies	GOP-run states
2009-16	Legal hardball	Sharp uptick in use of Senate filibuster rules during Obama presidency	McConnell-led GOP Senators
2011--	Legal hardball	State laws to restrict union bargaining rights and dues collections; additional state changes to restrict voting, purge rolls	GOP-run states
2013 (June)	Legal hardball	In <i>Shelby County v. Holder</i> , Supreme Court invalidates federal supervision of voting rules in states with history of racial discrimination	GOP-appointed 5 to 4 Supreme Court majority
2016 (March-December)	Legal hardball	After Justice Scalia's death, Pres. Obama's nominee blocked from consideration	McConnell-led GOP Senators
2017-20	Legal hardball	GOP resistance to Russia election interference investigation, including firing of FBI Director Jim Comey, and Attorney General Barr	Trump administration; key GOP House members
2018	Legal hardball	In <i>Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees...</i> , Supreme Court weakens public sector unions by removing rights to collect fees from non-union members they represent in bargaining	GOP-appointed 5 to 4 Supreme Court majority
2019	Legal hardball	In <i>Rucho v. Common Cause</i> , Supreme Court refuses to limit unlimited partisan gerrymandering by state legislatures	GOP-appointed 5 to 4 Supreme Court majority
2020 (October)	Legal hardball	Hasty, last-minute confirmation of new Supreme Court Justice after Justice Ginsburg death and 2020 voting had started	McConnell-led GOP Senators
2020-21 (November - January)	Extralegal	Defeated Trump re-election campaign tries to reverse, invalidate Electoral votes favoring Biden	President Trump, lawyers and aides, RNC Chairwoman, local, state GOP officials, some GOP members of Congress and state legislatures
2021 (January 6-7)	Extralegal	Trump and allies, including violent insurrectionists, try to derail Congressional certification of 2020 presidential election	Trump and aides; protestors and rioters from 45 states, including some militia members; 147 House Republicans, six Senators who voted to reject state slates
2021	Legal hardball	In <i>Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee</i> , Supreme Court further weakens Voting Rights Acts protections.	GOP-appointed 6 to 3 Supreme Court majority
late 2020-22	Extralegal	Scattered GOP election administrators question or refuse to certify 2020/22 results; harassment of election officials	Trump supporters and GOP officials in some states and districts
2021-24	Legal hardball	Purges of state election rolls, changing rules about election administration	GOP-run states
2023	Legal hardball	In <i>Moore v. Harper</i> , Supreme Court subtly opens the door to future reviews of state supreme court decisions about elections	GOP-appointed 6 to 3 Supreme Court majority
2023-24	Extralegal	Threats against law enforcement involved in Trump cases	Trump encourages threats from supporters; Trump and some GOP officeholders promise retribution; improper Congressional interference legal cases
2023-24	Legal hardball	Plans for new Trump administration to purge and reorganize federal bureaucracies and harass civil servants; plans to direct federal-law enforcement against Trump opponents, use state National Guards or military against migrants and protestors	Trump allied think tanks and potential 2025 new Executive appointees
2024	Legal hardball	Pardons promised to convicted Jan 6 insurrectionists and others involved in attempted election overthrow	Candidate Trump and allies, repeatedly
2024	Legal hardball	Stalled criminal cases following indictments of Trump and allies for election interference, national security violations	GOP-appointed 6 to 3 Supreme Court majority; Trump appointed Florida judge
June-July 2024	Legal hardball	Supreme Court authorizes capacious presidential and post-presidential immunity for criminal acts, legalizes kickbacks by politicians, weakens convictions of some Jan 6 insurrectionists; opens doors for federal courts to reverse administrative acts authorized by presidents or Congress	GOP-appointed Supreme Court majorities
2024	Extralegal	Republican Party re-nominates Trump for president, despite felony convictions, indictments, and encouragement of violence; 2020 election denier is nominated for Vice President	GOP primary voters and July 2024 Republican National Convention
2024	Legal hardball	Voter challenges, plans to subvert nonpartisan election administration, targeted especially on swing states and Democratic-leaning districts	Republican National Committee; GOP local or state-level officials and volunteers
2024	Extralegal	Last-minute changes in rules and county procedures in a critical Electoral College swing state, contrary to state law requiring prompt certification after elections	Three of five GOP members of the Georgia Election Board publicly encouraged by Trump
2024	Extralegal	Intensified threats to arrest, prosecute political opponents, judicial officers, election workers.	Candidate Trump and allies, repeatedly

(2023), direct our attention to demographic and socioeconomic shifts that have heightened fears about racial and gender changes, especially among older whites in economically declining regions and rural areas. From these studies, we understand why recent socioeconomic transformations have allowed revanchist politicians to appeal to voting blocs advantaged by US electoral rules that favor less densely populated areas.

Meanwhile, macrostructural studies place more emphasis, as I do here, on institutional and organizational conditions that shape interest group goals and elite careers and offer opportunities or blockages for those seeking to consolidate or disrupt power gains. Mass propensities are never univalent or directly translated into governmental outcomes; leaders and resourceful groups must supply appeals and opportunities to translate alternative possible readings of popular concerns into effective action. Two recent blockbuster accounts that pay appropriate attention to the interplay of elite and popular forces are *Tryanny of the Minority* by cross-national analysts Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2023) and *Partisan Nation* by American politics experts Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler (2024). Levitsky and Ziblatt stress the growing mismatch between the US constitutional system and current demographic shifts that threaten to relegate GOP conservatives to minority electoral status; Pierson and Schickler also probe changing interactions between formal institutions and party organizations, mass media operations, and partisan interest groups. In the past, they argue, permanent partisan polarization was limited by “Madisonian” relationships between, on one hand, decentralized media, party organizations, and interest groups and, on the other hand, federated, divided powers governing institutions. Limits to polarization kicked in because party or factional losers at any one time could fall back to repair and reassert political leverage from safe redoubts in dissenting regions or districts. But Pierson and Schickler posit that such Madisonian checks and balances no longer limit partisan radicalization because America’s two major political parties are now highly centralized and operate in the context of nationalized rather than decentralized media outlets and interest group systems.

My own analysis offers a somewhat different take on the societal and institutional factors behind recent GOP radicalization. In the societal realm, I highlight recently inflamed partisan polarization about immigration. The dispersal across the American heartland of millions of migrants from non-European parts of the world has created openings for ethnonationalist activists and politicians to stoke fears about who is truly “American” and what kind of nation the United States has been and should be. Especially since the 1990s, subnational, as well as national, polarization about immigration has supercharged previous partisan divides about race, religion, and family roles. (See Walters and Skocpol, 2023, for the full analysis; also see Abrajano and Hajnal, 2015.)

On the structural side, my approach probes how shifting organizational configurations influence capacities for party-aligned actors to gain leverage within long-standing US institutions.² In the analytic framework I use, organizations and networks magnify potential societal influences in politics and elites use, adapt, or create organizational networks to win power and influence. As I am about to explicate, twenty-first-century GOP radicalization has proceeded through two phases of multilevel organizational action—the kind of organizational approach that

effectively leverages federated US political parties and governing institutions. First, Republican Party extremism was driven by plutocrats who built a federated political machine to hollow out and capture the Republican Party and encourage GOP hardball tactics to advance unpopular agendas. Then GOP radicalization was supercharged by popular ethnonationalists who rebelled against plutocrats and Republican elites alike, opening the way for an authoritarian strong man to coordinate multiple constituencies and claim national power.

PHASES OF GOP RADICALIZATION

Although Donald Trump’s successful run for the White House in 2015–16 shocked most observers, the feats pulled off by this newcomer were easier than it seemed at the time because Republican officeholders and party organizations were very weak before he rode down the golden escalator in Manhattan. For the previous decade and a half, both plutocrats and ethnonationalists had undercut “establishment” Republicans, giving Trump’s campaign openings to sideline credentialed GOP contenders and win the Electoral College.³

Plutocrats United

In the late twentieth century, what we can call the “Republican Party establishment” consisted of party committees and consultants like Karl Rove, allied with the Chamber of Commerce, internationalist corporations, and established Christian conservative advocacy groups. In 2000, this establishment scored a surprise but pivotal presidential victory when a GOP-appointed Supreme Court majority halted vote recounting in Florida and handed the White House to George W. Bush. However, from the perspective of many of America’s billionaires and multimillionaires engorged by increasing wealth since the late 1970s, the Bush governing results were disappointing (especially the US plunge into the unpopular Iraq War and the enactment of a new Medicare drug benefit). In response, the Koch brothers, Charles and David, organized a new political machine funded by fellow ultra-right wealth holders who wanted Republican officeholders and candidates to prioritize massive tax cuts for the rich, union busting, and business deregulation.

The early 2000s “Koch network” was deliberately constructed as a federated array of organizations paralleling the Republican Party at national and state levels (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016a). Conservative megadonors convened twice a year in posh resorts to socialize, plan political strategies, and pool donations. Instead of scattering gifts to individual politicians or GOP committees, the network redirected funds to Koch-managed organizations that worked to elect ideologically attuned Republicans and shape their agendas. The centerpiece of the new network was Americans for Prosperity (AFP), founded in 2004 with Koch-appointed national managers overseeing paid directors and key staffers installed in dozens of US states and sometimes in districts within states. Much AFP organizing was deliberately done *not* in already very conservative states but in pivotal states like Wisconsin and North Carolina that would later help tip national balances of power toward the hard right. This disciplined yet federated plutocratic machine orchestrated voter contact efforts and lobbying operations to elect Republicans and then pressure them to address Koch policy priorities and block Democratic initiatives.

The AFP boosted the clout of preexisting right-wing powerhouse organizations, including the Federalist Society operating in

hundreds of law schools to advance conservative legal doctrines and foster career networks to staff public agencies and courts (Keck 2022; Teles 2008), the State Policy Network of state-level free-market think tanks, and the American Legislative Executive Council (ALEC) that writes “model bills” and links corporate interests and conservative advocates to elected officials who can introduce and enact them in state legislatures (Grumbach 2023; Hertel-Fernandez 2014, 2022; Pepper 2021; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016b).

Over time, the Koch network hollowed out and leveraged the GOP for plutocratic goals. Well-paid AFP state directors were recruited from the staffs of Republican officeholders and candidates, and many returned to more powerful versions of such positions when they moved on from their Koch posts (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016a). Koch network conferences groomed and influenced rising GOP candidates like Joni Ernst of Iowa, met with influential officeholders such as Arizona Governor Doug Ducey and Wisconsin legislator and eventual US House Majority Leader Paul Ryan, and convened confidential off-site dinners with other right-wing worthies including Supreme Court justices. Senate GOP leader and hardball strategist in chief Mitch McConnell was a regular guest at Koch conferences, where he shared legislative strategies to advance big upward-tilted tax cuts and antiunion laws, block climate policies, and reduce social spending.

Of course, Koch and allied networks did not achieve everything they wanted. Democratic victories in 2008 and 2012 were bitter setbacks, yet Barack Obama’s presence in the White House also spurred more and more wealthy conservatives to clamor for invitations to the twice-yearly Koch seminars and allowed aggregate Koch funding in the 2010s to exceed that of Republican party committees (Mayer 2010, 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016a).

Stepping back, we can see that the Koch-reoriented GOP increasingly relied on hardball tactics—such as constant deployment of Senate filibusters—because many Koch priorities were unpopular, and not just with Democrats or most Americans. Koch opposition to public spending sometimes undercut subsidies and infrastructure projects supported by GOP-aligned businesses. More important, Koch agendas ignored or sidelined grassroots conservative demands to restrict immigration and impose legal restrictions on abortion access and gay rights. For a time, the Koch-organized plutocrats got much of what they wanted from GOP candidates and officeholders, but they also weakened the Republican Party overall and unintentionally opened the door to fierce new eruptions of popular activism on the right.

Unbridled Tea Party Activism

Right-wing grassroots anger swelled following nationwide pro-immigrant protests in 2005 (see Walters and Skocpol 2023), and then boiled over after the GOP lost Congress in 2008 and Democrat Barack Obama, America’s first African American president, moved into the White House. Demonstrations featuring colorfully costumed “Tea Partiers” soon erupted and for Tax Day 2009, some 800,000 Tea Party activists staged coordinated protests in 542 counties across the country (Madestam et al. 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). National and regional protests recurred thereafter, and local volunteer Tea Party groups organized across all 50 states to keep up pressure against Obama Democrats and oppose any Republicans inclined to compromise. Between 2,000 and 3,000 local Tea Parties operated for stretches in virtually all Congressional districts yet were especially dense on the ground in

very conservative areas (Blum 2020; Skocpol, Tervo, and Walters 2022a, 383–86, 392–93; Skocpol and Williamson 2012).⁴

Trying to harness and speak for this upsurge, Americans for Prosperity and other professionally run advocacy organizations like Freedom Works got their leaders on TV and sponsored some Tea Party branded rallies and workshops. A few observers who accepted professional advocacy claims at face value described the Tea Party as animated by “fiscal conservatism” (e.g., Mayer 2016, chap.7; Oldham 2011; Rafail and McCarthy 2024). But scholars who studied local groups and Tea Party sympathizers found otherwise. In their 2014 book *Change They Can’t Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America*, political scientists Christopher Parker and Matthew Barretto (2014) documented that the Tea Partiers were more likely than other Republicans and conservatives to subscribe to anti-Black and anti-immigrant attitudes. Similarly, the grassroots Tea Partiers that Vanessa Williamson and I encountered in Virginia, Arizona, and New England were especially angry about immigration and in many cases also opposed abortion rights and gay marriage. Far from Koch-style antigovernment acolytes, grassroots Tea Party activists were proud to benefit from Social Security, Medicare, and veterans’ benefits, yet angry about the rise of Barack Obama and fearful about racial, ethnic, and generational changes in American society. Before long, most of them would become passionate supporters of Donald Trump.⁵

In the larger electorate, Tea Partiers helped secure sweeping GOP gains in 2010 and beyond, not so much because they conducted registration drives or canvassed door to door but because these predominantly older white men and women influenced similar people who tended to vote regularly, including in the 2010 and 2014 midterms when many Democrats stayed home. After 2010, active or lapsed Tea Party activists gave continuing voice to ethnonationalist concerns regardless of whether they still met regularly in local groups. In many states and localities, Tea Party people simply took over Republican Party positions or ran for offices themselves—in the process pulling the GOP apparatus and base voters toward their world views (Blum 2020). Elected GOP officeholders, especially in the US House, increasingly catered to the anti-immigrant sentiments and slashing, uncompromising style of politics favored by Tea Partiers (Gervais and Morris 2018).

Not surprisingly, a Pew poll taken in the spring of 2015 shortly before Donald Trump entered the presidential sweepstakes showed that almost three-fifths of rank-and-file Republican identifiers and leaners had very little faith in establishment GOP leaders, whom they felt had done a bad job on illegal immigration and same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center 2015).⁶ On all of the polarizing issues that Donald Trump would soon foreground as a presidential contender, grassroots Tea Partiers and their sympathizers were ripe for ethnonationalist and Christian revanchist alternatives to standard Republican and Koch network agendas.

Evangelicals, Gun Enthusiasts, and White Police

From the 2015 GOP primaries through the 2016 general election, the Trump presidential campaign not only provided a central focal point for scattered Tea Party groups and sympathizers; it also pulled together long-standing networks of Evangelical churchgoers, gun enthusiasts, and white police officers. These overlapping constituencies must be understood as more than “demographic” piles of Trump voters. Each involves organizationally networked people

and local and state organizations animated by fear and anger about changes in contemporary American society and politics. Even though, taken together, the constituencies I am about to briefly describe do not add up to a voting majority, they are intensely motivated, involved in interlocked organizations, and effectively located in US political jurisdictions to help tip the Electoral College for presidential contests and install majorities in state legislatures and Congress.

Important in Republican politics since the 1970s, **white Christian evangelicals** did not initially seem a natural constituency for a twice-divorced wealthy New York libertine but were destined to become the most important sector of the Trump popular base. As is well known, white Evangelicals were wooed with a Trump promise to appoint Supreme Court Justices who would overturn *Roe v. Wade* and end the nationally legalized right to abortion care (Mangan 2016). But that was far from all that mattered because the Trump operation fashioned close ongoing ties to Evangelical leaders and associations that could inspire grassroots believers with an apocalyptic Christian nationalist message (Posner 2021).

Trump secured a valuable early endorsement from Jerry Falwell, Jr., (Costa and Johnson 2016) and attended the Family Research Council's 11th Annual Values Voter Summit to declare there "are no more decent, devoted, or selfless people than our Christian brothers and sisters here in the United States" and to promise that in a "Trump administration, our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you've never seen before" (Goldmacher 2016; Politico Staff 2016). Additionally, following a June 2016 confab where candidate Trump spoke to some 1,000 Christian right leaders, 25 pastors and advocates were recruited to an "Evangelical Executive Advisory Board" to meet regularly during the rest of the campaign and visit the White House if Trump won (Gass 2016). This carefully constructed entity included pastors of megachurches in states like Texas, South Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas where white Evangelicals made up a fifth to a third or more of the population, along with pastors from swing states Florida and Virginia; hosts of prominent Christian radio and television outlets; and movers and shakers in the American Association of Christian Counselors, the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, and the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

Framed and transmitted with input from national Evangelical leaders and broadcasters, Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" theme had built-in potential to resonate with locally embedded religious messages and practices (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2022; Stewart 2019). As sociologist Lydia Bean (2014, 14–15) explains, conservative Christian ties to the GOP are "anchored from the bottom up within the worlds of local congregations" where fellow congregants and lay leaders reinforce a socially shared sense that good people vote for candidates who take righteous stands. Beyond Sunday services and sermons, Bible study groups, prayer sessions, Wednesday services, and special workshops deliver subtle, politically relevant moral messages to congregants, convincing them that they are part of a beleaguered "Christian nation" and should engage in "evangelism and community service outside of their local church."

Before Trump was in their ears all the time, well-networked American white Evangelicals already believed, in short, that liberals were responsible for their country's "moral decline." In 2016, with Christian right organizations deploying money and messages and reaching out to believers attuned to ethnonationalist themes,

Trump garnered even higher margins of support from white Evangelical voters than GOP presidential candidates had previously gained (Smith and Martinez 2016). Although not a majority, these citizens turned out enthusiastically and delivered votes beyond their population shares in districts and states crucial to carrying the Electoral College.

Gun enthusiasts are another constituency Trump tapped with extra effectiveness. In 2016, the National Rifle Association endorsed Trump unusually early and went on to spend "more than three times as much money to assist Trump as it spent backing Romney in 2012, airing 4.5 times as many individual ads" (Hamburger, Wagner, and Heiderman 2017). As with white Evangelicals, Trump's message—that America must be made "great again" in a battle against immigrant invaders, criminals, and unpatriotic liberals—resonated with the sort of us-versus-them worldview that the NRA cultivated for years among its members and their neighbors (Lacombe 2021).⁷

Intense support for guns and "Second Amendment Rights" is deeply embedded in everyday life in many regions. Close to a third of US adults claim to own one or more guns, which are bought, sold, and used especially in non-big-city areas often thick with sporting clubs, gun ranges, and gun dealerships. In her rich ethnography of "the everyday politics of guns," sociologist Jennifer Carlson (2015, 64, 67) finds that more than skills are conveyed during gun safety courses (which, until recently, were legally required before persons could obtain gun permits in many states). Instructors follow scripts that convey a morally framed social identity about "good citizenship" and "a moral disposition often associated with police and soldiers." Millions of Americans (disproportionately white male) who take these courses are urged to think of themselves as civically obligated to use guns to protect themselves, their families, and their neighbors against evildoers threatening violence. Another study of America's "social gun culture" finds that, for many people, gun ownership is a culturally meaningful identity reinforced by everyday family and friendship ties among people who go hunting or shooting together (Kalesan et al. 2015).

Not surprisingly, voting margins for Trump in 2016 were highly geographically correlated with the density of gun dealerships (Bump 2018), and surveys showed that Trump won a substantially larger share of votes from gun owners (62%) than McCain in 2008 (53%) and Romney in 2012 (56%). Trump's gun-owner margin over his Democratic opponent was "the second-highest percentage since 1976" (Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2017; Joslyn et al. 2017)—with outsized shares of such votes delivered in big swaths of states like Pennsylvania that are crucial to winning the Electoral College.

Trump's 2016 campaign was also significantly bolstered by the third and final well-established organizational network I will highlight here, the overwhelmingly white Fraternal Order of Police (FOP).⁸ Although typically favoring Republicans in presidential races, the FOP had not endorsed any presidential contender in 2012, because it saw Democrat Barack Obama as critical of law enforcement and Republican Mitt Romney as unfriendly to labor unions. But the FOP did get enthusiastically on board with Donald Trump in 2016 (Kamisar 2016).

During his 2016 presidential run, Trump fudged labor-relations issues, saying they were matters for states to decide, and instead sensationalized current partisan cleavages around race and rough policing (Alcindor 2016; Marshall Project 2016; Trump 2016;

Wheaton 2016). Whereas Democrats featured the mothers of people killed by police officers, Trump declared that police were the “most mistreated people in this country... . We have to give power back to the police because crime is rampant” (Lee 2016). In rare acts of in-person retail politicking, candidate Trump visited FOP Lodge #25 in Orlando, Florida, “just to tell cops how appreciated they are” and dropped in at other lodges or local law enforcement sites in North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia (Fraternal Order of Police 2016; Lee 2016; Livingston and Cottom 2016; Swicegood 2016).

Beyond providing Trump with media-friendly backdrops to define his racially pugnacious image, the dual organizational capacities of the federated FOP helped mobilize hundreds of thousands of members. As a union, the FOP knows how to deploy volunteer members for campaigns, donate resources to endorsed candidates, and manipulate public opinion (DeLord, Burpo, and Shannon 2008; Grimaldi and Horwitz 2010). Meanwhile, FOP lodges are social hubs that can encourage citizen engagement in many states and localities, just as Evangelical churches and gun clubs do—indeed, just as federated brotherhoods and sisterhoods have done throughout US history (Skocpol 2003; Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). Police networks can be especially potent in politics, because they not only channel in-group solidarity forged amid the stressful experiences of police work; their members are usually well-respected in blue-collar and lower-middle-class communities (Lofthus 2010). Accordingly, it was not surprising that empirical probes conducted by Michael Zoorob (detailed in Zoorob and Skocpol 2020) revealed that Trump in 2016 (compared with 2012 GOP presidential candidate Romney who had not enjoyed FOP backing) reaped additional vote shares from FOP members and in districts with FOP lodges.

The bottom line for the surge of popular ethnonationalism in and around the Republican Party is clear enough. Although many observers of the 2015–16 presidential cycle viewed Donald Trump as a lone wolf who came out of nowhere, this upstart New York showman not only had good instincts about how to voice popular fears and resentments already strongly felt at the Republican grassroots; his campaign also played an organizationally savvy game. In essence, it forged a federated Trump-focused combination of geographically widespread constituencies ready to displace establishment Republicans, fight liberals, and join a crusade to purify and revive their idealized version of America. “I am on your side,” Trump told white Evangelicals, gun people, and police who felt embattled. He told them he was allied with them in a life and death struggle to “make America great again.” Along with many others in their families and friendship and work networks, men and women in these social worlds, along with Tea Party participants and sympathizers on the alert since 2009, were thrilled by the MAGA message and stood ready—as they still do to this very day—to go all out for Trump and his cause.

A RADICAL SYNTHESIS FORGED FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

After Donald Trump won the Electoral College, many observers expected tensions between the new president and some congressional Republicans and business interests wary of his priorities. Kerfuffles did surface in day-to-day media stories, but, step by step, Trump as president found it relatively easy to attract or cow most Republicans and GOP allies (Leibovitch 2024). Ultimately, Trump successfully operated from the White House and beyond to

remake almost all levels and parts of the Republican Party as a synthesis of plutocratic McConnellism with violence-prone MAGA popular ethnonationalism.

After his 2016 victory, Trump’s transition advisors turned to the Koch network and even parts of the GOP establishment to staff parts of the Cabinet and federal administration focused on fiscal matters, the environment, labor relations, and business regulation (for details and references, see Skocpol 2020, 19–23). From Trump’s first presidential year, such standard-fare appointees worked with GOP congressional majorities not only in nearly successful efforts to repeal Obama’s Affordable Care Act but also to deliver massive, upward-tilted tax cuts benefiting corporations and multibillionaires, along with a slew of deregulatory maneuvers and quickly confirmed federal judicial nominees. Such victories were roundly cheered by plutocrats previously skeptical of Trump when the Koch network convened in June 2017 at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs to hear a grinning Charles Koch declare, “America’s best days are ahead of us” (Donachie 2017).

But the Trump administration did not stick to standard-fare GOP elitism; it also catered to and cultivated ethnonationalists. From the White House, President Trump and hardcore staffers issued a constant stream of tweets to keep popular followers angry and discredit factual reports in mainstream news media. They imposed a quick ban on Muslim travelers and stepped-up deportations of undocumented immigrants, including peaceable, long-term residents of interior communities. Trump’s departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and parts of Health and Human Services were staffed with officials expected to deliver on promises to Christian conservatives, police and border guards, and gun advocates while pushing a steady stream of tough measures against immigrants and refugees.

By deploying the many powers of the White House and federal executive agencies and enacting legislation as they could, Trump and his loyalists forged a new synthesis between plutocrats and ethnonationalists and sought organizational and personnel shifts in the federal government and Republican Party organizations to enforce new measures, no matter how unpopular. Where the Koch network had used a centrally disciplined, federated political machine to outflank the GOP and reshape party agendas under the tutelage of wealthy extremists, the Trumpian regime disciplined GOP elites through a looser and more ominous call-and-response interplay between the strong man and his grassroots followers. Well-organized ties to the Christian right, gun people, white police, and persisting Tea Party groups and networks continued to be nurtured, including at White House events (Hamburger, Wagner, and Heiderman 2017). But more-encompassing virtual outreach was added to the mix, as Trump’s White House megaphone and social media operation connected his resentful, bombastic persona, hour by hour and day by day, to tens of millions of loyalists (Wikipedia 2024). That wider MAGA circle included many relatively isolated people, mostly men, millions of whom follow Trump via the internet and right-wing media. Overall, President Trump delivered policy gestures or victories to the best-organized of his popular constituents while relentlessly emitting emotionally laden social media messages that often asked his mass enthusiasts to pressure or harass Republican party leaders and public officials, along with any others who pushed back against Trump actions. Tellingly, the same bombastic messages sparked daily journalistic commentary to keep Trump front and center in the so-called mainstream media,

which, intentionally or unintentionally, has always magnified his harassing threats.

Loosely knit angry social media outreach allowed Trump during and after his White House years to prevent opposition, not just from public officeholders and Republican party leaders but also from many business, media, and professional elites who think of themselves as outside of or “above” partisan politics. Such efforts have proved remarkably effective. From 2016 on, Republican legislators, candidates, and allies fell in line with Trump or else retired or went silent. Often under grassroots pressure, local and state GOP organizations—and ultimately the Republican National Committee itself—purged foot-draggers and installed new heads willing to do whatever Trump demanded at any given moment. By 2024, the Republican National Committee was turned into a family-run Trump patronage machine.

Furthermore, if we are honest about it, many non-Republican elites have also been manipulated to do little or nothing about even the most extreme Trumpist transgressions of long-standing civic norms or red-letter laws. Media outlets keep squeezing Trump outrages into normal political horserace narratives; many criminal justice officials and judges help Trump evade or delay legal consequences for egregious crimes; and US Army authorities refuse to enforce basic rules at Arlington Cemetery.

Perhaps most telling, leaders of US-headquartered corporations and financial operations have proved willing to tolerate—or outright propel—Trump-orchestrated threats to US democracy and the legal order. Many US-based corporate leaders and wealthy donors promised to withdraw support after the August 2017 “Unite the Right” events in Charlottesville, Virginia, when then-President Trump praised “very fine people” marching Nazi-style through the streets and wielding violence against pro-democracy protestors and then again following the Trump-encouraged and GOP-abetted attacks at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. But most soon backed down and quietly started contributing to election-denying Republicans again or, in some cases, publicly joined self-declared would-be authoritarian Trump’s campaign for a comeback to the White House. Apparently, new chances for access, federal contracts, or generous tax cuts are enough to entice betrayals of democracy by many of America’s most influential professional business leaders and wealth holders; or perhaps many fall silent or curry favor in fear of punishments like IRS investigations. Whatever the combination of carrots and sticks, US corporate and wealthy elites have revealed malignant priorities and lack of elementary capacities to work together for the public good, joining many professional elites in their unwillingness to stand up loud and clear for the social and legal fundamentals of a US system that has enabled their success. Too many are going along with, or actively propelling, the return to power of an incompetent, vengeful authoritarian and his allies—authoritarians who will, if returned to power, surely undercut the very societal and legal conditions that have enabled business prosperity.

Countless pundit hours have been spent contemplating why so many Republican office, business, and professional leaders have “gone along” with Trumpism. But maybe there is less to explain that meets the eye—for reasons that differ somewhat for Republican elites versus other elite groups.

Electorally oriented elites have clear cut reasons to go along. Given Trump’s evident ability to direct large popular followings, most Republican elites and party-allied groups toe the line in hope of avoiding primary election challenges or, better yet, gaining

career and policy benefits if Trump can use extralegal steps along with votes to regain the White House. In many states and districts, GOP officials who did not going along with 2020 election subversion have retired or been removed in primaries (e.g., Healy 2024). MAGA operations have been set up to pressure election offices and train volunteers and friendly local officials to purge voter rolls and get rid of voting drop boxes and other means to ease ballot access. By now, Trump and allies nationwide are even urging local and state officials to delay or refuse to report election results after the fact—likely a more effective way than the mob violence of January 6, 2021, to disrupt congressional certification and throw a disputed election into the House of Representatives where the GOP controls more state delegations. Everyone knows the Supreme Court would adhere to the wording of the constitution in that scenario.

Of course, many non-Trumper Republicans kvetch in the shadows, but that doesn’t matter much. Given that vocal GOP critics have been tossed out in primary elections or purged from government, most GOP dissenters keep mum or just retire to make money in the private sector. Trump doubters who have remained in government—like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell—accept humiliations in the hope of making electoral gains to achieve or cement long-standing policy goals such as enacting/preserving tax cuts, gutting environmental regulations, and above all putting Federalist Society judges on the Supreme Court and at all levels of the federal court system. This approach has actually paid off. As we see in Figure 1, legal hardball GOP radicalization may have started before the emergence of the Tea Party and Trumpism, but it also continued apace during the rise of MAGA radicalization.

Beyond Republican opportunism or fears, we should also keep in mind how potent direct or online harassment can be in cowering relatively privileged people in general. Here is a quick sociological take that may apply especially to US elites, who may be more individually ambitious and less socially embedded than established elites in other nations. Not just elected US politicians but also federal civil servants and military staffers, nonprofit board members, university leaders, and professionals of many kinds, including journalists on the White House or presidential campaign beats, are susceptible to threats of public humiliation and can therefore be pushed around via actual or threatened internet and media firestorms. Highly credentialed and otherwise advantaged, such persons are pursuing careers in which public reputations matter. In the past, they enjoyed considerable reputational control, able to curate their images among peers and deploy standard public relations tactics to project their accomplishments. When such worthies encounter Trump’s attack-oriented social media echo chambers, they suddenly have to worry about electronic harassment and public magnifications of social media attacks coming from hard-to-pin-down MAGA supporters. Trump and other MAGA provocateurs can act as insulters, harassers, and reputation destroyers against anyone they dislike, using their bullying call-and-response systems to break through or bypass the usual peer circles in which professional reputations and careers have been shaped and protected.

Being singled out for such amorphous humiliation is terrifying to many politicians and professionals, not to mention for any ordinary citizen who gets targeted, and such harassment via the internet can also be physically dangerous to oneself and one’s family members. Small wonder that even reluctant elites across the

GOP-aligned world and beyond have fallen in line with Trump—or have run for the hills. Most people, especially those with professional careers to lose, are terrified by the threatening amorphousness of the Trump operation and its ability to use a social media post or a speech to spark reputation destruction and even violence.

The results are exactly what Trump and his MAGA allies want—as long as they look powerful or on the way to more authority.⁹ Intimidating effects could wane if Trump becomes (or looks to become) a sure political loser. But by now, the Trump-era synthesis of hardball legal manipulations plus extralegal threats has fully taken over the GOP and that will not change until and unless Trump himself or any would-be successors definitively lose the 2024, 2026, and 2028 elections. Until then, Trumpism is grounded in federated networks able to influence plurality election outcomes and can also deploy call-and-response systems to harass opponents inside and beyond GOP circles.

The Trumpian synthesis of plutocratic and ethnonationalist radicalism reached a culmination and choice point in late 2020 and early 2021. Outgoing President Trump and his immediate allies, including lawyers, some congressional Republicans and White House aides, worked from November 2020 through January 6 and 7 to outright overturn the results of the president's failed reelection bid. Recruited through Trump's social media operation, thousands of ordinary grassroots supporters traveled from 45 states to Washington DC. Many who would riot at what they thought was their President's behest espoused Christian nationalist and other right-populist worldviews, but only a small minority were enrolled in organized militia groups like the Proud Boys (Pape 2022). The chaotic insurrection fell short in its goal to delay congressional certification of Electoral College results long enough to allow the majority of GOP state delegations in the House of Representatives to reinstall Trump. Who can doubt that, had it come to that, the Supreme Court majority would have found that the U.S. Constitution allows such House action? That would have been the ultimate legal hardball victory, secured by an extralegal violent attack!

For a short time after the January 6 failure, many Republican officials and allied groups appeared to break the MAGA synthesis by repudiating Trump and his outright threats to the constitutional order. But the hesitations did not last. Within weeks, the GOP House leader and other elected GOPers, worried about retaining MAGA voters, dropped their condemnations of the insurrection. And, when alternative 2024 presidential primary contenders faltered, most returned to full-throated Trump advocacy. Even Senate leader Mitch McConnell crawled back, despite having denounced Trump's January 6 actions and calling for his possible criminal prosecution in early 2021. Soon thereafter, McConnell helped block a bipartisan congressional investigation of January 6, then turned evasive for two years, and ultimately endorsed Trump's comeback presidential bid in March 2024 (Mascaro 2024). The MAGA capture and remake of the Republican Party was complete well before Donald Trump was renominated for president in July 2024.

Before moving on to what comes next, it is worth underlining that Trump's MAGA message is now more unabashedly threatening because it has taken on a wrathful, pseudo-Biblical cast. Recent studies show that many conservative Republicans now embrace the "Evangelical Christian" identity even if they do not regularly attend church or even practice Christianity at all (see Burge 2023). Another recent analysis by McKay Coppins (2024)

tracks the changing themes in prayers delivered by clergy at the start of Trump rallies. Where once Trump was portrayed as an imperfect instrument of God's will in need of religious guidance to bolster defenses for white Evangelicals, now he is presented as an unabashedly God-like figure in his own right, sent to redeem and reverse recent changes in US society. More worrisome, Trump is touted as a righteously wrathful holy warrior sanctified to visit the most severe punishments on US liberals, Democrats, and other marginal groups portrayed as subhuman and un-American "evil doers." This message is the American version of outright fascism.

For the 2024 presidential campaign, the Trumpified GOP not only features the Christian nationalist message that America is a hellhole only they can redeem; this campaign expresses the full MAGA radical synthesis, linking pro-Trumpers ranging from Christian evangelicals and gun enthusiasts to Wall Street hedge fund guys and tech multibillionaires to propel an extreme winner-take-all partisan mission. A Republican Party once committed to legal hardball tactics now also embraces many leaders, followers, and organized groups willing to engage in or countenance extralegal harassment, threats of violence, and moments of actual violence. Perhaps this party crusade will not hold firm much longer, but for now it is hard to escape the conclusion that the current incarnation of the US Republican Party seeks to take unchallenged government power for the far right. In the words of the Heritage Foundation's Kevin Roberts (the potential new Chief of Staff in a second Trump administration, prearmed with plans to remake the federal government), "we are in the process of carrying out the Second American Revolution"—to take "the country back." That GOP authoritarian takeover can "remain bloodless," Roberts ominously suggests (quoted from Associated Press 2024a), but only "if the left allows it to be."

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE, RECENT AND PROSPECTIVE

Although I offer no predictions about what may happen during and right after the November 2024 elections, let me focus briefly on how Democrats and center-left allies have recently fashioned new local and state as well as national capacities to push back against authoritarians and explain why similar efforts must continue within a US governing system that has already been irrevocably transformed by GOP radicalism.

Sources of Resilience

In the late twentieth century, Democratic politicians and constituencies relied on Congressional legislation, presidential actions, and federal court cases to advance racially equal civil and voting rights and modest socioeconomic redistribution. In civil society, popularly rooted labor unions and large-scale federated associations lost members, local roots, and federated organizational clout, even as thousands of professionally run liberal advocacy organizations set up shop in Washington DC and other metropolitan centers. The new professionally run liberal operations mostly relied for funding not on dues-paying members but on foundations, big donors, centrally designed mailing-list operations, and government grants (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018; Kuttner 2024; Newman and Skocpol 2023; Skocpol 2003). Although some analysts suggest that both major US political parties along with partisan-leaning interest groups and news media have nationalized largely in tandem, the evidence I see suggests that nationalization happened earlier on the liberal side.¹⁰

As right-wingers fashioned new kinds of multilevel federated capacities alongside and through the Republican Party, Democrats and liberal groups did not adjust quickly. They continued to file federal lawsuits and push new legislation (increasingly blocked by Senate filibusters). To be sure, some grassroots electoral mobilization happened during Barack Obama's 2007–08 campaign (McKenna and Han 2015; Milkis 2017), but after Obama moved into the White House his federated campaign machine was absorbed into a centrally managed Democratic National Committee. In March 2010, Democrats eked out a major redistributive victory when the Affordable Care Act squeaked through Congress; but after the Supreme Court relegated choices about Medicaid expansion to the states, advocacy groups funded by wealthy progressives were ill-prepared to push this crucial economically redistributive step in the dozens of states not already fully governed by Democrats. Liberal funders and foundations in the Democracy Alliance and beyond continued to prioritize national advocacy, leaving state-level Medicaid expansion to reach only four-fifths of states (as of 2024), fitfully propelled in GOP-led states by pro-business Republicans or nonpartisan referendums (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Lynch 2016; Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018). Medicaid expansion battles offered many opportunities to build subnational Democratic Party clout, but most such opportunities were missed.

It took the GOP's shocking 2016 victories to spark waves of new center-left innovation and state-by-state steps to remake Democratic parties. The full story is too long to tell here, but my colleagues and I along with many others have spelled out such shifts.¹¹ Effective resistance to Trump was, at first, spontaneous and widespread from outside party organizations. Women's Marches and several thousand volunteer local resistance groups, the center-left analogue to post-2008 Tea Party groups, took to the field to push back against Trumpist efforts to repeal ObamaCare and exclude immigrants (Meyer and Tarrow 2018; Putnam 2020; Skocpol, Tervo, and Walters 2022a). Across many districts in all states, grassroots resisters led by older white and African American women breathed new energy and life into local and state Democratic Party organizations. In some states, party organizations and aligned unions or nonprofits built new capacities to do year-round organizing and citizen contacting.

Professionally staffed progressive advocacy groups have been involved but not as the prime drivers of civic gains since 2016. To win and exercise political power in the current period, Democrats must build inclusive center-left alliances bridging disparate social and geographical constituencies. Hard partisan tilts cannot fuel Democratic victories as they have for Republicans anchored in safe states and highly gerrymandered districts. Democrats must build civic infrastructure and broad alliances in varied ways in different states—often by first waging pivotal, broad-tent grassroots campaigns for state and local offices and popular referenda on issues like abortion rights, the minimum wage, and voter rights. Exactly that has happened in various ways in key states. After GOP Governor Scott Walker and the Republican legislature weakened the public employee unions on which Wisconsin Democrats had long relied, party and resistance leaders built remarkable new year-round capacities for grassroots contacting. Georgia Democrats and nonprofits have built new civic alliances for grassroots organizing beyond as well as near Atlanta (Skocpol, Tervo, and Walters 2022b). And Democrats in states like Michigan, Minnesota, and Maine have taken advantage of governing “trifectas” (where the

party controls both the governorship and legislature) to counter gerrymandering, extend voter access, and strengthen legal election protections.

Since 2018, citizen organizing and new people running for office at all levels have brought vital new subnational gains. Given fierce ongoing struggles over voter access, fair election management, and certification, it matters enormously that Democrats have recently won governorships in five of seven Electoral College swing states—in North Carolina (2016, reelected 2020), Michigan and Wisconsin (2018, reelected 2022), Pennsylvania (2022), and Arizona (2022). Secretaries of State also matter for fair elections, and recently elected Democrats hold those positions in the swing states of Arizona, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.¹²

What Comes Next?

Alternative scenarios are possible going forward—but my concluding argument is that no matter what happens in the 2024 elections, America's pro-democracy forces cannot expect any once-and-for-all victories against GOP authoritarian tendencies. Although some advocates dream of big constitutional redesigns like abolishing the Electoral College or suddenly revamping the Supreme Court, such solutions are not likely to happen any time soon—and even realistic near-term reforms like removing the Senate filibuster or enacting enforceable ethics rules and perhaps retirement requirements for Supreme Court Justices require a solid basis in national power gains that can only be secured by winning and extending pro-democratic alliances well beyond core “blue” states and regions. Especially in the US Constitutional system, politics is not like Scrabble. Advocates with ideal designs for change cannot just turn in the entire tray of letters and draw new ones to start afresh. Defenders of US democracy are going to have to push forward from where they are now, continuing to build subnational as well as nationally synchronized alliances to cope with all possible short- and medium-term scenarios.

Imagining a worst case full GOP electoral sweep in 2024, analysts and investigative journalists have highlighted authoritarian blueprints (such as the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 detailed in Carpenter et al. 2024) that might allow a second Trump administration to transform US governance along ethnonationalist lines using quasilegal steps like those executed in post-Communist Hungary under the leadership of Victor Orban and his Fidesz Party (Scheppelle 2018; Szelenyi 2023). Very possibly, the formal constitutional powers of the US presidency could be stretched to fire and replace masses of federal employees, direct the Department of Justice and the Internal Revenue Service to target political opponents, and even deploy the US military and state National Guards for domestic repression (Gellman 2024; Savage et al. 2024). A reinstated President Trump would also surely pardon January 6 insurrectionists he has steadily touted as “patriots,” allowing many of them to join citizen militia units to provide muscle for MAGA harassment operations (Cheney 2024; Date 2024).

Should the scariest possibilities come to pass, standard push-back tactics such as pouring protestors into urban streets or filing federal lawsuits (Savage, Swan, Haberman 2024) would almost certainly not stop White House authoritarians. Such long-standing liberal tactics might even backfire by enabling mass arrests of pro-democracy protestors or drawing liberal lawyers into long marches through the federal courts to ultimate defeat in the Supreme Court.

Nevertheless, even though allies of a reelected Donald Trump could use the Orban playbook to transform federal bureaucracies and courts (and even add extralegal enforcement into the mix), I do not see ultimate authoritarian consolidation as likely. Unlike post-Communist Hungary, the United States remains a federated polity, where many of the largest, economically vital states and metropolises are governed by Democrats or non-MAGA Republicans who would not readily go along with DC power grabs.¹³ Furthermore, US military institutions and many state-level national guards would not be as pliable to a would-be dictator as, for example, the already nationalized Prussian civil and police bureaucracies proved to be when the Nazis took over in Germany in 1933. Unlike analysts who believe that US politics has become almost entirely nationalized, I see considerable room for dogged pushback against any outright authoritarian takeover because ongoing resistance can proceed subnationally under the leadership of citizens' groups and elected leaderships linked across many states and metropolitan areas.

To give one example, pushback would surely happen quickly and garner broad citizen and business support if a reinstalled President Trump were to carry through his promises to round up and expel more than 10 million undocumented migrants. Settled migrants are not as readily corralled as border-crossers. Many are long-term residents embedded in families, workplaces, schools, and churches, woven into the fabric of communities across the heartland. As I learned when I did fieldwork from 2017 to 2019 in pro-Trump counties in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, most Americans, including many conservatives and local law enforcement officials, are horrified at deportations of known individuals from their communities. A massive new MAGA deportation drive would evoke immediate public and institutional opposition, including in districts and towns far from liberal big cities.

For another example, Trumpists in Washington DC would have a very hard time delivering the huge upward-tilted tax cuts their plutocratic allies want and expect. Even if Republicans controlled Congress, the fiscal consequences would play out in ironic ways because the ethnonationalist-plutocratic alliance I have recounted in this lecture has glaring internal contradictions. Popular Trump supporters do not want huge national deficits that threaten Social Security, Medicare, and military veterans' programs on which many depend. What is more, MAGA calls to deploy federal government authority to control women's fertility, redirect local school curricula, and round up and deport millions of migrants would have to be implemented by bureaucracies the Trump planners intend to eviscerate and financed through income and corporate taxes they have promised to radically reduce or eliminate. The most sweeping new authoritarian measures are also slated to be deployed against cities and states whose businesses and residents disproportionately generate federal tax revenues. Over time, the fiscal math would not add up—especially if Democrats weaned themselves from the idea that equality can only be pursued through federal tax-and-spend redistribution and instead found creative new ways to redirect tax revenues to bolster public finances in states and cities they control.¹⁴

Setting aside state-level pushbacks and internal contradictions that might play out if MAGA candidates sweep to power in DC, the more important point from my analysis is that supporters of US multiracial democracy must continue to build local and cross-state civic capacities much more fully than liberals did from the 1970s to

the 2010s. This must happen because the dual GOP radicalization I have tracked fuses McConnellist hardball politics with extralegal MAGA harassments and threats of coercion. Even if MAGA radicalism is blunted, hardball tactics will live on among GOP officeholders and probably wax stronger for the immediate future.

As we see in the chronological chart accompanying this lecture, in the McConnell era before and during the 2017–20 Trump administration, hardball legal tactics succeeded in shifting many kinds of final policy determinations to the federal courts, led by a radical-right Supreme Court majority and certain federal district and appellate courts that have shown willingness to block or undo steps undertaken by Democratic presidents or congressional majorities since the New Deal (Schwartz 2024; Shane 2024b). Given the Supreme Court as it now operates, compared to the one in office in 2012, the Affordable Care Act itself would likely not have survived the first attempts to rule it “unconstitutional.” Going forward, regardless of whether Democratic nominee Kamala Harris wins the White House, any further Democratic initiatives to use federal powers to expand economic opportunity and equal rights are likely to devolve into years-long dog fights with federal judges. We already see this in the constant court injunctions against the Biden administration's immigration and student loan forgiveness regulatory initiatives (Associated Press 2024b; Bacon 2024; Galvan 2024).

Recognizing this big picture means acknowledging that, with or without Trump-orchestrated extralegal threats or an outright MAGA takeover in Washington, *the US political opportunity structure has already been fundamentally shifted by Republicans committed to hardball tactics*. Going forward, pro-democracy forces in the United States must therefore do more than win the presidency and as many Congressional seats as they can.¹⁵ They must also devote more talent, time, civic energy, and resources to building and sustaining power in governors' mansions, state legislatures, and local governments and school boards—all of which are both alternative policy-making venues and crucial stepping stones for maximizing long-term prospects of achieving durable national clout and reforming federal courts in sustainable ways.

In the new US political opportunity structure, leaders working for a more inclusive and effective democracy will have to forge civic and political careers in subnational venues as well as national venues. Public interest advocacy groups must move staffers out of metropolises and Washington DC to many state capitals and medium-sized urban hubs. And, civic-minded Americans must honor and support subnational public service, not just actions by national officeholders or talking heads on cable television. Some of the potentially very popular causes that subnational pro-democracy supporters need to pursue—persistently—include strengthening state and local voting rights and election administration, improving state and local regulatory measures and social programs, building cross-state and cross-metro alliances to deal with climate change, and bolstering fair and effective tax systems to finance all the above.

Subnational actors beyond government have their own vital parts to play—for example, by bolstering local and state party organizations, fostering new forms of regional news media, and beefing up college teaching and research about state governance and legal systems. Given that the currently ensconced US Supreme Court has declared open season on federal regulatory agencies, pro-democracy groups are going to want to better

understand how state governments can remain free to tax, spend, and regulate without federal vetoes and citizen groups will need better information about subnational initiatives.

Of course, presidential campaigns and presidents speaking from the White House will continue to articulate visions of national purpose and America's identity and role in the world. Likewise, efforts to further social security and opportunities for all Americans will continue to require adjustments in federal taxes, spending, and regulations. But as long as the federal courts, the currently structured Senate, and the Electoral College give extra advantages to minority obstructors of national initiatives, forward-looking states and subnational alliances must be strengthened and Democrats must strive to contest all elections and win victories in additional states (like Texas) well beyond current blue strongholds.

In the big historical picture, we should not be surprised at currently shifting obstacles and opportunities within the US constitutional system. Many times before, the country has gone through epochal shifts of power and leverage within the federal framework. The United States is now going through another set of such shifts. Difficult as it is for scholars to bring such macropolitical revamping into sharp view, part of our job is to clarify, without romanticism, the exact nature of today's authoritarian threats and feasible responses to them at all levels of government and civic life.

My own bottom line is relatively optimistic. Political actors who imagine they can impose a single authoritarian vision or ruling system on the United States are going to find out just how wrong they are. Although antidemocratic GOP factions will likely continue to use one of the nation's two major political parties to their advantage, they will not, in the end, succeed in turning America into a close-minded regime and society.

Making this flat declaration is my one departure from a refusal to prognosticate. I do not know what exactly will come next for American democracy in this period of flux and crisis, but I do know what will never come. With or without would-be authoritarians in charge of central institutions at given junctures, James Madison and the other Founding Fathers can rest, albeit uneasily, in a measure of peace. However long it takes, ethnonationalist revanchists will be sidelined and the United States will advance in one way or another toward more fully realizing its best ideals of plural-ethnic, multiracial democracy and government accountable to all its people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the expanded written version of the James Madison Lecture delivered on September 6, 2024, at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Philadelphia, PA. The author gratefully acknowledges help on details of the chart and lecture from Michael Skocpol, Ellen Fitzpatrick, Alex Hertel-Fernandez, Paul Pierson, Jacob Hacker, Rachel Blum, and Eric Schickler, along with valuable insights gained during the audience discussion after the September 6 lecture. Many other scholarly inputs to this presentation come from the studies and journalistic articles listed in the footnotes and references. ■

NOTES

1. I say "supposedly" demographically inexorable because many such projections simply presume that entire categories of voters, such as "Hispanic Americans,"

will continue to skew in the same partisan direction as their population shares grow. But as today's Republicans and Democrats revamp their agendas and core constituencies, they find new ways to peel off growing shares of groups that previously voted for the other party, taking advantage of internal fault lines within broad groups. In politics, demography is always possibility, not destiny.

2. Beyond the recent structural analyses of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2023) and Pierson and Schickler (2024), I have also learned a lot from *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020). My approach likewise has some resemblance to the recently published book *Hollow Parties* by Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld (2024), but I focus more specifically on changing organizational configurations in and around the two major parties and I conclude that the twenty-first-century GOP has been much more "hollowed out" than the Democratic Party.
3. This section draws on arguments previously developed in Skocpol (2020), Skocpol and Tervo (2020), and Skocpol (forthcoming).
4. This estimate goes beyond what Vanessa Williamson and I originally found in 2011 by including later inventories of all known local Tea Parties identified by Skocpol research groups after 2016. We used archived internet lists from Tea Party Patriots to develop more complete tallies by state and Congressional districts.
5. Hints of Trump's eventual rise amidst all this emerged in interviews Williamson and I conducted early in the 2011–12 presidential primary cycle, when Tea Party people expressed little enthusiasm for the available GOP choices such as Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan. We spoke with many of them just as Donald Trump went public with his "birther" attacks, essentially claiming that the African American President so hated and feared by Tea Partiers was not truly American. If Donald Trump had declared a 2011–12 run for the White House on the same anti-immigrant "Make America Great Again" platform he espoused when he descended the Trump Tower escalator in 2015, he might very well have swept away all other GOP contenders four years earlier.
6. Poll respondents also faulted their party for a poor performance on "government spending." Although that phrasing is ambiguous, these rank-and-file Republicans almost certainly meant that their party had done too little to combat ObamaCare and other programs they viewed as "welfare" for the undeserving.
7. In his impressive study, political scientist Lacombe (2021) tracked themes and arguments in editorials published in *The American Rifleman*, the NRA's flagship magazine, between 1930 and 2008 and analyzed letters to newspaper editors to show that the themes influenced gun owners. The NRA, Lacombe finds, portrayed gun owners as law-abiding, honest, patriotic citizens, and true Americans who are unfortunately opposed and beset by liberal elites trying to restrict their rights. Gun organizations like the NRA, according to this research, exert outsized influence in US politics not simply because they spend money on elections and lobbying but because gun-owning members and supporters have come to see themselves as true Americans threatened by antigun forces.
8. Trump's campaign appealed to border guards and other security professionals, too, but the FOP probably mattered most because it extended Trump's reach into even more blue-collar communities.
9. In different ways, both Pierson (2015) and Kagan (2023) highlight the ways in which Trump gains momentum and leverage by winning or appearing to be on the way to winning each of his legal and political battles. Power accretion is not only cumulative but, in certain stages, multiplicative, as potential dissidents or defectors adjust their calculations. Comparative-historical perspectives are also vital for understanding Trump and Trumpism, especially Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: How They Rise, Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (2020) and Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2019).
10. Not only have right-wingers used the Koch network, Tea Parties, and Trump's operations to do cross-level politics through organizational networks with real local and state roots, but, arguably, partisan media are also more multitermed on the right than on the left because Fox and other dedicated right-wing TV outlets have always been bolstered by local and regional talk radio networks and recently by Sinclair ownership of remaining "local" TV stations.
11. Here I focus on organizational and infrastructural shifts, but Democrats have also shifted issue agendas toward redistribution in ways that allow them to appeal to both college-educated metropolitan constituencies and less-privileged current and potential supporters (see Hacker et al. 2023).
12. In contrast, MAGA forces in Georgia, the one state without any statewide Democratic officeholders involved in election oversight, are manipulating certification procedures that could potentially undercut Democratic wins in November 2024 (Himmelman 2024; Niesse 2024; Rawnsley and Suebsaeng 2024; Tribe and Aftergut 2024).
13. Especially in the states, not all Republicans have been entirely pressed into the MAGA mold. In Georgia, some Republican state officials remain reluctant to go along with extralegal steps to overthrow elections, and, in a study of partisan effects on COVID-19 policies, my colleagues and I (James, Tervo, and Skocpol 2022) had to divide state-level Republicans between pro-Trump and others to accurately describe and explain variations.
14. Liberals in the United States have spent decades trying to either build up or at least defend federal fiscal powers to direct or subsidize some redistribution toward the elderly and the most-vulnerable economic and racial groups. Ironically, many of the states that have gained the most from federal redistribution send politicians to DC determined to cut redistributive spending and force

unwanted regulations on the very liberal states whose wealthier citizens pay the federal tab. Going forward, it may be hard for liberals to get away from the idea that federal income and payroll taxes are the right tools to further economic security, opportunity, and a bit of equalizing redistribution. But liberals may have to modify these notions, either if Trumpists take full control in Washington DC or if the federal courts steadily dismantle Democratic policies. Liberals and others who want to preserve electoral democracy and use government to spread opportunity and ensure security will need to beef up state policy making and fiscal capacities. Even minorities of Congressional Democrats could take advantage of GOP tax-cutting to recapture some revenues to fund social, environmental, and educational initiatives in their states. In this scenario, rules of fiscal federalism that have prevailed since the 1930s and 1960s would gradually give way to new sources and allocations of revenue.

15. Right after the Trump 2016 win, I first made a forward-looking argument along these lines in “A Guide to Rebuilding the Democratic Party” (Skocpol 2017). Even then, it was obvious that the Supreme Court would be remade in ways that would fundamentally change the federated US political opportunity structure going forward. See also a collective statement by the What’s Next Project (2023).

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