

The crisis of American democracy

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Commentary \ The Crisis of American Democracy

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In the [BICC-Webinar "After the storm of the Capitol: How endangered is democracy?"](#) [Thomas Mockaitis](#), Professor of History, DePaul University, explained about the drivers (such as "echo chambers" and "alternative facts") and perpetrators (such as white supremacists and Christian nationalists) of the outbreak of violence on 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC. In his recent commentary, he reflects upon how deeply the democratic consensus in the United States is endangered.

Democracy requires a consensus, not on policies or political agendas, but on the electoral process itself. Candidates and their constituencies must have confidence that elections are free and fair for the political system to work. Without that confidence, the legitimacy of any government can be questioned. By insisting that he won an election he clearly lost, Donald Trump and his enablers have undermined the consensus that has sustained the American democracy for more than 150 years. The insurrection of January 6 was the almost inevitable result.

Prior to 2020, only two US presidential elections since the end of the Civil War have been controversial. In the [election of 1876](#) between Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, 19 electoral votes in three states were contested. A bipartisan commission with eight Democrats and seven Republicans awarded the states to Hayes. In return for Hayes' promise to withdraw federal troops from the South and end [reconstruction](#), the Democrats accepted the result.

For more than a century, no one contested a presidential election. Then in 2000, the race between George W. Bush and Al Gore came down to a few hundred [votes in Broward County](#), Florida. The state declared Bush the winner. Gore demanded a recount, but the Supreme Court ordered it halted. With his last avenue of appeal exhausted, Gore graciously conceded a month after the election.

The losers in 1876 and 2000 had legitimate grounds for contesting the election. The same cannot be said for Donald Trump in 2020. Joseph Biden got 306 of 538 electoral votes and won the popular vote by more than seven million. In 2016, Trump won only 304 electoral votes and lost the popular vote.

Facts do not, however, matter to the former president and his supporters. They live in an alternative reality bubble governed by what Adolf Hitler called "[the big lie](#)." Truth is not what is objectively verifiable but what the leader proclaims it to be. Trump laid the groundwork for his erroneous claim of a stolen election in the spring of 2020, when he insisted without evidence that [mail-in ballots would be the source of widespread voter](#)

[fraud](#). By election day he had insisted that he could only lose through widespread voter fraud.

No one was surprised that the former president persisted in his fantasy long after Biden was declared the winner and even after Congress certified the election results on December 14. The refusal of all but a handful of Republican leaders to acknowledge the truth, however, shocked many Americans. Even more disturbing were the rumblings of unrest from the most radical elements of Trump's base, white supremacists and members of other extremist groups, many of whom were heavily armed.

As long as there was a glimmer of hope that the results could be overturned by some legal maneuver, discontent simmered but did not boil over. More than [60 lawsuits](#) filed on the behalf of the former president failed, some dismissed by judges he appointed. Trump even pressured the Georgia Secretary of State to ["find" him 11,870 votes](#), which many legal scholars believe merits a criminal investigation.

January 6 offered the last procedural opportunity to change the outcome of the election. On that date, Congress was scheduled to formally count electoral votes delivered by the states with Vice President Mike Pence presiding. On January 5, Trump tried to [bully Pence](#) into rejecting the result. The vice president refused, explaining that he had a perfunctory role in a purely ceremonial process.

Meanwhile, the president was summoning his supporters to the capital to protest what they considered a "stolen" election. "Big protest in D.C.," [he tweeted on December 19](#). "Be there. Will be wild!" Perhaps [as many as 30,000 people](#) heeded his call to attend the "save America rally." After preliminary speakers fired up the crowd, Trump himself spoke. "We fight like hell," he declared, "and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." He then told the crowd to walk to the Capitol to give "weak" Republicans "the kind of pride and boldness that they need to "take back our country."

The subsequent assault on the Capitol has been well documented. While some people got caught up in the excitement of the moment, [others had come prepared to storm the building](#). As of January 24, [237 people had been charged](#) with crimes ranging from unlawful entry to conspiracy. Investigations continue, and more arrest are expected. Five people died as a result of the incident, and several were injured. No lawmakers were harmed, although many feared for their lives.

Despite the chaos, democracy prevailed. Congress officially counted the electoral votes in the [early hours of January 7](#), and Pence read out the results. That same morning, Trump grudgingly promised a peaceful transition, although he has still not conceded. Joe Biden was sworn in without incident on January 20.

Nonetheless, considerable damage to the political system had been done. Even after the insurrection, eight senators and 139 representatives (all Republicans) [challenged the election results](#) on unsubstantiated grounds. The government took extraordinary

measures to secure the inauguration, deploying more [25,000 National Guard troops](#) to the capital. Even though neither Trump nor his supporters have provided any credible evidence to support the claim, [76 per cent of self-identified Republicans](#) still believe there was “widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election.” Even though officials from both parties have attested to the integrity of the election, Republican legislators in 28 states have introduced more than [100 bills to restrict voting](#), allegedly to prevent fraud that never happened. The real goal is suppression of Democratic voters, especially minorities.

Confidence in the electoral process upon which American democracy rests has been profoundly shaken. How extensive and long lasting the damage is remains to be seen. Rebuilding the democratic consensus will, however, require hard work by both parties. The lesson of January 6 is that we can never take democracy for granted.

[Thomas Mockaitis](#) is Professor of History at DePaul University, where he teaches courses in British, Modern European, and Military History. His research and writing cover violent extremism, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and peace operations. As a consultant for the Institute for Security Governance at the Naval Postgraduate School, he does presentations on these subjects at venues around the world. He is the author of the book [Violent Extremists: Understanding the Domestic and International Terrorist Threat](#).