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To cite this article: Timothy W. Luke (2021): Democracy under threat after 2020 national elections in the USA: 'stop the steal' or 'give more to the grifter-in-chief?', Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2021.1889327](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1889327)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1889327>



Published online: 21 Feb 2021.



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Democracy under threat after 2020 national elections in the USA: 'stop the steal' or 'give more to the grifter-in-chief?'

The shameless struggle by the Trump White House to maintain its rule after Election Day 2020 should startle no one. From President Trump's first days on the campaign trail in 2016, his cynical willingness to exploit the worst fears and instincts of many voters across the United States of America always had been openly on display. Rather than coming to the nation with a humane democratic vision to protect and improve the lives of all its citizens in the twenty-first century, President Trump was inaugurated in 2017 with little education in the most basic elements of civic knowledge (Woodward, 2018). As he left the presidency at 11:59 AM on January 20, 2021, it was immediately obvious many future historians will present Trump and his administration as 'Exhibit A' of the deep threat to democracy posed by electing, or even nominating as any party's candidate, a Chief-Executive who is ignorant of, and/or indifferent to, the foundational precepts of representative democracy, constitutional legality, national history and foreign affairs.

Despite having four years to become more educated about the serious demands of his office and the decisive stakes behind all his decisions, Trump remained the lazy lead-player in an amateurish, but extremely popular performance as the President of the United States. While he celebrated the incredible boom in the nation's stock markets, which made his policies appear effective, Trump fumbled the policy initiatives to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which he never rationally understood. Despite Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar promising during 'Operation Warp Speed' to vaccinate 20 million Americans through the end of 2020, only 3 million had received inoculations by New Year's Day 2021. In episode after episode of governmental incompetence, Trump's White House allowed America's four percent of the world's population to suffer 20 percent of the world's deaths from the corona virus (Wright, 2021, 20–22).

Always 'the Performer' playing to his devoted base of supporters rather than 'the Policy Manager' responding effectively to threats, Trump rebooted his 2016 campaign scripts from the victory over Hilary Clinton in a reality TV star remake of the 2020 campaign against former Vice-President Joe Biden. New twists and turns in his 2020 script sprang from the spreading pandemic plus new hooks provided by QAnon conspiracy theories about globalist elites engaged in pedophilia, lenient Democratic local governments allegedly caving into Antifa occupations and/or Black Lives Matter protests, and blaming China for all the major crises on his watch. Such nationalistic pitches often are effective, and they have been offered up to the American public by would-be saviors during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to enflame naive populists, nasty libertarians or nativist movements. Traditionally, they confuse and divide the American electorate, as they did again on Donald J. Trump's campaign trail to the White House in 2016, as he mobilized his political followers during the years of Great Recession and the Obama administration (Luke, 2020).

Always the confidence man, Trump continued to count on his amazing artistry at 'gaslighting' any commonly held belief. His skills at triggering irresistible feelings of suspicion, malfeasance, and insecurity about ordinary facts has mesmerized audiences of millions to trust only in him and his 'alternative facts' – a talent he perfected over decades of pulling together unprofitable real estate deals, crass branding ventures and tasteless television programs. Trump's genius is

ignominious, but still potent. During the entire 2020 election campaign, his standard stump speech boiled down to attacking early mail-in balloting, deriding local control of election day voting, and mobilizing his base to buy 'the Big Lie', namely, he could never lose 'a fair election'.

As the tallies from every precinct across the nation in November 2020 gradually added up to Biden's victory, President Trump leveraged the lie to intensify his attacks on constitutional government itself. Playing off citizens' unawareness about the mechanics of modern elections as well as the seeming contradictions in normal bi-partisan processes for legitimate vote counting, his memes about malfeasance were proof-positive of a vast shadowy plot by Democrats to steal the election from him – in keeping with the Trump campaign's gas-lit narratives since 2018. Even after impartial voting recounts in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Nevada, Michigan, Georgia, and Arizona, he and his campaign continued to hunt for fraudsters in these major swing states up to and after the ascertainment of each state's returns prior to the voting by the Electoral College on December 14, 2020.

In keeping with prior trends from national opinion polls every presidential election year since 1992, many voters still question the integrity of America's elections. Going into the 2020 election, however, only 22 percent of all voters felt the contest would be 'free and fair', while 60 percent believed some fraud would occur, including over half of Trump's and around a third of Biden's supporters (Curl, 2020). After the election itself, however, around 80 percent of Republican voters and a little over half of all white males (Democrats, Independents, Republicans, and non-voters) were convinced the Democrats and former Vice President Biden 'stole the election'. Of course, Hilary Clinton made similar ill-considered charges in 2016 against Trump's GOP campaign, but her national popular vote did exceed Trump's, and she conceded quite early once the inevitable Electoral College implications of his narrow popular voting victories in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan by the duly established Democratic and Republican state authorities confirmed those states' vote counts.

Even before January 6, 2021, a scenario involving challenges in Congress during the final Electoral College vote count was not inconceivable. It was two centuries ago, but Congress has decided the winners of the national election three times in the past, which sparked destructive discord for years. In the nineteenth century, the House elected the President in 1801 and 1825, while the Senate had to select the Vice President in 1837. In this century, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) challenged President George W. Bush's victory in 2005, and a few House Democrats tried the same play against Trump in 2017 (Bolton & Brufke, 2021). Vice-President Biden, presiding over that count of the 2106 Electoral College votes, which were marred by the maverick actions of five 'faithless electors', refused to entertain their gambit to contest Trump's election, declaring 'It is over'. At first, it seemed Vice-President Pence and the Trump loyalists in Congress would do the same this year, especially given the highly-charged 2020 run-off elections for two Senatorial seats in Georgia held the day before on January 5, 2021. Trump counted on this outcome into 2021, but Pence refused to abide by the White House directives to intervene in the Electoral College vote count. In turn, the Republicans lost both seats in Georgia, setting the stage for the Trump bloc in the GOP to make unprecedented transgressions against America's constitutional government.

Accepting his inevitable loss angrily two weeks before the Inauguration might have allowed Trump to more effectively run hard for the 2024 GOP nomination as the 'putatively wronged and legitimately reelected POTUS 45' in 2020, even before Biden and Harris took their oaths of office given his impudent refusal to attend the Inauguration on January 20, 2021. The lazy liberal toleration of Trump's incredible style of leadership since 2017 with a dismissive hauteur in too many policy circles was dangerous. So too was the largely parodic, or even timid, reporting in the mass media about Trump's bizarre borderline subversion since the morning after Election Day. Even worse, the nation has suffered a deep public health crisis with virtually no effective national executive response. The Trump White House spent all of its time and energy for weeks after Election Day in 2020 trying to hold on to power after January 20, 2021, leaving nearly

75,000 more people to die during the days leading to the Electoral College vote on December 16, 2020. President Trump at times seemed to be clowning about never conceding his defeat, but he and his close-knit crew of anti-democratic clowns were working intently behind the scenes in many states, like Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania to pressure those states' Republican administrations to invalidate their electoral results, even after multiple recounts. Such acts have torn the country's fragile democratic trust since the November election, and they will continue to make effective governance far more difficult for the Biden administration in the months ahead.

The key difference behind these stark divisions in 2020, are the endless affronts to reason that basic educational philosophy faces constantly over what are 'the facts' and that settled political practice confronts daily in sustaining civic 'institutional integrity'. Both of these threats to democracy have been fanned by President Trump. As a defeated incumbent, who aggressively refused to accept the accuracy of the popular vote count, the legitimacy of Electoral College balloting, and the overall conduct of the 2020 election, he sowed deeper doubts about American democracy itself. Unable to accept his electoral loss, Trump rallied his base to 'stop the steal'. A national wave of protests on November 12, 2020 mobilized thousands of his ordinary voters plus a dangerous assortment of citizen's militia groups, hard-core Proud Boy activists, and Boogaloo cadres, who frequently tout the merits of civil war, white supremacy and anti-government violence (Gaines, 2020), after Trump complained for days that Dominion Voting System machines deleted or changed 2.7 million Trump votes in key swing states. Even though his own Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency and Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council, which are both embedded in the Department of Homeland Security, jointly declared the 2020 election 'the most secure in American history' (Mulraney, 2020), Trump continued to push this widely discredited claim.

This delusion about changed, missing or stolen ballots enthralled many of his followers, because it was embraced fervently by Trump himself. Unlike many con men, Trump is the first victim of his public and private prevarication, believing his own 'big lies'. This deep devotion to his own deceptions strengthened his role as 'The Grifter-in-Chief', who incredibly held more rallies and fund raisers after Election Day to fill even larger campaign chests for future efforts by himself and/or his political allies. In many ways, this relentless grifting of his base by the Trump White House has become an even greater threat to democracy inasmuch as his loyalists now largely control the Republican party.

Since 2016, 91 of the 168 places on the Republican National Committee have been filled mainly with new loyalists tied to Trump-aligned state GOP organizations. In turn, 'It is priority No. 1 to retain Trump voters', said Harmeet Dhillon, an R.N.C. member from California. 'There is no way to do that with rapid change, tacking in a different direction. Voters are looking to the party for continuity and to stay the course'. What is the continuity Trump's GOP is seeking, and how does staying the course work? An Axios-Ipsos poll reported in mid-January nearly ten days after a mob assault on the Capitol during the final certification of the 2020 Election that it boils down 'to keeping the faith' in Trump, since 'a majority of Republicans support the president's recent behavior and say he should be the Republican nominee in 2024' (Lerer & Epstein, 2021, A1).

As a fortunate survivor of SARS-CoV-2, Trump charismatically continues to celebrate his resilience and strength, while pushing his favorite myths: his administration protected the nation from the ravages of COVID-19, wearing protective face masks in crowded public settings is unnecessary, and the national economy would have been tremendous if Democratic governors, mayors and scientists would have just stopped closing businesses, schools and public gatherings 'to let the virus run its course'. Nonetheless, the final outcome of the 2020 election was confirmed on December 15, which showed former Vice President Biden winning 306 Electoral College ballots, and 81,283,485 popular votes (51.38 percent) against President Trump's 232 Electoral College ballots, and 74,223,746 popular votes (46.91 percent). Three weeks later, the

Democrats took both Senatorial seats in the run-off, which added up to the GOP losing the White House and its control of the Senate, while the Democratic party maintained its slim majority in the House (Politico, 2021).

Even Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell (R-KY) finally congratulated President-Elect Biden and Vice-President Elect Harris the day after the Electoral College voted during a florid and protracted address praising the achievements of the Trump administration. Yet, on December 16, President Trump remained defiant, rebuking McConnell on Twitter: 'Mitch, 75,000,000 VOTES, a record for a sitting President (by a lot). Too soon to give up', President Trump bellowed through social media to his base, 'Republican Party must finally learn to fight. People are angry!' (Bella, 2020).

Reshaping the GOP around such anger and aggression, however, has not helped what once was the Republican Party. A few old guard members, like Liz Cheney (R-WY) and Mitt Romney (R-MI), are seriously troubled by Trump's neglect of the party's professed faith in conservative values, civic responsibility and fiscal stability from its Reagan-era reconstruction after the Nixon years. That said, they are in a very small minority, increasingly dismissed as the latest RINOs (Republican in name only) left over from the past. More cynical figures, like Ted Cruz (R-TX), Lindsey Graham (R-SC) or Marco Rubio (R-FL), realize the populist turn to more multi-ethnic, lower middle class populist, and a rougher nativist ideological positions has enabled Trump to capture much of the party. These millions of energized new partisans often also serve increasingly as Trump's foot soldiers in the MAGA ('Make America Great Again') political movement. These facts are not 'fake news'.

Indeed, the President's ramshackle 2020 campaign still drew an unprecedented 74 million plus votes for him as well as, more significantly, major GOP down-ballot gains in the House of Representatives and state legislatures for those GOP candidates who willingly pushed Trump's party line in their campaigns. This hard-core base support, which proudly labels itself as the MAGA Movement, definitely will keep Trump in the national limelight as an unstable but potent political force. This is another threat to democracy. Another hard reality here, due to his second impeachment for allegedly inciting the January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol, Trump will have weeks of free media coverage until the Senate trial starts on February 9. In turn, the conditions of that Senate trial, as specified in The Constitution, federal law, and Congressional protocol, will certainly be regarded as more evidence to his loyal voters of his victimization by global elites or election-stealing Biden Democrats. Elements from the MAGA movement were in the vanguard of the attack on the Capitol, and many continue to believe they must give their all to The Grifter-in-Chief, even as they are being arrested by the FBI and other police agencies for participating in the insurrection of January 6, 2021.

From the daily struggle over the allegedly First Amendment right to not wear medical masks in public to the myths about America's insecure system of voting in key swing states, like Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, Trump's wing of the Republican Party is leveraging these talking points to keep growing as a disruptive political force through the 2022 and 2024 election campaigns. Already Trump operatives are aiding new candidates to 'primary' current GOP members of Congress and the Senate, who protested Trump's quixotic legal protests against the 2020 election's outcomes in the swing states or who actually voted in the House to impeach him for a second time (Epstein & Klueck 2021). The former president is talking about forming 'The Patriot Party', but he has, to a certain degree, already made that move by 'Trumpifying' the GOP, from below and within. He also promises to run along with thousands of his newly energized followers in the 2024 elections completely confident that he will beat his second impeachment during the 2021 trial in the Senate, as he did in 2020.

Consequently, the unrepentant bloc of Trump Republicans, including the 13 Senators and 134 Representatives, who openly challenged the final tally of 2020 Electoral College votes in a Joint Session of Congress presided over by Vice-President Mike Pence on January 6, 2021, are still not cowed by the outrages of the mob storming their chambers that day. Until then, the USA had

averted any attempted coup for 232 years. That afternoon, however, a number of House Republicans, organized by Congressman Mo Brooks (R-AL), and supported by Senator Ted Cruz challenged the Electoral College results from Arizona. Two hours earlier, President Trump addressed an immense crowd of supporters at the 'Save America' rally south of the White House, and urged them to march on the Capitol to 'fight like hell' as Rudy Giuliani touted 'trial by combat' before the same crowd (Leatherby et al., 2021), triggering a final gambit 'to stop the steal' in a brazen, if inept, *autogolpe*. While it plainly did not succeed, it already is being celebrated as great victory for the MAGA movement and its more violence-ready members.

The Trump bloc in the GOP is not beyond positioning to itself to be – at a minimum – as an aggressive permanent opposition, like the Anti-Federalists in the 1790s or the Southern Democrats after 1876. The GOP is now Trump's party, and as a few more moderate Republicans responsibly acceded to Biden's win, GOP politicians have had to decide what to do about the Trump bloc as well be ready for what will be done to them by Trump's insurgent resistance to the sitting Biden-Harris administration in Washington. The US Presidential Election of 2020 was not stolen from Donald Trump by Joe Biden on Election Day. Yet, many weeks of GOP agitation about illegal voter registration, rampant voting fraud, biased election boards across the nation, and systematic ballot spoiling are now almost institutionalized truisms in many local and state Republican circles. To the extent, the sustained post-election campaign to prove the GOP's loss of the White House in a duly conducted and legally certified election was not, in fact, lost legally and fairly, American democracy faces greater threats. The allegedly hidden GOP victory instead will be repeatedly found in specious assertions, and proven to be true by the Make America Great Again Movement for Trump's base if only to continue the 24 × 7 efforts by the President Trump to gaslight the national consciousness about this new 'Lost Cause' campaign on social media, from the Trump Tower or the former president's last resplendent trenches at Mar-A-Lago in Florida. Not surprisingly, then, Donald Trump opened his Office of Donald J. Trump on January 25, 2021 in Palm Beach County, Florida to 'carry on the agenda of the Trump Administration through advocacy, organizing, and public activism' (Contributing Author, 2021).

Despite all of these troubling trends, the so-called '10,000 national elections across the USA' in 2020 were a distinctive achievement for the American body politic. Never have so many individual voters been moved to cast their ballots – Democrats, Independents, Republicans – in common cause to decide the future course of the republic, largely because they felt 'as if their country depended on it' (Wright, 2021, 59). By the time the last polling places closed on November 2, 2020, and final vote tallies were ascertained a few days after national elections, it was clear over 155 million American citizens turned out to vote. In casting their ballots, Republican incumbent, Donald J. Trump, drew 74,223,746 votes – a historically unprecedented number of ballots for any GOP presidential candidate. Yet, his Democratic Party opponent, former Vice President Joseph Biden pulled even more votes, 81,283,485, the highest number for any presidential candidate ever.

Unfortunately, this decisive day for electoral democracy, popular participation, and civic engagement for the republic was followed by weeks of disgraceful wrangling by President Trump and the Republican Party to overturn the results of this amazing electoral wave of civic participation, and invalidate the vote of millions in their desperate effort to maintain control of the White House. All of this follows Trump's January 6, 2021 personal threats to pressure Vice President Pence to illegally halt the final count of the Electoral College votes in a joint session of Congress as well as President Trump inciting thousands of his supporters to march on the Capitol 'to stop the steal'. The resulting assault on the Capitol left five dead, scores injured, and the sad spectacle of Trump's supporters defiling the House chambers, vandalizing the Capitol building itself, and leaving the nation to deal with a tragic result – the first attempted insurrection against Congress to overturn a national election by a defeated sitting President.

These tumultuous trends in the 2020 electoral campaign have been shocking. Yet, in other ways, such disturbing events are exactly what 'Publius', or Alexander Hamilton, James Madison,

and John Jay anticipated in *Federalist No. 1* could happen in the new American republic in their times or today (Hamilton et al., 2014). Indeed, it is through such on-going factional struggles for power that historical providence ‘reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force’. As the nation moves ahead from January 20, 2021, the new Democratic administration’s cabinet and other agency chiefs are being approved in the Senate, and all 50 states are seeking rapid responses to the worsening pandemic. Yet, both parties also are already hurriedly organizing their coming campaigns for the 2022 mid-term elections. Ideally, as Congress did with alacrity on January 6 and 7, 2021 in finishing its certification of the Electoral College votes on time, the republic’s reliance on The Constitution also will remain true in the coming trial of former President Trump.

As America’s citizens continue tussling in agonistic struggles for office between the now Trump-dominated Republican and Biden-led Democratic Parties, the 2020 election and 2021 final certification of the Electoral College ballots prove, once again, how crucial it is to not allow accident and force to foster devious disarray or deeper division. Dangers to democracy are answered best by decisive democratic action against any threat. Pandemics will not be contained through the dismissive acceptance of inept presidents declaring ‘it is what it is’ nor can the best popular guidance be discovered through more confrontations between Antifa and the Alt-Right. Maintaining good government depends instead on the far more demanding work of honest civic education and engagement in a humane and caring politics steered by rational reflection and careful choice as well as civil conduct and ethical example.

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