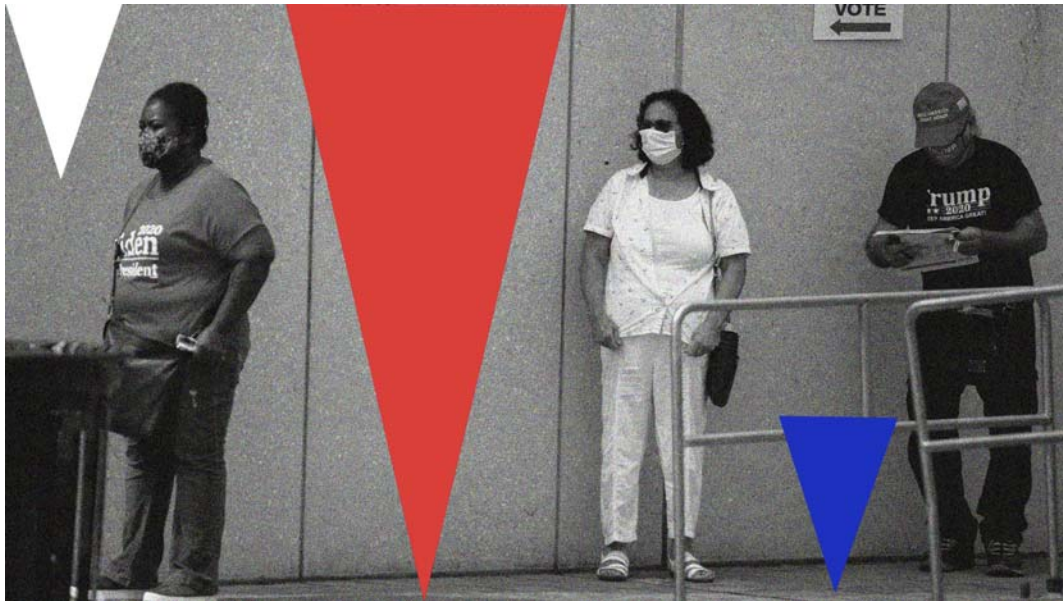


IDEAS

The American System Is Broken

It should not take the largest voter turnout in U.S. history to guarantee that a president rejected by the majority of the American people actually stops being president.

By David Frum



Raedle / Getty / The Atlantic

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A MERICANS WOKE UP today to an even more destabilized reality, one shadowed by dangerous uncertainties.

The United States has lived through the largest democratic event in its history. At least 70 million votes have been cast for Joe Biden. As always, however, it remains uncertain whether the U.S. electoral system will ratify, or subvert, the people's vote. As of midday today, Biden seemed to be moving count-by-count toward the presidency. If he reaches it, he will in all likelihood confront a blocked and paralyzed Senate under Republican leadership. Hopes for decisive action against the pandemic and the economic recession seem dashed.

David A. Graham: The nightmare is here

Meanwhile, President Donald Trump demands an early and arbitrary end to voting—and says aloud that he expects the judges he selected to deliver a result favorable to him. Trump may still have to exit office in January. But he delivered proof of concept: corruption, authoritarianism, the abuse of state power—the political price for Trumpism proved remarkably manageable. Slightly better luck, slightly more competent management of the coronavirus, and Trump could likely look forward to four more years of quid pro quo governance. Even as is, Trump's party seems unchastened.

Through the murk, however, some truths are coming into view. Regardless of the ultimate resolution of the impasse, here are three things that can now be said.

1. The American system of government is ineffective and crisis-prone.

The point of elections is to produce effective governments generally regarded as legitimate by most citizens.

Over the past two decades, the U.S. system of government has failed that test again and again. Elections now systematically disfavor voting majorities. From 1892 through 1996, the person who won the most votes became president, every time. In 2000, the U.S. got its first minority-rule president since the aftermath of the Civil War. That outcome was seen as a freak at the time. Four elections later, it happened again. Today, Trump is looking to the courts to overrule the voting majority for a third time.

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Even given that turnout, assuming Trump steps down, the electoral system will produce a gridlocked government—not because “the voters” or “the American people” wanted it that way, but because strategically positioned voters in small states did. The unrepresentativeness of state governments is even more extreme because of gerrymandering. And Republicans seem to have done well enough at the state level in 2020 to thwart any systemwide move to fairer representation in 2021.

Adam Serwer: The Supreme Court is helping Republicans rig elections

These unrepresentative state and federal governments seem less and less capable of coping with the problems of the modern world. In the span of 12 years, the U.S. has had the two worst economic collapses since the Great Depression. It has started and lost wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It cannot collect taxes it is owed—including from the current president. It cannot balance its books even in prosperity; in fact, it long ago ceased even to write annual budgets. It cannot police its borders against unauthorized immigration. It cannot act against existential environmental threats. It cannot protect its people from a disease that can be controlled by wearing a \$5 mask.

The U.S. system depends on compromise and cooperation. The administration cannot administer without the budgets and laws passed by Congress; Congress cannot legislate without dealmaking between the parties and (except in the most extreme cases) a signature from the president. Yet the spirit necessary to make the U.S. system work is draining away.

A Biden presidency will have no choice but to do business with a Republican Party gripped by paranoid delusions and enablers of authoritarianism. That party seems unlikely to feel the shame and remorse called for by the Trump presidency. Instead, it will pour its energy into all-out war against non-Republican power holders, convinced that such conflict is the surest route back to the total control it enjoyed from 2017 to 2018. A decisive Trump defeat might have induced some renewal and redemption in the Republican Party. As is, Republican incentives favor a recommitment to corrupt and authoritarian Trumpism, reformed only by a stronger work ethic and more focused messaging.

2. The harm to U.S. world leadership is grave and irreparable.

Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis liked to say that the U.S. wielded two great

powers: the power of inspiration and the power of intimidation.

Under Trump, the power of inspiration has dimmed. Trump's contempt for liberal democracy—his crookedness, bullying, and bigotry—has alienated allies and emboldened adversaries. Trump used American power not to protect allies and partners, but to extort weaker countries to fabricate disinformation for his reelection campaign.

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Until yesterday, those who looked to the U.S. for leadership could dismiss Trump as an aberration. But even if he loses, he cannot now be dismissed, or excused, as such. Trump received at least 3 million more votes amid the self-inflicted disasters of 2020 than he got in 2016. Every responsible world leader now has to take Trumpism into account when planning. Trump is not the whole of America. But he is part of America. The disease of Trumpism is on the loose. It has been contained, but not cured, and therefore it may recur at any time.

How does the U.S. look from the vantage point of Berlin or Seoul or Mexico City? How does it preach anti-corruption after four years of Trump apparently collecting payments from corporations and foreign governments, after four years of Trump seeming to divert taxpayer dollars to his hotels and resorts? How does it preach respect for human rights or the free press? Or religious liberty, after Trump sought to ban an entire category of religious believers from setting foot on U.S. soil? Trump insisted again and again in interviews that the U.S. was no different from, no better than, dictatorships such as Putin's Russia. "You think our country's so innocent?" Trump bequeaths that taunt as his enduring legacy to adversaries of the United States and enemies of liberal democracy. The idea that America should and did stand for something more than wealth and military power has been soiled by the Trump presidency—and whatever happens to Trump, those who assisted him in the soiling are not going away.

Meanwhile, the power of U.S. intimidation has also faded under Trump. On the eve of 9/11, the U.S. economy was eight times the size of China's. Today the two countries are near peers. In terms of purchasing-power parity, the Chinese economy is now actually larger than that of the U.S.

The U.S. is no longer effortlessly the world's strongest country. It cannot structure the world by itself, to suit itself. Trump tried, and Trump fell short. His trade war ended in failure that would very likely have pushed the U.S. into recession in 2020 even without the pandemic, according to the consensus view of the nation's business economists.

The U.S. will emerge from the Trump presidency crushed by debt, under a gridlocked government unable to act against the debt. If the Republican Senate blocks the

necessary fiscal stimulus, as seems likely, the job of restoring economic health will be left to the currency creators at the Federal Reserve, stoking inflation risk. The dollar will look a lot less almighty in the 2020s and the '30s than in the recent past. And just as America's friends will admire the country less because of Trump, its adversaries will respect and fear America less because of Trump.

3. American society is more divided than ever, but not along expected lines.

A popular theory explained the Trump presidency as a last gasp of white dominance in an ever more multiethnic society.

But Trump seems to have raised his voting share among Latinos, the secret of his victories in Florida and Texas. And he seems to have lost voting share among white Americans, the secret of his gathering failure in the upper Midwest. The idea of a Democratic “coalition of color” looks shabby and threadbare.

[Christian Paz: What liberals don't understand about pro-Trump Latinos](#)

The full story of Trump's comparative success with Latinos has not been written. It's fair to ask, however, whether the race-saturated language of college-educated America —“white supremacy,” “systemic racism,” “intersectionality”—might have baffled and maybe even repelled not only white voters without college degrees, but some Latinos too.

If anything, the most important voting divide in U.S. society seems not to be “white people” versus “people of color,” but men versus women. The world-historical gender gap ripped through U.S. society by the Trump presidency looks to have shredded even the Black vote. If early exit polls are to be trusted—and in recent elections, they have frequently been wide of the mark—Trump seems to have raised his share of the vote among Black men, maintaining the large gender gap among Black voters that appeared in 2016.

THE UNITED STATES remains a great country, endowed with tremendous strengths. The people who made plans to vote, who stood in lines for decency and democracy—they have honored the character of the country. But there is another America, and it too has its power: in politics, in culture, and in pro-Trump communications media that interpreted their job as distributing falsehoods to serve the needs of power holders.

The Trump-Biden race was a test of national character, and it looks likely that the United States will pass, if only just. But the outcome was not a comfortable one, and the work of converting aspirations into realities will be no less difficult and uncertain over the next four years than over the four years past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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