

United States The Long American Meltdown Led to the January 6, 2021 Insurrection

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The January 6 Capitol riot was the product of a decades-long attempt to destroy democracy in America — one that Democrats have never made an effort to stop by creating a government that is serious about the public interest.

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Today is the one-year anniversary of the January 6 riot, which was the violent crescendo of a generation-long [meltdown](#) that exploded in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

Amid all the solid reporting about the details of that day — who plotted it, who participated in it, who supported it — the larger context of the mayhem is almost never mentioned, because to mention it is to raise uncomfortable questions about the roots of right-wing authoritarianism, and spotlight what kind of soil allows those roots to sprout into bloodshed.

The Republican Party is now a [corporate-sponsored insurrection](#) creeping through right-wing media, state legislatures, and Congress.

Democrats’ stunned, deer-in-headlights reaction to that insurrection’s January 6 riot — and the belated fears about the end of democracy — only underscore that they remain totally out of touch with the political environment their party was complicit in creating. Their shock also illustrates how oblivious they are to the erosion of democracy that’s been going on for a half century.

The Loss of Faith in Government

At its core, the January 6 insurrection was the weaponized manifestation of virulent anti-government sentiment in a putatively democratic country where a majority has not trusted its own government for two decades, according to the Pew Research Center [polls](#). That anti-government sentiment on display during last year’s riot wasn’t spontaneous — a quick trip back in time in a flux-capacitor-powered DeLorean shows it was cultivated by both politics and reality over the last four decades.

Let’s remember: the ideological crusade against government has always been a part of American politics. But it really began [coalescing](#) in modern form in the late 1970s when conservative demagogues, moguls, and business interests began building a movement to demonize public institutions — and to insist as Ronald Reagan did that “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are, ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’”

When these right-wing forces gained power, they enacted policies that turned their ideology into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Tax cuts for the wealthy starved government institutions of resources, and when those hobbled agencies then delivered worse services, Republican politicians cited those failures to justify even more budget-starving tax cuts, privatization, and deregulation.

Conservatives tilled this bumper crop of anti-government resentment in soil made fertile by a liberal establishment that was at the time discarding the proven political formula of Franklin Roosevelt. He became the Democratic Party's most popular president because he understood that delivering economic gains for the working class is not merely good and moral policy, but also the only way to preserve democracy. As he said, a government that refuses to deliver those gains will create a population willing to "sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat" (and one of his first acts as president was [quelling](#) a potential insurrection by supporting help to aggrieved veterans).

In conjunction with Reagan's ascent, more and more Democratic politicians abandoned this New Deal formula of delivering help to voters and then being rewarded in elections by those same voters. Instead, modern-day Democrats shoved aside a beleaguered labor movement in pursuit of corporate campaign cash, figuring they could help Republicans kick voters in the face, and then just try to buy reelection with corporate donors' money.

The pillars of neoliberalism — tax cuts, corporate-written trade deals, financial deregulation, budget austerity, and privatization — soon became a bipartisan affair.

Bill Clinton, the first Democratic president after the Reagan era, proudly [declared](#) that "the era of big government is over," and then launched a crusade to [slash welfare](#), [help capital crush unions](#), [deregulate](#) Wall Street, [privatize](#) government services, and pass the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) — the latter of which [prompted](#) culturally conservative working-class voters to abandon the party in droves, according to new research.

George W. Bush picked up where Clinton left off, and then turned the volume [up to 11](#) with the Iraq War — a disaster defined by such epic lies, mismanagement, and theft that it thoroughly discredited the entire political (and media) class. The Hurricane Katrina debacle further underscored the idea of government as unable — or worse, unwilling — to fulfill its most basic responsibilities. During Bush's tenure, polls showed a mind-boggling [forty-point drop](#) in Americans' faith in their government.

Then came the financial crisis and the presidency of Barack Obama, in what now looks like a last-chance opportunity — a fleeting moment to use a massive election mandate to resurrect Roosevelt's New Deal formula, reverse the neoliberal deregulation that fueled the emergency, and really deliver for a ravaged working class.

Instead, Obama fortified the policies that created the crisis in the first place. Regulations were aesthetically polished but not fundamentally changed. Bailouts were quickly delivered to the Wall Street donors whose banks were firing up a foreclosure machine. Meanwhile, millions of people thrown out of their homes were given some meager health insurance [subsidies](#), a few nice speeches about "hope," and the [prospect](#) of Social Security cuts.

A Predictable Riot

To be sure, there were some public sector successes in the last forty years. Yes, infrastructure was built and important scientific research was subsidized. Yes, most medicinal innovations were [funded](#) by the public (and then [privatized](#) and profited by politically connected drugmakers). And yes, the government miraculously helped make a lifesaving vaccine available to everyone in America who

wants one.

But overall, the government was not addressing eminently solvable economic problems that have been enriching a handful of billionaires while making life miserable for millions of people.

As economic inequality [grew](#) to levels not seen since the before the Great Depression, the topline message to millions of Americans over decades has been clear: Despite saccharine campaign speeches to the contrary, and despite some begrudging policy improvements at the margins, governmental leaders have been telling us that they are at best uninterested in aiding most people unless it enriches their donors. More often, they are actively hostile to helping anyone other than the rich and powerful.

Though blue-no-matter-who liberals don't like to discuss it, the Obama administration's alliance with Wall Street in the aftermath of the financial crisis was the inflection point solidifying distrust in government, providing a political opportunity for not just Trump but for his entire movement that ultimately tried to torch the Capitol on January 6.

As Trump's consigliere Steve Bannon [said](#), "The legacy of the financial crisis was Donald J. Trump."

That's not an overstatement nor a shocker: [comprehensive research](#) shows that in the last 150 years, such financial crises and weak responses in the industrialized world have almost always been followed by an assault on democracy by right-wing authoritarian movements whose anti-government arguments find even more purchase among voters who blame public institutions for the emergencies.

The insurrection was the American version of that global phenomenon — and it followed a Trump term that was performance art for public sector incompetence. The businessman-president seemed completely uninterested in the actual job, the rich [got richer](#), [fixable crises got worse](#), and governmental corruption was not only rampant, but cartoonishly explicit — a signal that graft once considered scandalous is now considered just regular "government."

Though he was literally the head of that government, Trump cynically blamed most of the grotesquerie on government (and by extension the obsequious political press) — from the "deep state" to the [Centers for Disease Control](#) to [state governments](#). Come election day, he and his cronies effectively [blamed](#) his election loss on an alleged government conspiracy to steal the election, knowing that an ever larger share of the public was already alienated from its institutions and therefore pre-primed to believe any anti-government argument at all, no matter how absurd.

Hence, when egged on by Trump and a right-wing misinformation machine, some of the hardest of hard core of those believers amassed at the Capitol ready to burn the government down — literally.

It's hardly a surprise that [many of the](#) disgruntled rioters had faced recent financial hardship, which no doubt many blamed on — you guessed it! — the government. It's even less surprising that many [other rioters](#) were economically well-off and considered "mainstream" rather than fringe militia types — showing that anti-government sentiment had been normalized and spread to Republicans' golf-and-tennis crowd.

“Nobody Elected Him to Be FDR”

Acknowledging this context is not to defend the violence or sympathize with its motives — it is simply to recognize that neither Trump's cabal nor January 6 are anomalies. They are villainous

characters and horrifying events in a larger parable that unfolds when for decades a government stops governing and democracy is routinely defiled.

Preventing the next insurrection or something worse, then, is not just a retrospective investigatory or law enforcement matter about a single January day that will live in infamy. It must also be a forward-looking political project — one that Democrats seem to either not understand or not care about.

Up to now, Democrats have spotlighted the January 6 Commission's revelations about Trump's [coup](#) attempt, and they have touted their party's [half-hearted promise](#) to protect voting rights — a promise simultaneously undermined by their steadfast refusal to end the filibuster.

Democrats have coupled this pro-democracy theater with high-profile betrayals of the working class — from dropping a [\\$15 minimum wage](#) to ending the expanded child tax credit, to refusing to eliminate [student debt](#), to killing [paid family and sick leave](#) proposals in the middle of a pandemic. Most recently, Biden's spokesperson [scoffed](#) at the idea of delivering free COVID tests to people's homes, Biden's consultants aided [Big Pharma's efforts](#) to kill promised drug-pricing legislation, and Biden's White House is promising no more [stimulus legislation](#), no matter how much worse the pandemic gets.

Sure, there have been some successes — unlike Obama using his election mandate to give a handful of bankers a giant bag of cash, Biden's first COVID relief bill actually delivered some [tangible benefits](#) to millions of Americans. But the benefits were a temporary reprieve. There has been no permanent structural change of the economy to alleviate any of the increasingly impossible challenges of surviving in America, from exorbitant health insurance bills to predatory rents, to the prospect of elder poverty. Indeed, there hasn't even been a real public *attempt* at such structural changes.

As a recent [Gallup poll](#) shows trust in government further cratering under Biden, Democrats' theory seems to be the opposite of Roosevelt's truism — they seem to believe that a working class facing unending precarity would never dare “sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat,” and that simply screaming about the end of what's left of democracy is a winning formula.

Democratic representative Abby Spanberger perfectly summarized these beliefs when she recently declared that “nobody elected (Biden) to be FDR, they elected him to be normal and stop the chaos” — as if “stopping the chaos” has absolutely nothing to do with delivering FDR-like help to millions of angry people struggling to survive.

In this dominant Democratic ideology, “democracy” and “normalcy” are ends in themselves that enough Americans will supposedly be motivated to defend. And who knows, maybe they will. Maybe we really are living in a *West Wing* episode where high concepts like self-government alone can win the day as a syrupy soundtrack swells with patriotic music.

But maybe not. Maybe the trouble is that in the absence of effective government, more and more Americans see “democracy” alone as a weak lifestyle brand or worse — a ruse.

In the last two decades, they've seen a former president's Supreme Court appointees hand the White House to that president's son after he lost the national election.

They've seen senators representing a tiny minority of the country routinely use the filibuster to block bills supported by the vast majority of the country, as Democrats do nothing — choosing instead to defend arcane rules and the Senate as an institution.

They've seen corporations and billionaires buy elections, legislation, and [Supreme Court seats](#).

They've seen the Fourth Estate — a pillar of any functioning democracy — become a megaphone for the same corporations buying the elections.

They've seen senators from the poorest states become [loyal shills](#) for the richest oligarchs.

They've seen the opposite of what happened after America voted out Herbert Hoover and Roosevelt delivered the New Deal.

They've seen their votes for politicians deliver little more than inaugural parties, vapid appeals to our better angels, donor enrichment schemes masquerading as public policy — and then reelection campaign ads promising that progress is somehow still out of reach but just over the horizon, as long as you send a bit more cash to your preferred political party.

What they haven't seen — and are still not seeing — is a robust attempt to combat anti-government nihilism by creating a government that is serious about the public interest.

Until they do, the insurrection is likely to continue.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 01.06.2022:

https://jacobinmag.com/2022/01/january-6-capital-riot-trump-obama-biden?mc_cid=8dc73d1aa6&mc_eid=ed033bb17d

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