

United States: What it means to say Trump will govern like a fascist

Friday 9 February 2024, by [RENTON David](#) (Date first published: 31 January 2024).

The U.S. presidential elections in November pose the risk of a Trump victory. His opponents warn that Trump is a fascist and demand that the Left stand down our independent voices and subordinate everything to the call to resist him. David Renton argues the answer is not to minimize the risk posed by Trump but to insist that our organizing is the only protection against the rise of authoritarianism in the United States and worldwide.

The U.S. presidential election is coming closer and its outline is becoming easier to see. Donald Trump has won the first two primary contests in Iowa and New Hampshire with over 50 percent of the vote in each election. He will win the Republican nomination with ease. After years of being built up as Trump's nearest challenger, Ron DeSantis was [forty points](#) behind Trump even in DeSantis' home state of Florida before exiting the race shortly before New Hampshire. Nikki Haley is now his only primary opposition, with fewer than 15 percent of [Republicans](#) nationally likely to vote for her. She is a [substantial underdog](#) in the next primary contest that takes place in her home state of South Carolina for Republicans on February 24.

As for who will be president, some polls suggest parity between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, while others give the presumptive Republican nominee a small lead. The closeness between the two parties shouldn't be surprising: since 1996, there has only been one presidential election (Barack Obama in 2008) in which the victor won by more than five percentage points. But it is bad news for Biden. The Electoral College, whose origins were rooted in projecting disproportionate political power towards the southern slave states, gives in the present day a significant advantage to Republican candidates, who can expect to win many of the smaller and more rural white states. To be confident of victory, a Democratic candidate needs to win the popular vote by three to four percentage points.

Biden's personal approval ratings have been trending negative since the first week of September, and heavily so since October 7: more voters [disapprove](#) of his record in office than approve of it. In three of the last five national polls, Trump was ahead of Biden by an average of one percentage point, in a fourth poll they were even, and in a fifth poll Biden led Trump, again by a [single point](#). Reading these figures, the bookies make Trump the slight [favorite](#) to win the White House.

The reason why his prospects matter is that when you get behind the familiar in U.S. elections, the reassuring talk of red and blue and swing states, a Trump election victory would mean something different from any normal election. But how different would politics be?

One difficulty in answering that question is that for eighty years, pro-Democratic journalists have had a consistent answer. They have exaggerated the threat posed by the right, as well as the differences between Republicans and Democrats in office. They have told U.S. voters that every Republican candidate would open the door to fascism. Ronald Reagan was a proto-fascist because he

celebrated the [Waffen-SS at Bitburg](#), George Bush Sr. was a proto-fascist because of how he used [Willie Horton](#) in the campaign against Michael Dukakis. Voters considering support for Ralph Nader in 2004 were told they couldn't possibly vote Green because "the Bush team has neared some elements of fascism [in its day-to-day operations](#)." In 2016, it became an article of faith for many Democrats that Trump was already a fascist. Madeleine Albright, a key architect of brutal U.S. sanctions against Iraq, wrote a book [warning that Trump](#) was a fascist.

This way of understanding is middle-of-the-road [commentators](#) using the most demonstrative and angry language to prove how radical they are, while urging their readers to take forms of political action that won't change anything. Their language has an impact on us, too. At the moment that fascism presents itself in the world, the Left has a moral responsibility to fight it. Pro-Democrat anti-fascism becomes, in practice, an argument for standing down all independent organizations and campaigning without distraction in favor of the reelection of Joe Biden.

It doesn't not just make bad activism but it's thoughtless politics, too. The term "fascism" is at the endpoint of a dial that goes only up to ten: fascism is the worst of the worst. But if Trump was already at that point in [2016](#), and has been continuously at the same place ever since, then there is no need to differentiate from moments when his administration deradicalized (as in 2017, when criticism of Trump for his defense of the Charlottesville rioters forced him to "temporarily" drop [Steve Bannon](#)) or moments when he started to plot actively for dictatorship (as in December 2020 and January 2021). Twisting the analytical dial up to ten and holding it there also makes it harder to understand where Trump is today. It leaves no space for the chance, which I'd put as real, that if Trump is elected again in 2024, his administration will be significantly worse than it was from 2017 to 2021.

A further difficulty for people trying to understand Trump or the threat of fascism from within the political traditions of the U.S. Left is that, since the 1960s, a significant strand of Marxist analysis has posited that the country was already fascist. The [European Marxists](#) of the 1930s may have distinguished sharply between politics under capitalism and politics under fascism. But, by contrast, [many Black radical theories of the 1960s](#) tried to broaden the definition of fascism in order to reject racist and authoritarian politics. The U.S. empire was [fascist](#), the Republicans were fascists, and the Democrats, too. This way of looking at the world may have encouraged impressive activism, but it was a rejection of analysis. And in the different contexts of today, it gets in the way of addressing whether anything is changing.

At the moment that fascism presents itself in the world, the Left has a moral responsibility to fight it. Pro-Democrat anti-fascism becomes, in practice, an argument for standing down all independent organizations and campaigning without distraction in favor of the reelection of Joe Biden.

Undoubtedly, a second Trump administration would operate with considerable continuity with normal U.S. racial politics: he would maintain the border wall and the detention regime. He will work, just as tirelessly as Biden has, to promote the interest of Israel. Under Trump, as under Biden, Black people will be incarcerated in far larger numbers than whites. The question is really whether Trump will govern differently next time.

It is easiest to start with the arguments for continuity. Contrary to the writers who think of Trump as a new Mussolini, Trump is not a natural fascist. He is not even a natural politician. Both Mussolini and Hitler were obsessives. Out of office, they were constantly plotting in relation to their own parties. In government, they were always thinking through what their politics meant in terms of every aspect of people's lives. Mussolini was so concerned with the details of quotidian Italian life, that he even managed to outlaw the handshake, making the fascist greeting mandatory by law. During his presidency, Trump treated his government not as a device to change U.S. society, but like a large version of *The Apprentice*, a business in which Trump's main role was to dismiss those whom he had just appointed. Even if this felt like "draining the swamp," what it meant in reality was that little was ever done.

More than a third of all Trump's appointees were dismissed in his first year in office, [a figure twice as high as any other U.S. president in the past forty years](#). Trump's appointees have the records for the shortest tenure by any national security advisor in U.S. history (Michael Flynn) or by any chief of staff (Reince Priebus) or by any White House director of communications (Anthony Scaramucci—"the Mooch," in case any readers have forgotten him). If Trump was serious about turning the United States into a fascist state after 2024, he would need to learn skills of administration and patience. Every sign suggests, however, that he has not widened his base of advisors, nor learned any skills in (dictatorial) government. In 2024, he will be the same person as before, only eight years older and more cantankerous.

Save for Trump's use of social media and his involvement in plotting January 6, he did not govern as a fascist. In almost every area of his administration, he left the United States no closer to racial dictatorship than it already was. Under Obama, the state deported people at the rate of 400,000 to 900,000 people a year, while under Trump the range was 400,000 to 600,000 people a year. Under Biden, deportations have accelerated, to between 1.3 million and 1.5 million [people a year](#). On the border wall with Mexico, the first five hundred miles were built by a conservative Republican, George W. Bush, and the next 130 miles by President Obama. Trump added about 85 miles, and Biden has added a [further twenty](#). The number of Black inmates held in U.S. federal prisons [fell](#) under Trump. So did the number of federal capital punishment [executions](#). None of this is to minimize Trump's authoritarian intent. It is to say, rather, that—from the perspective of the U.S. Left—the most serious opponent is the one who has the administrative skills to match their authoritarian language. Compared to his promises to his base, Trump's record in office was one of failure.

If Trump was going to govern as a fascist, what that means is that he would govern not just as an authoritarian but as an authoritarian of the most extreme sort. He would seek, for example, not just to fix future elections, but to remove the very idea that a President needs to be elected at all. There were no elections in Italy after 1924 or in Germany after [1933](#). But if Trump was to declare himself leader for life, he would be cutting against the political wisdom of the last eighty years, the consensus of the U.S. business and political classes, and the way in which the United States has [spread its power](#) around the world. Among the Republican donors with whom he is in an awkward alliance, the latter, and their advisors, are calling for ever greater wealth [transfers to the rich](#), but they are not yet providing the blueprints for authoritarian rule that Trump cares about.

None of this is to say a fascist turn is impossible. If we take seriously Karl Marx's description of the state in the *Communist Manifesto* as "a committee for managing [the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie](#)," one insight that follows from this is that many individual capitalists will often find themselves having to live under a political leader who wasn't their first choice. But a dictatorship that gives up on elections makes itself harder to rule. It means that every individual protest is also a challenge to the legitimacy of the state. Accordingly, any serious move to institute fascism in the United States, or to replace democratic elections with one-party rule, would face critics—even from

within the set of far-right plutocrats in whose interests Trump proposes to rule.

In addition, if the U.S. were to turn toward fascism, this would not be in response to a radical, combative, Left. Save in the fevered imagination of the [fascists](#) and [the cops](#), there is no lurking revolution against which Trump could pose as the sole guardian of order.

The problem is that, for all these arguments that a Trump victory might mean no significant change at the top of the U.S. state, points can be made to the opposite effect—that a Trump victory would be a strategic change in the balance of forces between those who want democracy to continue and those right-wing leaders who have given up on it.

The central idea of January 6 was that Trump should be able to govern, even if he lost the election. Members of Congress could object to the results in their states, and [substitute themselves for the voters](#). Before the march on the Capitol, Trump addressed a crowd of his supporters, telling them that by marching they could “[take back our country](#).”

At the heart of the classical Marxist theory of fascism is the idea that, in order for the world to be returned to a condition of inter-imperial wars and genocide in the advanced countries, it is not enough that a fraction of the rich or the army should support dictatorship. What you need is a mass party in which millions of ordinary people have a personal relationship with their leader. That party needs to call for and enact violence. It needs to live by the rules of mass politics in which vast crowds are mobilized to destroy democracy.

During his presidency, Trump used his Twitter account to create an audience of eighty million followers. A significant proportion did not believe in Trump’s mission, at least not at the start. They saw him rather as a joke, an entertainer who would break through the extraordinary conservatism of America’s governing institutions. (They also included journalists, tens of thousands of his opponents, as well as people who were at the start of his presidency mere old-school Republican voters or other non-fascist forms of right-wing voter – neoconservatives, free marketeers). Over four years, however, a significant group of people in that large, shapeless, right-wing audience moved toward positions of hatred for and actual violence towards the Left (now defined as “[antifa](#),” supporters of “[Critical Race Theory](#),” woke, even Joe Biden himself).

During the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA, white supremacists are confronted outside Emancipation Park (now called Market Street Park and was called Lee Park named for Confederate General Robert E. Lee until 2017) by anti-fascist counter-protestors and legal observers (seen here wearing green hats). [Photo](#) by Anthony Crider.

Trump amplified marginal figures—Patriots, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, White nationalists, Christian nationalists, followers of Alex Jones, anti-vaxxers, and QAnon conspiracy theorists. Promoted by Trump, social media accounts with audiences of hundreds of followers soon had thousands and sometimes even millions of followers of their own. At the time, this seemed to be a particularly ineffective form of base-building, in which the president of the United States, a person who had the constitutional power to appoint cabinet secretaries or start wars, was less concerned about changing the state and more worried about boosting the influences of his followers who were, by any objective standard, irrelevant nonentities.

Intentionally or not, Trump was creating a party of people who were indebted to him. In the classical fascist model, the fascist leader and the member belong to one organization, a vertical system of dues-paying and centralized leadership. Trumpism was different in that it relied on social media rather than membership fees or party publications to sustain the binds of reciprocal loyalty, but it was ultimately a modest tweak to a familiar process.

More than one thousand people [face criminal charges](#) for January 6. They need Trump to win so that he can pardon them. If he does, as he has promised he would do if elected, his supporters will be able to say that they were really people who “[revered the Capitol](#).” His victory would retrospectively justify their violence. Equally, in 2024, Trump will need these individuals and their allies to show up at his election rallies, to pay for his election ads, and to undertake whatever rerun he tries of his previous attempts to [intimidate](#) the court.

The pro-Democrat wing of the U.S. state has spent the last three years trying to make Trump’s conduct seem so bad that he would have no chance of standing again for election. He was indicted by the Justice Department and faces criminal charges for subverting the election result. That case is still listed as due to start hearing in Washington D.C. [this March](#). Other significant trials are also advancing in New York, Florida, and Georgia.

The prosecutions were begun late, and now face the fundamental problem of whether a former president is immune from prosecution because of his constitutional position. Prosecutors have asked the Supreme Court to resolve that issue, relying on the precedent of the prosecution of [Richard Nixon](#), but there are a number of differences between that case and Trump’s. When Watergate came before the Supreme Court in July 1974, more or less the entire political class agreed that Nixon’s behavior had been criminal and wrong. A year earlier, the Senate had voted 77-0 to establish a select committee to investigate him. Unlike Trump, Nixon could not appeal to the people (he was already into his second term).

Trump also has the further advantage that his case will be decided by a Supreme Court accustomed to polarization and comfortable with it, appointed 6-3 by Republican presidents (and three of the justices appointed by Trump). It is just about possible that the Supreme Court might indeed rush to the assistance of the prosecution, as they hope, but it seems incredibly naïve to assume that the same court that overturned *Roe v Wade* will suddenly decide that its historical mission is to prevent a Republican candidate from standing.

The strong sense is that Trump’s opponents have done enough to anger him and to stoke his feelings of injustice, without doing anything that would change the 2024 result.

And if Trump does win, he will have been freed of the influence of the “grownups” who once tried to manage him. He would be led by his closest supporters, by the people who believe his conspiracy theories about the election last time.

Even sophisticated theories of fascism tend to apply an “[ideal-type](#)” method—or, to be less charitable, a “shopping list” approach. Journalists read the works of historians and use them to draw up lists of the defining characteristics of fascism. Then, depending on which historian is being cited, you might say that fascism is defined by its [mobilizing passions](#), its [ultra-nationalism](#), its [beehive of contradictions](#), or its multiple negations (anti-socialism, anti-democracy), and so on. In that way, any writer can come up with a list, match Donald Trump against it, and say to their satisfaction, either that [he is](#) or [is not](#) a fascist.

When you look at the way in which historians have been writing about fascism in the last decade, however, they have followed a different approach. Most of them find it uninteresting to look back at the 1930s and ask which of Benito Franco or Oswald Mosley or Adolf Hitler was in the “truest” sense a fascist. The important questions to ask are, rather, which features of the historical conjuncture enabled some, but not all, of these figures to take power—and that allowed some of their governments to become more radical in office?

The [most compelling](#) theories have focused on the interactions between fascist parties, showing how

a breakthrough in one country led fascists in another society to want to copy and overreach the rivals who'd come to power before them. Fascism, you might say, is never purely a domestic phenomenon (a state, a fascist Italy, a Nazi Germany). It is always a set of relationships located at the level of the international. Hitler saw Mussolini and wanted to both copy and go further than him. The reason why Hitler tried his Beer Hall putsch is because of Mussolini's March on Rome. Part of what helped Franco win the Spanish Civil War was the presence of soldiers from Italy, Germany, and Portugal. The first mass killings of Communists took place not in Italy in 1924 or Germany in 1933 but in Spain in 1939.

Seen, through an international perspective, Donald Trump is the local representative of a global shift to the right, the equivalent in the U.S. of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Narendra Modi in India, or Vladimir Putin in Russia. From that viewpoint, Trump's first election victory was a threshold moment. Once the richest country in the world, with the largest army, was led by the far right, it became meaningless to think of the old center-right as the norm any longer. There was a time when the election of a far-right government was an outrage and the states surrounding it would seek to [put pressure](#) on the new regime. But it becomes much harder to think like that once, at a global level, the authoritarians and the ultra-nationalists are winning and the conservatives are choosing to follow them.

Russian President Vladimir Putin during a controversial political summit in July 2018 held in Helsinki, Finland between the two world leaders gifts U.S. President Donald Trump an official soccer ball from the 2018 FIFA World Cup that was held that summer in Russia. Photo credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

We are living through a process in which the systems by which it once seemed possible to sustain capitalism, through the [mute compulsion of economic relations](#) that used to seal the domination of the capitalist over the worker, no longer seem adequate. And those who want capitalism to win are demanding a return to authoritarianism, even fascism.

Watching this historical process is like watching Shelley's Frankenstein build a human body from the disassembled parts of dead bodies. Closer and closer we come to a complete corpse—we see the boots of General Pinochet, here the lungs of Mussolini, there the hands of the Argentinean generals who once took pleasure in throwing captured socialists out of planes. None of us knows what form the monster will take in adulthood, but a birth is taking place in front of us, and the creature is coming ever closer to its first breath.

Part of the dynamic that makes it possible to imagine a post-democratic United States is that there are now multiple far-right centers all competing with each other, and all have crossed or are crossing the post-democratic point, including Hungary and much of Eastern Europe. Anti-fascists find ourselves worrying, What's going to happen next in Italy? In Holland under Geert Wilders? In Argentina under Javier Milei? At the next presidential election in France?

Although the word that liberals throw against Trump is *fascist*, relatively few of these countries have sought to suppress elections altogether. They have not gone to war, nor (with the exception of Israel) waged genocide on their racial enemies. Rather, they operate in an authoritarian space between conservatism and fascism.

Think, for example, of how elections take place in Hungary. Although formally those elections see different and hostile parties compete with one another (indeed, there are no rules permitting a multiplicity of parties from standing), Hungarian elections are structurally rigged in multiple ways. All non-state TV stations and almost all the newspapers are owned by allies of the governing party, a process achieved by introducing punitive fines for companies that criticized the state, and then, as

the value of press companies collapsed, authorizing key individuals to buy them using state funds to cover the costs of their purchase. Both state and independent media are instructed to boycott opposition candidates. During the 2022 election campaign, opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay was permitted a mere five minutes on [public television](#) to present his program. State officials have been purged for disloyalty. Judges are only appointed if they support the governing party.

It is perfectly possible, it turns out, to maintain the pretense that there are still contested elections while also running a system in which the governing party could never lose. The decision to keep on holding elections, even though the rivalry is meaningless, becomes another way for a dominant party to assert its power. You can demoralize your opponents and discredit the very idea that elections could or should make a difference.

And such a process would be easier to achieve if you started in the United States, rather than other countries with a similarly-long history of “democracy.” The U.S. already has electoral rules that keep third parties off the ballot, which disenfranchise Black voters, a capitalist class that is committed to contributing ever less to the upkeep of the state, and a legal system that permits them, instead of paying taxes, to use the same system to buy candidates with the result that the average candidate for Congress spends around a hundred times more on political advertising than their counterparts in Britain or Germany or France.

Twenty years ago, socialists used to speak of the U.S. as a two-party dictatorship, in which beneath the story of rival parties alternating in office, there was a single continuous history of government by the same ruling class. It really wouldn't be beyond the capabilities of a committed authoritarian to convert that into a single-party electoral system.

When people say that Trump is a “fascist,” what they often seem to mean in practice is that he is serious about creating a system of managed democracy in which any remaining choice at the presidential level would conceal the obliteration of choice everywhere else. Not two parties contending for power but in most places a one-party state.

Whether Trump has the skills and focus to create such a system or not, one thing which socialists and anti-fascists must take seriously is his desire for revenge. In 2016, Trump's grudge against Hillary Clinton was that she was a woman, she had been permitted to run against him, and she might win. That was enough for him to demand, “Lock her up” Now imagine an elected president in his second term who has spent three years not just out of office, but repeatedly in court, been living under the threat of jail, the destruction of his finances, and other ignominies.

Already, Trump has started joking about whether he will govern as a dictator, responding to Fox News' Sean Hannity's question “[Y]ou would never abuse power as retribution against anybody?” by saying, “No, no, no,” he would not be dictator, “other than [day one](#).” By those last two words, he went on to explain that he intended to expand the racist state and remove any remaining obstacles to the unfettered destruction of the planet by the oil companies. “We're closing the border and we're drilling, drilling, drilling,” Trump said.

The problem with the fascism discourse is that it assumes that political people are, essentially, constant. That they have a set of views by the age of twenty and then stick to them all their lives. Whereas, if you look at the lives of individual dictators or fascists, they were made by events. They improvised in certain situations, and then clung to the logic of their decisions. At one point, Mussolini was a socialist. At another, he was willing to be hired out in the services of the rich, doing work for them as a paid strikebreaker and pro-war journalist. Those decisions, to leave the Left and to associate with the worst parts of the right, changed him.

It is realistic to speculate that something similar may well have happened to Trump: in choosing the side of insurrection rather than conceding the 2020 election, he committed himself to a path. It is not yet clear where it will lead, but it is a journey that points only toward his further radicalization and the radicalization of his base.

The problem with the fascism discourse is that it assumes that political people are, essentially, constant. That they have a set of views by the age of twenty and then stick to them all their lives. Whereas, if you look at the lives of individual dictators or fascists, they were made by events. They improvised in certain situations, and then clung to the logic of their decisions.

One of the more likely outcomes would be Trump failing to convert the U.S. into a one-party state: because the obstacles are too high, because to achieve the transition to open authoritarianism would require the emergence of a historically ["irreplaceable"](#) individual, capable of administering a regime in the strategic way that still seems beyond Trump.

And yet, such a failure would still have consequences. The effect of Trump's first term in 2017-2021 was to win millions of people in support for fascism, and to convert the Republican party into something more authoritarian than it had been before. A fresh administration would be obliged by the logic of its situation and by Trump's need for vengeance to go further than it had before. Even Trump being in power, even failing, would still be a disaster from the perspectives of the U.S. Left and the social constituencies we serve.

Yet, no matter how powerful a fascist or far-right threat seems, there are always practical steps people can take to undermine it. We are still in a moment of trade union revival, with the UAW [showing the way](#) to other unions. Part of Trump's mystique is his claim—which is masochistically repeated by liberal sources, even when it is obviously [untrue](#)—to represent the blue-collar working class. But here we have at last a movement of workers, visible and speaking in their own name, and supporting the victims of [U.S. power](#) in the Middle East rather than their settler-colonial rulers.

Those who argue that Joe Biden represents a bulwark against fascism seem to think that Trump's threat begins and ends with whether he wins the next presidential election. But if Trump does win, people will be needed to resist him, as happened when his supporters were blocked at Charlottesville, and in the year that followed it when anti-fascists were able to [out-mobilize the right](#), with the result that for the next thirty months and until the January 6 attempted coup the right was [in retreat](#). We will need more of that same spirit again.

Liberals pretend that by campaigning for Biden they can stop the worldwide shift to the right. But the Democrats are not blocking the rise of the authoritarians, rather they are helping them. Biden, even to the despair of some of his [own advisers](#), is promoting the [war lies](#) of that regime, and providing the funds and the [weapons](#) which have made possible the slaughter in Palestine. Israel says to the world that it can do what it likes, who cares what the rules of the liberal order say? In legitimizing this genocide, Biden has made it easier for Trump to say that he can do what he likes and who cares what the rules say.

For the last three months, the country has seen the largest protest mobilizing since Black Lives

Matter, led by tens of thousands of Palestinians and people of Arab origin and supported by many anti-Zionist Jews. Anti-war networks have been revived.

When we think of this movement, and the counterpower it is producing, the first question is: are activists doing enough to undermine the leaders of the United States and their policies of [covertly](#) funding the genocide and [dismissing](#) those who stand up for Palestine? But whether activists can win the demand for a ceasefire or not, the likelihood is that the networks we are all building now will be needed again sooner than we would like.

David Renton

Featured image credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DC_Capitol_Storming_IMG_7965.jpg; modified by Tempest.

P.S.

- TEMPEST. POSTED JANUARY 31, 2024:
<https://www.tempestmag.org/2024/01/what-it-means-to-say-trump-will-govern-like-a-fascist/>

Opinions expressed in signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of the editors or the Tempest Collective. For more information, see "[About Tempest Collective](#)."