



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

DEMOCRACY, STABILITY AND DOMESTIC POLICY IN THE 2024 AMERICAN ELECTION

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The US Presidential election is only a few months away and for the third time in a row American voters will be faced with the primal question of whether they want Donald Trump in the White House. A paradox of the Trump Era, which is now entering its 9th year, is that with regards to domestic policy, Trump has changed everything, while also changing nothing.

During the four years he was President, Trump brought a level of avarice, ignorance, buffoonery and contempt for democracy to the White House that had never been seen before. However, from a policy perspective, he did many of the same things that Jeb Bush, John Kasich or Ted Cruz would have done if they, not Trump, had won the Republican nomination and then the general election in 2016. The three major domestic policy accomplishments of Trump's presidency, appointing conservative judges, including to the Supreme Court, passing a massive tax cut that shifted wealth upwards and loosening environmental and other regulations were exactly what any other Republican would have done, and indeed what all recent Republican presidents, going back to Ronald Reagan, have done.

This paradox is relevant for the coming election as well. If Biden is reelected, we can expect him to pursue the center-left kinds of policies we saw in his first term that, although larger in scope, would not have been out of place in the Obama administration. Accordingly, a second Biden term will look a lot like his current term—an experienced and aging President who knows how to work with Congress trying to pass as much as possible given the likelihood that at least one chamber of Congress will be in the other party's hands. Similarly, if Trump wins, he will push, like any Republican President, for more tax cuts and more deregulation. Both would appoint as many judges as possible that share their ideological, and partisan, perspective.

That is where the normalcy ends because the domestic issues that are at the absolute heart of this election are democracy and stability. If Biden is reelected, American democratic institutions, which have been in crisis for several years now, will live to fight another day. To be clear, a Biden victory does not guarantee democracy will survive in the US, but it keeps that possibility alive.

A Trump victory would mean something very different for American democracy as he would not only continue to weaken and corrupt democratic institutions, while consolidating power around himself, but Trump has also proposed draconian laws that would radically remake the US.

This is not hyperbole from some left-wing coastal elite academic but is based on the words of promises of Trump and the MAGA activists and experts who are currently writing the blueprints for the authoritarian edifice Trump has promised to construct.

The Heritage Foundation, a very influential right-wing think tank, has already published something they call “Project 2025” that promises to “bring quick relief to Americans suffering from the Left’s devastating policies”, and “includes a comprehensive, concrete transition plan for each federal agency”. This plan is so extensive that it runs more than 800 pages. Anne Nelson, a Columbia University scholar, has written extensively about the document and described it as “latest iteration of a four-decade-long process of crafting right-wing policies to dismantle the federal government, deregulate industry and eliminate consumer protections and public health measures, while installing a regime controlled by fossil fuel interests and the Religious Right”.

Others have less charitable opinions of the Republican plans outlined in Project 2025. Andra Watkins has noted that the document calls for “A gutted federal government; immigrants rounded up in work camps and deported; a military response to peaceful demonstrations; oppression of women, minorities, the poor and the disadvantaged,” and asserted that it is “a 1,000-page Christo-fascist screed”. It is tempting to dismiss this as hyperbole but given the state of the GOP and Trump’s public statements, that would probably be a mistake.

Throughout this century, American presidential elections have been extremely close with control of both houses of Congress going back and forth between the two major parties. This speaks to both the deep divisions in American society, but also the relatively equal support for both sides. These dynamics have only become more acute over the last decade. At the heart of this tension is a political fight between those who would like the US to become a more pluralist social democratic country and those who have a vision of the US as a populist-libertarian white Christian country.

Disagreements of this kind are much deeper than disputes over things like the marginal tax rate for the wealthiest Americans or even the most effective way to combat climate change. Many Americans believe that if the other side wins, the country will be lost and, as we saw in January of 2021, some are willing to destabilize the country and disrupt democratic processes because of their fear of the other side. That belief, that consolidating power in the person of Donald Trump is more important than democracy or stability in the US, still exists in the MAGA movement and remains the defining issue of this election.

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