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Teaching the January 6th Insurrection: Historical Perspectives on a Crisis in American Democracy

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Abstract
This article offers a framework for analyzing and teaching the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol. The crisis itself offers an opportunity to unpack and better understand American political discourses and institutions. I focus on four historical and contemporary currents that elucidate the January 6th crisis: 1) White supremacy and backlashes against Civil Rights; 2) conservative assaults on the New Deal order and the regulatory state; 3) organized labor's decline, right-wing populism's rise, and nativism; 4) political polarization, sectarianism, and minority rule. These themes enable students to assess both crucial challenges posed by January 6th and the vitality of American democracy.

Keywords: January 6th crisis, pedagogy, Donald Trump, political institutions and discourses, conservatism, white supremacy, anti-regulation, populism, polarization.

Introduction[1]

On January 6, 2021, a mob descended on the US Capitol, following a rally on the Ellipse behind the White House at which the outgoing President Donald Trump and his associates spoke. Trump claimed that the recent election had been stolen. He was, and remains, unwilling to accept the results. The electoral vote was scheduled to be certified by Congress later that day. When the rally ended, thousands of Trump supporters and election deniers joined a crowd already at the Capitol. A relatively small but strategically placed contingent was connected to militias, nationalist

groups, and white supremacist organizations, including the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the Three Percenters. Others had been riled up by conservative media that amplified election denials and the message they heard at the Ellipse.[2]

As Congress met inside the Capitol, hundreds from the larger crowd stormed the building, forcing their way in through doors and windows. They aimed to obstruct the work of Congress, to stop the Electoral College votes from being certified, as prescribed by the Electoral Count Act. During the roughly five hours that rioters breached police lines – entering Congressional Chambers and offices, while members of Congress and the vice president were evacuated – the sitting president failed to call off the mob. The Capitol lay in shambles, trashed by the insurrectionists. Members of Congress and their staff were in shock. The day resulted in five deaths (including four members of the Capitol Police) and injuries to more than 140 law enforcement personnel.

By the end of the day, the electoral ballots were counted, and Joe Biden was affirmed as the winner. Unlike past elections in which Congress voted ceremonially to certify the Electoral College tally, this January day showed a divided Congress. An astounding 8 Senators and 139 House Representatives, all Republicans, voted to overturn the election results, even after the mob had threatened members of Congress. The events of January 6th underscored the work of an outgoing president unwilling to concede defeat, who instead subverted the peaceful transition of power – an essential element for a stable democracy.[3]

Trump and the people in his circle had begun questioning the election results well before election day. Even during the 2016 campaign, when Trump became president by winning the electoral vote but lost the popular vote, he alleged that a Democratic victory meant a rigged election. During the 2020 campaign, those claims intensified as opinion polls showed Biden leading. On election night, viewers witnessed an unprecedented scene as the sitting President claimed victory despite contrary evidence. He made unsubstantiated claims about election fraud and then brazenly declared: “Frankly, we did win this election” (C-SPAN). January 6th was built on the “Big Lie” – a falsehood that the election was stolen – that Trump and his associates spread.

As the democratic theorist Jan-Werner Müller argues, a healthy democracy relies upon fair elections and good losers. Since a democratic contest inevitably has a winner and one or more losers, the system depends on losers abiding by the norm of conceding – to recognize the legitimacy of a winner who must have the capacity to govern and signal to supporters that another election contest lies ahead (Müller). The 2020 presidential election illustrates what happens when a "sore loser" breaks norms and fails to concede, despite the election's integrity being well documented. Trump and his associates had of course been gearing up for this moment well before election night. Without regard to the damage their scheme would do to American democracy and governance, they persuaded supporters – from everyday Republican voters to right-wing extremists and militia groups – that a Democratic win was possible only through cheating. This was audacious and dangerous.[4]

While January 6th hinged on an effort to get the Vice President and Congress to reject the electoral ballots that states had sent to Congress, prior efforts to reverse the results after election day included calls for state vote recounts and audits, demands to disqualify mail-in ballots, disputes over vote totals from heavily Democratic districts (especially urban Black precincts), accusations lodged against election workers, complaints filed in dozens of unfounded lawsuits, and attempts to appoint fake electors. Notable among these actions was Trump's phone call to the Georgia Secretary of State asking him to "find" enough votes to reverse the results in that state: "I just want to find 11,780 votes . . ." (Shear and Saul). Trump also sought to manipulate the US Justice Department into doing his bidding, intending to replace the acting Attorney General with an unqualified loyalist.

Following January 6th, the insurrection has been the subject of much attention, including Trump's second impeachment (the United States Senate failed to convict), as well as a United States House select committee's extensive hearings and report that followed an investigation entailing over 1,000 interviews, hundreds of hours of video evidence, and tens of thousands of documents. Federal and state officials continue legal action against the rioters who entered the Capitol, destroyed property, or attacked police officers, resulting in criminal charges against more than

1,200 people, with others still in process. Hundreds have already pled or been found guilty. Seven of the rioters, all members of the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, were convicted of seditious conspiracy. Justice Department special prosecutor Jack Smith, appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland, launched investigations into Trump's role and actions, during and after his presidency. Despite resistance from Trump and his associates, these investigations resulted in two sets of federal indictments against the former president. One case, stalled by appeals, directly addresses January 6th. The Fulton County, Georgia, district attorney also brought charges against Trump and allies for attempts to overturn that state's 2020 election results.[5]

The January 6th insurrection is a flashpoint in American politics. Although many elected officials and the public initially condemned the riot and Trump's complicity, the tide turned quickly. Republican congressional leaders and members who first said that Trump could no longer be trusted with political power soon fell in line behind Trump. Public opinion also shifted, marked by a pattern of deeply divided partisanship that defines contemporary American politics.

This article focuses on teaching January 6th, especially as a crisis through which to understand the American political system and themes in US history, all of which profoundly shape contemporary politics. In the spring of 2022, just as the House special committee was gearing up for its public hearings, I taught a class for entering American Studies graduate students at West University in Timişoara, Romania. The course was built on the following foundation:

> The events of January 6th . . . bring into action all branches of the US government (executive, legislative, and judicial), involving federal, state, and local governments and authorities. Other institutions of American politics, such as the media, are crucial players in the drama. The dynamics of race, gender, class, religion, and region are never far from the surface. This constitutional crisis also raises questions about how elections are organized in the US and how the right to vote has been defined, limited, and expanded. ("Syllabus")

By unpacking the January 6th crisis – a dense fact rich in implications – the course exposed students to a practical and nuanced understanding of

American politics, institutions, and political discourses. For instance, obscure features of the American system, such as the Electoral College, become legible, including battles over states' slates of electors in the lead-up and the violent attempt to delay the electoral vote certification on January 6th.

Unpacking January 6th also sheds light on crucial dynamics in American society and history that shape present-day politics. This is an event that demands contextualization; January 6th did not emerge from nowhere. In this class, I asked students to seek explanations of why this riot occurred and interpret subsequent investigations, trials, and contests over its meaning. What were the slow burning fires upon which the riot instigators threw gasoline? What social forces or decisions set politics on a path toward January 6th? While not inevitable, what were the foundations underlying this calamity?

In this brief and selected history drawn from my teaching experience, I highlight four currents – some recent, some stretching back farther in US history – to contemplate when examining and contextualizing January 6th: 1) White supremacy and backlashes against Civil Rights; 2) conservative assaults on the New Deal order and the regulatory state; 3) organized labor's decline, right-wing populism's rise, and nativism; 4) political polarization, sectarianism, and minority rule. These are, of course, intersecting currents rather than distinct streams. All are salient while pondering the vitality of American democracy.[6]

White Supremacy and Backlashes against Civil Rights

A Confederate flag carried into the Capitol on January 6th was weighted with implications, including the insurrection's links to a long history of white supremacy, to white replacement theory, and to reactions against Black Lives Matter protests. As Representative Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, chair of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack, said in opening remarks: "I'm from a part of the country where, in my lifetime, Black people were excluded entirely from the political process. . . . As a violent mob stormed the Capitol trying to take away

people's votes, rioters carried the battle flag from a failed rebellion of confederate states" (United States House viii).[7]

Race and power are, of course, central to US history. The *Declaration of Independence*'s claim that "all men are created equal" and the *Constitution*'s opening line "We the people . . ." set in motion the possibility of expanding rights and democratic pluralism. However, other founding measures and laws, created in a slave society, made white supremacy a pillar of American society. The Constitution's provision that counted each enslaved person as three-fifths of a person when calculating representation, enabled the slaveowner aristocracy's accounting of enslaved people as property while also tallying the number of bodies to bolster Southern white political power.[8]

Direct antecedents of the 2021 insurrection can be found in 20th- and 21st-century backlashes against Civil Rights initiatives and Black protest, as well as in 19th-century reactions to the post-Civil War Reconstruction period. The latter resulted in the making and century-long defense of Jim Crow, a formulation of white supremacy that has marked modern American society. Soon after the Civil War, the US Congress passed a series of Reconstruction Amendments to the *Constitution* that altered the terms of citizenship, elevating federal citizenship and rights relative to state authority. But white resistance sought to stall and reverse these changes. First, the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery. Black Codes, instituted in several Southern states, followed immediately on the heels of full emancipation. These were unabashed attempts to retake control over the lives and labor of recently freed Black men and women. Anger at Southern white intransigence, in turn, pushed Congressional moderates to join with "Radical Republicans" and pass the next two amendments, as well as a series of enforcement and civil rights acts. The Fourteenth Amendment established the rights of federal citizenship, including due process, equal protection, and birthright citizenship (thereby making ex-enslaved people US citizens). The amendment, which dealt with the thorny politics of reuniting a country that had been torn apart in the Civil War by the Confederacy's defense of slavery, also included a provision barring insurrectionists from holding office. The Fifteenth Amendment went one step further to establish political rights and

reconfigure political power in the South by securing the vote for Black men – "the right of citizens of the United State to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This represented a significant step toward Black inclusion as full citizens in American society and politics.[9]

The terror inflicted by the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante groups, the deepening economic oppression of sharecropping, and a series of adverse legal decisions, among other factors, soon halted Reconstruction. A Jim Crow society was constructed in its place, entailing the separation of races and the assertion of white supremacy, evident in all regions and aspects of American life, from white and Black waiting rooms at bus stations to residential exclusion through restrictive covenants and redlining. Extra-legal violence, including lynching, and legally sanctioned policing enforced this system in the South, North, and West. Jim Crow undermined recently established Black citizenship rights – denying equal protection and due process for Black citizens. While Black voters had briefly gained access to the polls and accrued political power during Reconstruction, state laws and local practices sabotaging the 15th Amendment's protections, accompanied by persistent threats and acts of violence, quickly disenfranchised Black men. The modern Civil Rights movement, or Black Freedom movement, took up the challenge of dismantling Jim Crow.[10]

Questions about immigration and citizenship, some of which are tied to controversies over Reconstruction Amendments, also highlight how deeply rooted white supremacy is in American history, while pointing to room for contest as well. The first US Congress in 1790 defined who could immigrate and become a naturalized citizen, limiting this to "free, white persons" (United States Congress). In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented Chinese laborers from entering the US and deemed that people of Chinese origin were unfit to become citizens. This became a precedent for subsequent restrictions on immigration from Asian countries and, in the 1920s, on immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. While race and racial exclusion often ran on a Black/white axis, immigration and other processes of racialization made for a complicated history. This was in tension, however, with expansive

ideas about equality embedded in the Reconstruction Amendments. Although disparaged, these amendments furnished levers to challenge exclusion. The Fourteenth Amendment's birthright citizenship cut against other restrictions. Even a conservative 19th-century Supreme Court, which had sanctioned Jim Crow with its 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, put a dent in Chinese exclusion and xenophobia with its 1898 *US v. Wong Kim Ark* ruling that a man of Chinese parentage was protected by birthright citizenship.[11]

Other provisions in the Fourteenth Amendment, especially the equal protection clause and rights attached to federal citizenship, along with voting rights in the Fifteenth Amendment, served as a legal and moral foundation for the Civil Rights movement. Following World War I and even more so after World War II, Black veterans claimed their right to vote. Individually and in groups, they showed up at Southern courthouses, often wearing their military uniforms. White officials and vigilantes prevented most from registering. In fact, Black veterans or active servicemembers in uniform were targets of the most vicious attacks. The ferocity of this reaction made clear white supremacists' determination to deny Black rights and prevent democratic participation, fearing that organizing and voting would lead to Black political power.[12]

Campaigns to register and assert voting rights constituted one strand of the Black Freedom movement of the second half of the 20th century. Because Jim Crow touched every aspect of American society, the movement tackled exclusions, discrimination, and intimidation in many arenas, from segregated schools and buses to racist hiring practices and policing. The intensity of white reaction compelled Black activists and leaders to build a broad social movement. These grassroots campaigns led eventually to passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and the Fair Housing Act in 1968. Achievement of the Voting Rights Act marked, in many ways, the moment when the US became a full-fledged democracy (aside from a short window during Reconstruction), with the voting franchise finally secured for all adult citizens.[13]

Much like the reaction against the Reconstruction Amendments, the backlash against the Civil Rights victories and landmark legislation

came fast and furious, seeking to undercut a powerful movement that pressed for racial equality and power in a multiracial democracy. Backlashes that aimed to bolster white supremacy have been carried out by vigilante groups, drawing a line from the 19th- and 20th-century Klans to today's white power militia groups that stoke fears of white replacement and commit acts of domestic terrorism, whether in Charlotteville, VA, Washington, DC, or elsewhere.[14] But reactions against equality and a multiracial society are also fully present in mainstream politics, as during Reconstruction. Following the Civil Rights highwater mark, the major political parties sorted along regional and ideological lines, with the Republican party becoming the party to which the white South and white rural areas gravitated. Increasingly, opposition to the Civil Rights laws and even to provisions of the 14th Amendment have moved from fringe to central Republican talking points. Trump in particular, amplified attacks on the Fourteenth Amendment, including his anti-immigrant assault on birthright citizenship, and efforts to suppress voting in areas with concentrations of Black and other minority voters.[15]

Like anti-Reconstruction campaigns, the Voting Rights Act became the target of not only political opposition but also aggressive legal challenges. The Voting Rights Act established provisions for federal oversight for states with histories of voting rights discrimination that proposed changes in voting law or procedures. Challenges to federal oversight and authority became a part of the Republican party platform, landing eventually on the Supreme Court's docket. Two consequential decisions that chipped away at the Voting Rights Act are *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which derailed federal preclearance, and *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee* (2021), which weakened federal authority to intervene in state and local actions that might limit access to voting. This opened the door to restrictive state voting laws, many of which were enacted under the guise of preventing fraud, despite the lack of evidence of any fraud. Republican state legislatures erected new obstacles to voting, with an eye toward depressing vote totals in Democratic-leaning areas that, not coincidentally, have greater numbers of Black and immigrant voters. The "Big Lie" about the 2020 election as a fraudulent election underlay not only the January 6th insurrection but

scores of new voting measures targeted to suppress votes and have an impact during the 2022 and 2024 elections.[16]

Conservative Assaults on the New Deal Order and the Regulatory State

The crowds assembling in Washington, DC, on January 6th, consumed a steady diet of misinformation about the 2020 election. Fact checkers tried to keep up with this deluge, but the unregulated right-wing and conservative media operated at an unmatchable pace. This media's message, of course, spoke to a conservative political coalition that earlier had celebrated Ronald Reagan's 1980 victory over the New Deal order, but also had transformed considerably in the following four decades to align itself with Trump.

The New Deal, a response to the crisis of the 1930s Great Depression, began with Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1932 presidential election. Inaugurated just as the US economy sank to its lowest point, Roosevelt was backed by overwhelming majorities in Congress and by an emergent Democratic coalition that included labor unions, urban working-class immigrants, farmers, and Black voters (especially in northern cities), but also conservative white Southern Democrats. The New Deal state opened the door to federal regulation of the economy, ambitious public works and employment programs, and modest social welfare policies. This was not socialism, but instead a regulated capitalism. Nevertheless, it represented a tidal change in American policy and political culture, with an unprecedented expansion of the federal government's role in society and the economy.[17]

Conservatives decried these changes. Historian Kim Phillips-Fein makes clear in her subtitle to *Invisible Hands* who animated and underwrote this reaction against the government's role in the economy and the private sector – *Businessmen's Crusade against the New Deal*. Since the New Deal's advent, a multi-pronged crusade against the regulatory state, along with persistent calls for tax cuts, continues to rouse Republican party leaders, funders such as the Koch brothers, and voters. Dozens of recent court cases, aiming to land on the conservative Supreme

Court's docket, have attacked environmental and antitrust protections, consumer and public health safeguards, and workplace regulations and labor relations.[18]

During the lead-up to the Reagan administration, business-oriented conservatives made a bargain with Christian Evangelicals and other social conservatives, groups in the Republican coalition that could turn out voters. But economic conservatives held the upper hand until recently. By the later-20th century, as conservative Republicans continued to chip away at the regulatory state in the courts and Congress, issues championed by social and cultural conservatives gained more traction (Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism" 741-742). Recent contests over transgender rights and public education curricula, for instance, indicate the growing influence of social and cultural conservatives. And in 2022, the Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the culmination of a lengthy battle over abortion. Antitax, budget-cutting, economic conservatives remain prominent, but now the voices of evangelical conservatives, antifeminists, gun rights advocates, and isolationist nationalists are amplified and constitute a significant slice of Trump's MAGA – Make America Great Again – base (Bartels 1483, 1485). This shift in conservatism came about, in part, because of another challenge to government regulation – one that contributed to reshaping the media landscape and gave voice to social conservatives' agenda.

The New Deal had emerged as radio became dominant, followed by the advent of television. Franklin D. Roosevelt used radio to connect directly with people. New Dealers sought to regulate the new media, driven by the proposition that *public* airwaves should serve a *public* purpose. As in much of the New Deal, this was not a call for public ownership. Advertising-based radio and television prevailed. But regulatory tools such as the Fairness Doctrine established boundaries for private use of the public airwaves. In short, the Fairness Doctrine called for equal time. If a station aired a conservative or liberal voice, speakers from the other side could call for access and equal time. This approach prevailed into the 1980s, but had come under attack from conservatives, just as a new format of politically charged talk radio (plus cable television) took hold. The talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, a central figure in the

aggressive right-leaning media ecosystem that drew millions of listeners and viewers, targeted the Fairness Doctrine. In 1987, Reagan vetoed congressional action that would have made the Fairness Doctrine law, not simply an inconsistently enforced regulation that depended on the party in power. A Republican-controlled Congress in the mid-1990s killed subsequent efforts to revive the Fairness Doctrine. At the same time, Fox News began its ascent.[19]

By the time social media exploded, amplifying political extremes far beyond that of radio-era fear-mongers such as Father Charles Coughlin, Fairness Doctrine-style regulations were well in the past. The Fairness Doctrine itself would not have been up to the task of tempering social media. But the path toward an analogous regulatory framework for contemporary media was almost unimaginable, now beyond the realm of political possibility. Instead, social media, alongside talk radio and cable news, proved to be an accelerant for the conspiracy theories, threats, and lies – especially those tied to the "Big Lie" propagated by Trump and fellow election deniers – that became the rationale for the January 6th insurrection. While the technology itself and its impact on social psychology are crucial, the conservative push against regulation helped to reconstitute a media landscape that fostered a 21st-century political culture in which the "Big Lie" flourished.[20]

Organized Labor's Decline, Right-wing Populism's Rise, and Nativism

Accounts of Trump's rise frequently underscore his populist appeal to working-class voters. While earlier Republicans had attracted parts of the Democratic party's working-class base, MAGA's mantra took direct aim at white working-class voters' grievances at a time of diminished labor union power.

Organized labor sat at the core of the New Deal coalition, spurred by the dynamic rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). While labor unions had a mixed record of inclusion, some catering solely to white male workers, the industrial unions that energized the labor movement during the 1930s and part of the 1940s advanced a strategy of

racial and ethnic unity, sometimes even egalitarianism – aptly labeled a "culture of unity" and "civil rights unionism." At their best, these unions brought together Black workers, Mexican American workers, and white workers, including immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Egalitarian CIO unions also became allies of progressive antifascists, putting this branch of organized labor at odds with right-wing populist and fascist groups.[21]

Bolstered by New Deal-era labor legislation, especially the National Labor Relations Act (1935) and wartime protections, organized labor in the US reached its membership peak soon after World War II, accounting for a third of the paid workforce. Union presence was most significant in "labor cities" and industrial regions in midcentury America. Although less powerful than unions in many other industrialized nations, organized labor in the US exerted influence in workplaces and public life.[22] But relentless assaults on labor's power began in the immediate post-WWII period, as Republicans regained control of Congress and began undermining key elements of the New Deal political coalition. Notably, the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) limited unions' ability to organize and use their newly acquired power in contests with employers. Postwar anticommunists targeted the most militant of these unions, prompting purges of left-wing leaders and a turn away from civil rights unionism. Business-sponsored anti-union campaigns, especially right-to-work laws which hampered union organizing in many Southern and Western states, constrained labor's power.[23]

Large-scale economic reorganization, plant shutdowns, and policy changes in the 1970s, driven in part by an increasingly aggressive business leadership that engaged in strike-breaking and union-busting, further undercut labor's power. The scale and influences of labor unions plummeted as the market for low-paid service work swelled, as employers turned to temp or outsourced workers and institutionalized multi-tiered compensation schemes that pitted new hires against older workers, and as the later-20th-century workplace became more bureaucratic and alienating. Unions claimed just 13.9 percent of the workforce at the close of the 20th century and now just 10 percent of the overall workforce. The number of strikes and workplace actions fell precipitously after an immediate post-

World War II high point, and a brief uptick in the 1970s, further contributing to labor's decline.[24]

Intensified globalization, which reshaped workplaces and weakened workers' bargaining position, also recast American political culture. Global competition and capital flight resulted in economic loss, as well as a decline in personal and public efficacy. Whereas the post-World War II-era of the great compression – a narrowing distance between the top of the economic ladder and most workers – coincided with organized labor's rise, the subsequent great divergence that began in the late 1970 – marked by a widening income and wealth gap – coincided with neoliberalism's rise. Market solutions to economic and social problems, rather than New Deal-style regulatory and social welfare policies, had begun to define political culture.[25]

Working-class and middle-class Americans experienced economic decline, along with a loss of control and dignity, affecting how they viewed the prospects of politics, public life, and collective action. This change parallels another shift that social scientists observe in contemporary American life. As sociologist Jennifer Silva writes, a challenging economy and a burgeoning contingent workforce produced a "culture of competition, self-reliance, and self-blame" (12). The Great Recession of 2007-2009 exacerbated these trends, fueling widespread discontent and resentment. Scholarly and popular accounts depict late-20th-century and early 21st-century white working-class and middle-class responses as backlash politics, pointing to the 1980s Reagan Democrats, the early-2000s NASCAR Dads, and MAGA followers more recently. White racism, antifeminism, and reactions against liberal arrogance are offered as explanations for conservative ascendancy, converging with antitax, homeowner, business, anti-labor, and anti-Civil Rights conservatism. White resentment, while not the sole factor, became a throughline for these politics. Rather than the fits and starts implied by backlash, however, these trends reflect deep currents in economic and social relations.[26]

Later-20th-century right-wing populism rose amidst a transformation in the political economy and organized labor's decline. With a lineage stretching back to the Second Klan of the 1920s and the

radio priest Charles Coughlin in the 1930s, this political discourse adapts a "people versus elite" framework that defines all populisms.[27] But right-wing populists, journalist John Judis contends, add another element to explain their hardships, scapegoating marginal groups. They complain that "the people" lose out when elites elevate marginal groups' interests (Judis 15). In the US, the subjects of right-wing populists' wrath have frequently been African Americans and immigrants, including Asian (especially Chinese), Mexican, Catholic, and Jewish immigrants, all at different points in US history viewed as threatening white privilege. More recently, American Muslims became a target. Also suspect are feminists and LGBTQ+ people, accused of undermining the patriarchal family and gender norms. In short, a cabal of the elite and combinations of these marginalized groups are depicted as sources of corruption or decline. Hence, right-wing populism blends elements of anti-Black racism, white nativism, anti-Semitism, Christian nationalism, and fascism. Likewise, gender and sexuality figure prominently in their resentments, evident in antifeminist, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-trans discourse.[28]

The histories of right-wing populism, MAGA, and January 6th need further study, teasing out historical and contemporary connections. What are the discursive and institutional links from the Second Klan to Coughlin to the World War II-era America Firsters to Joseph McCarthy to the John Birchers to the Moral Majority to the Tea Party to MAGA, just to name a few way stations in this history? More immediately, connections between 1990s politics and the MAGA movement's emergence are revealing. Pat Buchanan, who rose to political prominence in Richard Nixon's administration and then, as a vocal cultural warrior and anti-immigrant spokesperson, challenged mainstream Republican candidates in the 1990s and then ran as a third-party candidate in 2000, beating out Donald Trump for the Reform Party's nomination. Buchanan railed against globalization and international trade agreements such as NAFTA, while also stoking fears that immigrants – especially from Mexico and Central America – were to blame for declining wages, lost jobs, and crime. Although this story got sidelined by that of the contested 2000 election in which George W. Bush won the electoral vote only after the US Supreme Court stepped in, Buchanan's populism became a template for the

aggressive and overblown politics that would follow. The Tea Party, emerging in reaction to the policies addressing the Great Recession, picked up on Buchanan's themes, tying economic anxiety and taxpayer resentments to denunciations of government spending on immigrants and minority groups.[29]

For candidate Trump in 2015 and 2016, anti-immigrant fears and calls to build the wall on the Mexican border were staples, as were birtherism and resentments against President Barack Obama. Likewise, Trump's isolationism and anti-globalist politics echoed the populist isolationism of Buchanan and the America First Committee, a World War II-era group spouting nativist and anti-Semitic tropes. As historian Joseph Lowndes writes,

> Trump's nativism was the key to his electoral victory not simply because it played on the racist fears of invasion, but because it was embedded in a broader logic of right-wing populism. . . . For nativists, right-wing populism provides the vehicle of class resentment to propagate it. For right-wing populism, nativism provides a clear target – immigrants – to add to its list of threats. (265)

Trump's nativist-inflected populist appeals came straight from Buchanan's playbook, animating his campaign and presidency, and fueling the January 6th Insurrection.

Political Polarization, Sectarianism, and Minority Rule

Trump claimed repeatedly to have won the 2020 popular and electoral votes, despite winning neither. But this highly partisan battle, fueled by false charges of corruption and conspiracy, centered on the decisive Electoral College tally, the mechanism to elect a president that the American founders installed to allay their concerns about "mob rule" in an untethered democracy. Tragically, it was the electoral vote that Congress convened to certify on January 6, 2021, when the mob attacked.

Commentaries about contemporary American politics underscore the partisan polarization and even sectarian dynamics, which now prevail. The most visible symbol of this is the Red/Blue map of the United States, illustrating the geography of Republican and Democratic party strength.

Yet this simplified map shows only which party carried a majority, or sometimes a plurality, of each state's vote. While graded shading can display the intensity of partisan division, finer-grained analyses of other geographic boundaries are revealing. In 21st-century American politics, the partisan gap between metropolitan and rural areas is stark. This was not always the case. The New Deal-era Democratic coalition, while steadily building an urban base, drew support from Western and Southern agricultural areas, as well as mining and logging regions. But today, metro areas tend to vote Democratic, while rural areas and small towns vote Republican. Population density translates into Democratic intensity, and vice versa. The suburbs, where the greatest share of the US population lives, are filled with independent and swing voters, often making suburbs the main battleground in elections.[30]

Education levels converge with geography, as more highly educated voters cluster in metro areas. Political analysts frequently use education as an imperfect stand-in for class. Whereas the New Deal Democratic party relied heavily on working-class voters, drawing support from workers with a high school education or less, that shifted during the last decades of the 20th century, beginning with the political and economic turbulence of the later 1960s and the 1970s. Republican appeals to white working-class voters by Nixon, Reagan, and others occurred as the hardships of the "great divergence" and the Democratic party's embrace of neoliberal policies left workers with lower levels of schooling casting about politically. Today's Democratic party attracts voters with college and advanced degrees, while the Republican party claims more white high school graduates and those who started without finishing college.[31]

Black voters lean heavily toward the Democratic party, while the Republican party is overwhelmingly but not exclusively white. Latino voters, while predominantly Democratic, are fractured. For instance, older generations of Cuban Americans vote Republican. Gender divisions also shape this partisan map, although regions differ, with Republicans attracting a higher proportion of men and Democrats drawing women. If Black women are the most reliable Democratic voters, white men play that role in the Republican party. In recent elections, the Republican party has courted Black and Latino men, with some success. Other identities and affiliations, such as sexual orientation and religion, demarcate

partisan lines, with LGBTQ+ voters tending Democratic and white Christian Evangelicals central to the MAGA base.[32]

Partisan divisions also became sharply defined along ideological lines. In the 1950s and 1960s, the two major parties had discernable ideological affinities, with Republicans as conservatives and Democrats as liberals. But each party had ideological breadth. Liberal Republicans provided early support for Civil Rights, while conservative Southern white Democrats obstructed Civil Rights measures. Following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – both measures advanced by a powerful social movement and championed by the Democratic President Lyndon Johnson – and growing conflicts over the US war in Vietnam, the two major political parties began sorting ideologically and regionally, with lines hardening. As the Democratic party became more liberal and pro-Civil Rights, the Republican party's conservatism was tied to Civil Rights opposition.[33]

The 20th century's last decade marked an important juncture in this history of heightened polarization as the parties continued to sort, despite Democratic candidate Bill Clinton's limited success in Southern states. Talk radio and cable television proved to be effective vehicles for a weaponized political language, championed by Newt Gingrich during his rise in the Republican party and tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives (1995-1999). Along with his rhetorical and media strategies, Gingrich's confrontational governing tactics, including government shutdown threats during budget negotiations, offered a template for future Trump allies and advisors such as Steve Bannon and eventually Gingrich himself.[34]

Political polarization and the distance between the parties' adherents widened as the 21st century unfolded. Political psychologist Eli Finkel stresses that this extreme polarization can be best understood as "political sectarianism" (Finkel et al. 533). While vigorous party competition should foster productive policy contests, a more extreme sectarianism breeds political enmity directed against the other party and the people associated with the "other" party. This gulf between parties and the behaviors of villainizing the "other" begets sharply defined sectarian identities. Political enemies' ideas, actions, and gains are perceived as fundamentally menacing rather than as the give-and-take of politics. This,

in turn, further divides the political landscape. The loss of an election is treated not as a temporary setback, but as an existential crisis. And with political righteousness as the new default, compromise denotes weakness – making governing unworkable. The corrupting power of private money in politics, unleashed by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Committee* decision (2010), further propels this cycle. At the extreme, leaders and followers turn to antidemocratic and even violent means to attain or retain power.[35]

Political sectarianism and the US's divided political geography become even more perilous in the context of institutional arrangements that the 18th-century founders put in place to address their fears of democracy's "excesses," establishing a constitutional republic to temper majority rule. In 21st-century politics, and vital to the MAGA faction's rise, two of these features have served not only to check majority rule but to advance minority rule. First, the US Senate – one of the two legislative bodies – is composed of two Senators from each state, regardless of population. That is, two senators from Wyoming, a rural and red state with a population of just over 570,000, and two senators from California, a densely populated blue state with more than thirty-nine million residents. Although the most extreme of the contrasts, this disparity between rural red states and metro blue states plays out across the map. The Senate's filibuster rule, requiring a super-majority to overcome a single Senator's objections, tilts the scale even further. Among the Senate's consequential responsibilities is the confirmation of cabinet appointees, diplomats, and judges, including Supreme Court justices. The decidedly conservative cast of the current Supreme Court is one consequence of this imbalance.[36]

Secondly, the Electoral College, the mechanism for electing the president, also confers an advantage to thinly populated red states. Each state is allotted electors according to its congressional delegation's size – the number of members from that state in the House of Representatives, as determined by population, plus the two senators. Even though Wyoming gets just three electoral votes in comparison to California's fifty-five votes, the imbalance carries through. For Californians, each elector stands in for approximately 718,00 people, whereas in Wyoming just 192,000 people are spoken for by each elector. Wyoming's electors have almost four times the strength of California's electors (Lu).[37] In the 21st century's six

presidential elections, Republicans won the combined electoral and popular votes only once, during George W. Bush's 2004 re-election, whereas all three Democratic presidential winners carried both the popular and electoral votes, Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Joe Biden in 2020. The Republican victories relying solely on the Electoral College occurred in 2000, with the contentious Bush election settled only after the Supreme Court's decision, and in 2016. Trump's Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton had almost three million more popular votes.

In short then, the smaller, more rural, and disproportionately white states that lean heavily toward the Republican party have a built-in advantage for both presidential elections and legislative power – even more so when the impact of gerrymandered Houses districts is added to the Senate advantage. An increasingly conservative judiciary follows from Republicans' sway with the other two branches. Given the geographic and ideological polarization of American politics today, along with constitutional provisions to check majority rule, the contest for control over all three branches tilts toward a highly sectarian Republican party.[38]

Conclusion

January 6th and its fallout, including the continual repetition of the "Big Lie," pose significant challenges to democracy and governance, deepening the sectarian divisions, distrust, and cynicism that destabilize American society.[39] The looming 2024 election, as well as ongoing investigations and court cases against Trump and January 6th rioters, mean that this crisis in American democracy requires close attention and concrete analysis. This hinge moment for the future of American democracy also cries out for contextualization. At the same time, the crisis itself offers an opportunity to teach about American political history, discourses, and institutions with a sense of urgency that draws students to inquire about opaque but consequential features of the political system and seemingly distant historical developments that help us to explain and interpret January 6th. The four "currents" offered in this article – white supremacy, conservative assaults on the regulatory state, right-wing populism, and minority rule in a polarized landscape – provide a preliminary framework for understanding the January 6th crisis and for teaching American politics.

Notes:

[1] An early version of this article was presented for Fulbright Day, West University of Timişoara, Romania, June 15, 2022.
[2] On January 6th events and actors, see United States House; Karl.
[3] See Fandos and Cochrane; Levitsky and Ziblatt.
[4] See United States House.
[5] The Supreme Court's Trump v. United States (2024) decision, granting considerable latitude for claims of presidential immunity will likely delay the case from being tried before the 2024 election. On investigations, hearings, indictments, and court cases, see United States House; Murray and Weissmann; Zelizer.
[6] This is neither a comprehensive nor final account of this event. See also Sánchez et al.
[7] See also Barreto et al.; Edsall; Feuer.
[8] On race, the country's founding, and the early republic, see Foner, *Story*, chapters 1-3.
[9] See *Constitution of the United States*; Foner, *Second Founding*; Holt, *Children of Fire*. Colorado and Maine sought unsuccessfully to remove Trump's name from 2024 primary ballots, using the Fourteenth Amendment.
[10] See Hahn; Holt, *Children of Fire;* Holt *Movement*. Black women continued to be denied the vote, many waiting until the modern Civil Rights movement dismantled barriers.
[11] See Smith; Lee.
[12] See Clark; Delmont, *Half-American*; Holt, *Movement*.
[13] See Holt, *Movement*; Johnson; Newkirk.
[14] See Gutiérrez; Kruse; Hemmer, "Alt-Right."
[15] See Belew; Coates; Lowndes; Sides et al.
[16] See Corasaniti; Johnson; Newkirk.
[17] See Rauchway; Cohen.
[18] See MacLean.
[19] See Lepore; Lenthall; Hemmer, *Partisans*; Peck.
[20] See Haidt; Hemmer, "Remade"; Lepore.
[21] See Cohen; Korstad; Woloch.
[22] See Freeman; Fure-Slocum; Lichtenstein.
[23] See Lichtenstein and Shermer; Stromquist.
[24] See Cowie; Weil; Windham.
[25] On neoliberalism and globalization, see Gerstle, *Rise*.
[26] See Silva; Hochschild; Noah; Winant.
[27] See Kazin; Brinkley; Gordon.
[28] See Judis; Peck.
[29] See Hemmer, *Partisans*; Gordon; Skocpol and Williamson.
[30] See Gelman et al.; Dottle.
[31] See Cohn, "Educational Differences"; Delmont, "Lasting Legacy"; Pew, "Changing."
[32] Pew, "Changing"; Sides et al.

[33] See Carter; Newkirk.
[34] See Hemmer, *Partisans*.
[35] See Finkel et al.; Cohn, "Political Sectarianism"; Dimock et al.; Mayer; Shapiro.
[36] See Gerstle, "Federalism"; Levitsky and Ziblatt; Thomas.
[37] Most states allocate their electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis.
[38] See especially Levitsky and Ziblatt.
[39] See Gellman; Garber; Levitsky and Ziblatt; Pew, "Public Trust."

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