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America's democracy designed to survive Trump crisis

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The genius of democracy lies in converting adversaries into rivals, channelling their enmity into organised and orderly political competition. But because that competition relies on passions as much as on interests, there is always a risk that the antagonisms it mobilises will spiral out of control, unleashing the violence that democracy itself is intended to avoid.

Nowhere have those risks been greater than in the United States, whose history has been characterised by conflicts of exceptional persistence and severity. Americans may be remarkably solid in the defence of their country, its institutions and its way of life; riven, however, by enduring social divisions, their politics have always been marred by an undertow of serious unrest.

It is therefore unsurprising that there would be violent protests in the dying days of a deeply contentious administration; and, given Donald Trump's confrontational style, it is also unsurprising that he fuelled the protests, refusing to concede what the vast majority of observers regard as a clear electoral defeat.

The mere fact that last week's events were predictable does nothing to excuse Trump's conduct. No matter how aggrieved he may feel, the president is charged with upholding the constitution's purposes, which include to "insure domestic tranquillity", and has an explicit responsibility to help "protect each [state] ... against domestic violence".

Even if Trump did not call for an assault on Capitol Hill, urging an inflammable crowd into an extremely dangerous situation is plainly incompatible with the prudent exercise of those presidential duties.

Yet Trump's errors should not be allowed to overshadow his political achievement. Unlike his hero, Andrew Jackson, who served as the seventh president of the US from 1829 to 1837, Trump lacked the judgment, patience and experience needed to spend his first term building the coalition that would allow him to convincingly secure re-election and fully achieve his policy objectives; but much as Jackson did, he galvanised sections of the American population that had been alienated from the political system, boosting aggregate turnout to unprecedented levels.

Ultimately, that not only strengthens American democracy; it also means that the needs and preferences of many working-class voters, whose electoral choices are now truly up for grabs, will receive greater weight in future contests than they have in recent decades.

The implications are as profound for the Republicans as they are for the Democrats. It is nonsense to believe that the Proud Boys are representative of Trump's base; on the contrary, as John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck have convincingly shown, the distinctive feature of the millions of new voters Trump attracted is that they hold conservative values while being "liberal" (in the American sense) when it comes to issues such as protecting Medicare and Social Security, restricting unskilled immigration and imposing higher tariffs.

Rather than a move to the extremes, capturing those voters requires a shift towards what has historically been the American mainstream. It is clear that there are forces pushing the parties to the fringes and inducing them to fan the howls of outrage; but it is equally apparent that they will face intense pressures to regain the centre ground.

To begin with, as the 2020 election highlighted, and as Stanford's Morris Fiorina, one of the country's most respected political scientists, demonstrated in *Unstable Majorities* (2017), American politics has become increasingly competitive in virtually every measurable aspect of its structure, conduct and performance. Landslide elections are a thing of the past; incumbency advantages have dwindled; and changes in the political balance are more and

more frequent.

Nor is that mainly a matter of the “rust belt” states; rather, as John Aldrich and John Griffin conclude in *Why Parties Matter: Political Competition and Democracy in the American South* (2018), electoral contests in the former states of the Confederacy – which account for a third of all voters – are now no less hard fought than those elsewhere, eroding what seemed like an unassailable Republican stronghold.

Moreover, although a slight majority of American voters self-identify as “liberal” or “conservative”, each group remains substantially smaller than the “moderates”. In the early post-war decades, the Democrats could hope to win the presidency with just the votes of self-identified Democrats (and only lost to Eisenhower because he was so resolutely centrist); today, neither party could possibly succeed without appealing to unaffiliated moderates and independents.

All of that will figure prominently in the thinking of the many strong candidates eyeing the 2024 election. And those candidates will also know that, as James Campbell's *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (2019) explains, every serious “review of American history leads to the same conclusion: throughout American history there have been cycles of surges in political interest followed by periods in which political interest wanes”. As political interest declines, “intense and protracted conflict” subsides, and the political prizes gravitate to those who represent the electorate's persistently large middle ground.

To say that is not to suggest that the US will become Switzerland, with its broadly tranquil politics, stable governing coalitions and centrist policies. As Herbert Nicholas, one of the mid-20th century's most perceptive historians of American political institutions, pithily observed, “the United States is a difficult country to govern”.

However, despite the chaos, it would be a mistake to think its contentious politics condemn it to being badly governed, much less to being ungovernable. In reality, for all the talk about gridlock, the recently updated results of David Mayhew's path-breaking *Divided We Govern* (1988) show that more “highly consequential” legislation was enacted in the extremely polarised first decade of the 2000s than in any of the five preceding decades, including the

Great Society decade of the 1960s.

Unlike the Ancient Greeks, who believed that republican government could only survive in small city-states, where civic friendship would bind citizens into stable communities, the founders of the American republic were convinced that the new nation's size and diversity would make it both freer and more resilient, impeding the formation of tyrannical majorities and checking abuses of power.

Designing institutions that could withstand the stresses of an open society, they laid the bases for a country of unparalleled dynamism and prosperity. Yet, mindful of the risks inherent in this "new thing unto the world", they also provided the federal government with sweeping constitutional powers, since then frequently invoked, to quell insurrections and maintain public order.

Those powers may once again be required in the days ahead. But once again, when the crisis passes, America's democracy will, as its founders expected, be intact – with its turmoil and dissension, but also all of its hope and promise.