

Chomsky: Republicans Are Willing To Destroy Democracy To Retake Power



Noam Chomsky

Today's Republican Party is an extremist force that no longer qualifies as a mainstream political party and is surely not interested in participating in "normal" politics. In fact, today's GOP is so wrapped around extreme and irrational beliefs that even Europe's far-right parties and movements, including Marine Le Pen's National Rally, seem conventional in comparison.

The GOP's political identity has been dramatically shaped by former President Donald Trump, but these recent shifts would not have been possible if there weren't already an array of groups across U.S. society and culture (including white supremacists, right-wing Evangelical Christians and Second Amendment activists, to name just a few) that have long embraced extremist and "proto-fascist" views about the way the country should be governed and the values that it should hold. For them, Trump was and remains America's "great white hope." In this context, Trump's voting base — which continues to believe in the idea of a stolen election and to support Trump-led GOP efforts to stamp critical race theory out of schools and restrict voting rights — speaks volumes about the anti-democratic and threatening nature of today's GOP.

In the interview that follows, world-renowned scholar and activist Noam Chomsky explains what has happened to the Republican Party and why even more than democracy is at stake if the "proto-fascist" forces inspired by Trump return to power.

C.J. Polychroniou: Over the course of the past few decades, the Republican Party has gone through a series of ideological transformations — from traditional conservatism to reactionism and finally to what we may define as “proto-fascism” where the irrational has become the driving force. How do we explain what has happened to the GOP?

Noam Chomsky: Your term “[neoliberal proto-fascism](#)” seems to me quite an accurate characterization of the current Republican organization — I’m hesitant to call them a “Party” because that might suggest that they have some interest in participating honestly in normal parliamentary politics. More fitting, I think, is the judgment of American Enterprise Institute political analysts Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein that the modern Republican Party has transformed to a “radical insurgency” with disdain for democratic participation. That was before the Trump-McConnell hammer blows of the past few years, which drove the conclusion home more forcefully.

The term “neoliberal proto-fascism” captures well both the features of the current party and the distinction from the fascism of the past. The commitment to the most brutal form of neoliberalism is apparent in the legislative record, crucially the subordination of the party to private capital, the inverse of classic fascism. But the fascist symptoms are there, including extreme racism, violence, worship of the leader (sent by God, according to former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo), immersion in a world of “alternative facts” and a frenzy of irrationality. Also in other ways, such as the extraordinary efforts in Republican-run states to suppress teaching in schools that doesn’t conform to their white supremacist doctrines. Legislation is being enacted to ban instruction in “critical race theory,” the new demon, replacing Communism and Islamic terror as the plague of the modern age. “Critical race theory” is the scare-phrase used for the study of the systematic structural and cultural factors in the hideous 400-year history of slavery and enduring racist repression. Proper indoctrination in schools and universities must ban this heresy. What actually happened for 400 years and is very much alive today must be presented to students as a deviation from the real America, pure and innocent, much as in well-run totalitarian states.

What’s missing from “proto-fascism” is the ideology: state control of the social order, including the business classes, and party control of the state with the maximal leader in charge. That could change. German industry and finance at first thought they could use the Nazis as their instrument in beating down labor

and the left while remaining in charge. They learned otherwise. The current split between the more traditional corporate leadership and the Trump-led party is suggestive of something similar, but only remotely. We are far from the conditions that led to Mussolini, Hitler, and their cohorts.

On the driving force of irrationality, the facts are inescapable and should be of deep concern. Though we can't credit Trump entirely with the achievement, he certainly has shown great skill in carrying out a challenging assignment: implementing policies for the benefit of his primary constituency of great wealth and corporate power while conning the victims into worshipping him as their savior. That's no mean achievement, and inducing an atmosphere of utter irrationality has been a primary instrument, a virtual prerequisite.

We should distinguish the voting base, now pretty much owned by Trump, from the political echelon (Congress) — and distinguish both from a more shadowy elite that really runs the Party, McConnell and associates.

[Attitudes among the voting base](#) are truly ominous. Put aside the fact that a large majority of Trump voters believe that the elections were stolen. A majority also believe that “The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it” and 40 percent take a stronger stand: “if elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves, even if it requires violent actions.” Not surprising, perhaps, when [a quarter of Republicans](#) are reported to believe that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the US are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.”

In the background are more realistic concerns about the disappearance of “the traditional American way of life”: a Christian and white supremacist world where Black people “know their place” and there are no infections from “deviants” who call for gay rights and other such obscenities. That traditional way of life indeed is disappearing.

There are also elements of realism in the various “great replacement” theories that seem to consume much of the Trump base. Putting aside absurdities about immigration and elite plotting, a simple look at distribution of births suffices to show that white domination is declining.

It's also worth remembering the deep roots of these concerns. Among the founders, there were two distinguished figures of the Enlightenment, one of whom hoped that the new country would be free of "blot or mixture," red or black (Jefferson), while the other felt that Germans and Swedes should perhaps be barred entry because they are too "swarthy" (Franklin). Myths of Anglo-Saxon origin were prevalent through the 19th century. All of this is apart from the virulent racism and its horrifying manifestations.

Concerns about satanic cults are dangerous enough, but other deeply irrational beliefs are far more consequential. One of the most threatening revelations of recent days was a scarcely noticed observation in [the latest report of a Yale University group](#) that monitors attitudes on climate change — the euphemism for the heating of the planet that will end organized human life on earth unless soon brought under control. The report found that "Over the past year, there has been a sharp decline in the percentages of both liberal/moderate Republicans and conservative Republicans who think developing sources of clean energy should be a priority for the president and Congress. The current numbers are all-time lows since we first asked the question in 2010."

Meanwhile every day's news provides information about new potential disasters — for example, the June 11 release of studies reporting [the accelerated collapse of a huge Antarctic glacier](#) that might raise sea levels by a foot and a half — along with reminders by the scientists reporting the warning that "The future is still open to change — if people do what is needed to change it."

They won't, as long as the reported attitudes prevail. Unless overcome, they might be a kiss of death if the current strategy of the Republican Party succeeds in putting the wreckers back in power. The strategy is plain enough: no matter what the harm to the country, and to their own voting base, ensure that the Biden administration can do nothing to remedy severe domestic problems, and ram through Jim Crow-style legislation to block voting of people of color and the poor, counting on the acquiescence of the reactionary judiciary that McConnell-Trump have succeeded in installing.

The party is not a lost cause. The Democrats have helped by failing to provide a constructive alternative that answers to the needs and just aspirations of many of those who have flocked to the Trump banner. That can change. Furthermore, attitudes are shifting among younger Republicans, [even among younger](#)

[Evangelicals](#), a core part of the Republican base since the '70s.

Nothing is irremediable.

With regard to the political echelon, there is little to say. With fringe exceptions, they have abandoned any semblance of integrity. Current votes are a clear indication: Total Republican opposition to measures that they know are favored by their constituents in order to ensure that the Biden administration can achieve nothing.

The most abject capitulation of the political echelon was on global warming. In 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain had a limited climate plank in his program, and congressional Republicans were considering related legislation. The Koch energy conglomerate responded in force, and any spark of independence was extinguished. That much was evident in the last Republican primaries in 2016, pre-Trump: 100 percent denial that what is happening is happening, or worse, saying maybe it is but we're going to race toward disaster without apologizing (as said John Kasich, who was honored for his integrity by being invited to speak at the 2020 Democratic convention).

I can't raise any objections whatsoever to what you say, but I am a bit baffled by Biden's insistence in trying to reach out to Republicans on some of the major issues confronting the country. Isn't bipartisanship a pipe dream?

Not entirely. Democratic majority leader Chuck Schumer did manage a triumph of bipartisanship. Abandoning a prior commitment to legislation on global warming, Schumer teamed up with Republican Todd Young to conceal [a limited industrial policy program within a "hate China" bill](#) that appealed to shared jingoist sentiments. Republicans ensured that such significant components as funding for the National Science Foundation would be whittled down. Young celebrated the triumph by declaring that "when future generations of Americans cast their gaze towards new frontiers," they won't see "a red flag planted" there, but our own red, white, and blue. What better reason could there be to try to revive domestic manufacturing while trying to undermine the Chinese economy — at a moment when cooperation is a prerequisite for survival.

Meanwhile Biden's Department of Defense is reorienting resources and planning to war with China, a form of madness barely receiving attention, analyzed in detail in Issue #1 of the [Committee for a Sane U.S.-China Policy](#), June 11, 2021.

Trump has transformed the Republican Party into a cult of personality. Is this why Republican leaders blocked the creation of a commission to investigate the January 6 attack on Capitol?

Trump has captured the voting base, but the political echelon faces a quandary. For a long time, the party elite has been a rich man's club, pandering to business power even more than the Democrats, even after the Democrats abandoned the working class in the '70s, becoming a party of Wall St. and affluent professionals. The business world was willing to tolerate Trump's antics as long as he was loyally serving them — with some distaste, since he tarnished the image they project of "soulful corporations." But for major sectors, January 6 was too much.

The McConnell types who run the party are caught between a raging voting base in thrall to Trump and the masters of the economy whom they serve. A commission of inquiry, if at all honest, would have deepened this rift, which they have to find a way to paper over if the party, such as it is, is to survive. Best then to cancel it.

Lies, propaganda, and restricting voting rights have become the governing principles of today's GOP. To what extent will the new voting restrictions work to the advantage of the Republican Party, and how will they impact on the current political climate in general and the future of whatever is left of democracy in the United States in particular?

Trump's highly effective strategy of legitimizing "alternative facts" was based on an endless flood of lies, but a few true statements floated in the debris. One was his comment that Republicans can never win a fair election. That's a real problem for the rich man's club. It's hard to garner votes with the slogan "I want to rob you. Vote for me." That leaves only a few options. One is to prevent the "wrong people" from voting. Another is to shape the party program so that policy is concealed by appeals to "cultural issues." Both have been actively pursued. Trump gave the practices a particularly vulgar twist in his usual style, but he didn't invent them.

The current wave of Republican Jim Crow-style legislation is understandable: Trump's observation is accurate, and is likely to be more so in the future with demographic changes and the tendency of younger voters to favor social justice and human rights, among Republicans as well. The efforts have become more

feasible after the Roberts Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in the Shelby decision in 2013, which “set the stage for a new era of white hegemony,” [as Vann Newkirk rightly observed](#).

Displacement of policy by “cultural issues” traces back to Nixon’s southern strategy. With Democrats beginning to support mild civil rights legislation, Nixon and his advisers recognized that they could switch the southern vote to Republican by racist appeals, barely disguised.

Under Reagan there was little disguise; racist rhetoric and practices came naturally to him. Meanwhile the Republican Christian nationalist strategist Paul Weyrich easily convinced the political leadership that by abandoning their former “pro-choice” stands and pretending to oppose abortion, they could pick up the northern Catholic and newly politicized Evangelical vote. Gun-loving was soon added to the mix, by now reaching such weird absurdities as the recent [Benitez decision overturning California’s ban on assault rifles](#), which are, after all, hardly different from Swiss army knives [according to Benitez]. Trump added more to the mix. Like his fellow demagogues in Europe, he understood well that refugees can be used to whip up xenophobic passions and fears. His racist appeals also went beyond the norm.

Trump has exhibited a certain genius in tapping poisons that run not far below the surface of American society and culture. By such means, he managed to capture the Republican voting base. The party leadership is dedicated to the obstructionist strategy of sacrificing the interests of the country in order to regain power. That leaves the country with one functioning political party, itself torn between the neoliberal leadership and a younger social democratic voting base.

Your phrase “whatever is left of American democracy” is to the point. However progressive it might have been in the 18th century — and there is much to say about that — by today’s standards American democracy is deeply flawed in ways that were already becoming clear to the leading Framers, James Madison by 1791, when he wrote to Jefferson deploring “the daring depravity of the times,” as the “stockjobbers will become the pretorian band of the government — at once its tools and its tyrant; bribed by its largesses, and overawing it by clamors and combinations.”

That could well be a description of recent years, particularly as the neoliberal

assault achieved its entirely predictable consequence of placing government even more at the command of concentrations of private power than before. The “largesses” are too familiar to review. Ample research in mainstream political science has shown that the “clamors and combinations” have left the majority of voters unrepresented, as their own representatives heed the voices of the super-rich, wealthy donors and corporate lobbyists.

The most recent study, using sophisticated AI techniques, dispels “notions that anyone’s opinion about public policy outside of the top 10 percent of affluent Americans independently helps to explain policy.” [Thomas Ferguson](#), the leading academic scholar of the power of the “tools and tyrants” of government, concludes: “Knowing the policy area, the preferences of the top 10 percent, and the views of a handful of interest groups suffice to explain policy changes with impressive accuracy.”

But some vestiges of democracy remain, even after the neoliberal assault. Probably not for long if neoliberal “proto-fascism” extends its sway.

But the fate of democracy won’t actually matter much if the “proto-fascists” regain power. The environment that sustains life cannot long endure the wreckers of the Trump era of decline. Little else will matter if irreversible tipping points are passed.

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[*Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books; *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors); and *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change*, an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books (scheduled for publication in June 2021).