

Noam Chomsky: To Make The US A Democracy, The Constitution Itself Must Change



Noam Chomsky

Why do so many people in the U.S. today find Trump's racist rants and authoritarian mindset appealing? What are the political checks and balances — or lack thereof — that can ward off the impact of the Republican leadership's disastrous policies? Is a constitutional crisis on its way? And how do we face the consequences of an administration that is essentially competing for the title of most dangerous organization in human history? In this exclusive *Truthout* interview, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at MIT and Laureate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona *Noam Chomsky*, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all time (ranking among the top 10 cited sources of all time, along with Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Hegel and Freud), dissects Trump's racist attacks, Trumpism and the current condition of the country in the second decade of the 21st century.

C.J. Polychroniou: According to popular conception, the United States is a "nation of immigrants," although this formulation significantly excludes Native people — who were already here, and were subjected to colonization, displacement and genocide at the hands of European immigrants — and also excludes African Americans, whose ancestors were kidnapped and enslaved. When it is described as a "nation of immigrants," the U.S. is often portrayed as a varied nation where people have the freedom to pursue their dreams of a better life while maintaining their own cultural, ethnic and religious distinctiveness or uniqueness. Yet, the

truth of the matter is that inequality and oppression of the “Other” have been ongoing political and social realities since the origins of the republic. In fact, today we have a president in the White House who makes no bones about wishing to see non-white people, even elected representatives of the U.S. Congress, leave the country because they challenge the status quo and seek a United States with a more humane and democratic polity. Meanwhile, the very rich are enjoying political privileges like never before. Noam, what are some of the tangible and intangible factors that seem to be pushing the country — socially, politically and economically — backward rather than forward?

Noam Chomsky: Trump’s diatribes successfully inflame his audience, many of whom apparently feel deeply threatened by diversity, cultural change, or simply the recognition that the White Christian nation of their collective imagination is changing before their eyes. White supremacy is nothing new in the U.S. The late George Fredrickson’s [comparative studies of white supremacy](#) found the U.S. to be almost off the chart, more extreme even than Apartheid South Africa. As late as the 1960s the U.S. had anti-miscegenation laws so extreme that the Nazis refused to adopt them as a model for their racist Nuremberg laws. And the power of Southern Democrats was so great that until ‘60s activism shattered the framework of legal racism — if not its practice by other means — even New Deal federal housing programs enforced segregation, barring Black people from new housing programs.

It goes back to the country’s origins. While progressive in many ways by the standards of the day, the U.S. was founded on two brutal racist principles: the most hideous system of slavery in human history, the source of much of its wealth (and England’s too), and the need to rid the national territory of Native Americans, whom the Declaration of Independence explicitly describes as “[the merciless Indian savages](#),” and whom the framers saw as barring the expansion of the “superior” race.

Immigrants ... were supposed to be white immigrants — in fact, basically “Anglo-Saxon,” in accord with weird racist myths of the founding fathers that persisted through the 19th century. That includes the leading Enlightenment figures. Benjamin Franklin urged that Germans and Swedes be barred because they were too “swarthy.” Thomas Jefferson was greatly interested in Anglo-Saxon language and law, part of his immersion in the “Saxon myth” that English democracy and law trace back to a pre-Norman Saxon period. The first Naturalization Act, 1790,

restricted the option to whites, extended to ex-slaves after the Civil war.

The country of course needed immigrants to settle the “Indian country” from which Indigenous nations were expelled or “exterminated” (as the Founders put it). But they were supposed to be “white” — a somewhat flexible culturally constructed category. By the late 19th century, Asians were excluded by law. The first more general immigration law was in 1924, designed to bar Jews and Italians primarily. There is no need to review here the horrendous record of how Jews were prevented from fleeing Nazi barbarism, crimes that persisted even after the war. Truman sent Earl Harrison on a mission to inspect the concentration camps where Jews were still held, under grotesque conditions as he reported. About the only effect was to intensify efforts to ship them to Palestine.

The 1924 law remained in place until 1965. By the 1980s immigration began to be criminalized. Treatment of Haitians fleeing terror was particularly despicable. Guantánamo was first used as a detention center by the Bush I and Clinton administrations, a place to get rid of Black people fleeing in terror from the murderous coup regime that [U.S. leaders] were supporting, despite pretenses to the contrary. They were classified as “economic migrants,” a cynical pretense in gross violation of international law and minimal decency.

Another ugly story.

It’s not terribly surprising, then, to read a report of a [conference of conservative intellectuals](#) where one esteemed speaker, University of Pennsylvania Law professor Amy Wax, explains learnedly that “[our country will be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites](#),” since immigrants may not quickly come to “think, live and act just like us” because the social and cultural climate of their places of origin.

Wax failed to elaborate on whether her parents, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, came from a cultural and social climate where people were thinking and acting like “us.”

It’s not hard to understand why these deep currents are becoming more manifest, and ominous, today, after 40 years of the “savage capitalism” unleashed by the neoliberal assault. It’s enough to recall that for a large majority of the workforce, wages have either stagnated or declined since 1979, when the neoliberal assault was just taking off. From the country’s origins, U.S. workers benefited from the world’s highest wages.... Since the 1980s, though the unusual advantages persist, working people have fallen behind the rest of the developed world by many

measures. For review of their current status, see Amanda [Novella and Jeff Madrick's February 2019 contribution](#) to the journal *Challenge*.

The effects of the assault are sharp concentration of wealth and power, increasingly in largely predatory financial institutions, stagnation or decline for the majority, deterioration of benefits, astonishing collapse of infrastructure, a form of globalization designed to pit working people against one another for the benefit of international investors, weakening of institutions to protect worker rights, undermining of functioning democracy, and much else that is all too familiar.

The result, in the U.S. and in Europe, is an upsurge of anger, resentment and, all too often, a search for scapegoats — typically those even more disadvantaged, who are portrayed as being coddled by liberal elites. It's a dangerous mix: fertile territory for demagogues.

The threats are far more extreme than the incipient fascist-style tendencies, which are severe enough. It cannot be overlooked that humans are facing a decision of extraordinary significance, which must be made very soon: Will organized human society survive in anything like its present form, or will it be devastated by global catastrophe? The two most ominous threats are nuclear war and environmental catastrophe, both increasing. On the latter, major energy corporations are apparently [planning on a future with 5^o Celsius above pre-industrial levels by mid-century](#), and with that in mind, are racing to accelerate what climate scientists recognize to be indescribable catastrophe by maximizing the profitable production of fossil fuels, joined by the biggest banks and other major capitalist institutions.

Meanwhile the Republican administration, determined to safeguard its credentials as the most dangerous organization in human history, is anticipating a slightly less overwhelming catastrophe — a rise of 4^o[C] by end of the century, also far above what scientists recognize to be a colossal danger. And [it concludes from this detailed environmental assessment that we should not limit automotive emissions](#), because — what's the difference? We're going over the cliff anyway.

If there is anything like this in world history, I haven't found it. And this passes with scarcely a raised eyebrow.

Of course, this is only science, and as [right-wing radio host] Rush Limbaugh instructs his tens of millions of radio listeners, science is one of the “four corners of deceit,” along with government, academia, and media (of the wrong sort).

All of this tells us that the tasks ahead are urgent, on many fronts.

Another common (mis) perception is that American culture and society adapt easily to change. Yet, this is a country where it is immensely difficult to change even outdated and dysfunctional political processes and institutions, such as the Electoral College and the distribution of Senate seats. It is very hard to pass amendments to the Constitution. And so far, we have faced many barriers to moving away from the two-party system. How do we explain the inflexibility of U.S. political processes and institutions?

In the 19th century the U.S. Constitution was in many ways a progressive document, even though it was a “Framers’ Coup” against the democratic aspirations of most of the public — the title of Michael Klarman’s impressive study of the making of the Constitution, generally regarded as the “gold standard” in the scholarly literature.

The document has inherent problems, which are leading to a likely constitutional crisis. The problems are serious enough for law professor Erwin Chemerinsky, writing on “America’s constitutional crisis,” to entitle his article “The First Priority: Making America a Democracy” (contrary to the intentions of the Framers). He reviews some of the familiar problems. One has to do with the Electoral College, which was designed by the Framers because of their distrust of popular government. By now states with 23 percent of the population have enough electoral votes to choose the president. Even more importantly, the same radical imbalance makes the Senate a highly undemocratic institution — in accord with the intentions of the Framers. In Madison’s constitutional design, the Senate was the most powerful branch of government, and the most protected from public interference. It was to represent “the wealth of the nation,” the most “responsible” men, who have sympathy for property and its rights. Furthermore, though the Framers did not anticipate this of course, social and demographic changes have placed this excessive anti-democratic power in the hands of a part of the population that is mostly rural, white, Christian, socially conservative and traditionalist — generally sympathetic to the Wax principle.

Some of these undemocratic features were virtually unavoidable. The Constitution would never have been ratified if the smaller colonies were not granted an equal voice. But by now the effects are severe — and unchangeable by amendment because of the same radical imbalance in voting power.

These problems are exacerbated by the monopolization of politics by the two

political parties and “winner take all” state laws that bar proportional representation, which can permit a variety of voices to enter the political arena, sometimes growing to major parties. Some have argued, not implausibly, that if a country with the U.S. system tried to join the European Union, the application might be rejected by the European Court of Justice.

The impending crisis is becoming more severe because of the malevolence of the Republican leadership. They are well aware that their formula of abject service to wealth and corporate power along with mobilization of a voting base of the kind that shows up at Trump rallies is not enough to overcome their growing minority status. The solution is radical gerrymandering of the kind now authorized by the reactionary Roberts Court, and stacking the judiciary with far-right justices who will be able to hold the country by the throat for many years. Here the evil genius is Mitch McConnell, who maneuvered to block appointments under Obama, a campaign of obstruction that left 106 vacancies at the end of Obama’s second term (including the scandalous case of Merrick Garland), and is now [rushing through appointment of Federalist Society choices](#).

Another recurring theme of U.S. history involves religious fundamentalism, which is still widespread throughout the country. Does the United States, in some ways, look more like a fundamentalist nation rather than an advanced secular republic?

Throughout its history the U.S. has been an unusually fundamentalist society, with regular Great Awakenings and beliefs that are far off the spectrum of developed societies. Almost 80 percent of Americans [believe in miracles](#). There is a huge Evangelical community, a large part of Trump’s base, which he keeps in line by throwing them crumbs. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a devout Evangelical Christian, speculated recently that God might have sent Trump to save Israel from Iran — which is threatening Israel with destruction in the fantasy world of doctrinal verities. Fully 40 percent of Americans [expect Jesus to return to earth by mid-century](#) (23 percent certainly). It’s possible that this accounts for some of the “looking away” that we were discussing earlier. All in all, it is a curious form of exceptionalism that goes back to the earliest settlers.

The United States remains a global superpower, but its domestic society is strikingly unequal and poverty is rampant. Given that, should we interpret Trumpism as a political phenomenon akin to the same dynamics that gave rise in the prewar era to fascism and other forms of authoritarian rule in Europe and

elsewhere?

Already in the 1950s, economist John Kenneth Galbraith described U.S. society as marked by private affluence, public squalor. It's true that in the public sphere it often resembles a "third world" country. The Infrastructure Report Card of the American Society of Civil Engineers regularly ranks the U.S. down at the bottom, D+. And one can hardly walk through a U.S. city or travel in poor rural areas without being shocked at the squalor. The same holds for social justice measures. Among OECD countries, the U.S. ranks near the bottom. I don't think this relates specifically to Trumpism, except insofar as the contemporary Republican Party leadership is a virtual caricature of long-standing features of U.S. political economy, based on business power that is unusual by historical standards, with a pervasive impact on the political system and also on the "hegemonic common sense," in Gramscian terms. The business classes are not just unusually powerful, but are also highly class conscious, constantly engaged in bitter class war, in some ways vulgar Marxists, with values inverted.

There is variation. The New Deal period brought the U.S. somewhat closer to European-style social democracy, but from the '80s that has been sharply reversed. By now, when Bernie Sanders calls for renewing and extending the New Deal — ideas that would not have greatly surprised Eisenhower — he is considered a radical who wants to destroy "American values."

Trumpism and pre-war fascism seems to me a different matter. There surely are resemblances. Just speaking personally, Trump's [Greenville, North Carolina, rally](#) evoked my childhood memories of listening on the radio to [Hitler's Nuremberg rallies](#), not understanding the words but the mood was apparent enough, and frightening. The not-so-subtle appeals to racism, xenophobia, misogyny, the treachery of dissent, demonization of media that do not kowtow abjectly to the Grand Leader — all this and more is reminiscent of pre-war fascism. And the social base of Trumpism has similarities to prewar fascism as well: superrich power and petty bourgeois popular base.

But prewar fascism was based on control of all aspects of the society — business included — by a powerful state in the hands of a totalitarian all-powerful ruling party: Gleichschaltung. The situation here is quite different, almost the opposite, with the increasingly monopolized business world, particularly its financial sector, having overwhelming power in sociopolitical life and doctrinal management....

In the 1980s, Japan was regarded as the most likely power to replace U.S.

hegemony. We know what happened to that forecast. Now, many pundits see China as a future global superpower. Is this a realistic assessment of future geopolitical developments given the huge economic and military gap that exists today between China and the United States?

The “Japan is #1” fantasy traces in large part to the incompetence of U.S. management, which was unable to compete with superior Japanese production methods. Reagan took care of that with “voluntary export restraints” — where “voluntary” means do it or else, making clear who is #1 — and a number of other devices. One was SDI (“Star Wars”), sold to the public (and maybe to Reagan himself) as defense against the evil enemy, but to the corporate world as a great business opportunity, courtesy of the taxpayer, a familiar benefactor.

As for China, it has made substantial economic and technological progress, but remains a very poor country. It is [ranked 86th](#) in the 2018 update to the UN Development Index, right below Algeria. (India is [ranked 130th](#), barely above East Timor.) China has huge internal problems unknown in the West. It is argued that China is comparable to the U.S., maybe ahead, in Purchasing Power Parity, but that means that it is far below per capita. China has been pursuing systematic plans to expand its influence through Eurasia in a somewhat uneasy partnership with an economically much weaker Russia, first through the Shanghai Cooperation Council, now with the Belt and Road Initiative. In some areas of technology — solar panels, electric cars — it may be in the lead. But it still has a long way to go to reach the level of the rich industrial societies.

The U.S. is concerned with Chinese growth, and is seeking (pretty openly) to impede it — not a very attractive policy stance.

It’s also worth bearing in mind that in the age of neoliberal globalization, national accounts are a less meaningful measure of economic power than in the past. Political economist Sean Starrs has done informative work on a different measure: proportion of world wealth held by domestically based multinational corporations. By that measure the U.S. is far in the lead internationally, owning a spectacular 50 percent of world wealth — more than the U.S. share of global GDP at the peak of its power in 1945 — and U.S. corporations are in the lead in just about every category.

China is sure to have a major role in world affairs. A sane policy would be accommodation and cooperation, which doesn’t seem out of the range of possibility.

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