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Kieh: Political Values, Democracy, and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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The 2020 U.S. Presidential election was one of the most epochal elections in American history. This was because, among others, the incumbent President Donald Trump refused to accept the results of the election, and to oversee the peaceful transfer of power. In addition, Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol complex on January 6, 2020, to halt the counting of the Electoral College votes by a joint session of the U.S. Congress. There is an emergent corpus of scholarly literature that seeks to explain the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, especially some of its tradition-breaking dynamics such as political violence. One explanation is that a segment of former President Trump's supporters is aggrieved by what they view as socio-economic and political marginalization. Another perspective identifies the "Trump phenomenon," and its autocratic proclivity as the main reason. Against this backdrop, this article suggests that the erosion of the agreement on American democratic political values such as the peaceful transfer of power and the rejection of political violence within elite circles, as well as among the masses, and between the elites and the masses shaped the nature and dynamics of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The break-down of democratic political values, amid the emergence of countervailing authoritarian values, shaped the entirety of the election during its pre and post phases.

Keywords: U.S. presidential election, Electoral College, political violence, democratic political values

Introduction

Political values are indispensable to framing, shaping, and conditioning a country's system of governance (Kallos & Transnea, 1982; Welzel, 2021). This is done, *inter alia*, by setting the rules of the “political game.” In this vein, both the elites and the masses are socialized to internalize and accept these political values, and to use them as roadmaps for guiding their political behavior—voting, etc. On the other hand, the dominant political values can be challenged by counter-values that seek to replace them. For example, during the “third wave” of democratization that swept across Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, various groups challenged the dominant political values—obedience to the ruling party, one party rule, non-competitive elections, the leadership cult, the suffocation of political human rights, such as the freedoms of assembly, association, of the press and of speech, among others— that undergirded the authoritarian governance system in the various countries. The resulting counter-values were grounded in liberal democratic ideals such as multi-partyism, competitive elections, the rule of law, and the respect for fundamental political human rights, such as the freedoms of assembly, association, of the press, and of speech. Ultimately, the forces that espoused these counter-values to authoritarianism prevailed. In turn, the authoritarian governance system and its underlying political values in the Stalinist states in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the authoritarian states in Asia, Africa and Latin America collapsed.

In the case of the United States, its liberal democratic governance system has been undergirded by several major political values, including the holding of free, fair, and competitive elections, ensuring that the results of the elections reflect the will of the voters, the losers accepting the outcomes of the elections, respect for the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power. Since the founding of the American state, both the elites and the masses have been socialized with these

political values. And these values have shaped and set the parameters within which elections, including presidential ones, are held. However, the 2020 presidential election was an epochal event in the annals of the country's political history. For example, the incumbent President Donald J. Trump refused to accept the results of the election and took steps to overturn the results of the election. He mobilized and encouraged his supporters to engage in political violence, culminating in the January 6, 2021, insurrection; and refused to set into motion the orderly transfer of power.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will examine the implications of the major events of the 2020 presidential election for American political values. Second, it will interrogate these major events' ramifications for American liberal democracy. To address these twin issues, the article is divided into six major parts. First, a conceptual framework is provided for political values, the foundational concept of the study. Second, some of American political values and liberal democracy are reviewed. The purpose is to situate the study within the context of extant literature. Third, American political values and liberal democracy are framed for the purpose of providing the foundational pillars of the study. Fourth, the study examines some of the major events that were held during the 2020 presidential election cycle, including the pre-election, election, and post-election phases. The purpose is to provide the evidential base for addressing the research problems. Finally, the study draws some major conclusions about the future of American dominant political values and the liberal democratic project.

Conceptualizing Political Values

The conceptual framework for the study draws from the works of Karwat (1982) and Agissova and Sautkina (2020). According to Karwat (1982, 22), "Political values [are] objectified ideas of social phenomenon, which are of lasting significance for the satisfaction of needs of large social groups and the society as a whole, and which at the same time make these ideas as the ideas

of needs of larger social groups and the society as a whole.” In addition, as Agissova and Sautkina (2020, 3) observe, “the core political values are overarching ideas about the proper functioning of the government, citizenship, and society, which influence choices, such as voting behavior.”

Framing American Political Values and Democracy

American political values

Like every other country, there is an ideological divide in the United States encompassing divergent orientations variously referred to as “right,” “center,” “left,” and “conservatism,” “centrism,” “liberalism,” and “socialism” (including its varieties such as democratic socialism) (Schier & Eberly, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Importantly, these divergent ideological prisms have shaped, among others, their adherents’ views on the broad spectrum of public policy issues. One of the resulting effects has been political polarization and its associated intensity within the context of the various historical junctures in the country’s state-building process (Hare & Poole, 2014; Schier & Eberly, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). That is, historically, there have been gradations of political polarization ranging from low to high. For example, since the Obama administration (2009-2017), the intensity of political polarization has increased, as evidenced by, for example, the division of the population into what has been described as “political tribes” (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2018; Redmond, 2022). The resulting “tribalization” of American politics has led to, among others, the opposition to compromise and accommodation, the lack of tolerance for alternative views, and a sense of infallibility (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2018; Redmond, 2022).

Amid the increased level of political polarization over time, historically, the United States has had a set of dominant political values that has been shared by the majority of the population. The Sienna College Research Institute (2021, 4) puts the case this way:

... We are divided by political affiliation, by our stances on issues and by enduring racial and class divisions. But we are all Americans and we proudly say we share the core values that were enshrined in our founding documents, those that we teach in elementary school and those that we reinforce in our culture.

As has been discussed, the foundational pillars of the Declaration of Independence shaped the development and texture of the dominant American political values. The antecedent planks are equality, and inalienable rights such as life, liberty and happiness. “That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the Governed...” (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776, 1).

The resulting dominant American political values include freedom, political equality, citizen participation and political pluralism. In the case of freedom, it entails the unfettered capacity of citizens to exercise rights under both the constitution and statutes without the undue interference of either the state, individuals or groups. However, freedom is not exercised in a vacuum. Hence, cognizance must be taken to ensure that the exercise of freedom by a citizen or groups of citizens does not infringe upon the freedom of other citizens or groups. In addition, the exercise of freedom should not undermine the stability of the political order (Raeder, 2018).

Political equality is anchored in the ideal of equal citizenship. That is, citizenship confers rights and privileges that should not be differentiated in their application across class, ethnic, gender, religious, racial and other divides (Allen, 2016). For example, all Americans should have equal access to participation in the political process, including voting and running for public office (if the citizen fulfills the qualifications).

Citizen participation in American politics assumes several major forms (Langton, 1979; Hope, 2022). A key one is running for political office. It is commonplace for citizens from divergent socio-cultural, economic, gender, political and religious backgrounds to run for public offices at the federal level—president, vice president, senator and representative—state, county and municipal levels. Another is participation in various political organizations, including political parties and political interest groups. In addition, citizens help to conduct voters' registration by encouraging their fellow citizens, who are eligible to vote, to do so. Further, some of the citizens who are eligible to vote do so at various levels at various time intervals.

Pluralism is another major feature of the panoply of the dominant American political values (Baskin, 1970; Ralph, 2018). At its core, pluralism as an ideal recognizes that the American society is a mosaic consisting of various class, ethnic, gender, ideological, and religious strands, among others. Hence, these cleavages shape citizens' perspectives on the menu of issues in American society. In this vein, divergent views should be respected and tolerated. In other words, an individual or group should not be marginalized because their perspective on an issue diverges from the views of others. Instead, robust deliberations should be held about various issues, wherein divergent views are expressed. Ultimately, through the twin processes of accommodation and compromise, decisions can then be made.

In the electoral sphere, American political values emphasize the importance of accepting the results of elections (Priess, 2020). This requires candidates, political parties and voters to accept the results of elections. Importantly, this requirement shapes the resulting democratic norm that elections must be free and fair. This includes the results of the elections reflecting the preferences of the voters as expressed through their votes. However, the value of accepting the results of elections does not prevent candidates and political parties from pursuing legal means, if

they determine that there were irregularities in an election that adversely affected the outcome. But, once the aggrieved candidate or political party exhausts the legal remedies, it is expected that the outcome will be accepted. A noteworthy case was the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore, the flagbearer of the Democratic Party and the incumbent Vice President of the United States, and George Bush, the standard bearer of the Republican Party, and the incumbent Governor of Texas. Amid the controversy over the results from Florida, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in effect that the electoral outcome in Florida was legitimate. Despite the expression of consternation by the Democratic Party and the supporters of Vice President Gore, he accepted the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court and conceded to Governor Bush.

Finally, the dominant American political values have been maintained through three major methods. One is an agreement among the political elites. That is, irrespective of their ideological and partisan differences, American political elites have agreed on these values and their resulting framing, shaping and conditioning of the American liberal democratic project (with all the shortcomings). Another is the acceptance of these values by the majority of Americans. This has been done through the process of political socialization. For example, Americans are taught these political values from the inception of their educational experiences. In addition, counter-political values that espouse, for example, racial and ethnic hatred and political violence, have been relegated to the margins of the American body politic. Moreover, the political elites have denounced these values, and sought to distinguish themselves and shame those who promote them. For example, when David Duke, the former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), ran for the U.S. Senate in 2016, he was denounced by the leaders of the Republican Party in Louisiana (Pedermehr, 2016).

American democracy

American liberal democracy is anchored on the country's dominant political values. That is, the dominant political values have shaped both the complexion and operations of American democracy (with its shortcomings). In this vein, there are several major derived principles. However, in this section, the discussion will focus on the American democratic principles that are relevant to elections: respect for political rights and civil liberties, free, fair, and competitive elections, the rejection of political violence, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the peaceful transfer of power.

The respect for political rights and civil liberties is a bedrock principle of American liberal democracy. In the electoral context, these rights and liberties include running for public office, voting, and the freedoms of assembly, association, press and speech. For example, anyone who meets the qualifications for a public office at the federal, state, county and municipal level can compete for that position, irrespective of the individual's background. Similarly, American citizens, who meet the requirements, can vote in elections at various levels. In terms of civil liberties, Americans have the right to join political parties and other political associations, participate in publicly held political activities such as campaign rallies, and freely express their views on both issues and candidates without fear of recrimination. In addition, the press has the unfettered right (within the boundaries of libel) to report about and discuss the issues that are ascendant during the various election cycles at various levels, as well as the political parties and candidates' positions on these issues.

Another major element of American liberal democracy is the holding of elections for various public offices at various levels. Like other democracies, elections serve as what McDonald and Samples (2006, 1) call the "marketplace of democracy." That is, elections provide candidates

and political parties the opportunity to articulate their respective visions and to compete for the support and votes of the electorate. As well, elections serve evaluative, legitimation and political stability functions. In the case of the evaluative function, elections provide the electorate the opportunity to assess the performances of public officeholders, and to decide whether to re-elect them (if these officeholders are seeking additional terms of office) or choose their opponents (Kieh, 2006). In terms of legitimation, Americans use elections as vehicles for granting office holders the privilege to govern on their behalf (Reichley, 1987; Kieh, 2006). Elections perform their political stability function by providing the basis for the peaceful transfer of power (Reichley, 1987; Kieh, 2006).

The rejection of political violence is also a major principle of American democracy. This means, among others, that candidates and political parties should not promote violence as an instrument for either acquiring or retaining political power. For example, violence should not be used to inhibit the ability of candidates and political parties to campaign freely. In other words, candidates and political parties should have the freedom of movement devoid of either the threat of, or the actual use of violence. Similarly, violence should not be used during the pre-election, election, or post-election period no matter the nature of the grievances of the candidates and political parties.

The rule of law is indispensable to the establishment and maintenance of a democratic governance system (Stein, 2019; Winter, 2022). This is because the rule of law, among others, ensures the maintenance of order and stability, which are indispensable to the functioning of the state. Winter (2022, p. 655) captures the essence of the indispensability of the rule of law to democracy thus: “Democracy and the rule of law—like song and dance or pen and paper—[are] a natural pair.” Specifically, in the electoral sphere, the rule of law performs several functions. A

key one is ensuring that the electoral rules, including the qualifications of candidates and the voters, are impartially enforced. Another is to ensure that those who violate the electoral rules are held accountable, including bringing them to justice. In addition, the rule of law helps provide an enabling environment in which aggrieved candidates, political parties and voters can seek remedies for their grievances through the established legal processes.

The judiciary is not only indispensable to the maintenance of American democracy in general, but it also plays a critical role in adjudicating electoral disputes. To play its adjudicatory role effectively, the judiciary must be independent (Burbank, 1999; Geyh, 2003). As Paulette Brown, the Former President of the American Bar Association, argued, “The strength of [American] democracy and the maintenance of the rule of law lie in the independence and impartiality of [the] judiciary” (Brown, 2016, 1). That is, the courts at all levels of the American federal state system must be free from the control of any individual or group. In addition, irrespective of the ideological combined with judicial philosophies of the judges, they are expected to make rulings about electoral disputes based on the facts of the cases, and the applicable laws.

As well, the peaceful transfer of power is a major cornerstone of the American democratic system. Essentially, the expectation is that incumbents, at all levels, who decide not to seek additional terms of office, or are term limited, or lose their re-election bids would transfer power to their successors, who have been elected, in a peaceful manner. Importantly, the key transition that is used to help gauge the state of American democracy is the presidential one (Naftali, 2020; Tyson, 2022). Since 1822, after each presidential election, the incumbent has peacefully transferred power to the winner of the election, due to the former either losing his re-election bid or being term limited. Several recent cases are instructive. After he lost his re-election bid in 1980, President Jimmy Carter, peacefully transferred power to President Ronald Reagan, his successor;

after the 1992 election in which he lost, the incumbent President George H.W. Bush transferred power to President Bill Clinton, his successor; and after the contentious 2000 election that pitted Al Gore, the incumbent Vice President and flag bearer of the Democratic Party, against Governor George W. Bush, the standard bearer of the Republic Party, President Bill Clinton, who was term limited, transferred power to President Bush, after the U.S. Supreme Court ended Vice President Gore's legal efforts to award him Florida's electoral college votes.

Overall, American democracy (with its shortcomings), like its underlying political values, has been maintained through an agreement among the political elites, the citizens, and the repudiation and marginalization of those who advocate for non-democratic systems of governance like authoritarianism. For example, during the Gore versus Bush presidential election, there was agreement that Vice President Gore had the right to seek legal remedies for his electoral grievance. In addition, there was the expectation that after the legal remedies had been exhausted, the two candidates would abide by the final decision, and the peaceful transfer of power would proceed. Hence, as has been discussed, Vice President Gore accepted the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court that Governor Bush was the winner of the 2000 presidential election. In addition, as the President of the U.S. Senate, Vice President Gore presided over the joint session of the U.S. Congress for the certification of the electoral college votes, declaring Governor Bush as the duly elected President of the United States. Further, although some of Vice President Gore's supporters were displeased with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision, they did not seek to obstruct the peaceful transfer of power by, for example, using extra-constitutional and legal means such as political violence.

Literature Review

Background

The literature review is designed to situate the study within the crucible of American political values, and American democracy. The rationale is that the review will provide an understanding of the extant knowledge on political values in general, and American political values and American democracy in particular. In turn, this will link the study to the existing body of knowledge.

American political values

Huntington (1982, 1) posits that “throughout the history of the United States a broad consensus has existed among the American people in support of liberal democratic, individualistic and egalitarian values.” In other words, since the founding of the American state in the eighteenth century, Americans have had shared political values, irrespective of their ideological orientations. However, Huntington argues that historically Americans have not fulfilled these shared political values in a “satisfactory manner” (Huntington, 1982, 1). He concludes that the failure of Americans to fully live up to their shared political values has led to what he terms “cognitive dissonance,” as reflected in some combination of “moralism, cynicism, complacency and hypocrisy” (Huntington, 1982, 36).

Treading on the same path as Huntington, Zamelin (2014) contends that the American polity is anchored on a set of core political values that spans the broad gamut from representative government to the rule of law. Using these shared political values, Americans from divergent racial and political backgrounds have proffered various ways for practicalizing the shared political values. One of the emergent issues is linking these shared political values to emancipatory politics, including issues such as justice for all.

Patterson and Fosse (2019) identified freedom as one of the shared political values in the American political culture. For example, they argue that in general, “those who have more money feel freer” (Patterson & Fosse, 2019, 31). Thus, the issue of freedom is linked to class. In addition, they note that in the racial sphere, there is a perception among large portions of White conservatives that the freedom of Whites experienced a precipitous decline during the Obama administration. This view, Patterson and Fosse (2019, 31) argue, “...reflects in part, one of the most disturbing aspects of Americans’ conception, and perceived level of freedom, rooted in the nation’s past of racial slavery, Jim Crow and Northern racism...”

American democracy

Alexander (2013) examines some of the core principles of American liberal democracy. One is the nature of political equality. He notes that political equality connotes that all Americans have the same station in the political domain, irrespective of their divergent backgrounds. Another major liberal democratic principle is the centrality of citizens exercising their political rights and civil liberties, such as voting rights, and the freedoms of assembly, association, and speech. In addition, Alexander identifies pluralism as a key element of the American liberal democratic order. This dimension essentializes the tolerance for divergent ideological and political orientations and views, among others. He then links the American liberal democratic principles of political equality, the exercise of political rights and civil liberties, and pluralism to the electoral domain. He contends, for example, that the notion of “one person, one vote,” and that everyone’s vote counts equally regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or religious affiliation is something taught to students beginning at very young age” (Alexander, 2013, 5).

However, Arvanitopoulos (2022) argues that the United States is experiencing a democratic recession that predates the Trump era. However, he contends that the Trump epoch has exacerbated

the crisis. For example, he notes that the “storming of Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 was an assault on democracy that continues unabated” (Arvanitopoulos, 2022, 91-92). He maintains that one of the major causes for the current phase of the crisis of democracy in the United States revolves around Trump’s authoritarian proclivities. Against this backdrop, using his “personality cult” and his associated stranglehold on the Republican Party, Trump is leading the efforts to undermine American democratic values and practices, as well as democratic institutions at the municipal, state and federal levels. Some state legislatures are aiding Trump in his authoritarian quest.

Building on Arvanitopoulos’ argument, (2022) Masaru (2021) contends that there are underlying crises in the United States that provided the opportunity for right-wing populism under the leadership of Donald Trump to emerge on the political landscape beginning in 2016. The Trump-led right-wing populism has culminated in the erosion of democracy in the United States in several major ways, including strident partisanship, an aversion to political compromise, and increased extremism. However, Masaru is optimistic that the opposition to Trumpism, especially from a section of the Republican Party, militates against authoritarianism emerging as the dominant system of governance in the United States.

In addition to the causes of democratic backsliding in the United States proffered by Arvanitopoulos (2022) and Masaru (2021), Liberman et al (2019) identified two major root causes: growing economic inequality, and the continued racial divide. Trump took advantage of these and other issues both as a candidate, and subsequently President of the United States to promote an agenda of racial division, among others, as a reflection of his aversion to the United States continuing to exist as a multi-racial and multi-cultural liberal democracy. For example, “[Trump]...signaled support for the white nationalist mobilization that...surged [after] his

inauguration” (Lieberman et al., 2019, 470). In addition, Trump has demonstrated his admiration for authoritarian leaders around the world.

The study and the literature reviewed

The study draws from literature reviewed in two interlocking ways. In terms of American political values (as provided by the literature reviewed), the study uses them (the values) in combination with the resulting democratic principles as the evaluative criteria for assessing the major activities prior to, during, and after the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. The purpose is to juxtapose the dominant American values with the demonstrated political behavior prior to, during and after the 2020 presidential election.

Another major dimension is that the study draws from Kalles’ and Transnea’s (1982), Holman’s (2007), and Connors’ (2020) idea about the dynamic nature of political values. The idea is then used to frame the notion of the emergence of counter-political values, and the resulting application to political behavior during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. In addition, the study examines the relationship between the dominant American political values and the emergent counter-political values, and the implications for the American liberal democratic project. In other words, do the counter-political values represent continuity, based on Holman’s (2007) formulation? Or an effort to supplant and replace the dominant political values and the resulting American liberal democratic governance system?

The “Tugs and Pulls” of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Background

The 2020 presidential election was one of the most contentious in modern American history. Several reasons accounted for this, including increased political polarization among the American electorate (Schier & Eberly, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017; Chua & Rubenfeld, 2018; Redmond, 2022). Although hyper-partisanship predated the 2020 election cycle, the former represented a crescendo in what has been described variously as the increased “tribalization” of American politics (Schier & Eberly, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017; Chua & Rubenfeld, 2018; Redmond, 2022). The emergent phenomenon undermined the American political values of tolerance and respect for divergent views, accommodation, and compromise. In sum, the increased political polarization accentuated the “us” against “them” mindset, which is an anathema to democratic principles.

Against this background, this section of the article is designed to examine the dynamics of the 2020 presidential election. The pre-election, election and post-election activities were important because they provided a repository of evidence regarding the emergent contestation between the long-held dominant American political values and the emergent counter, or authoritarian values espoused by the Make American Great Again (MAGA) movement led by Donald J. Trump. The election is divided into three major stages: pre-election, the election, and the post-election. Some of the major events that occurred during each of these phases will be examined. Overall, this will provide the evidential base for assessing the state of the dominant American political values and democracy.

Pre-election major events

One of the major pre-election events was the incumbent President Trump's secret plan to prematurely declare victory. In an audio recording on October 21, 2020, Steve Bannon, President Trump's former White House Chief Political Strategist, stated: "What Trump's gonna do is just declare victory. Right? He's gonna declare victory. But that doesn't mean he's a winner...As it sits here today, at 10 or 11 o'clock Trump gonna walk in the Oval, tweet out. "I'm the winner. Game over. Suck on that" (Friedman, 2022, 1). Similarly, in his testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives' January 6 Select Committee, Brad Parscale, President Trump's former Campaign Manager, asserted, "Trump planned as early as July [2020] to falsely claim he'd won the 2020 presidential election—months before Election Day" (Blasi, 2022, 1). On November 3, 2022 (election day), while the ballots were still being counted, President Trump implemented his plan by prematurely declaring victory. However, President Trump's plan and the resulting action were contrary to American democratic principles and the underlying political values. This is because electoral outcomes are not decided prior to the holding of elections, or while the ballots are being counted. Instead, the results after the tallying of all the votes determine the winner.

Another major political development was President Trump's refusal to make a commitment to accept the results of the election (BBC, 2020a; National Public Radio, 2020; Panetta, 2020). According to President Trump, "I have to see. Look, you—I have to see. No, I am not going to just say 'yes.' I'm not going to say no, and I didn't last time either" (Mansoor, 2020, 1). President Trump's position, as he indicated, remained consistent: During the third debate for the 2016 presidential election, as Tumulty and Rucker (2016, 1) assert, "[Trump stated] that if he loses the election, he might consider the election illegitimate because the process [was] rigged." Trump's position was unprecedented in the annals of American politics: No presidential candidate or

incumbent president has refused to commit to the acceptance of the election results beforehand. In fact, the derived norm from American political values has been those candidates for the presidency, as well as other elected offices at various levels know and accept that there are only two electoral outcomes: winning and losing. However, the emergence of Trump on the American political scene has led to this principle being challenged.

As well, on September 29, 2022, during the debate with his then Democratic Challenger former Vice President Joe Biden, President Trump demonstrated acquiescence towards political violence when he urged the Proud Boys, a far-right wing, white supremacist, and violent organization to “stand back and stand by” (BBC, 2020; Collins & Zadrozny, 2020; Hassan & Cooke, 2020). In response, the Proud Boys “celebrated, and took Trump’s statement as marching orders...and pledged allegiance to Trump” (Collins & Zadrozny, 2020, 1). President Trump’s support for the use of political violence has its antecedent in the 2016 presidential election. For example, on February 1, 2016, during the final pre-Iowa caucus rally Trump told his supporters, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them...I’ll pay the legal fees” (Barrial, 2016, 1). Similarly, during a campaign rally in Las Vegas on February 22, 2016, Trump told his supporters about a protester: “The guards are being gentle with him. I ‘d like to punch him in the face, I ‘ll tell you that...You know what they used to do to a guy like this in a place like this...They’d be carried out on a stretcher folks” (Schreckinger, 2016, 1).

The election

As has been discussed, on election night, while the votes were still being counted, President Trump implemented his power maintenance strategy by prematurely declaring himself the winner of the presidential election. He told a group of supporters, who had gathered for the election night rally, “This is a fraud on the American public. This is an embarrassment to our country. We are

getting ready to win this election. Frankly, we did win this election... We want all voting to stop” (Knowles, 2022, 1). Contrary to a major tenet of American political values that requires all votes to be counted, President Trump demanded that voting in states like California that are in the west with different time zones be stopped. In other words, President Trump wanted to disenfranchise millions of voters, especially since the early vote counts gave him an advantage. However, when all the votes were counted, the results were as follow: for the popular vote, former Vice President Biden, the Democratic Party’s standard bearer, won 81,284,666 to 74,224,319 for the incumbent President Trump (CNN Politics, 2020). In terms of the electoral college, former Vice President Biden received 306 votes to 232 for President Trump (Ibid).

Post-election major activities

Background

After the results of the presidential election were announced, former Vice President Biden was declared the winner; and the incumbent President Trump knew that he had lost. However, in contradistinction to an established American democratic norm, President Trump refused to concede. According to the testimony of Alyssa Farah, a former White House aide, before the U.S. House of Representatives’ Select Committee on the January 6 Insurrection, “a week after the election was called in favor of Biden, Trump was watching Biden on television in the Oval and said: ‘Can you believe I lost to this effing guy?’” (Singh, 2022, 1). Similarly, in her testimony before the January 6 Select Committee, Cassidy Hutchinson, a former top aide to White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, asserted that President Trump told his chief of staff, “I don’t want people to know we lost, Mark. This is embarrassing. Figure it out” (Ibid.).

The “Big Lie”

The emergent post-election strategy was to peddle the false claim that the presidential election was stolen from Trump, due to fraud. Referred to as the “Big Lie” (Arceneaux and Truex, 2022, 1.; Painter & Fernandes, 2022, 1), the false narrative became the vehicle for mobilizing Trump’s supporters in MAGA, including government officials at various levels, to undermine the legitimacy of the results of the presidential election. In addition, President Trump and his supporters sought to overturn the results of the election. This was done in various phases. The first phase was the Trump campaign filed 61 lawsuits in state and federal courts seeking to overturn the results of the elections in states that President Trump lost (Cummings, Garrison & Sergent, 2021). However, the Trump Campaign lost all the cases, which were presided over by conservative, moderate and liberal judges, including some who were appointed by Trump (Ibid.). Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court, as Durkee (2021, 1.) observes, “Kill[ed] [the] last Trump suit.”

Second, pressure was exerted on Republican-controlled state legislatures in states that Biden won to overturn the results of the election. The strategy was based on the flawed premise that state legislatures had the authority to nullify the results of a presidential election and approve alternate slates of electors for the Electoral College. In this vein, President Trump, for example, invited Michigan’s Republican legislative leaders for a meeting at the White House on November 20, 2020. (White, 2020). However, neither the Michigan state legislature nor any other in state in which Trump lost to Biden obliged with Trump’s edict to overturn the results and declare Trump the winner.

Third, the Trump Campaign and allies designed a plan to select pro-Trump “fake electors” for the Electoral College in states that Biden won (Goodman, 2022). For example, on December 14, 2020, “Trump’s losing GOP slates of electors gathered in five states won by Biden—Arizona,

Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, and Wisconsin. The illegitimate electors acted as if Trump had been victorious in their states, signing certificates claiming to be ‘duly elected and qualified’ to represent their home states” (Cheney, 2022a, 5). In addition, in Michigan, the pro-Trump “fake electors” signed documents attesting that Trump had won the state, which were delivered to Congress, the National Archives and a federal judge” (Ibid, p.4).

Fourth, Trump and his allies pressured Republican election officials in states that Biden had won to also overturn the results of the elections. For example, President Trump called Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to essentially manufacture votes for him (Trump). In the call, which Secretary of State Raffensperger recorded apparently without President Trump’s knowledge, Trump pressured Raffensperger thus: “...All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11, 780 votes, which is one more than we have...” (Shear & Saul, 2021, 1). Raffensperger refused to comply with Trump’s demand for extra votes to enable him to win the election in the State of Georgia.

Fifth, Trump called for a rally of his supporters in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, the date the U.S. Congress was scheduled to certify the results of the Electoral College, and formally declare Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, and thus President of the United States. Trump sent out a tweet in which he stated, “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild” (De Pillis, 2021, 1). In response to Trump’s call, supporters in MAGA, including far-right-wing groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, undertook a massive mobilization campaign for the rally. In addition, the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers viewed Trump’s call for the protest as a “call to arms.” Hence, the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers brought caches of weapons for the purpose of staging a “coup” to keep Trump in power (Newton, 2022; Jackman, Weiner & Hsu. 2022; Morgan, 2022).

Sixth, President Trump pressured his Vice President Mike Pence to overturn the results of the Electoral College votes, using the latter's role as the presiding officer of the Congressional certification process (Niedzwiadek & Cheney, 2021; Schmidt, 2021; Zengerie & Cowan, 2022). President Trump's claimed that Vice President Pence had the legal authority to nullify the Electoral College votes, especially for the swing states that were won by Biden. However, neither the U.S. Constitution nor the Electoral Count Act gives the Vice President of the United States the authority to nullify Electoral College votes. Instead, based on the law and tradition, the vice president's role as the presiding officer over the Congressional Electoral College votes certification process is magisterial. Realizing that he did not have the authority to overturn Electoral College votes, Vice President Pence rebuffed President Trump's insistence.

Seventh, the Trump-called rally of his supporters was held on January 6, 2021, in Washington D.C. The various speakers at the rally led by President Trump repeated the "Big Lie" that the election was stolen from Trump (Godfrey, 2022). As a remedy, the various speakers urged Trump supporters to act to "stop the steal" (Godfrey, 2021; Luke, 2021). In his speech, President Trump stressed three major issues: the "Big Lie," the expectation that Vice President Pence would change his mind and nullify the Electoral College votes for the "swing states" that Biden won and instructing his gathered supporters to march on the U.S. Capitol, where Congress was certifying the results of the Electoral College votes. Finally, President Trump urged his supporters: "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.... Because you will never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong" (POLITICO, 2021, 1). In addition, Trump instructed his supporters to march on the Capitol to protest, and that he would go with them" (Ibid.). In this vein, Trump's supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent insurrection that witnessed attacks on

Capitol police officers, the destruction of properties, and a search for Vice President Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, in order to visit harm on them (Revolt Staff, 2021). In addition, the insurrectionists erected gallows, and shouted “hang Mike Pence” (Edmondson, 2022, 1). The overarching purpose of the insurrection was to prevent the Congressional certification process, so that President Trump could maintain power—a “coup.” The insurrectionists did succeed in disrupting the certification process, because the members of the U.S. Congress (both Democrats and Republicans) were removed from the chambers of the House of Representatives to safe locations, amid the mayhem that was unleashed by the insurrectionists.

Eighth, after several hours of delay because of the violent insurrection, the certification process resumed. Interesting, when the votes were taken, 139 Republican members of the House of Representatives, and 8 Republican members of the U.S. Senate voted against the certification of the Electoral College votes (Yourish, Buchanan & Lu, 2021). The collective rationale was that there were irregularities during the elections in the swing states that Biden won, thereby giving credence to the “Big Lie” (Ibid.).

The Implications for American political values and democracy

So, what are the implications of the 2020 American presidential election for the dominant American political values and democracy? This section of the article will attempt to address these twin issues.

The dominant political values

The overarching implication of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election and its attendant major developments (pre-election, election and post-election) is that the dominant political values that have framed and shaped American democracy prior to 2016, are being contested by a vibrant authoritarian movement. The emergent authoritarian movement is an amalgam of political elites

comprising government officials at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as prominent Americans, racist and violent groups such as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers and the One Percenters, conspiracy theorists such as QAnon, and rank and file Americans. That is, the emergent authoritarian movement has challenged and undermined the dominant American political values by what Kallos and Trasma (1982, 4) referred to as “breaking progress.” In other words, the emergent authoritarian movement is desirous of truncating the continued historical development of the dominant political values and replacing them with counter-political values that are rooted in authoritarianism. One of the major counter-political values is that political equality does not include all Americans. Instead, political equality only applies to the members of the authoritarian movement. This was demonstrated by the violent January 6 insurrection, which reflected, among others, the authoritarian movement’s belief that only the votes cast for President Trump should matter, and therefore count in determining the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

Another counter-political value is political intolerance. The authoritarian movement’s desire is to asphyxiate competing and alternative perspectives on political issues. For example, Vice President Mike Pence was derided and targeted for harm, because he refused to comply with the movement’s desire for him to illegally overturn the results of the presidential election. Similarly, Speaker Nancy Pelosi was vilified and sought after for nefarious reasons, because the authoritarian movement views her as the embodiment of the dominant American political values and democracy.

In addition, the authoritarian movement has introduced the political value of “alternative facts.” That is, in contradistinction to the American political value that essentializes the imperative of the agreement on the facts of a political issues, amid competing ideological perspectives, the authoritarian movement is seeking to normalize the counter-political values of falsehood,

misinformation and conspiracy theories as tools in American political discourse. For example, President Trump, the cult-like leader of the movement, orchestrated the “Big Lie” that he won the 2020 presidential election, when he knew, based on evidence provided by White House aides to the U.S. House of Representatives’ Select Committee on January 6, that he lost the election. Similarly, the QAnon wing of the movement formulated and peddled several conspiracy theories about the 2020 presidential election. One of the most insidious conspiracy theories was that President Biden and other leaders of the Democratic Party are members of an evil cabal of pedophiles and “Satan worshippers.”

The irrelevance of character as a criterion for evaluating candidates for political offices is yet a major counter-political value that the authoritarian movement has introduced. In other words, contrary to the dominant American political value that character matters for the candidates seeking political offices, the authoritarian movement has introduced the counter-political value that stipulates that character does not matter, if the movement supports a candidate, who has engaged in unethical and immoral behavior. However, on the other hand, character only matters if an anti-authoritarian movement candidate commits the same offenses. The implication is that double-standards can be used in evaluating the characters of pro- and anti-authoritarian movement candidates for political offices.

Also, the maintenance of political power at all costs is another counter-political value. In this vein, pro-movement candidates can plan to declare victory for the respective offices they are contesting prior to the holding of the elections. Subsequently, when the elections are held and the vote counting process is in progress, pro-movement candidates can then declare victory, irrespective of the electoral outcomes. This counter-value will contribute to, among other things, increased frivolous lawsuits by pro-movement candidates, who prematurely declare victory, but

then lose, when the vote counting processes are completed. As has been discussed, for example, President Trump practicalized this value prior to, during and after the 2020 presidential election.

Furthermore, pro-movement candidates' refusal to commit to accepting the results prior to the holding of the elections, and after the counting of the votes is another counter-value. For example, President Trump refused to commit to accepting the results of the 2020 presidential election prior to the holding of the latter, and even after the results were announced (even though he knew he lost the election). Treading on the foundation President Trump has laid, several pro-movement candidates in the 2022 elections have refused to commit to accepting the results. For example, six pro-movement candidates for governor and the U.S. Senate have declared that they cannot commit to accepting the results of the elections (Barron-Lopez, 2022). Several lessons are instructive. One is that the norm that requires candidates to accept beforehand that there are two major outcomes to an election—win or lose—is being eroded. Another is that electoral outcomes are only legitimate if pro-authoritarian movement candidates win. In addition, as has been discussed, post-election periods will become tumultuous as pro-authoritarian movement candidates who lose clog the court system with lawsuits claiming they won their elections but were cheated. In turn, this will delay the certification of winners in elections at various levels. Consequently, this will erode citizens' trust in the electoral systems and outcomes. Ultimately, this could lead to political instability, especially the increased prospects for post-election violence, as was the case with the January 6 insurrection in 2021.

The utility of political violence is at the vortex of the counter-values. Contrary to the dominant American political value that requires political parties, candidates, and supporters to participate in the political process using peaceful means, the pro-authoritarian movement views the use of political violence as an appropriate vehicle for political participation. As the January 6

insurrection demonstrated, the movement believes that political violence can be used for the attainment of preferred political outcomes, including electoral ones. Hence, for example, as presidential and other elections in the United States become increasingly contentious and divisive, political violence can be used to harass, intimidate, and inflict harm on those, who are viewed as adversarial to the movement. For example, during the 2022 U.S. elections, pro-authoritarian movement armed vigilantes monitored voters, who used drop boxes to cast their ballots in Arizona (Cathey & Dukakis, 2022; Reston, Schouten & Sneed, 2022). The action is based on the movement's continued false claims that there was widespread fraud during the 2020 elections. Hence, the purpose of the monitoring was to intimidate voters. For example, the vigilante groups photographed the voters, including the license plates of their vehicles (Cathey & Dukakis, 2022; Reston, Schouten & Sneed, 2022).

Two major sets of interrelated factors are driving the contestation between the dominant American political values, and the counter ones. A key one is the erosion of the agreement among the American political elites regarding the dominant political values. Similarly, there is also the break-down of the agreement among American citizenry concerning the dominant political values that they were socialized to accept as the foundational pillars of democracy. Several major cases are instructive. One is that some political elites, including U.S. senators and representatives, have supported the "Big Lie." Another is that several senators and representatives, despite the evidence that there was no election fraud in the states that President Trump lost, still voted to reject the certification of the results. The January 6 violent insurrection is another example of the collapse of elite agreement about American political values. Although the lives of all members of Congress (Democrats, Republicans, and Independents) were threatened by this action, some have sought to minimize and downplay the deleterious effects of the event. In addition, President Trump has

repeatedly denounced the efforts to hold the insurrectionists accountable through the rule of law. In fact, President Trump has promised to consider issuing pardons for the insurrectionists, if he is elected during the 2024 presidential election. Moreover, the National Republican Committee passed a resolution censuring Liz Cheney (Republican-Wyoming) and Adam Kinzinger (Republican-Illinois) for serving on the U.S. House of Representatives' Select Committee on January 6. Interestingly, the Select Committee was established to investigate the violent insurrection for the purpose of ensuring the rule of law, and the avoidance of similar acts in the future. On the other hand, the Republican National Committee sought to normalize the violent insurrection by referring to it as "legitimate political discourse" (Cheney, 2022b, 1).

Democracy

The 2020 presidential election has several implications—both negative and positive—for the future of American democracy. A major negative implication is the effort to normalize the use of political violence in the electoral process. The support the insurrectionists have received from the Republican National Committee, and Republican members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as Republican officials at the state and local levels has set the precedent for losing candidates in future presidential and other elections at various levels to mobilize their supporters to use political violence as an instrument for overturning the results in their (the losing candidates) favor. However, political violence is anathema to democracy, including elections. This is because political violence undermines the democratic principle of the use of persuasion as the motor force for candidates and political parties to seek support from the electorate. Hence, pro-democracy forces in the U.S. across the ideological divide need to organize and undertake a sustained campaign to counter the injection of political violence into the blood stream of American democracy by pro-authoritarian forces.

Another negative implication can be gleaned from President Trump's refusal to peacefully transfer power to the then President-elect Joe Biden, and to attend the latter's inauguration. President Trump's refusal to concede defeat (even though, he knew and admitted that he had lost) undermined the peaceful transfer of power by, among others, preventing federal cabinet departments and agencies from providing extremely useful information to the then incoming Biden administration. By the time President Trump grudgingly notched the federal bureaucracy to cooperate with the incoming Biden administration, valuable time was lost. Like his other anti-democratic acts, including his pre-election plan to prematurely declare victory, his refusal to accept the results of the presidential election even though he knew and admitted that he had lost, and the resulting peddling of the "Big Lie," and the mobilization of his supporters to stage a "coup," President Trump's refusal to undertake a peaceful transfer of power is without precedent in American political history. Thus, President Trump has established the precedent for an incumbent president in the future, who loses his or her re-election bid, to refuse to concede defeat and peacefully transfer power to their duly elected successors.

On the other hand, in terms of the positive implications of the 2020 presidential election, a key one is the demonstration of the independence of the judiciary at both the state and federal levels. Judges at the state and federal levels adjudicated the Trump Campaign's 61 lawsuits alleging election fraud. And in each case, based on the evidence, each state and federal judge ruled against the Trump Campaign. Importantly, the judges that adjudicated the Trump Campaign's various lawsuits have divergent ideological orientations and the resultant judicial philosophies. In addition, the federal judges, included some who were appointed by President Trump. The fact that these judges examined the facts of the cases presented by the Trump Campaign, and based their rulings on them, bodes well for the future of American democracy. This is because an independent

judiciary that is not the handmaid of political forces and their particularistic interests is indispensable to the survival of American democracy, especially against the backdrop of the emergence of a vibrant authoritarian movement.

Another is the resistance of the rule of law to the authoritarian movement's efforts to replace the democratic principle of accountability with the culture of impunity. Several cases are noteworthy. One is the refusal of Republican state election officials in some of the swing states that President Trump lost to comply with the latter's demand for them to overturn the results of the election in his favor. These actions are good for the maintenance of the legitimacy of the electoral process, especially the electorate's faith and trust in it to truly reflect their electoral choices in various elections. However, a point of concern is that several election deniers in various states are running in the 2022 elections for the positions of governors and secretaries of state, two major categories of positions that are critical to the certification of state election results for the electoral college. In addition, the secretaries of state supervise the electoral systems for the various states. If these election deniers are elected, especially as secretaries of state, in the future, they could overturn election results or refuse to certify the results of elections that do not favor their preferred candidates. Such actions will undermine the democratic principle that election outcomes should reflect the choices of the voters, as demonstrated in the casting of their ballots. Moreover, it could occasion needless political violence, as well as numerous court cases. Ultimately, the voters could lose faith and trust in the electoral system, which is a major anchor of American democracy.

The other is that the United States Congress, including Democrats and some Republicans, held President Trump responsible for inciting the violent insurrection by impeaching him in the House of Representatives and nearly convicting him in the Senate. Similarly, the House of

Representatives established a Select Committee comprising Democrats and Republicans (although the Republican Party's leadership in the House of Representatives chose for their members not to participate in the committee) to investigate the January 6, 2021, violent insurrection. The Select Committee heard testimonies from several individuals, including former officials of the Trump administration. In addition, the Select Committee subpoenaed President Trump to testify and produce requested documents. Moreover, President Trump and some of his principal supporters are under investigation in Fulton County, Georgia, for their efforts to coerce the Secretary of State of Georgia to "find additional votes" that would have made President Trump the winner of the presidential election in Georgia. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) has charged, arrested, and detained several of the insurrectionists. By October 2022, about 928 insurrectionists had been charged, arrested, and detained (Hall et al, 2022). In addition, the DOJ is still searching for scores of other insurrectionists. Moreover, several of the charged, arrested, and detained insurrectionists have been tried, found guilty and sentenced (Feinberg, 2022). These actions bode well for the rule of law, a bedrock principle of American democracy, in two major ways. One is that those who engaged in or aided the violent insurrection are being held accountable by bringing them to justice. The other is that these actions will hopefully serve as deterrents to others, who might think about engaging in political violence in the future.

Conclusion

What do the 2020 presidential election (pre-election, election, and post-election) portend for American political values and democracy? First, the erosion of the agreement among the political elites, among the citizens, and between the political elites and the citizens over the dominant American political values and its liberal democratic system will lead to contestations between the former and the emergent authoritarian values espoused by the Trump-led MAGA

movement. As is being currently observed, the emergent counter-values or authoritarian values are being championed by some members of the United States Congress, governors, state legislators and an appreciable number of citizens.

Second, and in view of the foregoing, the United States will continue to experience democratic backsliding or recession. Several cases support this prediction. At the level of the United States' House of Representatives, former Speaker Kevin McCarthy and Judiciary Committee Chair Jim Jordan have taken steps to interfere with the indictments and the resulting court cases against President Trump. For example, Rep. Jordan sent letters to the Manhattan District Attorney, federal special counsel and the Fulton County, Georgia District Attorney demanding that they turn over all the documents pertaining to these cases. Clearly, this is a violation of the principles of the due process of law and the independence of the legal system, two bedrock pillars of American political values and democracy. Further, states like Georgia and Florida have passed laws banning certain books, and altering the curricula, in contravention of first amendment rights.

Finally, drawing from the repository of global history regarding the contestations between democratic and authoritarian values and their respective systems of governance, Gaston and Kamarck's (2022, 3) warning to Americans is quite instructive:

...if democracy fails in America, it will not be because a majority of Americans is demanding a non-democratic form of government. It will be because an organized, purposeful minority seizes strategic positions within the system and subverts the substance of democracy while retaining its shell—while the majority isn't well organized or doesn't care enough to resist.

Hence, the survival of American political values and democracy amid the contestations by the emergent authoritarian movement requires that pro-democracy Americans spanning the

ideological spectrum, partisan divide, race, ethnicity, gender, and the broad gamut of identities must forge an alliance that is designed to peacefully resist the authoritarian onslaught. One of the major tools that can be used in this campaign is mass civic education that is designed to counter the lies and conspiracy theories that are the major mainstays of the authoritarian movement's propaganda machinery. Similarly, the pro-democracy coalition must consistently and persistently denounce political violence and re-socialize their fellow Americans to do the same. This is because of all tools that are in the authoritarian movement's kit, political violence has the greatest potential of plunging the United States into a civil conflagration that could have wide ranging ramifications for virtually every sphere of American society.

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