

TRUMP AND THE DEEPER CRISIS

Edited by Kevin A. Young,
Michael Schwartz and Richard Lachmann

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SOCIAL THEORY

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TRUMP AND THE DEEPER CRISIS

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

While preparing this volume we lost our friend, colleague, and coeditor Richard Lachmann, who died unexpectedly as the chapters were arriving. He had just completed the first draft of his own chapter, which appears here in revised and updated form. In this project as always, Richard was insightful, meticulous, generous, and guided by a strong moral compass. His death is an immense loss to his friends and family, to the field of sociology, and to the fight for a humane world. The volume is dedicated to him.

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INTRODUCTION: TRUMP AS SYMPTOM

Kevin A. Young

ABSTRACT

Most analyses of Donald Trump's presidency stress its uniqueness. For many commentators, the "crisis of democracy" refers to Trump's January 2021 coup attempt and his other authoritarian machinations. Some analysts speak of the "Trump effect" on the Republican Party. Yet in most respects Trump is an extreme expression of longstanding patterns. Trump's style of demagoguery draws from the historic repertoire of the Right, while most of his policies as president were consistent with those of his predecessors. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, appears incapable of stopping the spread of far-right politics, largely because the party is unable and/or unwilling to deliver major redistributive reforms. Trump and Trumpism are symptoms of this deeper systemic crisis. This brief introduction previews the chapters that follow, which will examine the roots, impacts, and future prospects of Trumpism and the possibilities for combatting it.

Keywords: Donald Trump; Trumpism; democracy; climate emergency; Republican Party; Democratic Party

We briefly considered calling this volume *After Trump*. It was the days immediately after January 6, 2021, when Donald Trump had incited his white nationalist followers to take the US Capitol and prevent the certification of Joe Biden's 2020 election victory. Corporations were vowing to withhold donations from pro-coup Republicans and even some Republican leaders in Congress were condemning Trump's actions. For a fleeting moment, it seemed like Trump might finally be banished from US politics, perhaps even imprisoned.

As of spring 2022, this has not happened. Trump may be permitted to seek the presidency again in 2024 and he may win. He may well have defeated Biden in 2020 had he not reacted to COVID-19 with such catastrophic disdain. And

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whatever happens to Trump himself, *Trumpism* – that toxic formula of scapegoating, anti-intellectualism, and disingenuous economic populism – appears here to stay. Rather than using the failed coup attempt to shake free from Trump’s grip, the Republican Party doubled down on its bigotry, disinformation, and voter suppression. After Trump left office Republicans continued to oppose the measures necessary to protect public health and mitigate the climate emergency while obstructing all progressive reform in other realms (e.g., [Cochrane, 2022](#); [Davenport & Friedman, 2022](#)).

Republicans’ post-Trump policy proposals changed little. In early 2022, Senator Rick Scott, Chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, released a *Plan to Rescue America* that promises policies at least as extreme as Trump’s ([Scott, 2022](#)). The manifesto pledges to raise taxes on low-income workers, to finish “the wall” on the US-Mexico border (and name it in honor of Trump), and to intensify the attack on the rights of LGBTQ (particularly transgender) people. Scott’s key domestic target is the “militant left,” which he says “controls the entire federal government, the news media, academia, Hollywood, and most corporate boardrooms” (p. 7). The manifesto mentions the climate emergency just once – to reassure readers that “the weather is always changing” and thus “we will not adopt nutty policies” like regulating polluters (p. 58).

Like Trump, Scott takes gaslighting to a buffoonish extreme, accusing the “militant left” of everything the Republicans are doing. Though he supported Trump’s effort to overturn the 2020 election, Scott rails against “left-wing efforts to rig elections” (p. 12). Though he denies that the heating of the planet is a major crisis, he says that supporters of LGBTQ rights “deny science” (p. 46). While condemning left-wing efforts to “indoctrinate children,” he promises to mandate that “our kids will say the pledge of allegiance, salute the Flag, [and] learn that America is a great country” (p. 11). Such is the modern Republican Party: a mix of clownishness and criminality. Incapable of winning elections based on its economic agenda, it has made demagoguery, voter suppression, and parliamentary obstruction the centerpieces of its electoral strategy.

Little about this strategy, or about Republicans’ policies, is fundamentally new. Although many commentators focus on the “Trump effect” on the party, the Republican leadership had been moving in that direction long prior to the 2016 election. Trump’s style of demagoguery drew from the historic repertoire of the Right ([Zelizer, 2022](#)). Most of his actual policies were similar to those of his predecessors, and he even continued many of the policies of recent Democratic administrations. In comparison to many analysts, contributors to this volume are more skeptical about Trump’s uniqueness. They generally see Trump and *Trumpism* as symptoms of deeper malignancies. In most ways Trump was simply a grotesque extreme rather than something new.

In one regard, however, modern-day Republicans (and right-wing Democrats like Joe Manchin) are qualitatively different than all prior criminals in human history: their commitment to energy policies that are guaranteed to render much of Earth uninhabitable and to imperil the prospects for organized society on the rest. Not even Genghis Khan or Adolf Hitler attempted such a feat. It is curious

that those spearheading this rush toward planetary destruction are described as “conservative” by analysts of all political stripes (Young, 2021). The fact that those people control so much of the state apparatus underscores the urgency of understanding how they wield power and how we might overcome it.

The return of Democratic control of the White House and Congress in 2021 raises a related question: to what extent do elections result in actual policy change? In Biden’s first year there were only modest tweaks to policy, leading some observers to compare the early Biden era to Barack Obama’s presidency. Some policy continuities in each era can certainly be attributed to the obstructionism of Republicans and right-wing Democrats. Others, however, reflect the shared goals of all Republicans and most Democrats in Washington. Although observers often lament the polarization in Washington, there is bipartisan unity on certain issues. Since the 1970s the “center” in US politics has shifted rightward, particularly on economic issues, and now lies well to the right of majority opinion. For instance, despite strong public support for diverting Pentagon spending to programs that serve human needs (Saperstein & Cirincione, 2020), both parties vote annually to approve a military budget that is three times the size of China’s and twelve and a half times Russia’s (SIPRI, 2021). To take another example, a Medicare for All program of universal health coverage regularly garners the support of large majorities of poll respondents (e.g., KFF, 2020). Not a single Congressional co-sponsor of Medicare for All has lost reelection in over a decade, even in districts that lean Republican (Lachmann, Schwartz, & Young, 2020). Yet for “centrist” politicians, Medicare for All is too extreme to merit discussion.

The same is true of most economic, social, environmental, and foreign policies. Most poll respondents favor a progressive redistribution of wealth and more rights for workers, even though they dramatically underestimate the real level of inequality in the country (Monmouth University Polling Institute, 2021; Norton & Ariely, 2010; WPO, 2021b). Most favor strong environmental protections, including immediate action to stop climate destruction, even though few realize the true magnitude of the emergency (WPO, 2021a). Most believe the United States should adhere to international law (WPO, 2011). In all these realms policy diverges sharply from public opinion. Only the most affluent citizens’ preferences have any significant influence over policy (Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014). Though the phrase *crisis of democracy* is understandably used in reference to Trump’s authoritarian machinations, Donald Trump is an extreme manifestation of a systemic crisis. “Centrist” politics are utterly incapable of resolving that crisis, which the ascent of Trump and similar demagogues across the world makes clear (Albo, Panitch, & Leys, 2021).

In soliciting contributions for this volume, we asked authors to explore the style, content, and impacts of Trump’s presidency while placing Trump in the larger context of recent history. What factors and strategies undergirded Trump’s electoral success? To what extent did his presidency transform right-wing politics in the United States, versus merely continuing prior patterns? What were the consequences for those affected by Trump’s policies? We also encouraged the contributors to reflect upon the first year of the Biden presidency, assessing

the changes and continuities since Trump left office and what they mean for social movements attempting to address the country's multiple and interlocking crises.

Each of the chapters examines Trumpism from a particular angle, albeit while recognizing that no one aspect of Trumpism can be understood in isolation from the rest. Two opening chapters offers broad assessments of the Trump era. My chapter presents a general description of Trump's term in office, differentiating among his rhetoric, actions, and policy results. I also address the policy continuities during Biden's first 15 months in the White House. I focus on the structural barriers to progressive change and how movements might overcome them by exerting direct pressure on corporate and institutional powerholders.

Joshua Murray's chapter likewise stresses the continuities across administrations. Though the tiffs between Trump and certain sectors of the corporate elite have received much attention, Murray shows that the corporate elite reaped enormous benefits from the Trump presidency. He also argues that Trump's "more extreme versions" of previous rhetoric and policy helped to make the standard "pro-corporate policies seem moderate," thereby shifting the spectrum even further to the right.

The following three chapters examine the white nationalism and xenophobia that are central to Trumpism. Malik Miah analyzes Trump's mobilization of racism and the effects of his presidency on Black people in the United States. He stresses that Trump is not an outlier in US history, but rather a new incarnation of the racism that has been foundational to this country from its inception. He explores how attacks on Critical Race Theory – a fancy term for the honest teaching of US history – have become central to the Right's politics since Trump left office. Miah argues that "only an interracial mass movement, with working-class Black people at the forefront," can neutralize Trumpism and the social and economic conditions that incubated it.

Grace Yukich's chapter assesses white evangelicals' support for Trump, locating that support within the longer-term resurgence of Christian nationalism and the racist and conspiracist views held by many white evangelicals. Trump delivered on key evangelical priorities by appointing an army of misogynist theocrats to the federal bench and Supreme Court, who in June 2022 ended federal protections for abortion rights. Since Trump left office, the Right's attacks on COVID-19 vaccines and Critical Race Theory have continued to draw support from the white evangelical crowd, suggesting "that Trumpian politics will maintain influence over white evangelicals in the near future."

Justin Akers Chacón's chapter on immigration politics highlights the overt xenophobia of Trump and the Right, but also demonstrates the lack of major policy differences between Republicans and Democrats. "Managerial differences" between the parties mask "the fact that there has been a convergence of interest in maintaining an enforcement-only approach," which excludes most would-be immigrants and keeps most others in precarious legal status. Akers Chacón notes the benefits of this approach for a nexus of capitalist and institutional interests, including Border Patrol, low-wage employers, and the industries devoted to detention, surveillance, and weapons sales. He concludes that electoral

avenues may be a dead-end for immigrant rights activists and that alternative “forms of class struggle in workplaces and communities” hold more promise for achieving the movement’s goals.

Colin Gordon addresses Trump’s healthcare record. He describes the administration’s criminal negligence in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While that negligence has been amply documented by journalists and scholars, Gordon places it “in the context of systemic deficits and deficiencies” in US healthcare policy. The catastrophic impact of COVID-19 ultimately stems more from “those longstanding weaknesses” than from Trump’s own actions. It follows that merely electing Democrats or defending the Affordable Care Act will not address the system’s profound sicknesses.

My chapter on energy and climate policy similarly looks at structures rather than personalities. Despite major differences in rhetoric between Trump and Biden, the differences in policy and results are modest. I analyze how the fossil fuel industry’s control over the economy helps it block decarbonization policies. I also explore why other sectors of the ruling class have not yet united against fossil fuels even though climate destruction ultimately jeopardizes their interests. Despite the bleak present scenario, I argue that the climate movement has the potential to impel other capitalist sectors to abandon fossil fuels, particularly by targeting the financial sector.

The final two chapters look at Trump’s foreign policy. As Corey Payne and Beverly Silver note, Trump’s “America First” platform failed to stem the long-term erosion of US global power. In recent decades, the United States’ foreign policy has accelerated its decline relative to other powerful nations and economies. It is “increasingly dysfunctional” and destructive, desperately clinging to its remaining advantages (namely its military supremacy) while fueling the very problems that it claims to be addressing: economic misery, ecological breakdown, nonstate terrorism, the risk of nuclear annihilation, and refugee displacement, to list only some of the most salient.

Richard Lachmann’s chapter also addresses the decline of US global hegemony and why Trump did little to counter it. Lachmann emphasizes the extent to which capitalist sectors like fossil fuel and pharmaceutical companies have successfully colonized the state, leading to policies that harm both the general population and most of the country’s economic elite. This process has contributed to the waning of US power on the global level. He argues that progressives must develop their strategy based on “realistic appraisals of points of conflict among capitalists and in the military/foreign policy establishment.” Understanding and exploiting those points of conflict will increase the movement’s ability to resist US militarism.

These chapters are not a comprehensive assessment of Trumpism. Some gaps in the volume’s coverage were beyond our control, since four authors who had signed on for particular chapters had to back out at the last minute. Some of the topics that are given relatively short shrift, such as attacks on labor, reproductive, and LGBTQ rights, are treated in more depth elsewhere ([Ahmed, 2020](#); [Ker-rissey, Weinbaum, Hammonds, Juravich, & Clawson, 2019](#); [Lennard, 2022](#)). We’re also aware that any book about recent events will be a bit outdated by the

time it appears in print. We do, however, expect that the authors' analyses will remain useful for understanding Trumpism and US politics more generally in the years ahead.

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TRUMP, BIDEN, AND WHY ELECTIONS DON'T BRING BIGGER POLICY CHANGES

Kevin A. Young

ABSTRACT

Most US activists place a high priority on elections. The default strategy for those seeking policy change is some combination of electoral campaigning and pressure campaigns targeting politicians. Yet policies show a high degree of continuity across recent presidential administrations. Despite substantial differences in rhetoric and legislative agendas, the policies resulting from Republican and Democratic presidencies have stayed within a narrow range, defined by the promotion of corporate profits, the impunity of law enforcement agencies, the defense of imperial prerogatives, and nearly unfettered ecological destruction. Focusing on the Trump and Biden presidencies, I analyze some of the structural barriers that inhibit major policy change. I also explore why the ruling class as a whole has not yet united against parasitic industries like fossil fuels and pharmaceuticals that endanger the interests of other capitalists. I argue that activists must move beyond electoral and legislative approaches by directly disrupting ruling-class interests that have the power to change policy. Only then will we win major progressive reform.

Keywords: Capitalists; climate emergency; healthcare; ruling class; Donald Trump; Joseph Biden

Donald Trump's presidency featured criminal negligence of unprecedented magnitude. Trump mocked and ignored warnings about the COVID-19 pandemic, actively discouraged mask wearing and other public health measures, slashed public health funding, opposed robust economic relief for working people, and sabotaged global cooperation by attacking the World Health Organization, among many other actions and inactions that seemed calculated to

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maximize the toll of death and misery. Far worse, but receiving less media attention, was his dedication to imperiling the survival of human society by maximizing fossil fuel use and dismantling international agreements on nuclear arms. All these efforts were amplified by Trump's officials in executive branch agencies and by his allies in Congress, state and local governments, and the courts. The number of deaths for which Trump and his army are wholly or partially responsible is in the many millions, especially if we include projected deaths from global heating and the pandemic deaths that could have been prevented by a competent and coordinated global response to the initial outbreak (Bressler, 2021; Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness & Response, 2021; Woolhandler et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, the first year of the Biden presidency did not bring dramatic changes to policy. Some of the continuity was beyond Biden's control, insofar as his agenda was obstructed by Trump's far-right judicial appointees, Congressional Republicans, and Democratic senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, who together thwarted many progressive legislative proposals that were endorsed by the Biden administration and favored by large majorities of the public.¹ Not everything can be blamed on these actors, however. Biden opted for continuity even in those realms where the executive branch had great autonomy. In foreign policy he maintained the bellicose US stance toward China, Russia, Venezuela, and other countries. Despite his earlier condemnations of Trump's policies on the Southern border, President Biden proved only a shade less ruthless in his treatment of refugees. And despite Biden's modestly more competent approach to combatting COVID-19, many aspects of his pandemic policy were stunningly similar to Trump's: respect for drug company patents, miserly social assistance for the working population, and failure to prepare for the Omicron variant that emerged in November 2021.

The continuities between Trump and Biden raise larger questions about the US political system. To what extent do elections really matter? Under what circumstances do electoral outcomes make a meaningful difference in the material conditions of people's lives? What kinds of policies are unlikely to change regardless of who is elected? And if electoral activism is bound to yield disappointment for progressives, what alternative strategies might social movements consider? These questions are crucial for anyone interested in building just and sustainable societies, or even in preserving our current societies in the face of existential threats to life on Earth.

The remainder of this chapter presents a general review of the Trump and Biden administrations. I propose a general explanation for the policy continuities between Trump and Biden, highlighting various economic and institutional barriers that transcend election outcomes and severely limit the prospects for progressive reform. I also consider why the capitalist class as a whole has not mobilized to force a change in policies that harm the long-term interests of most capitalists, such as the unchecked burning of fossil fuels and patent monopolies on vaccines. I conclude by proposing that progressive social movements must look beyond electoral strategies and devote more energy to targeting the ruling