

The struggle for the survival of US democracy

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Opinion [US politics & policy](#)

As Donald Trump's grip on the Republican party tightens, Joe Biden is playing for huge stakes — and he knows it

[Martin Wolf](#)



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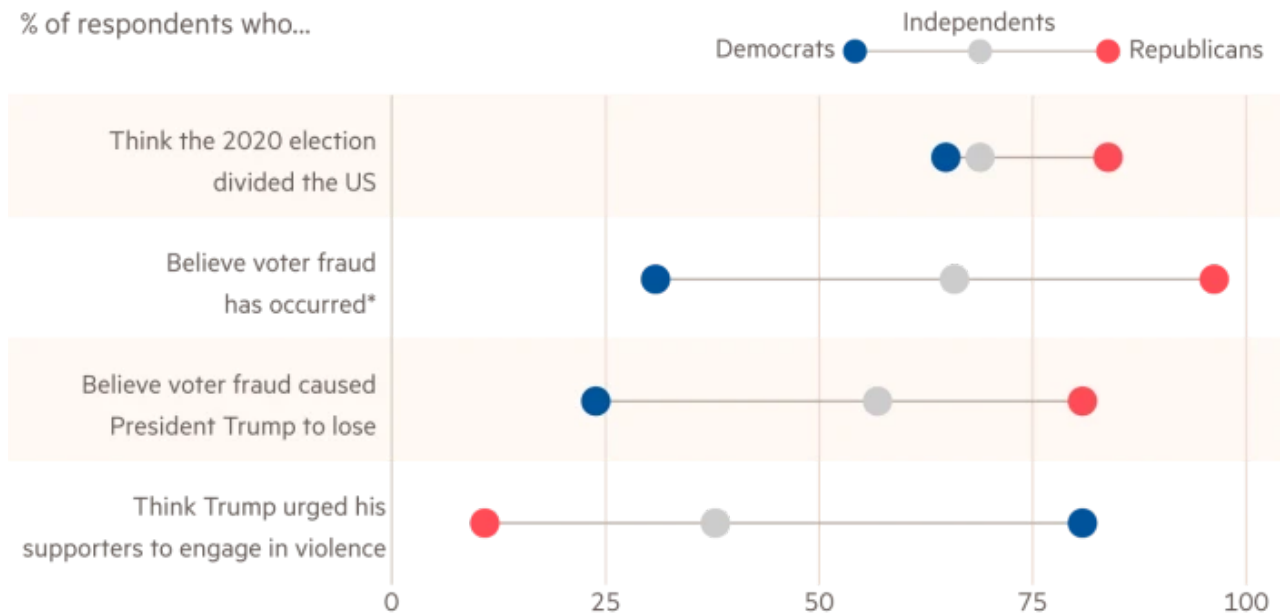
[Martin Wolf](#)

yesterday

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“The question of whether our democracy will long endure is both ancient and urgent, as old as our republic.” Thus, in his address to Congress of April 28, did Joe Biden define what is at stake in his presidency. He was right, too, in stating that autocrats are betting that US democracy cannot “overcome the lies, anger, hate and fears that have pulled us apart”. But those autocrats might even be right. One of the main American parties has become unambiguously anti-democratic. This is now a struggle between two old men for the fate of liberal democracy in the US.

Republicans and Democrats live in different political realities



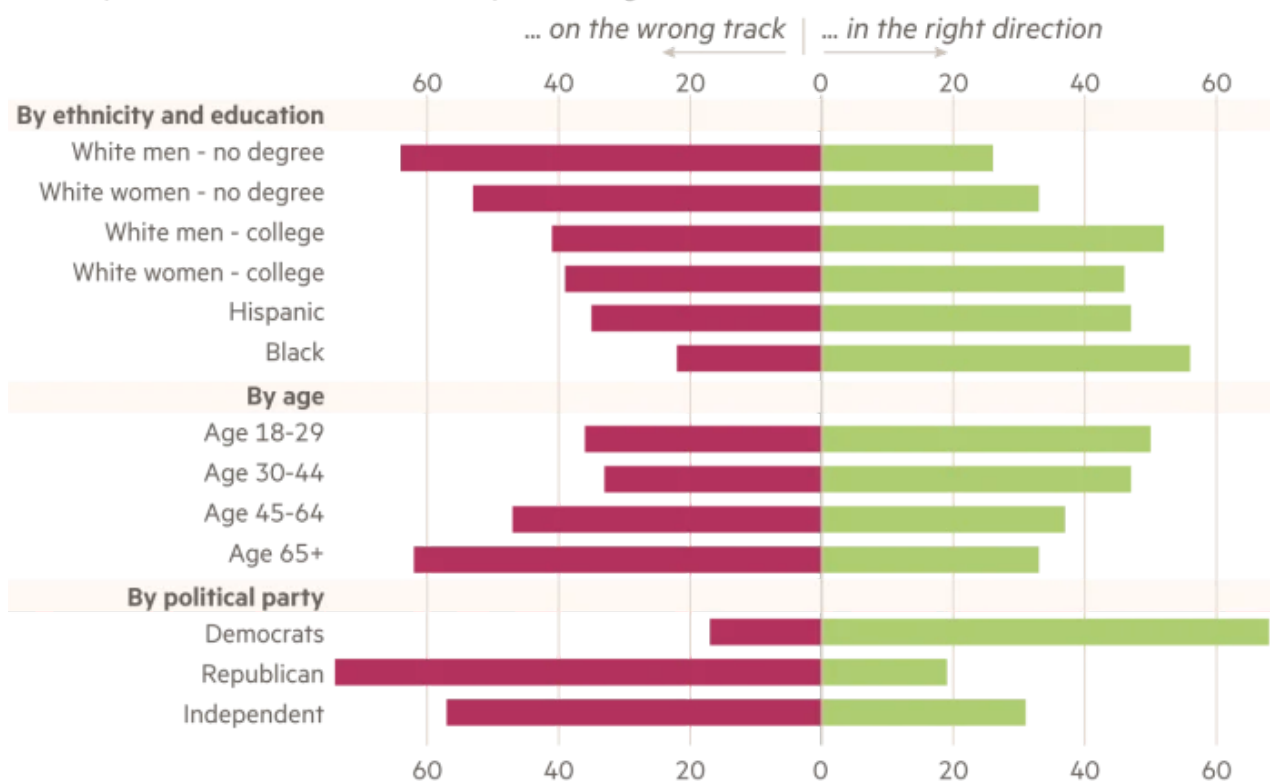
*Sum of ('a lot' and 'a little')
Source: YouGov (Jan 10-12 2021)

In a liberal democracy, fair elections determine who holds power. Attempts to subvert or overturn the vote are treason. That is precisely what Donald Trump attempted to do both before and after last year's presidential election. He tried to turn the US into an autocracy. That was not at all surprising: it had been obvious from the beginning of his political career that this was his aim.

He failed. Decent and brave people ensured that. But this story has only just begun. Even without social media, Trump still holds the loyalty of his party's base and so controls its leaders. Even people whose lives he placed in danger with the invasion of the Capitol he promoted rush to kiss his hand at Mar-a-Lago. Meanwhile, deeply conservative stalwarts, such as Liz Cheney, the third-highest ranking Republican in the House of Representatives, are being defenestrated. Her crime? Stating that Trump's Big Lie that the actual outcome of the election was a Big Lie is a big lie.

A country divided by education, ethnicity, age and political allegiance

% of respondents who think the country is heading...



YouGov (May 2021)

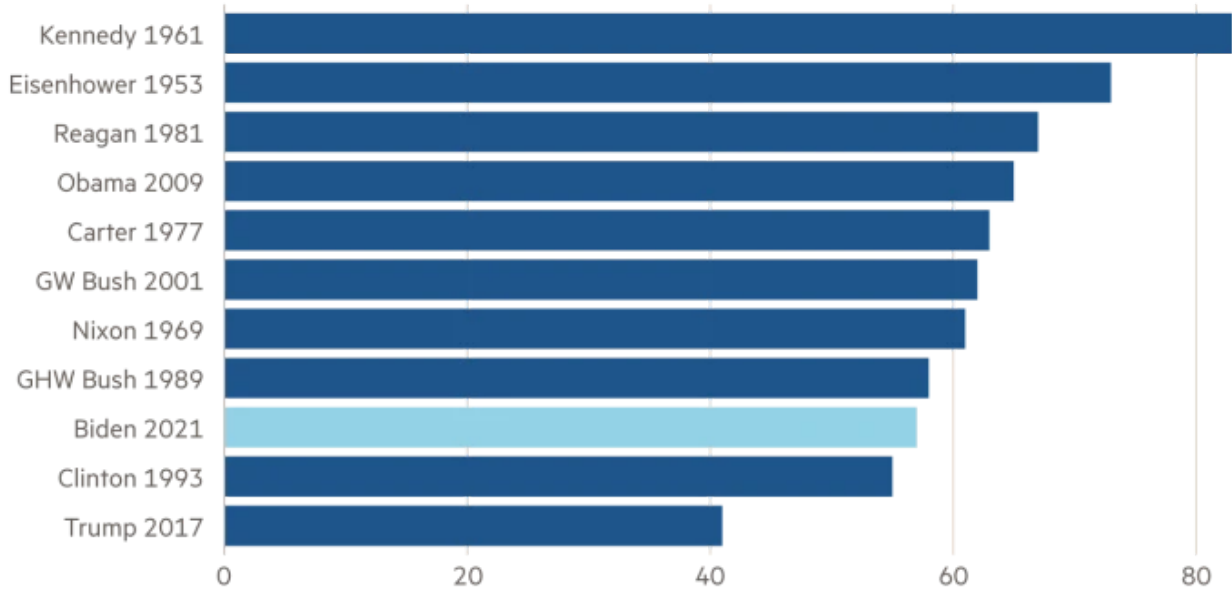
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The fact that Trump is lying is not news. What is news is that, even shorn of public office, Trump defines the truth for his party. There is a word for a political organisation in which the prime duty of members is absolute loyalty to a leader who defines what is true and right: *Führerprinzip* (“leadership principle”). The Republican’s wholesale embrace of Trump’s Big Lie is a perfect instance of it.

This, alas, is far from all. Trump’s Big Lie is being weaponised through state legislation designed to subvert elections. Much attention is being paid to obstacles to voting. But death threats have also hounded honest officials out of office.

Biden's popularity is far greater than Trump's. But it is still low.

Presidential approval rating 100 days after inauguration (%)



Excludes Truman, Johnson and Ford who took office after the death or resignation of the previous president

Source: Gallup

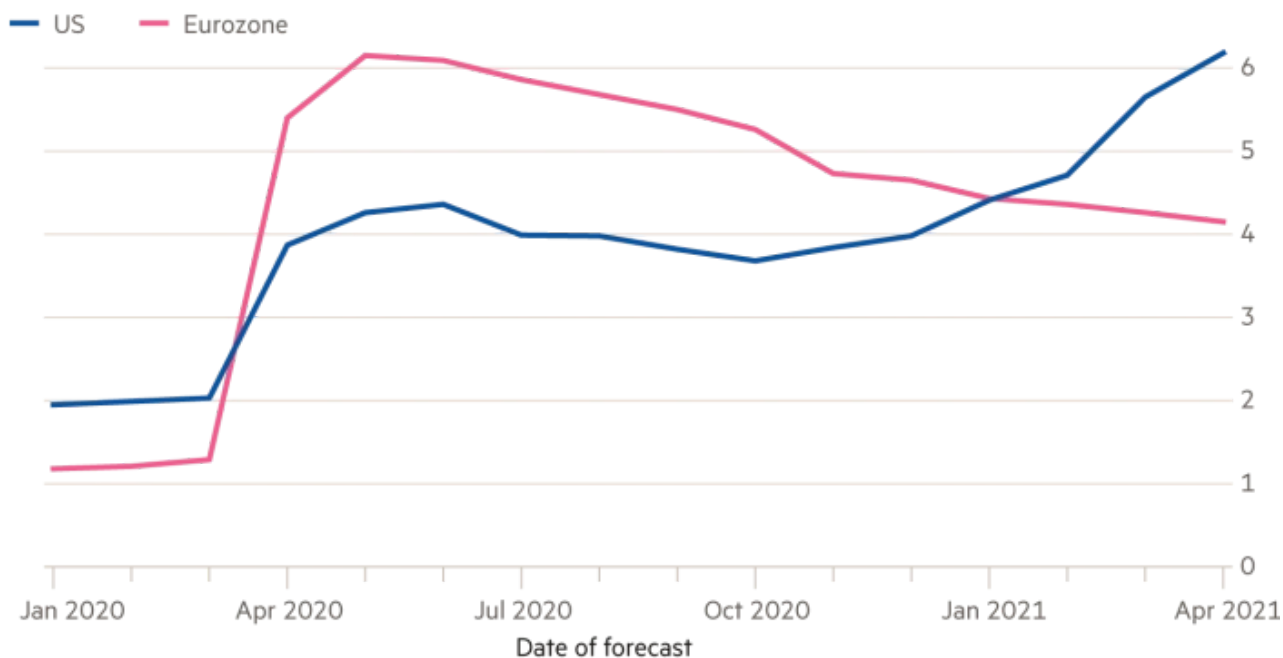
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Worse still, as the States United Democracy Center notes: “In 2021, state legislatures across the country — through at least 148 bills filed in 36 states — are moving to muscle their way into election administration, as they attempt to dislodge or unsettle the executive branch and/or local election officials who, traditionally, have run our voting systems.” Accountable individuals feel bound to uphold their oaths of office. Less visible legislators might not.

Alas, this assault is not surprising. Eight of the 23 states that Republicans control totally were members of the Old Confederacy. These states shifted towards the Republicans after passage of the Civil Rights Act, in 1964. A big part of this story then is the attempt of the South to protect itself, yet again, from the votes of African Americans.

Forecasters have become far more optimistic about US growth as forecasts for the eurozone weaken

Forecasts for US and eurozone GDP growth in 2021 (%)



Source: Consensus Economics

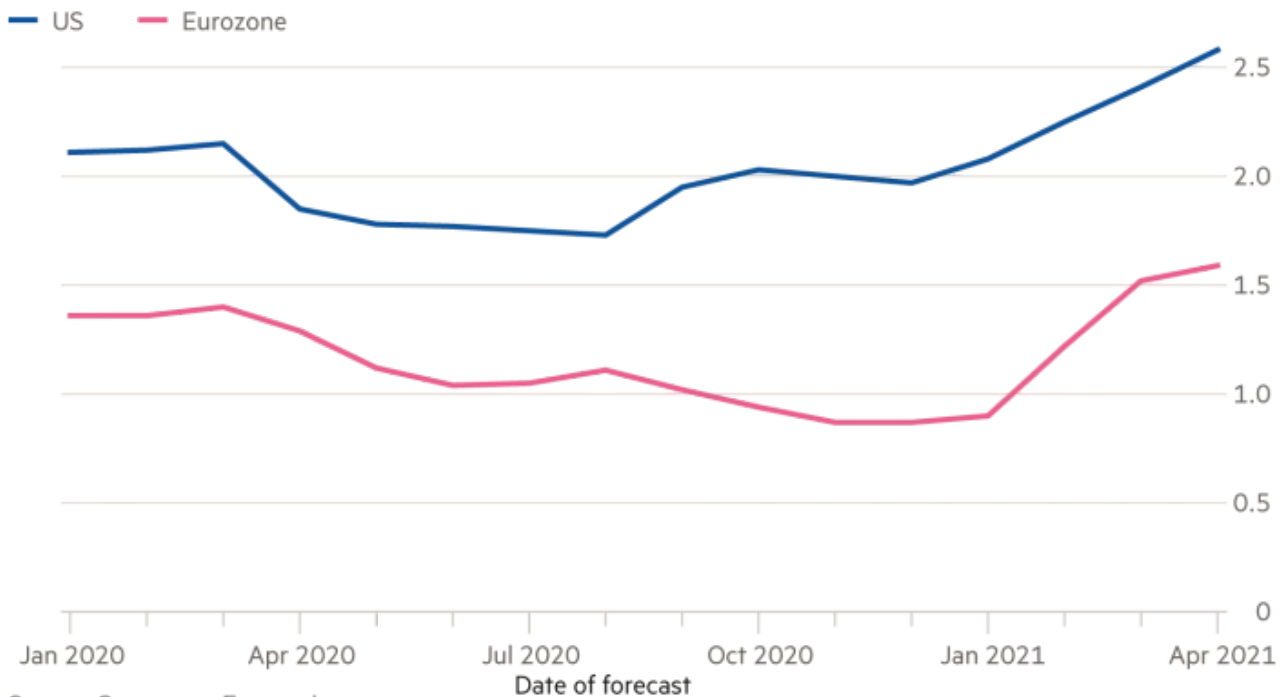
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So what we are seeing is a blend of fanaticism with careerism. It is fine, both groups feel, to subvert elections if doing so puts the “right” people in power. After all, these Democrats are just un-American. The end of keeping them out of power justifies any means.

Biden understands this. As he told Congress: “If we truly want to restore the soul of America, we need to protect the sacred right to vote.” But Democrats also need to change the electoral coalitions of the contemporary US in their favour. To do that, they have to move significant numbers of white non-college educated people into their camp. In brief, Biden needs to turn a decent approval rating (by Trump’s standards) into an overwhelming one.

Inflation forecasts are higher in the US and have strengthened

Forecasts for US and eurozone CPI inflation in 2021 (%)



Source: Consensus Economics

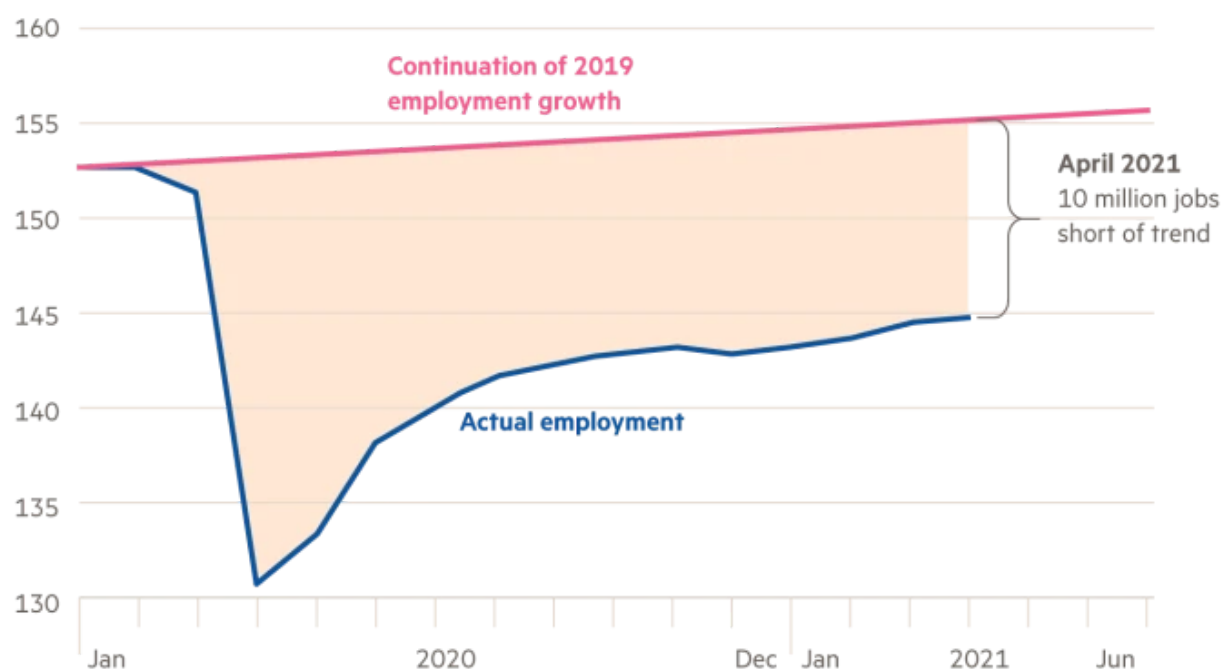
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The only hope of doing this, Biden understands, is to prove that government can act effectively, in the interests of all. He has done so through the spectacular vaccine rollout. He is trying to do so through his huge immediate and longer-term spending programmes. Huge, indeed, they are. Olivier Blanchard, former chief economist of the IMF, told the FT's Global Boardroom last week that discretionary and automatic fiscal support amounted to 12.6 per cent of US gross domestic product last year and is set to be 12.8 per cent this year. According to his estimates, that is three times as big as the US output gap — the shortfall of actual from potential output.

This spending seems certain to generate a very strong short-term boom. If all goes well, output will expand to meet demand, inflation will rise modestly and the economy will shift on to a new and more dynamic path. But if, as Larry Summers, former US Treasury secretary, told the FT's Economists Exchange, the outcome is, instead, a big jump in inflation and a belated monetary tightening, a financial crisis and a deep recession could occur before 2024, bringing Trump, or worse, to power.

There is still substantial room for US employment to rise

Actual employment vs continuation of pre-pandemic trend (millions of jobs)



Source: Peterson Institute for International Economics

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Biden is playing for huge stakes — and knows it. This is not just about securing a strong post-Covid economic recovery for the US. It is not just about restoring the US position in the world as ally and as actor on crucial issues, such as climate. It is not just about proving that the US government is capable of doing important things. It is now about protecting the core of democracy — peaceful acceptance of electoral outcomes.

If that were to go in the US, would-be autocrats everywhere would have carte blanche to do as they pleased. The danger is great, since the Republicans are no longer a normal democratic party. They are increasingly an anti-democratic cult with a would-be despot as their leader.

I desperately hope Biden succeeds. But he has taken a huge gamble on the success of his programme. It may be the most consequential gamble taken by any democratic leader in my lifetime. The future of democracy is at stake.

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