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Can We Call It Fascism? Trump's Voter Suppression Project, 2020



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Voter suppression and voter fraud have become dominant topics of discussion in the 2020 election. In an Orwellian twist, the Trump administration appears to be calling for the suppression of massive numbers of voters, in the name of combating “voter fraud.” This plan is coming to fruition by way of his assault on the U.S. Post Office and mail-in voting, which he admits is meant to restrict a form of voting that’s expected to cut heavily in favor

of Democratic candidates, despite non-partisan fact-checkers recognizing that the evidence of mail-in voter fraud is largely non-existent.

A second front is also materializing in Trump's voter suppression scheme, involving his efforts to recruit right-wing activists to serve as "poll watchers" on election day. As CNN reported in August, the Trump re-election campaign has coordinated an electoral initiative to "dispatch tens of thousands of election monitors to battleground states in what is shaping up as the Republican Party's largest ever poll-watching operation." These efforts have sparked very real fears of voter suppression, considering that the areas targeted in these monitoring efforts are certain to focus not on affluent white urban neighborhoods or suburban white ethnic enclaves, which are both more likely to cut toward Trump, but on cities and neighborhoods disproportionately populated by liberals, Democrats, working-class individuals, and poor people of color.

Trump and his campaign have been clear that they view these volunteers as essential to exerting pressure on local electoral systems to crack down on Democratic voters. In his support for the "poll watching" initiative, Trump appealed at a recent rally to supporters in North Carolina: "Gotta be careful with those ballots. Watch those ballots. I don't like it. You know, you have a Democratic governor, you have all these Democrats watching that stuff. I don't like it. Watch all the thieving and stealing and robbing they do. Because this is important. We win North Carolina, we win." Trump's campaign warns on its website, "armyfortrump.com," that "Democrats will be up to their old dirty tricks on election day," while Trump boasted in a recent Tweet that volunteering to be a "Trump election poll watcher" is an opportunity to "fight for President Trump" and his re-election.

There has been much reluctance on the American "left" to discuss Trump's electioneering efforts, and his politics more generally, with reference to the threat of fascist politics. Most Americans assume "It Can't Happen Here," drawing on the famous title of Sinclair Lewis's seminal novel about the rise of fascism in a country that historically prides itself in democratic politics. U.S. media discourse routinely downplays talk of fascism, preferring terms like "authoritarianism," or the more innocuous sounding "populism" to describe Trump's anti-democratic tendencies. For example, in the first six months of 2020, a search of the Nexis Uni database reveals that the New York Times included the terms "fascist" or "fascism" alongside references to the Trump administration in 56 articles, compared to 161 articles referring to the Trump administration within the context of "authoritarian" politics or "authoritarianism," and 193 articles referencing Trump alongside discussions of "populism" or "populist" politics. [1] Similarly, my review of the

iPoll database, which is a clearinghouse for national polling data, finds that, for the professional polling organizations operating in the U.S., not a single group or poll bothered to ask Americans between 2016 and 2020 about their opinions of the “fascist” or “fascism” question, at all or in relation to the Trump presidency.

Claims that Trump traffics in fascist politics are met with fierce opposition among mainstream intellectuals, and from what I’ve seen in my personal interactions, among many on the American “left” as well. From my experiences, it is relatively affluent white males on the left who are the most likely to reject the fascism description. I have little doubt that their privileged identities, as members of dominant class, race, and gender groups, feeds into this reluctance to seriously consider the fascism question. For those who are not familiar with scholarly discussions of fascism, I explore here efforts to establish a common definition. This definition includes recognition that fascists engage in the following activities:

- + Mobilizing popular passions, to stoke (often artificial) fears and construct “crises” which can be effectively dissolved by the superior leadership of a strong national leader.
 - + Portrayals of white majorities as victims in a larger cultural battle lamenting societal decline due to the threat of the rising power of religious minorities, immigrants, and people of color. “These groups are depicted as endangering the power of the white majority and repression of these groups is undertaken to further white nationalist values, politics, and identities.”
 - + The idealization of violence and authoritarian suppression of dissent, as a means of addressing perceived national political “problems,” and to combat the alleged outsize power of minority groups and political critics of the governing regime.
 - + A war on facts, truth, and history, with demagogic political actors stoking contempt for evidence-based reasoning, and reinforcing a cult of personality, with an eccentric leader consolidating his or her power by determining how their supporters interpret and understand the world.
 - + Anti-socialist and anti-worker corporatist economic schemes, which elevate national political leaders to the prime economic actors, in command-and-control style arrangements that relegate business leaders to a secondary role at best in coordinating political-economy.
- As I have argued in the past, I find the “fascism-not fascism” debate, to the extent that it even occurs in the U.S., to be extremely counter-productive. It’s a diversion from a more thoughtful engagement in the political crises we face. Fascism is not a political system that suddenly materializes overnight. So any discussion of potential fascism within a nation

must recognize that, particularly in periods when a fascist regime may be emerging, it makes little sense to talk about the phenomenon as fully formed or institutionalized. Hence the preference of more thoughtful engagements in this question, from intellectuals like David Niewert, William Connelly, and Alexander Reid Ross, via their discussions of “aspirational fascism,” “creeping fascism” and “parafascism.” The point of these frameworks is to recognize that, if we wait to have a serious discussion of fascism until a fascist regime has fully materialized, it will be far too late.

The creeping/aspiring fascist framework is advantageous because it looks at fascism as existing on a political spectrum, with nations moving relatively closer to or further away from fascism over time. And it is a more realistic way of discussing fascism because it recognizes that a straight historical repeat of the German or Italian fascist regimes isn’t likely to happen in the modern era, and particularly in American politics. Simplistic portrayals of fascism in America, replete with Charlottesville-style images of Nazis brandishing Swastikas and openly marching through the streets, clownishly saluting Donald Trump as a modern-day Hitler, will never catch on with the masses of Americans. Rather, the risk is that American fascism will take a more “friendly” form. As I’ve documented in previous research, the distinctly American-“friendly” version of creeping fascism involves far-right reactionaries like Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Donald Trump smuggling fascistic, racist, and authoritarian themes into “mainstream” media discourse, while denying the extremism of these positions. Revealingly, consumption of, and support for media venues such as Fox News, Breitbart, and Infowars is far and away the strongest statistical predictor of public support for alt-right style white nationalism, compared to other factors such as partisanship, race, gender, income, age, and education. This finding means that the dogmatic efforts to establish a “fascism-not fascism” framework are unsustainable and wholly lacking in merit. Still, that mode of thinking has been effective in reinforcing an “It Can’t Happen Here” mantra in the U.S., in which fascism becomes a taboo topic of discussion. Meanwhile, fascistic discourses and political aspirations continue to be sold through Orwellian propaganda techniques – celebrated through the rhetoric about freedom, liberty, and democratic empowerment.

The U.S. may not be a fully formed fascist society, like the corporatist regimes of Nazi Germany or Mussolini’s Italy of the 1940s. But considering the definition of fascism provided above, it is also unwarranted to downplay or ignore the fascism question, considering that American politics has increasingly been defined by many of the traits of fascism, which have qualitatively intensified since Trump took office, even if these

developments have been decades in the making. Among the recent developments that reinforce a creeping fascist understanding of American politics are the following:

- + Trump's successful confiscation of taxpayer funds, without consulting Congress, to build his wall, which represents a blunt effort to reinforce his white nationalist politics, via his attacks on Mexico and Latin American immigrants as a crisis-level threat to American identity and national security.

- + Trump's clear contempt for democratic institutions, via his preemptive efforts to discredit American elections in total as rife with "voter fraud," before a single vote has even been cast, and despite a complete failure to identify any such fraud as existing.

- + The intensification of mass incarceration against unauthorized immigrants, including the needlessly cruel separation of parents and children, and the housing of detainees in concentration camp-style conditions.

- + The demonizing of minorities in Trump's political rhetoric, which frames Black Lives Matter protests as a threat to national security, stability, and law and order, despite the overwhelming majority of protests – 93 percent – being non-violent.

- + Trump's attempt to use federal agents and the military to violently put down BLM protesters, with the aborted effort to order military forces into U.S. cities only happening because the U.S. military command structure responded with a resounding "no" due to fears of the authoritarian precedent such action would establish moving forward.

- + Trump's embrace of vigilante violence, as seen in his celebrations of "very fine" white supremacists in Charlottesville (2017), and his defense of the vigilante Kyle Rittenhouse as simply defending himself, despite being charged with first-degree murder following his shooting of numerous BLM protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, including one (Joseph Rosenbaum) whose forensics reporting documents he shot in the back.

- + The revelation that roughly one-in-five Trump supporters are openly authoritarian-fascist in their politics, embracing the "targeting and killing [of] civilians" "in order to further a political, social, or religious cause," while embracing white nationalist politics and Trump's discrimination against immigrants and people of color.

Trump's "poll watching" initiative should be understood within the context of his larger political agenda, and his creeping fascistic political initiatives, which seek to suppress political dissent, while further cementing his political power. Nowhere in this initiative does the president or his supporters advertise that "poll watching" is a euphemism for "vigilante white supremacist goons coming together in mass to harass, intimidate, and terrorize people of color in a massive voter suppression effort." But those are never types

of things that a serial gaslighter like Trump would ever say openly. His modus operandi has never been openly taking responsibility for his authoritarian proclivities. Rather, he is notorious for virtue-signaling to his far-right base, while implicitly supporting their vigilante efforts to suppress the administration's critics and people of color, while simultaneously denying that he is doing these things. And that's exactly the point: maintaining deniability and the ability to deflect critical public attention from his authoritarian politics.

Consistent with this profile, Trump is billing his "poll watching" plan as a well-intended effort to combat Democratic treachery and voter fraud. But considering the complete lack of evidence for this narrative, it would be naïve not to read between the lines and recognize the dangers of his efforts to monkey-wrench the integrity of local voting infrastructure across the nation. The danger moving into election day is that we will see tens of thousands of right-wing extremists and activists in the streets, flooding polling places in swing states and intimidating people of color and other Democratic voters, simply for trying to exercise their democratic right to vote. In a country that embraces conceal and open carry, and in which right-wing vigilantes are romanticized as "defending" themselves against overwhelmingly non-violent protesters, calling on these same individuals to confront Democratic voters on election day is a recipe for disaster. "Poll watching" will inevitably result in violence between right-wing election "police," and those seeking to vote in Democratic-leaning cities and other locales. Trump's supporters will write of this vigilante violence as no big deal, since the targets will disproportionately be liberals, poor people, and poor people of color. But the reality of the matter is that these efforts will constitute a massive voter suppression initiative, built upon efforts to coerce, intimidate, and terrorize Democratic voters. In an era when Trump celebrates vigilantes as heroes, white reactionaries who harass Democratic voters will be depicted simply as engaging in "self-defense" or as "freedom-loving" people seeking to "protect the integrity" of the electoral process. And since these vigilantes know that Trump has their back, they will feel even more emboldened in their aggressive attacks on Democratic voters.

Connecting the dots to understand where this is all headed isn't that difficult, at least for those who are not being willfully ignorant about the dangers this country faces. Sadly, large numbers of Americans are downplaying the threat. Voter suppression isn't going to happen in affluent white suburban and urban enclaves. And in a neoliberal narcissistic political culture like that of the United States, tens of millions of Americans are simply going to ignore the massive voter suppression undertaken by the Republican Party and its

supporters because it has no direct effect on them personally. This reality feeds into the larger problem of most privileged Americans not wanting to discuss the fascism question, since they perceive it (at least so far) as not affecting them directly.

Based on my own interactions with left intellectuals, I find it more than a little disturbing that the “debate” over Trump’s politics has degenerated into a discussion of whether Trump is “an authoritarian” or “a fascist.” As far as I’m concerned, once someone admits Trump is authoritarian in his politics, discussions of what type of authoritarian he is are largely academic. When the U.S. police state is systematically murdering people of color, and one of the two major parties is ramping up to engage in massive voter suppression, debating what brand of authoritarianism Trump ascribes to seems insensitive and disconnected from reality. Trump’s “poll watching” initiative, coupled with his celebrations of vigilante violence against his political enemies, represents a ticking time bomb in its potential to provoke disaster come election day. This administration represents an existential threat to what little remains of American democratic institutions and the rule of law. Whether one calls it fascist, authoritarian, or dictatorial is ultimately secondary to the larger question of what can be done to combat this menace.

Notes.

[1] My examination of the Nexis Uni historical media archive includes any New York Times articles that reference President Donald Trump within 50 words of references to “authoritarian” politics or “authoritarianism,” “populist” politics or “populism,” or “fascist” politics or “fascism.”

A digital copy of Anthony DiMaggio’s new book, *Rebellion in America*, can be read for free at the [*publisher’s website*](#).

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