

‘I Fear That We Are Witnessing the End of American Democracy’

The frank racism of the contemporary Republican agenda is on display at the R.N.C.

By Thomas B. Edsall [The New York Times](#) Aug. 26, 2020

The center-right political coalition in America — the Republican Party as it stands today — can be described as holding two overarching goals: First, [deregulation](#) and [reductions in corporate and other tax liabilities](#) — each clearly stated on the White House website — and second, but packing a bigger punch, the preservation of the status quo by stemming the erosion of the privileged status of white Christian America.

For those who want confirmation of Republican accomplishments along economic lines, the Brookings Institution has provided a helpful [deregulatory tracker](#). And The Times has published a thorough examination of Trump’s achievements in cutting taxes for the rich — not only the “[big, beautiful](#)” [tax bill](#) of 2017, but also this year’s “[Tax-Break Bonanza Inside the Economic Rescue Package](#).”

The most important issue driving Trump’s ascendance, however, has not been the economy but race. Last week, I argued that for Democrats the importance of ethnicity and race has grown, not diminished, since the mid-1960s. The same thing is true for Republicans — and many of the least obvious, or least comprehensible, aspects of Republican political strategy have to do with the party’s desire to cloak or veil the frank racism of the contemporary Republican agenda.

[Robert P. Jones](#), the founder and C.E.O. of the Public Religion Research Institute, in his book, “[The End of White Christian America](#),” [described](#) the situation this way: “America’s still segregated modern life is marked by three realities: First, geographic segregation has meant that — although places like Ferguson and Baltimore may seem like extreme examples — most white Americans continue to live in locales that insulate them from the obstacles facing many majority-black communities. Second, this legacy, compounded by social self-segregation, has led to a stark result: the overwhelming majority of white Americans don’t have a single close relationship with a person who isn’t white. Third, there are virtually no American institutions positioned to resolve these problems. Social segregation persists in virtually all major American institutions.”

Firm allegiance to the conservative agenda has become crucial to the ability of Trump and the Republican Party to sustain the loyalty of an overwhelmingly white coalition that experiences itself as besieged and under the threat of losing power. The time when a major political party could articulate a nakedly racist agenda is long past, although Trump comes as close as possible. “[Trump goes all-in on race](#),” declared the headline on a story in Politico just after the close of the first night of the Republican convention on Monday. While some speakers portrayed Trump as a friend of Black America, “others took a harder-edged tack that undercut the message of inclusion,” according to Politico.

Patricia McCloskey, who with her husband Mark was charged with “unlawful use of a weapon” after they wielded guns when Black Lives Matter protesters walked by their St. Louis home, played a crucial role setting the stage for the entire convention. Patricia McCloskey told viewers: “What you saw happen to us could just as easily happen to any of you who are watching from quiet neighborhoods around our country,” before adding, “Make no mistake: No matter where you live, your family will not be safe in the radical Democrats’ America.”



Mark and Patricia McCloskey emerged from their St. Louis mansion with guns after protesters walked onto their private street on June 28, 2020. Credit...Laurie Skrivan/St. Louis Post-Dispatch, via Associated Press

McCloskey provided a variation on a theme Trump has [repeatedly pounded home](#) on Twitter. Staying within the bounds of coded racial language — barely — Trump warns the “suburban housewives of America” that Joe Biden’s support of affordable housing “will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it, and make it even better!” [Matt Gaetz](#), a Republican Congressman from Florida, echoed Trump on a future with Biden in the White House: “It’s a horror film really. They’ll disarm you, empty the prisons, lock you in your home and invite MS-13 to live next door.”

In a series of studies published from 2014 to 2018, [Maureen A. Craig](#) and [Jennifer A. Richeson](#), professors of psychology at N.Y.U. and Yale, demonstrate how whites, faced with the prospect of becoming a minority, have embraced the Republican Party for institutional protection of their imperiled status. In their 2014 paper, “[On the Precipice of a ‘Majority-Minority’ America: Perceived Status Threat From the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans’ Political Ideology](#),” Craig and Richeson took a national sample of whites who said they were unaffiliated with either political party and broke them into two groups.

One group was asked “if they had heard that California had become a majority-minority state,” thus making the issue of white minority status salient, and the other was asked “if they had heard that Hispanics had become roughly equal in number to Blacks nationally,” with no reference to the status of whites.

At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they leaned toward either party. Those who had been informed about the minority status of whites in California said they leaned to the Republican Party by a margin of 45-35. Those who had not been informed of whites’ minority status leaned to the Democratic Party 40.5 to 24.3.

In a subsequent 2018 paper, “[Racial and Political Dynamics of an Approaching ‘Majority-Minority’ United States](#),” Craig and Richeson, joined by [Julian Rucker](#), a doctoral candidate in psychology at Yale, reported that “whites for whom the impending racial demographic changes of the nation are salient” endorsed more conservative positions on a variety of policy issues and reported “greater support for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.”

According to [Joshua Greene](#), a professor of psychology at Harvard and the author of “[Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them](#),” Trump is expert at sending “signals that are music to the ears of his base,” signals that ineradicably affirm his membership in the populist right wing of the Republican Party.

Greene argued in an email that when “Trump says that a judge of Mexican ancestry can’t do his job, or attacks women for their physical appearance, or makes fun of a disabled reporter, or says that there are good people on both sides of a violent neo-Nazi rally, or that Haiti is a “shithole.” or that the “Second Amendment People” can maybe do something about Hillary Clinton, Trump is very deliberately and publicly excommunicating himself from the company of liberals, even moderate ones.” In Greene’s view, Trump offers a case study in the deployment of “costly signals.”

How does it work? Greene writes: “Making oneself irredeemably unacceptable to the other tribe is equivalent to permanently binding oneself to one’s own. These comments are like gang tattoos. And in Trump’s case, it’s tattoos all over his neck and face.”

At the same time, Trump’s “costly signals” make his reliability as a protector of white privilege clear. [John Tooby](#), a professor of anthropology at the University of California-Santa Barbara, described the signaling phenomenon in a [2017 Edge talk](#) as an outgrowth of what he calls a “coalitional instinct.” “To earn membership in a group,” Tooby says, “you must send signals that clearly indicate that you differentially support it, compared to rival groups.” This, Tooby notes, encourages extremism: “Practical and functional truths are generally useless as differential signals, because any honest person might say them regardless of coalitional loyalty.” Far more effective are “unusual, exaggerated beliefs,” including “alarmism, conspiracies or hyperbolic comparisons.”

The success of Trump’s strategy will have long term consequences for the Republican Party, in Greene’s view: “Trump won over the base by publicly sacrificing his broader respectability. Back in 2016, the other Republican primary candidates looked ahead at the general election and thought this was a losing strategy. But Trump pulled it off, perhaps because he didn’t really care about winning. But now he owns the party. No Republican can get elected without the Republican base, and the Republican base trusts Trump and only Trump, thanks to his costly signals.”

What Trump understood from the start was that the Republican Party is now [the home](#) of white evangelical Christians and the residents of rural, small town America who see their privilege — what they experience as their values and culture — under assault from a rising coalition of minorities, feminists, well-educated liberals and veterans of the sexual revolution. “In the context of increased social diversity,” [Alexandra Filindra](#), a political scientist at the University of Illinois-Chicago, [writes](#) in a 2018 paper, “portions of the public are willing to support calls for an exclusionary moral community of virtue at the expense of norms and institutions of democracy.”

Filindra argues that “Contrary to our idealistic normative assumptions, citizens do not have a principled or ideologically constrained approach to democracy any more than they have a principled approach to governance and policy.” Instead, most citizens are prone to understand democracy through the lens of group memberships. When the social position of cherished groups is perceived as

threatened, and when trusted in-group elites use narratives of group threat and out-group dehumanization to justify anti-democratic actions, group members become more vulnerable to authoritarian leaders and parties that promise protection or restoration of the group's status but at the cost of institutional democracy.

Political polarization plays a crucial role here. As [Jennifer McCoy](#) and [Murat Somer](#), political scientists at Georgia State and Koç University, write in their 2019 paper, "[Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies](#):" Growing affective polarization and negative partisanship contribute to a growing perception among citizens that the opposing party and its policies pose a threat to the nation or an individual's way of life. Most dangerously for democracy, these perceptions of threat open the door to undemocratic behavior by an incumbent and his/her supporters to stay in power, or by opponents to remove the incumbent from power." The cumulative effect, McCoy and Somer continue, "is a deterioration in the quality of democracy, leading to backsliding, illiberalism, and in some cases reversion to autocracy."

[Milan W. Svolik](#), a political scientist at Yale, in his 2017 paper "[When Polarization Trumps Civic Virtue: Partisan Conflict and the Subversion of Democracy by Incumbents](#)," makes the case that polarization weakens the ability of moderate, centrist voters to serve as a check on extreme political behavior. "In the classics of democratization research," Svolik writes, "the public's disapproval is assumed to serve as a check on incumbents' temptations to subvert democracy."

In polarized societies, however, "this check fails" because the strength of partisan loyalty, for many voters, "makes it costly for them to punish an incumbent by voting for a challenger. Incumbents exploit this lack of credible punishment by manipulating the democratic process in their favor. A mass of centrist voters provides precisely the kind of credible deterrent against manipulation that polarized societies lack." [Matthew Graham](#), who is also a political scientist at Yale, writing with Svolik, published [a study this year](#) showing that when voters are forced to make a choice between partisan loyalty and standing on principle, only small percentages of either party's electorates stood on principle. The vast majority chose partisan loyalty, with little or no difference between Republicans and Democrats.

In an email, Svolik raised the next logical question: "If supporters of both parties oppose/tolerate authoritarianism at similar levels, how come it is the Republican Party that is primarily associated with authoritarian tendencies today?" In reply to his own question, Svolik writes, "The quick answer is Trump." But "The deeper answer is that the opportunities to subvert the democratic process for partisan gain have become asymmetrical. Because of the biases inherent in political geography and demographic partisan patterns, the two most easily implementable means of gaining an unfair electoral advantage — gerrymandering and voter identification laws — only offer opportunities for unfair play to Republicans."

Trump, in Svolik's view, has presented "his supporters with a stark choice between his conservative accomplishments (immigration, judicial appointments, tax cuts) while portraying the Democrats as the extreme left (something he did successfully with Hillary Clinton, and why I believe he often brings up Portland, AOC, and Sanders). By doing so, Trump is effectively raising the price his supporters must pay for putting democratic principles above their partisan interests."

Other political scientists and psychologists argue that there are differences between Republicans and Democrats that are deeper. [Hyun Hannah Nam](#), a political scientist at Stony Brook University argues in an email that "there is some evidence that Republicans and Democrats respond differently to information that violates their political beliefs or allegiances — that is, cognitive dissonance in the

political domain. A 2013 paper, “[‘Not for All the Tea in China!’ Political Ideology and the Avoidance of Dissonance-Arousing Situations](#),” which Nam wrote with [John Jost](#) and [Jay Van Bavel](#), both professors of psychology at N.Y.U., provided data from an experiment in which “supporters of Republican presidents and supporters of Democratic presidents were either asked or instructed to argue that a president from the opposing party was a better president than a president from their own party.” Nam and her colleagues “found that 28 percent of Obama supporters willingly engaged with the task of writing an essay favoring Bush over Obama, whereas no Bush supporters were willing to argue that Obama was a better president than Bush.”

This suggests, Nam continued in her email, “that there may be something special about Republicans when it comes to an unwillingness to criticize their own leaders or to praise the opposition’s leaders. Although this research preceded the Trump era, it could be that Trump supporters may now similarly double down on their expressed loyalty to Trump, in spite of various moral and ideological violations exhibited by Trump — or even because of them through processes of rationalization.”

In her email, Nam added, “It appears that a neural structure that guides our perception of salient threats and understanding of social group hierarchy also underlies political preferences and behaviors to keep society as it is. If voter suppression efforts are perceived as helping to maintain the existing power structures, then it is possible that our neurobiological predispositions support the legitimization of such endeavors to protect the status quo.”

The emergence of a right-populist, authoritarian-inclined Republican Party coincides with the advent of a bifurcated Democratic Party led, in large part, by a well-educated, urban, globally engaged multicultural elite allied with a growing minority electorate. Structurally, the Democratic Party has become the ideal adversary for a Republican Party attempting to define political competition as a contest between “us the people” against “them, the others” — the enemy. The short- and medium-term prognosis for productive political competition is not good.

Joshua Greene, the Harvard psychologist, closed his email with an addendum: “P.S. I think that Biden will probably win and will probably be the next president. But the fact that I can’t say more than ‘probably’ is terrifying to me. I fear that we are witnessing the end of American democracy.”