

Trump Is Back

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In 2024, some 80 national states held elections and a few international organizations held summits, demonstrating a global drift in politics back to nationalism, authoritarianism, and conservatism—away from liberalism, globalism, environmentalism, and social democracy.

In Italy by January, Georgia Meloni survived attempts by Matteo Renzi to amend the constitution to prevent coalition governments like hers. In practice, she has proved far from imitating Mussolini, as her fascist roots might suggest, and has become a leader for stability in the European Union.

Taiwan held its presidential election in January, when Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party had to step down due to term limits. She had long maintained the delicate balance between silence on Taiwanese sovereignty and threats of Chinese invasion of the Qing dynasty province (1885).

Russia held presidential elections in March. Vladimir Putin easily won with 88 per cent of the vote in a kind of rally-around-the-flag moment of the war in Ukraine.

Turkish local elections in March were a setback for Justice and Development Party's strongman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The rival Republican People's Party made gains to 38 per cent of the vote. Nevertheless, Erdoğan's rule continues to 2028.

French presidential elections in April resulted in Marine Le Pen's National Rally very nearly defeating President Emmanuel Macron's République en Marche, 41 to 58 percent in the second round.

India conducted elections to the Lok Sabha (lower house) in April. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) still won a majority despite many opposition parties, which means that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will pursue what some call his fascist Hindu politics.

Poland in April held local elections for all 16 regional assemblies. The nationalist Law and Justice Party of Jaroslaw Kaczyński remained the strongest, followed by the leftist Civic Coalition of Donald Tusk.

South Africa voted in May. The African National Congress (ANC) lost its majority for the first time since Nelson Mandela's first anti-apartheid government.

Mexico in June elected its first woman (and Jewish) president, Claudia Sheinbaum, closely tied to controversial populist Lopez Obrador.

Thailand elected its senate in June, after years when the military appointed senators. Elections to the house of representatives are tentatively scheduled for 2027.

European Union Parliamentary elections took place in June. Despite growth of nationalist and eurosceptic forces in member states, democratic forces preserved the coalition of pro-EU centrist, liberal, social democratic, and environmental parties against the anti-EU right-wing populist parties like the Europe of Sovereign Nations. Ursula van der Leyen remained president of the Commission.

Colombia in June held a run-off election won by President Gustavo Petro, facing a multi-party Congress of conservatives. The election was seen as a decision on Colombia's future, when internal security is still an issue going back to the 2016 peace accord (FARC).

UK Parliamentary elections in July brought down the Rishi Sunak Conservative government to bring Keir Starmer of Labour to power. Starmer does not promise a second referendum on Brexit but will focus on immigration policy.

Also in July, in the Netherlands a right-wing Dutch government under Dick Schoof came to power after Geert Wilders' far-right Freedom party won prior elections. Wilders seeks leadership in the E.U.

In September, the United Nations held a Summit for the Future, which was much heralded by NGOs and young people of good will. Despite the grandiose titles, it was quite ignored even by developing states that had much to gain by U.N reform. A typical escape clause in the final document was, "We will increase our efforts to revitalize the work of the General Assembly."

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party in September agreed to revise the 1947 constitution to mention the Special Defense Forces alongside the famous Article 9 renouncing the belligerency of the state. Shigeru Ishiba, who advocates the change, was nominated for president and was elected.

Brazil in October held municipal elections in which the Centraro (a coalition of centrist, center-right, and right-wing parties) made gains in the politicking for a successor for leftist Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the presidential election of 2026. Neither former president Jair Bolsonaro nor Lula can run.

In Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party government fell in November. AfD candidate Alice Weidel has already proposed to send thousands of migrants to their "safe country of origin."

Hungary in polling by December was gearing up for elections in 2026. Victor Orban's populist and illiberal Fidesz Party was pressed by upstart Péter Magyar's center-right Tisza party.

Syria's repressive Assad regime collapsed in December. Rebel forces of Hay'at Tahir al-Sham—linked to al Qaeda (after splitting in 2017)—took Damascus by force. A new government under Abu Mohammad al-Jolani ended 60 years of socialist Ba'athist rule.

Israel had no elections in 2024, but negotiations led by the Biden administration since May produced a cease-fire in Gaza just before the inauguration of Donald Trump. The Netanyahu government remains dominated by extreme conservatives while Hamas escaped total defeat.

This international context helps to explain the return of Donald Trump to power in the United States. Trump is not solely to blame for what is happening; the whole world is returning to the values of nationalism. One should appreciate how massive was his popular victory: 77.3 million (49.6 per cent) to 75.0 (48.3 per cent); Electoral College vote: 312 (270 needed) to 226. Analyses of what went wrong range all the way from the Democratic Party's favoritism to the highly educated (David Brooks) to loss of its focus from the time of Franklin Roosevelt on the working class and small business class (Thomas Piketty). Some now say, "Trump didn't win. The Democrats lost!" The Republicans, too, the party of conservatives and big business, are only beginning to make themselves over as a party of the working class. The prize of future electoral success is surely going to require reshaping the political parties.

Trump did not campaign on foreign affairs. He focused entirely on domestic affairs. When he talks of "making America great again" (MAGA), he is perceived not as referring to U.S. military power, as in the claimed "victory in the Cold War," but to American "greatness" in the 1945-80 period, when U.S. GDP was one half the world's, when the U.S. led the West in foreign policy (even though that was to establish a "rule of law world order"—something ordinary people often forget), when American manufacturing was thriving, and families were secure. Trump has been compared to Hitler, among fascists, but the comparison would be closer to Mussolini, who tried to build up the corporate state. Most voters, in interviews, were not so concerned about the "threat to democracy." They expressed concerns for everyday worries, like inflation in the grocery stores, immigrants crashing the borders, and children being set up for gender-reversing surgery. It is a mistake to think that such a large majority of the American people were persuaded by Trump's rhetoric or are as vicious as he sounds. Generally, their view is, "Don't listen to what he says: look at what he does." That's a good rule for our friends overseas.

What seems to be happening is that the working and small business classes' resent being treated as second-class citizens by the liberal elite (the ten percent), going back to the Reagan administration after 1980 and its subsequent policies of neoliberalism (Milton Friedman). They let American jobs go abroad and society to be flooded with "woke" (minority liberal) social experiments. When asked, people in the MAGA movement say, "Trump gets us. He fights for us." (He will reform and reduce the government.) When asked about his vicious remarks about

minorities, they say, “Oh, that’s just the way he talks. It doesn’t matter.” Or about his conviction for fraud and three more legal cases, one going back to the attempted coup d’état in the Capital on January 6, 2021, “Oh, that’s just political. The Democrats are using the law against him, and he in turn will use the law against them.” The majority fail to see how the rule of law is being eroded by delays of justice and defiance. People are so broken down by daily hardship that they fall for his simplistic promises, like reducing inflation by imposing tariffs on other countries, which even a non-economist can see will increase prices. Trump basically has escaped the supremacy of the law. The greatest challenge before us is to make the rule of law, in complex, interdependent democracies, fair to all and truly the standard of justice. Even presidents must obey the law.

In foreign policy, we will have to await what he does, not what he says. About the EU, I do not hear that he has any understanding of what is meant by a union to end wars. About NATO, however, it is different. Trump has complained about “free riders” (allies that do not pay their obligatory two per cent of GDP), then he threatens take the U.S.A. out of the alliance. He will shake things up everywhere, but does he not understand the reasons for U.S. leadership? Consider the war in Ukraine, which Europeans fear could lead to World War III. Perhaps he will end it with his well known skills in a day as a deal maker! Sometimes Trump is described as a “neo-isolationist,” but until he withdraws from NATO that is untrue. He may go only as far as laying down general tariffs on China, but have we reached the point in history where we do not see the mutual advantage of free trade? We have some fixing to do in world economics, apart from thrusting our thumbs into the dike of global migrations.

Something of Trump’s mind is revealed by nationalist expressions in his inaugural address. He promises to “put America first,” hearkening back to isolationism before WWII. “Sovereignty” will be reclaimed. His top priority will be “to create a nation.” “America will soon be greater” than ever before. The “world” exists only to witness the momentum of the U.S.A. His business is “to defend American borders.” He has found religion: “I was saved by God to make America great again.” He interprets his election as showing that “the entire nation is rapidly unifying behind our agenda.” He does not use the rhetoric of war and conquest, but he also does not admit any limitations: “If we work together, there’s nothing we cannot do.” He claims, against any international or world law, American “exceptionalism.”

Trump then outlines his proposed actions starting on the first day of his presidency, which at time of writing are being enacted in rapid fire. These are all executive orders—constitutionally, presidential actions to see that the laws are faithfully executed. But they look like dictates, not executions of law. The laws, especially on immigration, have come too late, even not at all, as when candidate Trump killed the last bill in early 2024. President Biden used such orders too, to nullify Trump’s policies in his first term. The usage of executive orders, which has become increasingly common in successive presidencies, is one of those excesses in American government that leads some people like former Senator Russ Feingold to see the need for Constitutional reform. I suspect that, as abuses mount in the Trump presidency, we may see calls for a Constitutional convention—first to secure us from dictatorship, then to set our domestic and international house aright.

Using executive orders, Trump will declare a national emergency at the U.S. southern border. He will begin the process of returning illegal immigrants (potentially 11 million) to their home countries. He will send 10,000 American soldiers to the border and treat Mexico as an accomplice in the invasion of the U.S. (In the campaign, he went so far as to warn of Army special forces crossing the border to find and destroy the Mexican cartels.) He will concentrate on foreign gangs and criminal networks in the U.S. He will defeat inflation by stopping overspending and energy conversion, as in Biden's industrial policy. He will free the oil and gas companies to drill without limit. He will make America a manufacturing nation again and export energy (fossil fuels) around the world. He will revoke the Green New Deal (apparently the Biden policy to address global warming). He will end the electric vehicle mandate and increase conventional car and truck production to benefit the automakers who voted for him. He will tariff and tax foreign countries to enrich Americans. He will oppose diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in the colleges and universities and bring back "free speech." He will stop policies of trying to socially engineer race and gender innovations in American life. Government will recognize only two genders—male and female. Thus we will forge a society that is color blind and merit based. He will restore "fair, equal and impartial justice under the constitutional rule of law." He will free the armed forces from social experiments and focus on their mission to defend the country against America's enemies. He will end America's involvement in wars abroad. He aims to leave a legacy as a peace builder and unifier. He will take back the Panama Canal and pursue our manifest destiny to plant the flag on Mars.

All this is a nationalist program of capitalist expansion. Some of it might actually help heal the divisions in the U.S.A. But the greatest danger, in my judgment, is of crises leading by small steps to general war, like, say, an Israeli nuclear strike on Iran's underground nuclear facilities at Fordow. Does Trump have the psychological strengths to resist escalation at a moment of supreme danger to the republic? There are also threats of war if China invades Taiwan. For people with historical memories (Sarajevo, Munich, Pearl Harbor), many signs point to coming world war. Donald Tusk (Poland, European Union) calls the present the "prewar era." The treaties that ended the Cold war (INF, CFE, START) have all been allowed to lapse. The Comprehensive Test Ban (1996) has not drawn in the nine nuclear powers nor all the 44 potential nuclear weapons states necessary for its entry into force. The U.S. established a new Space Force in 2019 (in the first Trump term), defying the Outer Space Treaty (1967). The recent Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017) is defunct. The United Nations is going the way of the League.

Such uncertainties seem most likely to plunge the second Trump administration into historic disaster.