

Peace to the People:
Election Denialism, Government Transitions, and Democratic Backsliding

Ingrid Janicki

Gould Academy

AP Comparative Government and Politics

Adam Leff

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Divided. The most politically charged buzzword of the decade, but for a reason. Americans of all creeds, parties, races, ethnicities, and genders ironically agree: the nation is cracking. According to a survey conducted by Gallup in 2024, 80 percent of US adults believe that the country is “greatly divided on most important values” (Jones 2024). How did the *United States of America* get to such a level of vitriol? Arguably of more importance, how is this division percolating into governmental systems, shaking the foundations of American democracy?

A pluralistic system of political parties is vital for a representative democracy; however, one of the tangible signs that there is true pluralism within a healthy democracy is the peaceful transfer of power between said parties. When leaders prioritize their mutual respect for democratic processes over their personal interests during a transition of power, they protect the sanctity of democracy; they protect the people. Outgoing leaders acknowledge the voice of the population, and the incoming administration acknowledges the service of those before them. In America and across historically democratic systems worldwide, this has been the standard. But that is not the case anymore. Following the attacks of January 6th, Americans have come to wait with bated breath each time Donald Trump comes into contact with a political opponent. Each election, local or national, stirs a flurry of attack ads, opportunities to resist election results, and the ever-looming threat of another violent assault on governmental proceedings. As the tradition of peaceful transfers of power between parties becomes increasingly threatened by the denial of election results, refusal to relinquish control, or attempts to prevent transition, democratic institutions are undermined. To preserve such a staple of democracy, there must be more opportunities for respectful civil discourse to limit hostility between political factions, correlating to a peaceful transfer of power, both for the leaders and for the people.

One of the first strategies employed by a prospective authoritarian leader is denying the results of free and fair elections. The most dramatic occurrence of this was during the 2020 US presidential election, when President Donald Trump claimed that President-elect Joe Biden had “stolen” the victory. This was not new rhetoric from Trump, who in 2016 accused Sen. Ted Cruz of committing “fraud” to win the Iowa Caucus and responded to his loss of the popular vote to Hillary Clinton with the statement “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally” (Axelrod 2022). Both of these comments lacked any citation of evidence. He continued to make unsubstantiated warnings of voter fraud through his first term and during the 2018 midterms. However, it is during the 2020 election cycle that his comments exploded. How did he manage to transition from occasional remarks of election fraud that were largely ignored to outright theories of rigging and cheating that many Republicans, voters, and officials adopted with full belief? Ultimately, it can be boiled down to two factors: repeated and inflated rhetoric from Trump and the close nature of the election. Before the election, Trump announced that “the only way we’re going to lose this election is if the election is rigged,” sowing the seeds of distrust in electoral results among his voters (Axelrod 2022). Combined with mounting concerns about the reliability of mail-in ballots - which were at an all-time high due to the COVID-19 pandemic and also led to a longer vote-counting period - the general public grew increasingly wary of the results of November 7. Their worries skyrocketed as Joe Biden’s razor-thin margins of victory were reported, and they were certainly not laid to rest by the President of the country. He had successfully “undermine[d] public trust in elections” (Jang, Kreiss 2024).

However, the instances of election-denying do not stop there. A report published by Stanford University claims that denialism was not left in 2020, but carried into the midterms,

stating, “In 2022, denying the 2020 election’s outcome became an explicit campaign strategy for many Republican candidates” (Malzahn, Hall 2023). Not only is election denial sowing mistrust, it is also catalyzing division as it becomes utilized as a platform, and it's working. Although big-name election deniers like Kari Lake and Adam Laxalt lost their elections, there has not been an agreed upon consensus that Americans are opting for candidates who accepted the 2020 election results, likely because “...relatively few Americans will trade off ideological or partisan considerations to support the democratic process itself” (Malzahn, Hall 2023). Preceding the 2022 midterm elections, Pew Research reported that 63% of Republicans said that their party “should not be accepting of elected officials who openly criticize Donald Trump” (Pew Research Center 2021). It is notable that the percentage of left-leaning respondents who said that the party should not welcome officials who criticize Biden increased by 11% from March to September as well (Pew Research Center 2021). The division down party lines is as stark as ever, and Donald Trump has turned his refusal to accept the results of free and fair elections into a mechanism to split the parties further. As a research article published in *The International Journal for Press/Politics* outlines, “If a country cannot have legitimate competitive elections despite all available evidence of their safety and security—if a political leader or party cannot lose—then there can be no peaceful transfer of power” (Jang, Kreiss 2024). Election denialism has lasting effects on democratic processes, negatively impacting peaceful transitions, the two-party system, and voter trust levels in elections.”

When General John Kelly called Donald Trump a fascist, the nation erupted. Using such a decisive (and divisive) term seemed reckless. In historical Western democracies, fascists are things of the past. They have been valiantly combated, and America has beaten them down time and time again. This image that is consistently perpetuated in American society lives, either

consciously or unconsciously, in the minds of the American people, which makes it all the more difficult to recognize the beginnings of a fascist regime. Experts long debated the validity of using the word ‘fascist’ to describe President Trump, however, this all changed following the Capitol riots of January 6. Roger Griffen, professor of modern history at Oxford Brookes University, notes that Trump used the “enemy from within” rhetoric in his incitement of the riots, a “major facet of fascism” and similar to that used by Hitler and Mussolini in their rise to power (Bowman 2024). Griffen says, “Fascists are obsessed with the idea that the present state of the nation is decadent. The world is falling apart. It's got inner and outer enemies. There are forces at work destroying sacred, eternal truths or important things about the nation or the race” (Bowman 2024). Trump was able to couple his supporters’ distrust of the election results with a belief that the nation would succumb under a liberal president. He urged his supporters to interrupt the congressional proceedings that sought to verify the results of the election and “fight like hell” (Cabral 2021). The riots of January 6, 2021, are in direct violation of the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, which ensures the “orderly transfer of the executive power” and affirms that any disruption of such processes is “detrimental to the safety and wellbeing of the United States and its people” (US Congress 2022). There cannot be a more straightforward affront to the sanctity of national government than the president ignoring federal law and supporting, if not inciting, violence against other elected officials, particularly those deemed the opposition.

What can be done to protect a democratic process that has stood as the historical standard and is only now coming under threat? Considering that threats to the peaceful transfer of power in the US have stemmed from rising tensions between parties and misleading or false comments by the president, further spread by other elected officials, communication appears to be the missing link. Presidential debates have grown to be more and more heated, rife with attacks on

personal character and below-the-belt punches, so much so that Vice President Kamala Harris shocked many by initiating a handshake between herself and President Trump. This policy needs to diffuse division, nurture civil discourse, and keep the US practicing respect between individuals.

After looking at other world democracies that also have major political parties with stark differences in ideology, this policy proposal for the US takes its inspiration from the parliamentary government of the UK. Prime Minister's Questions, or PMQs, are held each Wednesday that the House of Commons meets for at least half an hour. During this time, 15 randomly selected members of the Parliament (MPs) are given an opportunity to ask questions directly to the prime minister. The PM is not given forewarning of any questions that will be asked, ensuring a less rehearsed response and an expression of more candid thoughts. Questions are also asked systematically with an MP from the majority opposition party, the governing party, and the secondary opposition party all given opportunities to ask questions, as well as any other MPs whose names appear on the order paper following the shuffle (Baker, 2024). The general population of the UK also has the opportunity to see these sessions, as PMQs are broadcast on the BBC and recorded and posted to the UK Parliament's YouTube site, or they can be viewed by visitors in the public gallery of Westminster (UK Parliament 2025). While the PMQs may appear heated, with shouts of approval and chagrin rising from the backbenchers, the PM meets each question by thanking the asking member before answering. Although tense issues are being discussed, the system of questioning encourages MPs to maintain a level of decorum while also encouraging the PM to answer questions directly, unlike a debate stage. Instead of timed answers and limited rebuttals, elected officials have a question limit, and it is in the leader's best interest to provide a direct answer promptly.

A weekly presidential questioning in the House of Representatives would foster a healthy environment for civil discourse and open a channel of communication between the executive and legislature. Additionally, the federal system in the US is especially conducive to a televised leader questioning system, as Americans would get the chance to see democracy in action, with their district's elected officials having an opportunity to advocate for their constituents. Feedback from voters over specific issues could be incorporated into their questioning for the week, and both sides of the aisle can communicate these concerns to the president and one another.

Americans need to relearn how to be comfortable with different opinions. It is from a fear of the opposition that vehement rejections of change take root. But how can Americans be expected to welcome (or at least tolerate) change peacefully when their elected officials are not doing the same, when they are forced further apart from their neighbors with each passing headline, and when they feel unseen, unheard, or skeptical of democratic systems? In being exposed to more examples of respectful political engagement, they will be less likely to believe baseless election denials or commit acts of violence. Americans will begin to see the fundamentals of democracy again; they will stand together to protect the basic values of the nation.

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