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Article — Published Version

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Politische Vierteljahresschrift

Provided in Cooperation with:

Springer Nature

Suggested Citation: Simon, Julia; Sonnicksen, Jared (2024) : A Conservative (R)Evolution? Constitutional–Political Crises, Trumpism, and Long-standing Trends of Conservative Transformations in the United States and Beyond, Politische Vierteljahresschrift, ISSN 1862-2860, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, Wiesbaden, Vol. 65, Iss. 2, pp. 213-232, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00527-6>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/315563>

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A Conservative (R)Evolution? Constitutional–Political Crises, Trumpism, and Long-standing Trends of Conservative Transformations in the United States and Beyond

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Received: 14 September 2023 / Accepted: 18 December 2023 / Published online: 25 January 2024
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Abstract Starting from the most current developments in the legal and political processing of Donald J. Trump’s (post)presidency, this contribution highlights the persisting challenges to the constitutional, social, and political stability of democracy in the United States (U.S.). In particular, it outlines several dimensions of an enabling environment in which Trump(ism) could thrive. A key feature of this is the thorough and ever-growing asymmetry that has come to characterize the partisan political context in the United States and that directs our attention to the conservative side of the political spectrum: the Republican Party as its major organizational embodiment, as well as broader trends of conservative (trans)formation, including those related to the electorate, policies, institutions, civil society, and the media. Thus, this contribution underlines the importance of the multiple and often longer-term influences, conflicts, institutions, and conditions conducive to current developments, including, in particular, the range of actors that have been relevant in shaping them. Asymmetric polarization, economic inequality, and nationalist and anti-government (authoritarian–populist) tendencies and movements are among the factors that together pose the most serious threat to liberal democracy in the United States—and in “the West” more broadly. The introduction illustrates the importance of studying and reflecting upon the implications of the above trends, actors, and conditions for Germany and other European states, for transatlantic cooperation, and even for the global multilateral system as a whole. It concludes with an overview

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of the research articles in the special issue, outlining their individual as well as overlapping analytical interests and contributions.

Keywords Democracy · (Il)liberalism · Asymmetric polarization · Crisis · Radical Right · Republican Party

Eine konservative (R)Evolution? Politische und Verfassungskrisen, Trumpismus und längerfristige Trends konservativer Transformation in den USA und im „Westen“

Zusammenfassung Vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen Entwicklungen in der rechtlichen und politischen Aufarbeitung der (Nach-)Amtszeit von Donald J. Trump, skizziert der Einleitungsbeitrag die fortbestehenden Herausforderungen für die politische, gesellschaftliche und verfassungsmäßige Stabilität der US-amerikanischen Demokratie. Insbesondere stellt er dabei die verschiedenen Ebenen eines förderlichen Kontextes dar, in dem Trump(ismus) besonders erfolgreich werden konnte. Ein zentrales Merkmal dieses Kontextes ist die tiefgreifende und stetig zunehmende Asymmetrie, die das politische Umfeld in den Vereinigten Staaten (USA) kennzeichnet und unsere Aufmerksamkeit auf den konservativen Bereich des Spektrums lenkt: auf die Republikanische Partei als seine wesentliche organisatorische Ausformung sowie auf weiterreichende Trends konservativer (Trans-)Formationen, die sich unter anderem in der Wählerschaft, in Politiken, Institutionen, der Zivilgesellschaft und den Medien zeigen. Der Beitrag zoomt somit weg von Trump selbst, um die vielfältigen und schon länger bestehenden Einflüsse, Konflikte, Institutionen und Bedingungen sichtbar zu machen, die zu den aktuellen Entwicklungen beigetragen haben. Dies schließt insbesondere auch die verschiedenen, an diesen Entwicklungen beteiligten Akteure und Akteursgruppen ein. Asymmetrische Polarisierung, ökonomische Ungleichheit sowie nationalistische, regierungsfeindliche (autoritär-populistische) Tendenzen und Bewegungen stellen zusammengekommen die zentrale aktuelle Gefahr für die liberale Demokratie in den USA und dem „Westen“ insgesamt dar. Vor diesem Hintergrund veranschaulicht der Beitrag die Wichtigkeit weiterer Studien und Reflexionen zu den Implikationen der oben genannten Trends, Akteure und Bedingungen für Deutschland und weitere europäische Staaten, für die transatlantische Zusammenarbeit und das westlich geprägte globale multilaterale System als solches. Daraufhin schließt die Einleitung mit einem Überblick über die Forschungsartikel in diesem Sonderheft sowie über ihre individuellen und gemeinsamen analytischen Interessen und Beiträge.

Schlüsselwörter Demokratie · (Il-)Liberalismus · Asymmetrische Polarisierung · Krise · Radikale Rechte · Republikanische Partei

1 An Acute Multifaceted Crisis and Its Broader Context: Aims of the Special Issue

The focus of this special issue¹, the creeping political and constitutional crisis in the United States (U.S.), is clearly a moving target. To keep up with significant current developments, this introduction needed to be updated multiple times. In July 2023, former president Donald J. Trump was criminally indicted yet again, this time in the state of Georgia. This particular indictment, however, is quite significant. For the first time, it did not relate to Trump's actions during his 2016 campaign or after leaving office but to his actions *during* his presidency. This indictment charges him with conspiring “to overturn the legitimate results of the 2020 presidential elections and retain power.” As a “speaking indictment”—i.e., in short, one including more information and elaboration than the required presentation of the charges—the document detailed multiple schemes and actions in the wake of the 2020 election. They seemingly culminated in the Capitol insurrection, but also encompassed an array of attempts to intervene in and even overturn the vote counting and certification processes on the state level (see also Simon 2023).

Ultimately, the attempted coup to overthrow the legitimately elected government was thwarted. However, this indictment (along with state-level indictments of fake electors in Michigan and elsewhere) documents the serious and immanent threat that Trump and his allies presented to the constitutional democratic system—and that they still present: As Trump has been holding on to his election fraud lies, in December 2022 he publicly called for the “termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution” (cited in Astor 2022) to “rectify” the “stolen” election.

Even though Trump has been largely successful in linking the nation's fate to his own, our attention should not be monopolized by him or even the coup attempt alone. Democracy in the United States has been found to be “in decline” (e.g., Repucci in Freedom House 2022), a “backsliding” democracy (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mickey et al. 2017), and part of a much larger “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, pp. 1096–1097; Carothers and Press 2022). All the more so, we need to consider the different layers of an enabling environment that Trump(ism) could thrive in.² At the heart of our approach is the assumption of a particular relevance of the conservative side of the political spectrum in the context of the current challenges to liberal-democratic rule in the United States. Relating to historical antecedents in Europe (Ziblatt 2017),³ we maintain that in the first place, “the implications of a Trump presidency for American democracy are heavily

¹ We would like to thank the Editors of GPSQ/PVS for their support and valuable suggestions in the process of producing this special issue. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their dedication and critical feedback. Last but not least: Thank you to the authors for all of their time, efforts and, of course, their contributions!

² On processes of democratic backsliding on the state level that preceded the Trump administration, see, e.g., Grumbach (2022).

³ In his extraordinarily insightful book *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*, Ziblatt studies the conservative parties' role in democratization in Europe, particularly in Britain and Germany, in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

conditioned by the role played by the Republican Party” (Roberts 2019, p. 132; cf. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; for an international perspective, see also Biebricher 2023a). In spite of systematic norm-breaking, repeated Republican electoral underperformances, the Capitol insurrection, and subsequent federal and state indictments, party leadership as well as the rank and file continue to support Trump publicly, and many even uphold what has come to be known as the Big Lie of the “stolen” 2020 presidential election.⁴ Furthermore, current reactions by Republican leaders to the ongoing criminal prosecutions also document clearly that the underlying crisis is pervasive—and far from resolved. Their rhetoric even continues to become more drastic: After Trump’s latest indictment, his campaign released a statement maintaining that “[t]he lawlessness of these persecutions of President Trump and his supporters is reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the former Soviet Union, and other authoritarian, dictatorial regimes.”⁵ This perception was shared by national leaders, major figures, and officeholders of the Republican, or “Grand Old Party” (GOP), including Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who claimed that many people felt the United States was now “post-constitution.”⁶ Even the overwhelming majority of Trump’s competitors for the GOP presidential nomination continue to allege a conspiracy and the “weaponization” of the federal government, the Justice Department, and federal law enforcement against Trump. It is thus likely that Trump—with the full support of the national party establishment—will enter a new presidential race in 2024 as a defendant in a judicial system, the independence and legitimacy of which he and his party publicly undermine. Consequently, one may expect that the constitutional, social, and political stability of U.S. liberal democracy will continue to be put to the test.

But even this immediate enabling environment is embedded in a broader context that has been increasingly characterized and affected by partisanship as well as undemocratic tendencies. Our focus thus needs to extend beyond the party’s complete failure to rein in individual candidates with authoritarian leanings. This special issue thus zooms out from Trump in order to acknowledge the multiple and often longer-term influences, conflicts, institutions, and conditions conducive to current developments as well as the range of actors that have been relevant in shaping them (see also, e.g., Mettler 2011; Sonnicksen 2022; Vormann and Lammert 2023).

We thus approach and study the current situation as an especially forceful and critical manifestation of more complex, comprehensive, and long-standing struggles, including those based on strong reactionary, racist, anti-institutional, and illiberal tendencies. For instance, Mettler and Lieberman (2020) have identified four key

⁴ A poll published by the Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in February 2021 showed that 65% of self-identified Republicans do not believe that Joseph R. Biden was legitimately elected president. The poll is available at <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-capitol-siege-coronavirus-pandemic-elections-79599e3eef68732134c94375a26897f7> (accessed 28 December 2023).

⁵ Several similar statements by Trump loyalists in the GOP and the media have been collected by a non-profit and can be found at <https://forward.com/fast-forward/513708/trump-supporters-denounce-fbi-raid-on-mar-a-lago-this-is-gestapo-crap/> (accessed 28 December 2023).

⁶ Her video can be accessed at <https://www.mediaite.com/politics/marjorie-taylor-green-delivers-warning-from-her-home-gym-were-post-constitution-with-third-trump-indictment-feels-like-communism/> (accessed 28 December 2023).

factors that have resurfaced repeatedly at different times throughout U.S. history and that have threatened its democracy: political polarization, severe conflict over who belongs in the political community, high and rising economic inequality, and executive aggrandizement (pp. 5–6). As they explain, the confluence and radicalization of these destabilizing threats lie “behind the contemporary crisis of American democracy” (p. 7). Each of these factors is taken into account in our analyses. Together, they study the present as part of a broader conservative (r)evolution in which the current situation revolving around Trump is embedded and which is destabilizing and reconfiguring contemporary liberal U.S. democracy.

To summarize, the special issue addresses the following aims: First, it seeks to shed light on the diverse factors, conditions, and actors on the political right that have been instrumental in shaping and escalating the current constitutional–political crises, including those (r)evolutionary objectives, organized groups, and processes that preceded Trump’s presidency. Second, it draws particular attention to the features of the U.S. constitution and federal political system, the political culture, the party system, and its meso-institutional environment that impact (and are impacted by) the current state of crisis in U.S. political life. Third, it promotes reflections on whether and how the issues analyzed here and the respective findings parallel or are transferrable to other contexts, especially to contemporary liberal democracies in Europe, and what consequences the highlighted critical domestic processes have beyond the United States, i.e., regarding international relations. As a result, the special issue hopes to reinvigorate discussions on and deepen our understanding of the U.S. case, not least also as an advanced comparative reference or example case to study the critical state of a long-standing liberal representative democracy. Moreover, it will also prompt further-reaching theoretical reflections and refinements of analytical concepts. These reflections are warranted given the intricately linked institutional, political, societal, and epistemological facets of the crisis of democracy in the United States, which are not fully captured by many traditional conceptual tenets and assumptions about (U.S.) parties and politics.

2 Asymmetric Polarization and Threats to Liberal Representative Government in the United States and Beyond

2.1 Nationalized Polarization and How It Challenges Established Perspectives on U.S. Politics

Despite antecedent disconcerting trends of reactionary and autocratic tendencies on the national as well as the state level, a steadfast traditional confidence long persisted that “the American political system still maintains formidable obstacles against authoritarianism, populist or otherwise” (Lee 2019, p. 381; cf. Frymer 2011). Vertical and horizontal fragmentation of power was considered robust and the opportunity structure unfavorable for a populist *party* instead of just a single candidate (Lee 2019) and even for strong parties in general.

At the same time, and without recurrence to the concept of (authoritarian) populism, the key phenomenon of polarization in the United States—the “becoming

‘Us versus Them’” (Mettler and Lieberman 2020, p. 212; cf. 212–222)—has been studied meticulously and from various perspectives. In the wake of the consolidation of the civil rights realignment on the national level (Schickler 2016) and the Republican “Southern strategy” (cf. Lemke and Wiedkind 2022, pp. 51–58; see also Biebricher 2023b in this special issue), several relevant trends—such as a significant increase in ideological sorting, homogenization and radicalization—have been identified, either in Congress, in state-level parties, among party activists and/or within the electorate (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Grumbach 2018; Fiorina et al. 2006; Layman et al. 2010; Lee 2016; Levendusky 2009; McCarty et al. 2016). Especially since the 1990s, polarization has furthermore acquired a “pernicious” (McCoy and Somer 2019), “affective” (Iyengar et al. 2019) dimension that manifests in “party warfare” (Sinclair 2006) and “negative partisanship” (Abramowitz and Webster 2016) and that has evolved into a key threat:

“[T]he normal functioning of democracy can break down if partisans cease to be able to resolve political differences by finding middle ground, through mutual accommodation. Politics then instead becomes a game of mortal combat in which winning is the singular imperative and opponents are seen as enemies to be vanquished” (Mettler and Lieberman 2020, p. 17).

Moreover, as research at the level of citizens reveals, this has contributed to the shaping of encompassing and opposing social identities (see, e.g., Mason 2018). It can even lead to the acceptance of clear violations of democratic principles committed by fellow partisans (Graham and Svolik 2020; Somer et al. 2021) and pave the way for “partisan violence” (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

The gravity of these partisan shifts at multiple levels can hardly be overstated, as Trump’s time in office as well as the post-2020 election period document. All of the contributions to this special issue will therefore relate to the phenomenon of polarization. The longer-term and exacerbating processes of polarization are also interlinked with the trend of nationalization. The increasing homogenization and streamlining of political debates, issues, conflicts, and competition during the past decades (Hopkins 2018; Hopkins et al. 2022; for an analysis of the 2022 midterms, see Simon and Sonnicksen, forthcoming) has incrementally weakened various cross-cutting cleavages that used to *mitigate* polarization (Pierson and Schickler 2020). These processes of nationalization have transpired despite the persistence of, in structural and formal legal terms, a comparatively highly decentralized state party system. They have also affected how interest representation and the media function, thus creating a self-reinforcing polarizing dynamic with significant effects on the federal polity’s institutional and functional arrangements and, in particular, the system of checks and balances (Pierson and Schickler 2020; cf., e.g., Pickerill and Bowling 2014; for implications in the post-2020 election period, see, e.g., Bump 2022; Grisales 2022; Kranish 2022).

In important regards, these developments defy firmly established concepts for understanding modern U.S. politics (see Hacker and Pierson 2014). This includes in particular the assumption of a “natural” and organically developed two-party system (e.g., Dulio and Thurber 2000; Frymer 2011; but see Disch 2002; Hasen 1997, 2001) that, according to the Downsian “master theory” (Fiorina and Abrams 2009,

p. xvii; Downs 1957), produces party-like units promoting moderate positions in order to win over the majority of voters assumed to be located in the middle ground. The traditional focus on “the electoral connection” (Mayhew 1974) furthermore directs attention away from the dynamics of policy change, from parties’ institutional environments and the crucial importance of organized groups in U.S. politics (Hacker and Pierson 2014). Lastly, assumptions of a general adherence to good-faith and fact-based communication and conventional rationality sideline the relevance of increasing disinformation, heterodox knowledges, and conspiratorial thinking (but see, e.g., Butter 2018; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2018) in political communication and the media. Especially where such assumptions conceptualize the two major parties and their environments as mirror images of each other, they tend to foster conceptual bothside-ism and false equivalence with which both critical scholars and journalists struggle in a context of hyperpartisanship (Mann and Ornstein 2012, p. xvi). Importantly, such conceptualizations also critically limit our understanding of the current crisis, as it is one particular feature of polarization that actually stands out in helping us explain why political contestation has developed toward current patterns: Polarization in the United States is asymmetric on every level.

2.2 Dimensions of Party-Level Asymmetries

Most basically, over the past decade, evidence has mounted that polarization is led chiefly by the GOP (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2015; Mann and Ornstein 2012; McCarty 2019): Since the late 1970s, the widening ideological gap between the two parties has resulted predominantly from the consistent rightward trajectory taken by the Republican Party that meanwhile also became ideologically more coherent (e.g., Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Janda 2022; Jordan et al. 2014; McCarty 2019; McCarty et al. 2016). Moreover, the Republican Party has been the driving force behind an intensified important shift in approach from mutual accommodation and political compromise-seeking to outright obstruction and radical confrontation in national politics, especially from the 1990s on (Hacker and Pierson 2015; Lee 2009; Mann and Ornstein 2012; Theriault 2013).

In both regards, somewhat similar but distinct and less radical developments can be observed for the Democratic Party (see also, e.g., Cooperman, Shufeldt, and Conger 2022). These asymmetries likely also stem from the circumstance that the two parties are “different [...] also in type” (Nexon 1971, p. 717). The GOP, for instance, has increasingly diverged from the traditional expectation that parties in the United States are social group coalitions: After the civil rights realignment, the GOP has shown comparatively lower levels of social heterogeneity than the Democratic Party and has, most importantly, become “bound together by a common conservative identity” (Grossman and Hopkins 2016, p. 10; cf. Freeman 1986, p. 352). This reaches down to the level of Republican-identifying voters who “are ideologically aware and oriented to a degree that far exceeds their Democratic counterparts” (Lelkes and Sniderman 2016, p. 825). Historically, it is rather uncommon for parties in the United States (in contrast to Western European parties) to operate as “ideological vehicles” (Kabaservice 2013, p. xvi; Grossman and Hopkins 2016, p. 12). Yet the GOP clearly does.

A considerable rightward push (and subsequent normalization) of the GOP position across the spectrum of public policies had already emerged in the context of the nomination of Barry Goldwater as GOP candidate for president in 1964. This development seems to have intensified since the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially through the incorporation of the Christian Right into the GOP. While a similar “movement-anchoring dynamic” can be detected in U.S. history for the Democratic Party and labor (Schlozman 2016) as well, a significant difference is that the Christian Right anchored the GOP on the cultural and moral levels (Schlozman 2016; see also Pickel and Pickel 2023 in this special issue). The inclination to promote doctrinal purity and a morally hierarchizing view of the two parties, a concept known as the “Goldwater phenomenon” (Wildavsky 1965), coincided with a principled rejection of mutual accommodations and compromises not only with the opposing party but also with internal partisan moderates. Since then, “purists,” referring to themselves early on as the “real Republican Party” (Wildavsky 1965, p. 400), have persisted, especially among party activists and primary voters (see, e.g., Cooperman et al. 2022). Often, at least superficially, revolving around “fiscal conservatism,” movements led by Grover Norquist in the 1980s, Newt Gingrich in the 1990s, and the Tea Party after 2009 have successfully exerted pressure on those perceived as insufficiently loyal to the party’s ideological commitments (Grossman and Hopkins 2016, p. 4), thus leading to each “cohort” becoming more distinctive and ideologically extreme. Publicly denounced as “RINOs” (Republicans in name only) today, pragmatic and/or moderate incumbents continue to be marginalized, challenged in primaries, and thus effectively ousted from party leadership (e.g., Blum 2020; Skocpol and Williamson 2016; Theriault 2013). Most recently, ethnonationalist and reactionary strands of conservatism (e.g., Eddington 2018; Oswald 2017; Parker and Barreto 2013; Skocpol 2020; see also Biebricher 2023b in this special issue) and even conspiracist thinking (e.g., DiMaggio 2022; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2022) have permeated Republican partisanship and leadership. In the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement, for the first time, however, a purist “insurgency” or anti-establishment movement was directly oriented toward and headed by a Republican Party leader and president.

Furthermore, diverging organizational cultures undergird these patterns and the resulting differences among the two parties: As early as the 1980s, Freeman contrasted a more coalitional, “pluralistic and polycentric” Democratic Party in which multiple groups “compete for membership support in order to make demands on, as well as determine the leaders” (p. 329) with a monolithic and centralized Republican organizational approach. In the latter approach, groups “carry the party’s message outward, not the group’s message inward” (p. 332), a “winner-take-all attitude” persists (p. 347), and a “more unitary conception of representation as meaning the correct articulation of the national interest” is established (p. 337).

Focusing more immediately on presidential party leadership, distinct patterns of Republican and Democratic presidents, respectively, can also be identified (Galvin 2010). On the one hand, Trump has continued the traditional Republican presidents’ tactics of “domination paired with organizational investment” (Galvin 2020, p. 139) that can enable an “authoritarian style of party leadership” (p. 139). On the other hand, he has intensified this pattern and redirected the approach from its previ-

ous purpose of broadening the potential voter base to instead mobilizing his core base and solidifying their support (pp. 136–137). As a result, Trump successfully “turned his party into a formidable vehicle for advancing his personal purposes and augmenting his power—while raising troubling questions about the stability of American democracy” (Galvin 2020, p. 135).

2.3 Changes in Party Environment

Beyond party organization in the narrower sense, significant changes have taken place in the immediate party environment on the Republican side that drive asymmetric polarization and radicalization even further. Again, corresponding developments on the Democratic side are idiosyncratic, and in particular are less concerted and less ideologically coherent and disciplined. These changes include the heightened relevance and direct involvement of GOP-adjacent groups, actors, and institutions that promote especially “purist” candidates and/or “ultra-free-market fundamentalis[t]” agendas through performing a range of different tasks (including voter mobilization, the vetting of possible candidates, and the preparation of legislative acts) and by commanding vast financial resources and leveraging even personal connections (Skocpol 2020, p. 4; cf. Hertel-Fernandez 2019; La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Rauch and La Raja 2017; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; see Rauscher 2023 in this special issue). A similar pattern of increasing influence of private organizations and networks has also been identified, with a view to the judiciary that has led to more polarization and a stronger ideological coherence up to the Supreme Court, especially on the conservative side (e.g., Devins and Baum 2017; Hasen 2019). Most clearly, this has been documented through repeated norm-breaking nomination and confirmation processes under Trump—though also spearheaded by Republican leaders, especially in the Senate—that cemented a reliable conservative 6-3 Supreme Court majority,⁷ as well as through several subsequent “party-line” 6-3 rulings. With extensive ramifications, they reinterpreted and chipped away at crucial constitutional provisions and protections, including the right to privacy underlying abortion rights (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*), the principle of equal treatment (*303 Creative LLC v. Elenis*), and the separation of church and state (*Kennedy v. Bremer-ton School District*, *Carson v. Makin*), as well as the protection of core democratic principles violated through excessive gerrymandering (*Rucho v. League of Women Voters of North Carolina*)⁸ and voting laws discriminating against members of minority groups (*Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*). Overall, these processes were embedded in a discursive and media landscape in which distinct “echo chambers” (Jamieson and Cappella 2008) have taken shape that escalate polarization. Again most dramatically on the (radical) right side of the political spectrum, this

⁷ In two cases, Senate Republicans blatantly diverged from long-established norms to finally push through an almost decades-long effort to form a reliable, deeply conservative majority. Even in the only “regular” confirmation process, Senate rules were changed, and the “nuclear option” of eliminating the filibuster for Supreme Court confirmations was applied by the GOP Senate leadership (Davis 2017).

⁸ This case also reproduced the party-line pattern, which in 2019 was still 5-4 before the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the hasty and highly controversial nomination and confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett in 2020.

is often based not only on conflict over policies or a partisan reading of issues and developments but on the dissemination of doubts and disinformation (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2018; Oreskes and Conway 2010) as well as on the creation and perpetuation of outrage (Berry and Sobieraj 2013; cf. Benkler et al. 2018). Especially when condoned and furthered by Republican political elites (including the former president; e.g., Benkler et al. 2020), there is much indication that these changes contribute to the erosion of the public's confidence in institutions of democratic and epistemic authority (see, e.g., Benkler et al. 2018). As such, they can provide fertile ground for profound contestations like the ones we are currently witnessing within and between branches and levels of government and among the states (see, e.g., Sonnicksen 2022).

This specific aspect of creating distrust in the government and/or, e.g., traditional media and expertise (e.g., Fried and Harris 2021; Hofstadter 1963; Horwitz 2013; Peck 2018; Simon 2023) brings us back to a perspective through which the GOP, conservative media, other movement actors, and the right more broadly can be studied: populism. Even though anti-elitism, anti-institutionalism, and anti-government thinking are at the core of populism, this perspective has not played a major role in the understanding of the development of the GOP as such since the 1980s. Research on the GOP has only recently been connected consistently to the broader body of populism research (see, e.g., Kazin 2017, Chap. 10). Although populism has historical roots in the United States reaching into the 19th century (for an overview, see Lowndes 2017), only since Trump has the United States become a prominent (comparative) populism case study (e.g., de la Torre 2019; Heinisch et al. 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017).⁹ Many relevant recent contributions have intensely focused on Trump personally, relating to his created image as a party and Washington outsider and to his support for illiberal, nativist, and nationalist projects (e.g., Adorf 2017; Bonikowski 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Moreover, others have, importantly, also inquired into the economic dimension of this populist strand (e.g., Guardino 2018; Lammert 2020; Vormann and Lammert 2019) that prepared the ground for the recent “marriage of convenience between anti-government free-market plutocrats and racially anxious ethno-nationalist activists and voters” in the United States (Skocpol 2020, p. 22; cf. Hacker and Pierson 2020; Pierson 2017) and that has culminated in Trump(ism).

As the past years have revealed, the underlying distrust in (and contempt for) liberal representative government can be radicalized ever further. The notion of “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) thereby openly carries a nostalgia (with nationalist, racist, and sexist undertones) that easily dovetails with the “pessimistic frames that govern thinking about progress in the U.S. Alt-Right” and that lends itself as a legitimization for authoritarian and illiberal transformations (Michelsen and de Orellana 2020, p. 119). Against this backdrop, conspiratorial allegations have widely taken root that deny the legitimacy of the federal government and view any democratic opposition or dissenters as part of the “deep state.” Furthermore, they simultaneously elevate Trump to the status of a populist absolute leader embodying

⁹ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2012) book *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, for example, does not include the U.S. case yet (see also Lee 2019).

the a priori will of “the people.” As a result, legal, political, or moral challenges or limits to his power will likely not be accepted by his following.

In addition, research on populism reveals, among other things, parallels and interrelations between the U.S. case and other political spaces, including Europe, in the context of challenges to contemporary liberal democracy. Both regarding longer-term developments (e.g., Vormann and Lammert 2019) as well as more recent societal trends and populist heads of governments (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019), important similarities can be identified across the transatlantic political space. In particular, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, an important parallel developed across most Western democracies: an asymmetric polarization and growing societal, political, and economic influence that stems from the conservative to (radical) right-wing side of the political spectrum and that is open to reverting to conspiracism and systematic disinformation. As shown above, these trends are already entrenched in the United States. This example case thus promises to provide empirical insights to help trace and compare relevant driving forces and enrich our knowledge of key factors contributing to institutional, political, constitutional, and social (in)stability. Furthermore, the populism lens has also been applied to study (possible) changes in U.S. foreign and security policy during the Trump administration (e.g., Hall 2020; Löffmann 2019; Wojczewski 2020). This proves highly valuable as the basis for assessing consequences of critical domestic processes beyond the United States, i.e., regarding international relations (see also Böller 2023 in this special issue).

In this regard, it is important to study and reflect upon the implications of the above trends, actors, and conditions for transatlantic cooperation and the global (multilateral) system. On the international level as well, relevant “antisystemic” (Gowan 2017, p. 374) initiatives and threats have emanated from the United States under President Trump (Böller and Werner 2021). Not least, Trump’s first impeachment in 2019, a first peak in the looming constitutional–political crisis, related to his attempt to withhold congressionally approved military aid for Ukraine in order to strong-arm Ukraine’s president into publicly announcing an inquiry into Trump’s opponent Joseph R. Biden and his son Hunter in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election. Overall, Trump’s behavior consistently reminded European partner governments that joint policies, agreements, and international institutions such as NATO and the United Nations are vulnerable to shifts in the foreign policy orientation and commitment of the United States (e.g., Koschut 2021; Sperling and Webber 2019). The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine also underlines the international relevance of domestic intra-Republican and Republican–Democrat contestations regarding NATO and U.S. policy toward Russia (e.g., Tama 2023). Moreover, domestic assaults on democratic procedures, journalism, and the legitimacy of political opponents in the United States may provide cues or even lend legitimacy to certain far-right European leaders (e.g., Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán) and challengers (e.g., Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* party or France’s *Rassemblement National*) to openly foster autocratization¹⁰ and, in turn, destabilize the European Union.

¹⁰ For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin has notably adopted the “fake news” dictum vis-à-vis critical reporting (see, e.g., the NBC News interview by Keir Simmons conducted in Moscow and aired on

Beyond the level of the government, relationships and interconnections are also increasingly strengthened on the societal level: Conservative and radical right groups have increasingly built networks and a support infrastructure (Ramos and Torres 2020) that are, in turn, undergirded and sustained through online connections or shared (dis)information between individuals, such as via social media platforms (Froio and Ganesh 2019). An especially notable example of such direct “contagion” of Germany, in particular from the United States, is the initially online-based conspiracist mass movement QAnon: The cult has its greatest following in the non-English speaking world in Germany, where it merged with the protests against public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf., e.g., Bennhold 2020; Holroyd 2020).

What follows from this at bottom line is the necessity to examine, understand, and explain the many features, dimensions (institutional, societal, and discursive), dynamics, and effects of the current constitutional–political crises. While unfolding in a particular historical, societal, and institutional context, they clearly transgress the bounds of the United States in a variety of ways that need to be captured and thoroughly studied. This includes efforts to illuminate aspects that are still outside the scope of traditional lines of research in political science or that offer new concepts that allow us to obtain a fuller picture of different constitutive layers of the current crisis, or rather crises (see, e.g., Rauscher 2023; Simon 2023; Tokaltı 2023).

3 Contributions to This Special Issue

The special issue aspires to reexamine the idiosyncrasies of the historical, societal, and institutional context in which this set of crises in the United States continues to unfold. To this aim, it has assembled academics from German political science who are conducting innovative scholarship on the United States. With the U.S. case at the center of attention, the special issue encompasses different approaches, including more policy-, politics-, or polity-centered ones and more empirical or conceptually oriented ones, and thus fosters exchange and broader engagement within our discipline. This combination of foci and approaches can greatly enhance our understanding of key facets and dimensions of the ongoing crises and help us identify developments that are likely to remain relevant in the years to come. This applies within the U.S. case, especially given the midterm elections of 2022 as well as upcoming campaigns and elections at the state and federal levels in 2024, and of course beyond them. Given the myriad similar challenges confronting European democracies—sometimes simultaneously and sometimes with a certain time lag—this joint venture aims to pinpoint lessons for transfer to other contexts. It promises to be fruitful for further comparative research and analyses of relevant cross-national patterns and mechanisms and even more direct interplay, organizational networking, and strategic and ideological “contagion” within the transatlantic space. The special issue thus also addresses the current state of the United States as a contribution to the debate on the broader crisis of liberal democracy in the “West.” Accord-

15 June 2021. The interview is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pJd6O_NT0 [accessed 28 December 2023]).

ingly, the contributions, while each focusing on the U.S. case, include comparative perspectives and/or conclude with comparative reflections.

Studying the “Crisis of American Conservatism in Historical–Comparative Perspective,” *Thomas Biebricher* shows that the profound issues and conflicts brought forth by Trump and his Make America Great Again (Again) agenda have much deeper roots that need to be taken into consideration. *Biebricher* particularly inquires into the underlying permutations of U.S. conservatism, understood both as intellectual tradition and political force in the form of the Republican Party from the postwar era to the present. Providing a compact account of German conservatism as a backdrop for comparison, he maps out the diverging causes, dynamics, and manifestations of these two instances of conservatism in crisis.

In his article “Loyal Allies or Stubborn Establishment? Congress, the GOP, and Trump’s ‘America First’ Doctrine,” *Florian Böller* directs our attention to the realm of foreign policymaking during the Trump presidency. In particular, he examines ways and the extent to which Trump’s populist “America First” foreign and security policy agenda was (not) supported by the Republican Party in Congress. Focusing on the example cases of arms control and foreign aid, *Böller* identifies an important variance with regard to executive–legislative relations depending on the existence of long-standing Republican positions that “establishment” lawmakers asserted even against the then-president’s preferences.

Shifting focus to the polity dimension, *Roland Lhotta* assesses polarization and intensifying contestation in the United States as coincident with partisan shifts such as the radicalization of the Republican Party and also as more complexly interlinked with, and even fostered by, institutional factors. In addressing the questions of “Dysfunctional Constitutionalism or Dysfunctional Politics,” his article explores the ongoing constitutional crisis in the nexus between “law, politics, and institutional design.” With an analytical framework combining constitutional and institutionalist–theoretical perspectives, *Lhotta* shows how party-politically charged ideas and contestation around norms and rules become reinforced by the institutional design of the constitution. It reveals the increasingly disintegrative effects not only of partisanship but especially of the constitutional–political contestation that has grown increasingly polarized under the widely same constitutional framework.

While the United States has long stood out as a sort of outlier among contemporary democracies given the salience of religion in politics, it is also imperative to take religion into consideration, not least in relationship to the conservative sociopolitical spectrum, in order to comprehend the polarization in U.S. politics and society. In their article on the “God Gap,” *Gert Pickel* and *Susanne Pickel* delve precisely into this nexus, examining the Christian Right as a possible driver of “a revolution from conservative to the far right in the United States.” They examine the alliance between the Christian Right and Republicans, and also examine trends in the longer perspective of development as well as a wider orientation among (non)religious groups. In addition to pinpointing this solidifying alignment with the Republican Party, *Pickel* and *Pickel* elaborate on a variety of policy implications in the context of polarization in the United States as well as for other democracies that face trends—albeit so far less radical but nevertheless comparable—linking religiosity with rejection of pluralism.

In her contribution “American Philanthropy in the Age of Political Polarization: Conservative Megadonors and Foundations and Their Role in Spreading Climate Skepticism,” *Natalie Rauscher* examines the highly relevant, though in political science much neglected, changing role of wealthy donors and the organizations they have created under the banner of philanthropic giving. The focus is both on conservative “megadonors” and affiliated foundations and on the area of climate policy and their furthering of climate denialism in particular. To this end, the article illuminates how philanthropy has long occupied a special place in state–society relations in the United States but has come to reflect and even contribute to growing polarization in past decades. Moreover, *Rauscher* shows how conservative foundations in particular have adopted new tools and avenues for supporting and successfully influencing the conservative–libertarian and especially the market–fundamentalist agenda of the GOP and, in particular, have bolstered disinformation in public discourse. Their reach, as she demonstrates, is increasingly extending transnationally.

In “Problematising Modern Democracy in the United States,” *Julia Simon* examines the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the wake of the 2020 presidential election,” thus highlighting the epistemic dimension of the current extreme polarization that underlies the contestation of the constitutional–political order in the United States. Drawing on a Foucauldian governmentality/counterconduct approach, *Simon* inquires into liberalism’s authoritarian potential and studies how election denialism and related (violent) antisystem activity were being rationalized, legitimized, and anchored in political subjectivities as efforts to “protect” democracy. The study bears relevance beyond the U.S. case as it renders visible a profound struggle over the epistemic foundations of the current liberal order, and analytically disentangles patterns of subjectivation and forms of counter-conduct based on their prime targets, modes of operation, and the forms of knowledge they rely on.

Among many controversial developments linked to the Trump administration, the two impeachment procedures represent especially salient constitutional and institutional challenges. They underlined the contentiousness of the previous president, but they also invite renewed evaluation of impeachment as a control mechanism in government. In “Impeachment as Last Resort to Safeguard Democracy?” *Mahir Tokatlı* revisits “Removing the Head of Government in Different Institutional Settings,” placing focus on the U.S. impeachment but including a comparative perspective on parliamentary–democratic removal procedures, with a focus on the German “constructive vote of no confidence” in particular. The common denominator is conceptualized as institutionalized mistrust, an essential counterpart to elections of governments but which has received much less attention. *Tokatlı* thus sheds new light on how institutionalized mistrust is organized in different institutional settings, and prompts reflection on respective risks, including whether impeachment may become pathological and even reinforce democratic backsliding.

4 Conclusion

A point of departure for this special issue is the premise that the United States poses an especially powerful example in which multiple challenges and crisis-re-

lated trends have exacerbated, some of them recently in fast motion. We thus hope to contribute to further illumination not only of the asymmetric polarization and creeping autocratization in the polity and politics of the United States but also of their interlinkage with features of the U.S. constitution and political system, the political culture, the party system, and its meso-institutional environment. To us this means, first, taking into account the often complex, longer-term developments and various layers of a possible conservative (r)evolution and the conditions, conflicts, and actors that have been relevant in shaping them. The special issue thus includes diverse contributions that are geared more toward individual (e.g., presidents, party leaders, and activists) or collective actors (e.g., parties, interest and civil societal groups), institutions (e.g., executives, legislatures, administrative bodies), levels (federal, state) of government, the electorate, or policy fields, including foreign policy.

Second, examining the relevant phenomena from multiple angles also means diversifying, reflecting on, and potentially adapting the concepts we apply in order to visibilize key factors and actors and how they relate to the ongoing threats to U.S. democracy. The ideological, institutional, organizational, societal, and discursive asymmetry behind the current escalation of polarization, of the conflict over who belongs in the political community, of economic inequality, and of executive aggrandizement (see Mettler and Lieberman 2020) thus remain of crucial concern for our research endeavors.

Furthermore, the special issue underlines the importance and relevance of undertaking a concerted analytical effort examining the U.S. example in comparative perspective and with a view to shared challenges and commitments in international relations. The individual contributions, along with their respective findings, should thus prompt reflection and advance research into how key issues, longer-term developments, and escalating contestations parallel, are transferrable to, or are connected with other contexts, especially contemporary liberal democracies in Europe. Of course, context matters, and numerous trends and developments in focus here may prove in many ways peculiar to the United States. However, as the articles assembled in this special issue likewise show, taking the U.S. case as a focus provides a particularly appropriate approach to inquire into the mechanisms and interlinkages underlying several key challenges of—and to—advanced liberal democracy and its social, economic, institutional, and epistemic bases. Finally, we hope to foster exchanges that facilitate paths to accumulate insights on potential challenges to societal and systemic stability as well as on adequate responses to flaws and defects in the established structures, thus ultimately ensuring genuinely democratic stability.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Conflict of interest J. Simon and J. Sonnicksen declare that they have no competing interests.

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