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The 2020 election and its aftermath: Love, lies, and ensorceling leadership

George R Goethals
University of Richmond, Richmond, VA, USA

Abstract

Though Donald Trump decisively lost the 2020 US presidential election, his mob-inciting charisma created a large and devoted base unusual in American politics. Insights from Sigmund Freud's account of the emotional connections between leaders and followers, and later reframing of those views, suggest some of the dynamics that create the intense attachment expressed by Trump supporters, and his resulting ability to get his most loyal followers and allies to believe and do almost anything, no matter the evidence revealing his lies and the extremity of his demands. Essential elements include qualities of a leader and the leader's message that make followers unable to countenance any criticism of their loved, overvalued messenger; followers' uncritical willingness to believe whatever the leader says; and followers' capacity to rationalize whatever actions they take as a result of those claims. The troubling implications for democracy of both the Electoral College and the Republican Party's embrace of Trump and his message are discussed.

Keywords

Donald Trump, 2020 election, crowd psychology, leader idealization, rationalization, Republican Party, democracy

The 3rd November 2020 US presidential election and its 2-month aftermath revealed aspects of both resilience and vulnerability in America's republican democracy. We may never know how close Donald Trump came to overturning the clear will of the people, essentially staging a coup, by enlisting the support of Republican officials at various levels throughout the federal system and across state governments. They were shameless in being complicit in fomenting a dangerous riot of Trump supporters at the US Capitol. On the other hand, throughout the post-election period even more local and state officials in several swing states resisted the pressure of Trump and his allies, working diligently to ensure a fair outcome. It was not obvious that their resistance would hold. The

Corresponding author:
George R Goethals, Jepson School of Leadership Studies, 221 Richmond Way, University of Richmond, VA, 23173 USA.
Email: ggoethal@richmond.edu

result speaks to the courage and patriotism of judges, governors, secretaries of state, and others throughout the country who held firm. They saved democracy in the United States. We owe them a great deal.

This essay considers two main themes. First, we contextualize both Donald Trump's political message and the extraordinary strength of his rendering of it, but also the limitations of its appeal. Here, we also consider why so many of his obvious lies are believed, and why so many of his frighteningly anti-democratic actions are tolerated or worse yet, applauded. Second, we need to understand those who were complicit, or worse, with Trump's maneuvers. Unfortunately, the psychology of those who acquiesced to Trump's pressures is easier to understand than that of those who showed moral and political backbone. Research has told us more about the bad than the good in the human condition. Finally, we consider the threats to democracy that loom ahead, including the antiquated and anti-democratic Electoral College. Will we ever return to pre-Trump election norms? Are other elections likely to be contested, and perhaps even overturned in the foreseeable future?

The power of Trumpism

The strength of the Trump base's identification with him and each other is largely unprecedented in American history, though Andrew Jackson's populist support in the 1820s and 1830s was somewhat similar. Like Trump, Jackson complained that he and his followers had been cheated by condescending elites. Like Trump, Jackson also had a compelling strongman persona. However, the differences are notable as well. Jackson truly was cheated out of a presidential election, in the "Corrupt Bargain" of 1824. And, Jackson was a military hero rather than someone who avoided military service complaining of bone spurs. But, as with Jackson, Trump and his followers are bonded in their anger and even hatred of their political opponents. Trump did not invent the recent US polarization or tribalism—those have been part of the fabric since the 1960s—but those were hugely magnified and amplified by his divisive manner and message. While those have won him devoted followers, they have also led the majority of Americans to reject him. The Republican Party did quite well in congressional races, state house races, and gubernatorial elections in 2020, but the man at the top of the ticket was deserted by many in his party. Several of the same qualities that make Trump a hero to his base make him a villain to a majority of Americans, if Joe Biden's 51.4 percent of the popular vote is used as the measure. But, we need to understand Trump's enthusiastic appeal to his base. That attachment reflects both Trump's fundamental political narrative and the strongman manner in which he relates it.

Donald Trump's political narrative

Donald Trump expressed the core element of his political story when he announced his campaign for the Republican nomination in June of 2015. Railing at immigrants from Mexico, he declared "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." He also claimed that the United States had been ripped off by other countries through stupid trade deals. He generally opposed almost any international agreements. Those who now constitute his base knew from that opening that Donald Trump was their man.

In many ways, the nationalistic, nativistic, and often racist segment of the American electorate Trump gave voice to has long been part of American democracy. It revealed itself dramatically in the 1850s with the advent of the American, or "Know Nothing," Party. That group's defining principles were opposition to Roman Catholics and to immigrants. Unlike nativist constituencies in other periods, the Know Nothings were generally well educated and middle class, stridently opposed to

what they regarded as uneducated, poor Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany. The American Party was strong enough to run its own ticket in the presidential election of 1856, receiving 22 percent of the vote, mostly in the South. While the Know Nothing flame quickly extinguished, nativism and racism have continued to enlist considerable degrees of support in the subsequent decades. The Democratic Party ran explicitly racist campaigns in several post-Civil War elections. Anti-immigrant politics were prominent at a number of points in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. George Wallace ran as a white supremacist populist in 1968 and won 14 percent of the popular vote and 46 electoral votes in 1968. And, starting in the mid- and late 1960s, racists have been made welcome in the Republican Party, in line with Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy." So, there is nothing new about Donald Trump's nativist, nationalist, and racial appeal. It is just never been so successfully deployed in presidential politics. Trump has brilliantly exploited the economic fears and cultural resentments of his base.

Donald Trump's leadership persona

How do we understand the deep devotion proudly displayed by Donald Trump's large and ensorceled following? What does he give his followers, in his persona and in his message, that engenders the intense attachment we see in such unvarnished form at Trump rallies, and that he invoked in inciting a violent insurrection on the day the Congress certified Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election? Freud's analysis of group psychology is a good starting point in understanding both those events and the allegiance that carries over beyond them (Freud, 1920). First, Freud discusses the relief from restraint that people experience in crowds. Quoting Gustave Lebon's *The Crowd,* Freud details the lifting of inhibitions and the expression of often ugly passions resulting from feelings of anonymity and power that one feels in a crowd. People feel intensely bonded both to each other and to the leader. The group's common identification with the leader welds them to each other and enables the leader to take them nearly anywhere he wants them to go. Trump often suggests violence in his rallies and in his tweets, and while there are constraining factors both inside and outside of the rallies themselves, the potential for violence is plain. It became real in such instances as 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse shooting protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in August 2020 and in the attacks on the US Capitol on 6th January 2021. It is clear that Trump's crowds relish his unleashing of their aggression.

Importantly, Freud argues that crowd dynamics do not always dictate the outpouring of suppressed resentments and hostilities that we often see in Donald Trump's endless campaign events and post-election rallies. The basic crowd dynamic is selflessness. Normal self-regard is submerged in group identity, and the individual puts group interest ahead of self-regard. "The impulses which a group obeys may according to circumstances be generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they are always so imperious that no personal interest, not even that of self-preservation can make itself felt" (Freud p. 77, quoting LeBon). The "relevant circumstances" of course are the impulses provoked by the leader. The leader may inspire self-disinterested activity on behalf of the greater good. John F. Kennedy's famous call for service in his inaugural address is one such example: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." But, generally crowd leaders provoke hostilities toward those who are not included in the group they are mobilizing, with the target being any of a number of outgroups.

While the behavior seen in such enthralled crowds is extreme, the basic dynamics are the same outside the more charged crowd setting. A group attaches itself to the leader, group members feel bonded in their common identification with and attachment to the leader, and the leader has the capacity to direct the group members to both think and act in ways they would be very unlikely to

without the support of like-minded others. One fascinating example of the power of the leader of such a tight-knit, highly committed, and mutually supporting group comes from the classic study *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger et al., 1956). This book introduced academia and eventually the wider world to the concept of cognitive dissonance. A woman called by her pseudonym Marian Keech, living near Chicago, had gathered a small group of people who had committed to a religious faith conveyed through lessons Mrs Keech received in "automatic writing" from the planet Clarion. One set of those messages predicted that the city would be flooded on 21st December 1954 and that the world would be destroyed. Fortunately, the faithful were to be rescued by a flying saucer from Clarion at midnight of the fateful day. But, of course, there was no flying saucer, and no flood. The group sank into despair. Then, near dawn Mrs Keech received another message in automatic writing saying that the world had been saved by this small group's faith and that rather than giving up their beliefs, the group should begin proselytizing. And indeed, outreach commenced.

While there have been numerous critiques of this study, the basic dynamics seem valid. When people make irrevocable commitments to a belief system, and reality clearly does not support those commitments, the outcome is rationalized, and there is increased attachment to the belief system. Festinger et al. traced similar patterns in millennial groups since the time of Jesus. The leader and the group have the power to compel both belief and behavior that fall far outside conventional understandings of the world and dominant behavioral norms. In his book on civil rights hero and Congressman John Lewis, Jon Meacham notes that the defeated South's attachment to beliefs underpinning white supremacy during Reconstruction reflected the "willful suspension of reason in favor of tribal thinking [that] shaped everything" (Meacham, 2020: 132). We see extreme forms of this kind of leader power and tribal thinking in the Jonestown mass suicide and murders of 1978 and the Heaven's Gate suicides of 1997 (Tourish, 2013).

But what qualities must leaders or their message have, or what they must do, to persuade followers to absorb rather impermeable tribal beliefs, and to act in accord with them? Freud suggested several qualities. The leader (always assumed to be male in his analysis) must have a "strong and imposing will" and must be "held in fascination by a strong faith (in an idea)" (p. 81). More recent psychological analyses of persuasion and influence have rephrased these two claims. Terror management theory notes that under some conditions "people's allegiance may shift to an individual who exhibits an 'unconflicted' personality—in the sense of appearing supremely bold and self-confident—and offers a grand vision that affords a renewed prospect of being a valuable part of something noble and enduring" (Solomon et al., 2015: 117).

And then what attributes of the leader's faith or story make it work? Psychologists have argued that the message itself must either be logical and coherent enough to stand up to systematic thought, or it must have features, such as metaphor or complexity, that make it appear or seem to be convincing (Olson and Haynes, 2008). That is, audiences respond on the basis of some combination of "systematic processing" of arguments on the one hand, and on the other, simple cues that signal that the message is correct (Chaiken and Eagly, 1983; Petty and Cacioppo, 1984). Those cues might be attributes of the communicator ("strong and imposing will"; credibility; "unconflicted personality") or the message itself (it contains lots of arguments; it is easy to understand).

Gardner's (1995) analysis of leadership adds to these general considerations. Gardner defines a leader as an individual who by words and/or example markedly influences the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of a significant number of human beings. Furthermore, Gardner notes that leaders typically exert influence through the stories that they relate, particularly through stories of identity which offer narratives that explain where a group is coming from, where it is going, and what obstacles it faces. The leader and followers are portrayed as part of a dynamic quest in which they are the heroes.

Two elements of the leader and his or her story are particularly important. First, leaders must embody their story. They must act in ways that are entirely consistent with the identity claimed for themselves and the group they are leading. Second, the story itself must "fit" in some way with narratives that are "in the air," accounts that gibe with claims that are familiar in the culture, or at least to the group of followers who constitute the leader's audience.

How does the persona and rhetoric of Donald Trump match these considerations? For his followers, and even those opposed, Trump has a "strong and imposing will" and his manner is quite clearly unconflicted. His forcefulness is backed by his devoted base in a way that compels dissenting Republicans to fall in line or risk his wrath and that of the base, and effective excommunication from the tribe. As we will discuss later, the fear-driven acquiescence and compliance seen in the Republican Party, and its troublesome consequences, is an important matter in its own right. For now, it is nearly comical simply to note how much members of the GOP in the US Congress act like the sons of the despotic leader of the primal horde Freud discusses, who "knew that they were equally *persecuted* by the primal father, and *feared* him equally" (p. 125, italics in original). Somehow, according to this theory, the knowledge that they are equally persecuted leads followers to the illusion that they are equally loved. In this way, fear of the leader is morphed into love. Seeing this dynamic operate in many members of the Republican Party is amusing perhaps, but it is not funny.

Trump's words and behavior also suggest that he has "strong faith in an idea," or a set of ideas, all of which have fit with and resonate with his base. They relate an identity story of Trump and his followers fighting heroically to reclaim a lost greatness undermined by immigrant outsiders and disdained by urban elites. What Trump actually believes is a mystery, but his followers find the message utterly convincing and in line with their leanings. Trump's persona makes him a perfect messenger for his ideas. His confident, blustery manner is a heuristic, or "peripheral cue," to the believability of his message, a message that is not hard for his base to believe in any case. The nativism, nationalism, and racism that are part of that base are primed for such a message and such a messenger.

Beyond Trump's strongman persona, there is another important element to his believability. Freud makes much of the leader as a love object. Follower libido is directed to the leader with whom they are in love. One aspect of being in love is "overevaluation." The "loved object enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism." Freud adds that "the tendency which falsifies judgment in this respect is that of *idealization*" (p. 112, italics in the original). That is, the loved leader is so overvalued and idealized that the follower can stand no criticism and cannot judge rationally what the leader says. Weeks after the 2020 election, COVID-19 cases broke out in large numbers on tiny Tangier Island, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Its residents bonded and fought back by practicing strict masking and distancing. Rural Tangier Island is Trump country. When asked about Trump's essentially negligent handling of the virus, one 78-year-old woman said: "For me, he can do no wrong. I think he did the best he could." She suggested that perhaps he got bad advice from his advisers. The mayor said: "I love Trump as much as any family member I got. … Maybe he got a little relaxed. Like we did" (Jamison, 2020). Freud links such idealization to the fact that the followers' self-image is inordinately dependent on the image of the leader. Imperfections in the leader are imperfections in oneself and cannot be tolerated. Essentially, similar ideas find their way into "identity fusion theory" (Swann et al., 2012). This approach emphasizes "unusually porous, highly permeable borders between the personal and social self," which can lead to devotion to group and leader that makes possible sacrifice for the ingroup. It is not much of a stretch to see how a leader can bolster this devotion to and sacrifice for the ingroup into disdain for and aggression toward the outgroup.

Closely related to the idea of identity fusion is one other quality that Freud suggests a leader often displays. He "need only possess the typical qualities of the individuals concerned in

a particularly clearly marked and pure form" (p. 129). Social identity theory highlights this idea in the argument that leaders are generally the most prototypical members of their group (Hogg, 2001). Is Trump prototypical of what he calls "my people?" In some ways, he obviously is not. He is wealthy, they are suffering economically; he is urban, they are largely rural; he brags of attending an Ivy League school; they generally have not. But, there are ways in which Trump has embraced the culture of his base. For example, his long involvement in professional wrestling includes a phony body slamming and head shaving of World Wrestling Entertainment's CEO Vince McMahon. His long association with fake wrestling, NASCAR, and reality television creates highly visible linkages to the tastes of many of his followers. In some important ways, he is one of them.

It is not only Trump's strong persona and devotion to the "noble and enduring" vision that makes him and it so persuasive. It is the vision itself. Trump tells his base that the elite establishment represented by the Democratic Party has disdain for them and does not care about their interests. He capitalizes on resentment, envy, and the sense that "the system" is unfair (Applebaum, 2020). The tidy, simplistic quality of his message is itself a cue that it is credible. The slogan Make America Great Again is a fabulous summation of an entire set of beliefs. It is brief and sounds totally plausible, and its subtexts resonate with his followers well. The disdain felt from elites makes a narrative that they have value especially appealing.

The leader's imperative: Delivering self-validation

In his book *Hillbilly Elegy,* about growing up in rural Appalachian Ohio, J D Vance writes: "Barack Obama strikes at the heart of our deepest insecurities …. He is brilliant, wealthy, and speaks like a con law prof – which, of course, he is. Nothing about him bears any resemblance to the people I admired growing up: his accent – clean, perfect, neutral – is foreign; his credentials are so impressive that they're frightening" (Vance, 2016: Chapter 11). While Vance came from a tough background, he is an accomplished graduate of Yale University Law School, via the US Marine Corps and Ohio State University. But, reflecting on Obama while he was an undergraduate at Ohio State, Vance notes that Obama is different and superior. While he had no reason to suspect that Obama or people like him looked down on him, Obama's mere presence made Vance feel looked down on. The fact that he was a successful Black man may also have been a factor. Vance wrote that Obama's wife would tell people not to eat the kinds of food that people like him ate, and the fact that they knew she was right simply created more sense of inferiority. Of course, elites do sometimes make remarks that suggest that they are looking down on others, the classic example being Hillary Clinton's comment about the "basket of deplorables" supporting Trump in 2016. A sting of condescension is easily felt when inferiority is salient.

Vance's comments offer a clear window onto "status anxiety," a feeling of insecurity and inadequacy, linked among other things to the development of authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950). Recent work, especially on "right-wing authoritarianism" (Dean and Altemeyer, 2020), emphasizes the potential for racism-fueled aggression on the right to develop out of status anxiety. Trump's message both validates the worth of people who feel resentful about perceived disdain from elites and taps into and encourages their retaliatory inclinations. The potential for even more rioting and escalating violence by Trump allies toward their perceived outgroups, notably including disloyal Republicans, is part of the fabric of present-day American politics. Many of Trump's supporters are spoiling for a fight.

The idea that leaders draw support by validating the worth of people who are looked down on by others is central to my recent book with Scott Allison, *The Heroic Leadership Imperative* (Allison

and Goethals, 2020), which explores the importance of leaders gaining legitimacy by validating both individual worth and social identity. This element of the leader/follower exchange can become central when people's individual or social identity is insecure. The leader's payback for this validation is people's increased willingness to follow his or her direction (Tyler and Lind, 1992).

Trump, of course, exploits status anxiety, or the more general need for self-validation, in an entirely divisive way, a way that fosters demonization of those who are different and the potential for violence against perceived enemies. Trump seems obsessed with the idea that he and "my people" are treated unfairly. The press reports "fake news" about him, and it does not recognize his accomplishments. His political opponents and their deep state allies are out to undermine him, and by extension, his people. Most importantly, his enemies among the elites have stolen an election that he won decisively. The only solution is to contest them at every turn. And, Trump did this every day after Joe Biden was declared the winner of the election on the first weekend after the vote. When he had been asked in his first debate with Biden whether he would condemn extreme white supremacist groups, Trump called on the hate group Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." The call for violent intervention after the election, should he lose, was none too subtle, culminating in his explicit call to march on the US Capitol on 6th January of this year. Trump often vaguely walks back his provocations, but they are taken, as intended we can be sure, as a validation of the group and its resentments. After 6th January, there is no reason to expect that Trump will ever stop fomenting this violence.

Trump's followers in the nation's capital

Arguably, the most important lessons on the nature of leadership and followership from the 2020 election and its aftermath come from observing Trump's ability to get most of the Republicans in Congress to go along with his demonstrably false accusations of voter fraud. No matter how many court cases the Trump campaign lost, including being summarily dismissed twice by a unanimous US Supreme Court, Trump maintains considerable support for his lies not only from his base but from elected Republicans. It is difficult to know what is more worrying for our democracy—public compliance to Trump's demands for expressions of loyalty, offered by some members of Congress who reportedly know better, or the internalization and complete private acceptance of his reality-defying charges. Many seem as willing to accept alternative realities as Marian Keech's true believers noted earlier.

Freud noted that one of a leader's best techniques for persuasion is exaggeration combined with repetition: "He must paint in forcible colors, he must exaggerate, and he must repeat the same thing again and again" (p. 78). Trump does all of that perfectly. His baseless accusations are fully internalized both because of his skilled deployment of those tools and also the freedom from criticism that derives from being a love object to his base. How impervious are those beliefs? Can they be changed by evidence? Not a chance. In an early 2021 op-ed piece, David Brooks of *The New York Times* wrote: "It turns out if you tell someone that their facts are wrong, you don't usually win them over; you just entrench false belief" (Brooks, 2021). This assertion restates what Festinger et al. wrote years ago in introducing cognitive dissonance theory: "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. …. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. … The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of his beliefs than ever before."

But, not all Republicans accepted the alternative reality the president purveyed in what he notably called "Trump media," at least at first. But, what happens with those who simply go along without initially believing what they are publicly signing on to? The relevant dynamics have long been understood in terms of decades of research on cognitive dissonance. First, we know that

followers comply with small requests from leaders, even if they do not believe they should, because it is simply easier (Kellerman, 2004). Once on the path to yielding, it is very difficult to get off. This phenomenon is known as "foot-in-the-door" compliance (Freedman and Fraser, 1966). It was described in a 1st May 2019 *New York Times* op-ed about Trump by former FBI director James Comey: "It starts with your sitting silent while he lies, both in public and private, making you complicit by your silence. In meetings with him, his assertions about what 'everyone thinks' and what is 'obviously true' wash over you, unchallenged … because he's the president and he rarely stops talking. As a result, Mr Trump pulls all of those present into a silent circle of assent" (Comey, 2019). Comey goes on to note increasing levels of rationalized compliance. "Of course, to stay, you must be seen as on his team, so you make further compromises. You use his language, praise his leadership, tout his commitment to values. And then you are lost. He has eaten your soul."

Comey hints at but does not describe the frequent result of this overt acquiescence. As theory predicts, the discrepancy between what one has publicly said or done and what one believes creates an uncomfortable drive to resolve the inconsistency, that is, to rationalize the behavior to one's psychological satisfaction (Festinger, 1957). One route often taken is simply to come to believe what you have said. This apparently has happened to many Trump allies who first gave in in small ways but then could not draw back. However, there is then a further consistency problem. You are now saying and believing different things than what you said or believed earlier. One very frequent result is that people forget what they used to think and claim consistency (Goethals and Reckman, 1973; Nisbett, 2015). It might be difficult to do that when one's earlier views are a matter of public record. However, Republicans like Texas Senator Ted Cruz have demonstrated impressive capacities to deny or rationalize change. Ordinarily, however, much of this kind of change and denial of change happens without conscious awareness, or any need to publicly explain. Your brain as well as your soul has been eaten.

An important element in whether public compliance leads to private acceptance is people's perceptions of themselves as free, as having agency, and as not submitting to coercion. Many studies in cognitive dissonance tradition depend on people maintaining an "illusion of freedom," such that they feel that they went along willingly with an authority figure, not because they were coerced, but because they acted willingly (Kelley, 1967). Such a perception of willful acquiescence then fosters the need to believe what one is doing and saying, and the perception that one has always held those stances, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. It remains to be seen to what extent members of the Republican Party who initially were horrified by Trump but subsequently bent, more or less, to his will, come either to internalize the Trumpism they have been forced to enact, or recognize that they did what they had to do to avoid his wrath. Either way, in the months and years ahead, many Republicans will find it congenial to take pages out of Trump's playbook so as to stay in the good graces of both Trump himself and his loyal base.

The Republican Party and the future of American democracy

What happens now? Joe Biden faces daunting crises, both in the near term and farther down the road. Donald Trump did as much as he possibly could do to salt the earth before he left office, and thereby impede Biden's effort and effectiveness. Many Republicans have been only too happy to stand by and watch the destructive norm-shattering show, or play a part in it. How will all of this affect the prospects for American democracy?

There is still such a thing as a moderate Republican, but the breed is nearly extinct. The party is headed further and further to the right. As it does, its anti-democratic tendencies will become more

prominent. Despite doing well in 2020, party orthodoxy seems to be that voting should be made as difficult as possible so that likely Democratic voters will simply give up. So far that has not worked, as the Democratic victories in the Georgia Senate runoffs showed, but the undemocratic elements of this approach are worrisome. The GOP seems to believe that the more people vote, the worse their party fares. It has made numerous efforts to make voting identification requirements more onerous, to shrink windows for early voting, and to curtail absentee and mail-in voting. During the 2020 election, in Harris County, Texas, which includes Houston, Republicans cut the number of drive-thru polling sites from ten to one just a few hours before polls opened. All of this is somewhat ironic, since the Republican Party did very well as a whole in that election. There is no indication that increased turnout hurt the GOP.

Donald Trump claimed that the 2016 election was rigged against him, until he won. He made similar false claims about such rigging both before and after the 2020 election. He tried to get the election overturned in courts, in statehouses, and in Congress. Even though he failed, he may have rewritten the script that future Republican candidates will follow in the years ahead, especially if he is one of them. Will Republicans contest election losses in the future and hope for better outcomes in courts? They came close in losing a challenge in the Wisconsin Supreme Court on a 4–3 vote. The decision could easily have gone the other way and flipped the state to Trump (Kilgore, 2020). Possible new avenues for overturning future elections may open. While many election officials and judges across the country followed the law in resisting Trump's efforts to sideline democracy, it is hard to be confident that such efforts will fall short the next time around. We are looking toward a future where one party believes in and promotes democracy. The other seems afraid of it. Significant parts of the Republican Party seem willing to suppress voting, overturn election results, and refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Democratic victories. None of this bodes well for the future.

Finally, we must mention the Electoral College. There have been and still are many critiques of this very strange system, going back to the founders themselves (Wegman, 2020). This is not the place to explore them. But, it must be noted that its most undemocratic feature is that it can deliver the presidency to the loser of the popular vote. That happened twice in the late nineteenth century, in very close elections. It never occurred in the 20th century, though there were some close calls. Since then, we have encountered such mismatches twice in past 20 years, first in the extremely close Bush versus Gore election of 2000, and then quite dramatically in the 2016 election where the mismatch of the popular vote and electoral votes was stark. Hillary Clinton clearly won the popular vote that year, by three million, or 2.1 percent. But, Donald Trump received an even clearer victory in the Electoral College, by winning three decisive Great Lakes states—Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—by less than 1 percent each. Trump carried those states by a total of 78,000 votes out of the nearly 130,000,000 cast nationwide, or less than 0.001 percent. In the 2020 election, Joe Biden won the popular vote by more than seven million, or 4.5 percent, and the electoral vote by the same margin that Trump won in 2016. But, it could easily have gone another way. Biden won Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin each by much less than 1 percent, or 42,000 votes in total. If Trump had won those three states, the electoral vote would have been tied, 269–269. Eventually the House of Representatives, where each state has one vote if no candidate receives 270 electoral votes, would have named Trump president. The Electoral College is a horrible, horribly undemocratic trap that the founders started trying to fix almost immediately. Since then hundreds of attempts at reform have fallen short. Since it favors the Republican Party at the moment, there is no chance of resuming bipartisan efforts to abolish or amend it. Ultimately, this issue must be addressed, if we are to restore genuine democratic legitimacy to the leadership choices that American voters make in future presidential elections.

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ORCID iD

George R Goethals https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0807-8406

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Author biography

George R Goethals holds the E. Claiborne Robins Distinguished Professorship in Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. Goethals' recent books include *Presidential Leadership and African Americans: "An American Dilemma" from Slavery to the White House* (2015); *Realignment, Region and Race: Presidential Leadership and Social Identity* (2018); *Romance of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* (2019, with Scott T. Allison); and *The Heroic Leadership Imperative* (2020, with Scott T. Allison).