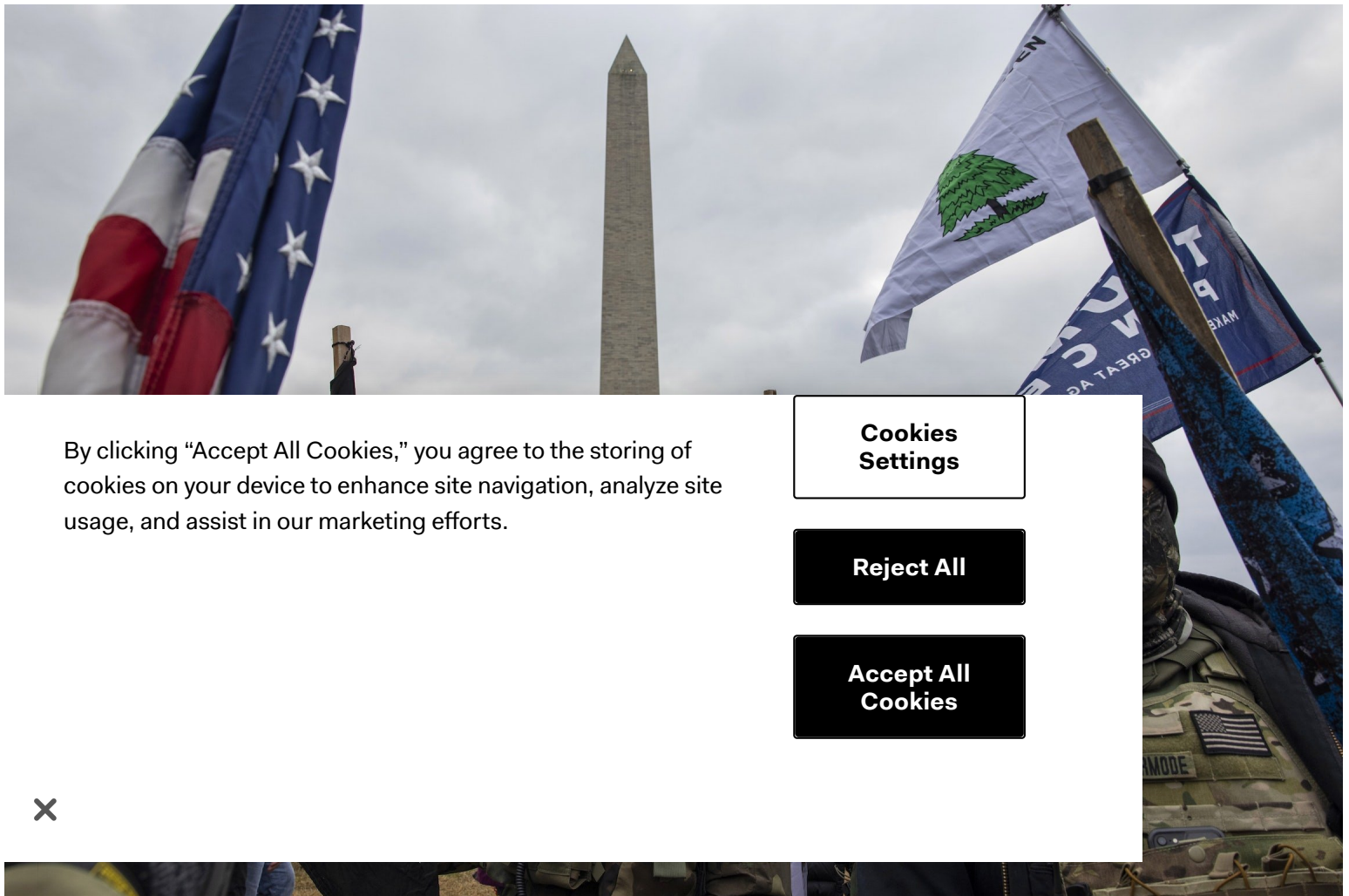


BRACE YOURSELF

It's Going to Take Several Miracles to Stop the Republican Party From Turning America Into Hungary

It's probably already too late to save American democracy. Here is the series of improbable events doing so would require.



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Pro-Trump protesters in front of the Washington Monument on January 6, 2021
Brynn Tannehill / July 26, 2022

When Nancy Pelosi told reporters back in May that “this country needs a strong Republican Party, not a cult,” she was expressing the desire among those on the center-left and moderates for the United States to return to a bygone age of political normalcy. They remember when the GOP still had a moderate wing and kept the “wacko birds” (as Senator John McCain called them) at arm’s length; when President Reagan cut deals with House Speaker Tip O’Neill, and when Republicans believed that it was more important for democracy in general to prevail than the Republican Party. It’s a noble idea, but I can’t help but be reminded of what famed pilot Chuck Yeager once told me when I asked him a “what if” question: “And if a frog had wings, he wouldn’t bump his ass when he hopped.”

The truth is that American democracy is essentially broken beyond fixing and is unable to withstand a right-wing populist movement determined to destroy it. The Eisenhower wing of the GOP was rooted out long ago. It will take multiple miracles to avoid getting one or more of the “bad” endings in this Choose Your Own Adventure of dystopias. The best realistic case resembles a Jim Crow America from the 1920s, complete with a Gilded Age, mass migration, violent militias running amok, and no-go zones for minorities. The possibilities only go downhill from there into secession, fascism, and civil war.

The U.S. today is a deeply polarized country. An Electoral College map from only 26 years ago—when Bill Clinton won four Southern states along with Ohio, Iowa, and Missouri—is a complete impossibility today. Over the past 40 years, Democrats have shifted incrementally to the left, while the GOP has taken a giant leap to the right, based on long-standing DW-NOMINATE scores. The Republican base has shifted since the Carter administration to focus on religious conservatives, and particularly white evangelicals, who are concentrated in the South. This base has little in common with the American public at large and holds outlier positions and priorities on almost every issue.

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Since (roughly) the second term of the Bush administration, there has been a tacit understanding between the GOP and its base that they cannot win hearts and minds: The demographics of the U.S. are inexorably shifting toward nonwhites and secularism. Despite the postmortem on the 2012 election that called for a bigger-tent party, the GOP has settled on a strategy that it must take the wheel away from voters and steer the country with or without the consent of the governed. While Latino voters swung toward Trump and Republicans in 2020, it remains to be seen whether this is the sign of a long-term trend of GOP messaging winning them over; Latinos tend to be less beholden to parties and are more “swingy” than the most voters.

The REDMAP project began the process of seizing power at the state and local level after the 2010 census, using gerrymandering and voter suppression to allow political parties that win one election to rig the game so that they might potentially never lose another one, regardless of the vote. The increasingly right-wing Supreme Court has stepped aside and allowed the de-democratization of large swathes of the U.S., by negating the enforcement mechanisms of the Voting Rights Act in *Shelby v. Holder* and permitting hyperpartisan gerrymanders in *Gill v. Whitford*.

Republicans tried to overturn the 2020 election results, but the guardrails held, if just barely. As a result of Donald Trump’s relentless attacks on the outcome, roughly 70 percent of Republicans did not believe that Joe Biden won legitimately, and still do not. The January 6, 2021, insurrection was a direct attempt to invalidate a legitimate election result, yet Republicans largely went along with it: Roughly two-thirds of House Republicans voted to give the insurrectionists what they wanted mere hours after they stormed the Capitol.

The GOP isn’t even bothering to hide its goals to seize permanent minoritarian power anymore. Republican candidates for various state offices in all the swing

states are promising to deliver their Electoral College votes to the GOP presidential nominee in 2024, regardless of whom people in the state cast their ballots for. Republican leadership also isn't even bothering to hide its ambition to turn the U.S. into a competitive authoritarian theocracy: The 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference was held in Hungary to celebrate and learn what can be gained by killing democracy as Viktor Orbán has.

Republicans' brazenness can be attributed to the knowledge that there is a vanishingly small chance Democrats can prevent them from achieving their goals. The path to avoiding this is extremely narrow and requires black swans to accomplish. First, Democrats must retain the House and win all five toss-up seats in the Senate. This is highly unlikely given that off-year elections are usually wipeouts for whichever party holds the White House. Biden's approval ratings are as bad as Trump's were at the same point, or worse. Democrats have gained on generic ballots since the hideous *Dobbs* decision overturning *Roe v. Wade*, but they still have an uphill climb. After the 2020 census and another round of gerrymandering, the House tilts about 3.4 points toward the GOP. The Senate has a seven-point lean. To break the filibuster with 60 votes in the Senate, Democrats would need to win the national vote by at least 16 points three times in a row. It's true that if Democrats win every toss-up Senate race in 2022, they might have the 50 votes to eliminate the filibuster without Manchin's and Sinema's support, though this only matters if they hold onto the House as well, which right now is a long shot.

But let's pretend Democrats do pull off the miracle, win the House, and have a 52–48 advantage in the Senate. Then they would have to end the filibuster, and pass laws dealing with gerrymandering and voter suppression and preventing the kinds of Electoral College fuckery the GOP is planning on. Then they will probably need a Republican justice on the Supreme Court to pass away of natural causes, because none of them will step down while Biden is in office. This is also crucial because the hyperpartisan composition of the court today ensures that it would likely overturn any laws Democrats pass. Making John Roberts the swing vote again is crucial. Democrats would have to hang onto at least one part of the federal government for decades, despite the seven-point lean in the Senate and the five-point GOP lean in the Electoral College, to prevent the GOP from overturning

these laws the next time it holds the trifecta.

Finally, there's the *juris ex machina* that the Supreme Court threw into the mix when the justices granted certiorari in *Moore v. Harper*. This case tests the fringe legal theory that state (and potentially federal) courts cannot interfere with how state legislatures conduct elections. This is known as the “independent state legislature” theory. It was the basis for Trump's attempt to get swing-state legislatures to declare the 2020 election fraudulent and replace Biden electors with ones who would vote for Trump. Should the Supreme Court embrace the independent state legislature theory, it in effect means that gerrymandered state legislatures in battleground states like North Carolina, Wisconsin, Georgia, Michigan, and Florida will have the ability to overturn elections whenever they dislike the outcome. This represents the end of any hope for free and fair elections in the U.S.: The GOP will control the White House in perpetuity regardless of how people vote in 2022 or 2024.

This is a longish explanation of an inescapable truth. To prevent the GOP from capturing the U.S. the way Orbán and the Fidesz Party did Hungary is going to require several miracles in a row: having a history-and-poll-defying 2022 election, then being willing to overturn the filibuster, then getting lucky with an opening on the Supreme Court and a GOP that never regains its footing or suddenly decides to abandon its quest while at the cusp of victory.

All of this is to say, barring a series of black swan events, we must be prepared to face the reality of what sorts of fates inevitably await our country in a postdemocracy future. With *Moore v. Harper* about to make the independent state legislature theory a reality, 2022 is the last chance for Democrats to shore up our democracy against the oncoming tide of Christian nationalist authoritarianism. We need only look at Russia, and Hungary, to understand the consequences of failure.

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