

# Politics as religion, or religion as politics?

## How the dynamic explains the state of U.S. democracy in the age of Trumpism

In the contemporary United States, political and religious identities are increasingly intertwined, and faith communities are as polarized as the country at large. As a result, houses of worship often no longer function as meeting places where people of differing backgrounds can build bridges, but rather as political echo chambers, or even amplifiers of grievance and conspiracy. This is especially true of white evangelical Protestant communities, where support for authoritarianism—and even political violence—is growing. Donald Trump has skillfully navigated these trends, as white Christians lend their support to him at the highest levels relative to any religious group. Understanding this reality contributes to a well-rounded picture of U.S. populism and democratic backsliding and may help leaders who wish to stand up for liberal democracy.

Over the past nine years, liberal democracy in the United States has been challenged unlike at any other time in the nation's modern history. While warning signs have existed for several decades, the trouble has accelerated since June 2015, when Donald Trump famously descended the golden escalator in his eponymously named Manhattan tower and declared his first candidacy for president. Tensions are high, and rhetoric is heated.

While examples of democratic backsliding are numerous, the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol remains the most prominent example of how the marriage of incendiary rhetoric and far-right networks can produce violent, real-world consequences. Americans, and many others around the world, watched in horror as this temple to U.S. democracy was desecrated by a mob of insurrectionists seeking to disrupt the Electoral College vote count.

Chants of "Hang [U.S. Vice President] Mike Pence!" alongside scenes of lawmakers scrambling for shelter,

staffers hiding on the floor of legislative chambers, and vandals looting the office of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi were shocking to behold. For a political movement that ostensibly champions "law and order," the fact that five police officers lost their lives as a result is evidence that this far-right ideology is anything but pro-law enforcement.


The events of January 6 are sobering and tragic. They are also embarrassing for a nation that is fond of referring to itself as the "leader of the free world," and which has long purported to champion democracy, the rule of law, and liberalism in its foreign and domestic policy. But is the rise of the far-right, as manifested in such disturbing events such as the 2021 Capitol attack and the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, surprising?

Much ink has been spilled to answer questions such as this one. However, no single reason or answer can adequately capture the issue in its entirety, nor explain its causes, conditions, and potential solutions. There



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are many overlapping considerations and forces at play. As such, it is important to take into account the many intersecting forces that have undergirded, and continue to fuel, the far-right. Each can add something new to our understanding of this complex and multivalent phenomenon.

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One force that is essential to consider in the rise of the far-right and nationalism in the United States is that of religion. This includes how religious communities, groups, and leaders have variously enabled the movement, or resisted it. It also includes how faith plays a role in U.S. politics and policy-making—including in movements on both the left and the right.

Just like the concepts of the far-right, nationalism, and populism, so