



Article

January 6th and De-Democratization in the United States

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Abstract: The events of January 6th were a clear example of threats to American democracy. De-democratization is a process that preceded Trump's election and that can still be seen in the United States and around the world. Social theorist Charles Tilly wrote about how becoming a democracy is not a unidirectional, one-time event or goal, but a non-linear process. This paper analyzes developments in the United States that signal rises and falls in the level of democracy over the last several decades. It discusses Donald Trump's rise to power, the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, and the state of inclusion of ethnoracial minorities in the United States. It uses Tilly's proposed processes of democratization and de-democratization. This more nuanced understanding of democracy and state–society relations helps avoid celebratory stances about the promise of electoral politics as well as pessimistic assessments about the imminent arrival of fascism and authoritarianism.

Keywords: Charles Tilly; democratic regimes; democratization; democratic erosion; categorical inequality; charisma; Donald Trump



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1. Introduction and Background: The Democratic Nation-State as an Unexpected Product of Territorial Wars

After January 6th, 2021, and indeed, in the years leading up to it, many Americans questioned the strength of the democratic institutions in the United States. In a country allegedly built on the principles of equality, freedom of expression, and free speech, it is often hard to square those ideals with a reality of social inequality and racial discrimination. Some might make the argument that given the makeup of the United States' Senate and Electoral College, where a proportionately small share of the population determines electoral and legislative outcomes, the U.S. was never fully democratic to begin with. We argue, based on the theoretical works of Charles Tilly, that these aforementioned statements about democracy are neither wrong nor right. Instead, we posit that the social meanings of “democracy” should shift to definitions surrounding a process rather than a binary label of democratic or non-democratic regime. In other words, democracy is an ongoing project – movements toward more social equality and racial justice, for example, are movements toward more democracy. Understanding democracy as a process can better explain how social movements, violent extremism, and political ‘anomalies’ can change the degree of democracy in any given state.

Charles Tilly was a social scientist who published many influential books and articles, and is known as a pioneer theorist of political violence. Tilly began his career studying the counter-revolution in the Vendée region of France in 1793. Contrary to the contemporary celebration of the French Revolution, soon after the fall of the French monarchy, contra-revolutionary militias formed in parts of rural France to re-establish a monarchy in France (Tilly 1964). While unsuccessful, this reactionary movement is a lesson that regime change is not one-and-done.

During the rest of his career, Tilly worked on popular history, categorical inequality, social movements, and democratization. He argued that coercion and violence ordered

by governors, generals, militias, and warlords set the basis for unifying territories with dissimilar people under a centralized administration and the same flag—the modern nation-state as a political unit demarcated by borders and a supposed common culture. Tilly compared the formation of early nation-states, where citizens agree to pay taxes and serve in the army in exchange for protection from the potential or actual violence that they themselves generate, to the *modus operandi* of organized crime. Territorial wars between different peoples and local rebellions simultaneously brought warlords and gangs—the “violence entrepreneurs,” as Tilly (2003) calls them—to negotiate with local populations in a *quid pro quo* that we now call citizenship and national loyalty or nationalism. Tilly writes,

How to gain consent [of the governed]? All army-building states turned to some combination of reliance on coopted entrepreneurs, aggressive recruitment, impressment, and conscription. Even so, they faced widespread resistance to the increased burden of taxation and to the seizure of young men for the military. They bargained. They bargained in different ways: by sending in troops to recruit troops and collect taxes, by negotiating quotas for troops and taxes with the headmen of regions and local communities, by confirming the rights of existing assemblies (Parliament in England, Estates in France, Cortes in Castile, Corts in Catalonia, States-General in the Dutch Republic) to legislate contributions to military budgets. Even bloody repression of rebellions typically involved bargaining. Authorities punished a few offenders spectacularly while pardoning others who agreed to comply with the state’s demands. Furthermore, the settlement of a rebellion would generally state the grounds and procedures for legitimate future remonstrance. White-hot bargaining forged rights and obligations of citizenship. (Tilly in Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 174)

By examining historical records, Tilly concluded that war and violence, in general, play a major role in regime formation, including that of democratic regimes (Funes 2016).

Many authors (e.g., Kaspersen and Strandsbjerg 2017) reduce Tilly’s work to the phrase that “war made states, and states made war” (Tilly 1975, p. 42). Nevertheless, the second part of his argument was that wars between states in Western Europe created a local need for coercion to enlist in the army, pay taxes, and follow authorities at war; and that all this in-turn, unexpectedly led to the development of citizenship and welfare states as part of a negotiation between those in power and the population in their territories. That is to say, the economic, fiscal, and military mobilization that created these militarized states also created internal rebellions and general discontent about tax collection and the conscription of a percentage of young men to serve in the military. Nevertheless, the formula is not “war, hence democracy,” nor vice versa. “If it did, every state in bellicose Europe would have democratized by the sixteenth or seventeenth century” (Tilly in Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 166).

Despite a common narrative, the granting of rights was not a gradual evolution pushed by the spread of the ideas of the enlightenment. According to Tilly, the implicit strategy of rulers was to grant national rights to the minimum set of persons that would guarantee the delivery of militarily essential resources to the state and to collaborate with citizens so privileged in exploiting and repressing the rest. Women and enslaved people, for example, only escaped from that arrangement very recently on a historical scale. Indirect rule operated reasonably well, with a small number of people having rights of citizenship (Tilly in Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 175).

The expansion of the vote and other rights to citizens has been brought forth through the struggles of marginalized groups through social movements and other forms of contentious politics. Tilly’s review of the historical record shows that rights are won, not given, or predetermined.

So, all these Tillyian arguments add up to the claim that state formation in modern western Europe arose out of a fight between kings, warlords, the Church, and other states. The need to staff and finance wars with the sustainable support of the local population led to the rise of democracy after previously disenfranchised civilian groups were able,

through protest, to get rights and commitments from their governors, which then became almost fully accountable to and dependent on these national populations through popular elections. This arrangement was unanticipated, contingent, bi-directional, and ever-changing. Democracies increasingly included new constituencies, e.g., women and ethnoracial minorities, while excluding others, such as recent immigrants, minors, and inmates. Conceivably, there are many incentives for rulers to wish not to be so dependent on an electorate, which leads to the tenuous state of democratic regimes. For Tilly, institutions and tradition are insufficient to keep some rulers from creating procedural changes that give them longer terms in office, more control, fewer checks and balances, and place them closer to totalitarian authoritarianism. Thus, the peaceful transfer of power is short of a social miracle.

The work of Charles Tilly on political violence and de-democratization helps us understand contemporary events in the United States of America. Furthermore, Tilly was a close reader of Alexis de Tocqueville, both worried about the real possibility of people electing a person with tyrannical tendencies that, such as Napoleon or Stalin, would then erode or overturn democratic institutions. Echoing Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), Tilly warned that the main threat, and seeming contradiction, is that both democratic electoral procedures and personalistic rule depend on the trust and support of an important percentage of the population. Thus, there would be tyrants who can attain power through democratic elections, especially if they take hold of a major party.

2. Analytical Method: Democracy as a Process

As Tilly did, we argue that democracy is not a state or destination, but instead is a process of struggle and negotiation between groups that ebb and flow over time. Tilly theorized that democratization increased with (1) the integration of trust networks (sets of interpersonal connections where people are willing to share resources and help one another) into public politics; (2) the insulation of public politics from “categorical inequalities” (referring to ‘categorical groups’, for example, those created by gender, class, race, ethnicity, or religion); and (3) decreasing the influence of ‘power centers’ (such as clans and warlords, multinational corporations, and billionaire families) in public politics (see Table 1). The idea is to integrate all groups and subpopulations into a common system so that social networks and categorical groups do not have incentives to isolate or antagonize each other. This process could also happen in reverse in what Tilly calls de-democratization. For example, in a two-party system where party identity has become an important part of some people’s personal identity and where party affiliation highly correlates with ethnic or racial identity and place of residence, it is easier for each group to try to take the country in opposite directions.

Table 1. Examples of Democratization Processes.

Tenet	Integration of Trust Networks into Public Politics	Insulation of Categorical Inequalities from Politics	Decreasing the Influence of Power Centers
Examples of democratization	Members of a religious or civic organization coming together to support a policy related to the wellbeing of others.	Expansion of women’s rights. Expansion of voting rights.	Citizen’s United is overturned. Labor unions are able to form easily.
Examples of de-democratization	Communities and individuals who know each other find few ways to come together and engage in collective action around public issues.	Gerrymandering that over-represents one group to the detriment of another.	Corporate lobbying, super-PACs, and dark money increased non-transparent influence in elections and policymaking.

Influential authors describe processes similar to de-democratization, such as democratic backsliding, or democratic erosion (for reviews of this work, see [Bermeo 2016](#); [Grumbach 2022](#); [Keck 2022](#); [Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018](#); [Lieberman et al. 2021](#); [Luo and](#)

Przeworski 2023; Mettler and Lieberman 2020; Waldner and Lust 2018). Nonetheless, here we focus on Tilly's approach. Tilly conceived democracy as both a relationship between citizens themselves and between citizens and the state. He explained democratization and de-democratization, then as the changes encompassing those relationships—from benefiting particular groups to a broader and more egalitarian relationship with as many members of the polity as possible, or vice versa. Using these ideas, we argue that January 6th was not an individual event in a vacuum nor purely the result of Trump's ego. Instead, Trump's rise to power and the riots on January 6th were symptoms of a longer process of de-democratization.

Democracy as a process is not linear. It is messy and unclear. It moves up and down. So, while rights have expanded for many over the last fifty years, different rights have been lost, and those in power work harder to consolidate power and resources at the top. One example is the changing landscape of the economy that is accessible to Black Americans. For instance, when slavery ended, sharecropping, segregation, and Jim Crow were created—and then, as Jim Crow ended, redlining and mass incarceration appeared in the subsequent decades, creating a system of broad segregation and disenfranchisement of Black Americans (Alexander 2012). Another example is, by way of the landmark decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973), reproductive rights advocates won the federal right to abortion in the United States under certain circumstances, which was withdrawn in 2022 by a decision of the Supreme Court. The process of affording rights while taking them away—in a manner that is often targeted at groups that are categorically marginalized—is indicative of de-democratization. Additionally, over the last fifty years in the United States de-democratization can be seen as a result of various structural changes in the economy dating back to at least the Reagan administration, but continuing to today. One example that illustrates this is that neoliberal policies have been associated with increasing doubt about the effectiveness of democratic governance and the value of citizenship and diversity (Castañeda 2012, 2014, 2019b; Castañeda and Shemesh 2020; Peterson et al. 2015). The rich are able to get endlessly richer, and the poor get poorer and criminalized (Pascale 2021; Reiman and Leighton 2023).

3. Historical Perspectives: Democratization, De-Democratization, and State-Making

Before returning to our current-day situation, we use the following section to provide historical perspectives on democratization and de-democratization based on Tilly's work. Tilly's work shows how political borders and democracy are not something that can or should be legislated, dictated from the outside, drawn, or declared by imperial scribes. Instead, they result from historical violence (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 149). Tilly recognized that the historical trajectories of France and Great Britain improperly influenced the typical story about the creation of democratic states. This emphasis made some theorists present laziness and cultural or racial differences as explanations for the later democratization of Southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Tilly highlighted colonialism's negative impact on the relationship between governments and populations. Among them is the relative autonomy of the repressive apparatus in colonies, bases, and military outputs, which are funded and commanded from the metropolitan capital, even if partly funded with the fruits of colonial exploitation, and do not have to be accountable to the local population. The importation of coercive forces reduces the short-term need for local administrators to obtain the locals' cooptation and consent.

In a historical accident, the European States conquered much of the world. Tilly analyzed this process's devastating impact on the states outside of Europe. In the Americas, many preexisting civilizations and political organizations were destroyed by conquest, pandemics, evangelization, and slavery, creating more violent types of vassalage than those reigning in Europe. The colonial administration utilized the resources of European armies to conquer and repress the national populations and extract labor and resources from the Americas, Asia, and Africa. By not needing a continuous local military mobilization and without the crucial negotiation mechanism between governors and governed,

the transplanted European institutions produced predatory relationships, not democratic agreements outside of settler colonies. This is not a fault of the ex-colonies but another negative legacy of the colonial experience and racial capitalism. Tilly's discussion on the effects of colonialism addresses a wrong but commonplace critique of his work as applying a Eurocentric process globally. We agree that it is incorrect to generalize the historical European experience to explain state formation worldwide. Nevertheless, Western European historical cases help us understand the national trajectories and the different contemporary challenges regarding state capacity and ongoing violence caused by organized crime (Mandić 2020). The historical account provided by Tilly about the formation of democracy is based on Western European cases. However, his larger theoretical argument is that democracy is not just a legal system that can be copied but a path-dependent local process that reflects the power and social relations on the ground.

Thus, Tilly theoretically describes democracy not as a fixed state but as a process within a scale, which goes from a level of 0, where one individual has all the power, to 100, where each resident of a territory, without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, place of birth, age, or religion, has the same rights and voice regarding public matters and collective self-government. For the high democratic arrangement to continue, Tilly indicates the importance of frequent citizen consultation, which should be broad, egalitarian, protected, or enforced, and part of mutually binding agreements through general consultation of all residents in a polity (Tilly 2007). That is why Tilly states that democratic regimes should have a signal reading "under construction" because there is always more inclusion, participation, communication, and cooperation possible (Tilly 1995).

4. A Two-Way Street

The victories of the Revolutionary War in the thirteen colonies of 1775 and the French Revolution of 1789 are broadly seen as the beginnings of liberal democratic regimes. Therefore, some would think that the United States or France would always be in the vanguard of domestic democratic experiments, the expansion of rights, and the protection of people who live in its territories, but that is not the case. For example, soon after the Revolution, Napoleon declared himself Emperor and put a pause on democratic rule in France. Today, France and the United States still need to take steps to democratize further by guaranteeing de facto equality to immigrants and racial minorities.

Contemporary American citizens, who have only known one regime type during their whole lives, may believe that once democracy reaches a country, it will be there forever, yet that may not be the case. France is living in a period of de-democratization with the current exclusion of minorities, limiting their cultural and religious rights in the name of national republicanism (Castañeda 2018, 2020). There have been government attacks on freedom of speech, an increase in racialization and political violence, and violation of the rights of association for religious minorities (Kamdar 2020) and protestors against retirement-age reforms. Therefore, a series of laws and practices during the government of Macron have resulted in what Tilly calls de-democratization (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 183). Tilly created a graph showing democratization and de-democratization in France in relation to historical events and state capacity, the ability of the state to carry out its policies with sufficient funds and effect (Figure 1).

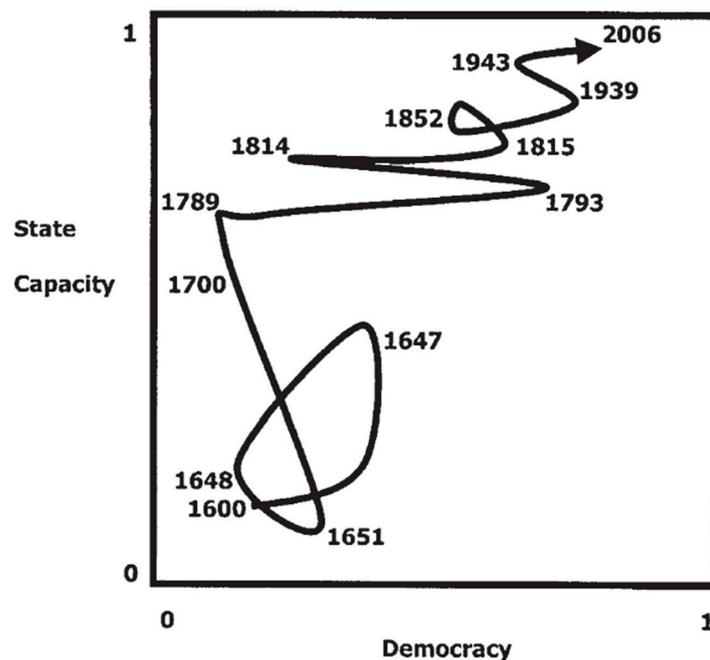


Figure 1. Schematic trajectory of French National Regimes, 1600–2006. Source Tilly in (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 191).

Democratic regimes as we know them are relatively recent in the history of humanity (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 185) and have always been partial since not all social groups are included. In a more ample sense, the United States could surely not be considered a true democracy until it expanded voting rights to African American women. The Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter demonstrated that access to voting, in theory, is insufficient to guarantee equal rights and legal protection from the police (Faust et al. 2019; Jenks and Castañeda 2020; Kaba and Duda 2017). The electoral college, voter suppression, and gerrymandering further distort the principle of one person, one vote. Foreigners living in the U.S. cannot vote, and many felons throughout the country are stripped of their right to vote for the rest of their lives. Since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, citizens' participation in deciding economic policies and social safety nets has also shrunk with the ideological argument of "freeing" the economy from the state (Castañeda 2012; Castañeda and Shemesh 2020). Furthermore, as we discuss below, recent events in the United States have marked a lapse in democratic practice. Rampant inequality, rights only partially protected, and a sense of decline for people's in-group may lead people to notice problems in their lives and to be lured by people, such as Trump, claiming to represent their disenchantment towards the system, the elites, or the establishment.

5. Analysis and Background: Tilly's Contentious Politics and Social Movements

Tilly defines a social movement as a group with a political agenda using various original and, most of all, culturally recognizable methods carried out in public with the State as the object of claims. Social movements can increase or decrease democratization. Tilly writes that movements demonstrate their importance through Worth, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment, or *WUNC* (Tilly et al. 2020; Bailey et al. 2023). The people marching and attacking the capital on January 6th showed *WUNC*; many followers who saw themselves as patriots felt they were saving their country and were willing to use violence, be arrested, or even die to keep Trump in power.

The support for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primaries, reflected an intentional grassroots mobilization in support of progressive policies that preceded his campaign. The initial political rise of Trump was not based on a grassroots grand mobilization a social movement—though it developed into one. Nonetheless, Trump benefited from the in-

frastructure and discursive space created by the Tea Party, the Heritage Foundation, gun groups, evangelical policy networks, and later on, militias, groups such as the Proud Boys, and Q-Anon followers. Trump used his campaign rallies and his time as President to create a WUNC among his supporters.

Trump created support during his presidential campaign and while president, with all the resources of the White House and 24/7 media coverage. While we would not call his election the result of a preceding grassroots movement, he ran his campaign and presidency intending to increase the support of his loyal followers. Rather than mobilizing followers behind policy positions, he focused on gaining their unconditional support of him as a leader. Trump indeed succeeded in mobilizing people beyond election dates. His followers were numerous, saw themselves as worthy of voice and representation, and showed unity, and most significantly, commitment to join the January 6th attack and kill or die for their leader if necessary. Thus, by January 6th, 2021, the elements that Tilly describes to qualify a proper social movement are met (Tilly et al. 2020).

Trump used his rallies and the media to generate political followers and fans, much like those worshipping celebrities. Like a performer, Trump used his rallies like a concert tour to cement a group of followers, and gain new supporters, converted into faithful followers after having seen him, listened to him in person, and experienced a collective effervescence with others and feeling part of a community. Michael C. Bender (2021) documents how a group of people would travel from town to town to attend Trump events. Some of these regulars got to know each other, became close friends, and called themselves the “front-row Joes” (Bender 2021). April Owens, a 49-year-old financial manager in Kingsport, Tennessee, had been to 11 rallies and told Bender, “Once you start going, it’s kind of like an addiction, honestly . . . I love the energy. I wouldn’t stand in line for 26 hours to see any rock band. He’s the only person I would do this for, and I’ll be here as many times as I can” (Bender 2019).

Trump was initially famous as the son of a rich man who built large public real estate projects in the New York boroughs—Donald Trump then conducted business in multiple arenas with varying and questionable levels of success (Badger 2021; Cattley 2023; Trump 2020). Later he became a popular figure in New York gossip pages and later nationally for being a reality TV star, hosting *The Apprentice*. As a celebrity, Trump was famous for being famous and supposedly rich. Some liked him for performing an embodiment of success and the spirit of capitalism.

Trump marketed himself for years as part of the New York elite. Yet as a presidential candidate in 2016, he claimed to represent the common people. Despite little evidence to this effect, some saw Trump as anti-establishment because he presented himself as a non-politician by doing things ‘differently’—speaking without a filter, uttering racist phrases, and supposedly ‘saying it how it is.’ In addition, Trump presented himself as the only person who could solve the primary problems he claimed the United States was facing, such as defending the U.S. from workers in China, disloyal competition, the supposed ‘invasion’ of immigrants, and, in his reelection campaign, supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. These themes have in common xenophobia and the celebration of Whiteness—including by some voters of non-European origins (Beltrán 2021). In his 2016 campaign, Trump blamed China, Mexico, and their nationals for the deindustrialization and growing inequality affecting the United States working-class class without identifying neoliberal policies, astronomical CEO compensation, and the prioritization of shareholders as responsible for those adverse effects of economic globalization but blaming migration instead (Castañeda and Shemesh 2020).

Despite losing the popular vote, Trump narrowly won the 2016 Electoral College and swiftly took over the Republican Party and most of its voters, espousing the politics and priorities of his fanbase, evangelical conservatives, White nationalists, and Christian nationalists (Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead et al. 2018). While there were some vocal resisters to Trumpism in the party, the vast majority of republicans went with him and for him—some may have privately disliked him due to his lack of politeness but were happy

to work with him to pass their conservative policies, remake the judicial system, and install hardline conservatives on the Supreme Court.

Once he was president, Trump continued using Twitter, the traditional media, and his rallies to keep gaining followers. Many were willing to follow him blindly, dogmatically believing in him. Following the populist textbook (Müller 2016), from his point of view, all criticism was erroneous, defamation, and caused by the manipulation of media corporations and the far left. No argument is enough to change the minds of many people who believe in the conspiracy theories of Trump and his followers. In this way, the growing partisanship and manipulation of facts by the Republican Party, and its Tea Party wing, came to its logical conclusion with the exaggerated conspiracies of Q-Anon. This was supported by the anti-immigrant militias, such as the Minutemen on the border and White nationalists who spread pseudo-academic arguments (Castañeda 2019a), as well as armed hate groups, such as the Proud Boys and the 3 Percenters (Miller-Idriss 2020).

Trump paraphernalia became increasingly conspicuous. Republicans had previously used the American flag and chants of "U.S.A., U.S.A" as a patriotic rallying cry, most of all after the September 11th attacks. Trump added the red hat with the phrase "Make America Great Again," also a historical reference to fascist groups in the early twentieth century. For the 2020 campaign, there were shirts, coats, winter hats, and even gigantic flags with Trump's name waving behind trucks, which some people on social media compared to the ISIS flags a top of trucks during the height of that group.

After losing the popular vote, the electoral college, and over 60 lawsuits claiming fraud at the end of 2020, Trump encouraged his followers to go to Washington, DC, on the day of the pro forma certification of the electoral college votes in Congress. It "will be wild" he promised on Twitter on 19 December 2020 (Select Committee 2022, p. 499).

On January 6th, some of the most loyal and radical of Trump's followers came from different parts of the country to take part in his "Stop the Steal" rally in front of the White House, where Trump encouraged them to put a stop to the certification of Joseph R. Biden's victory in the 2020 elections. Many attendees came dressed in military gear and Trump paraphernalia, their version of the Italian blackshirts or the red shirts worn by Southern White Supremacists. Guns were not in full display but there were discussions about not having functioning metal detectors to get to the rally, and Trump and allies spoke behind bulletproof glass. The gathering in front of the White House was a series of calls to action to rally the troops. As Chris Hayes said on MSNBC on 12 July 2022, "the crowd was the weapon." However, we are not talking about an angry mob reacting violently spontaneously. This was part of a concerted effort organized over months to challenge and even change the election results (Select Committee 2022). In the larger sense, it was also the logical outcome of actions taken by conservatives over decades to bring together different constituencies around changing Congress and the Supreme Court to advance conservative policy favorites, such as low corporate taxes, abortion bans, and the availability of weapons. The use of force around January 6th was part of a well-coordinated conspiracy orchestrated by Trump, but the things that led to it were not new. The demonization of Democrats and the use of religion, xenophobia, and patriotism by Republicans for electoral purposes preceded Trump and were used effectively in George W. Bush's reelection campaign and long before that.

Neither the District of Columbia's Metropolitan Police Department, national guard, nor the military acted during the first hours of the attack. The U.S. Capitol Police saved all the congresspeople and their staff, evacuating them to secure parts of the Capitol complex just in time. There is ample evidence that various agencies, including the national guard, were not authorized to defend the building in preparation for the event, despite threats being widely announced online, or even once the attack started and police were no longer able to guard the entrances. An article from the Washington Post documented 17 calls for help that were unanswered during the 78 min of the attack, and reinforcements did not come in adequate numbers until later (Bennett et al. 2021). Eventually, high-level actors in the government authorized the retaking of the building in a peaceful manner. After much

pressure from close members of his circle (Woodward and Costa 2021), Trump reluctantly asked his supporters to go home, long after much physical damage had been done and people had died. However, for hours before that, Trump willfully acted in dereliction of his duty to defend the country and its democratic institutions.

6. Tilly's Theories and January 6th

Tilly wrote about how de-democratization happened in Italy and Germany after the First World War. He wrote that losing a war, facing economic depression, depending on a foreign power, and growing autonomy and influence of the military can result in a democracy becoming an authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, for de-democratization to occur in any given society, it is not necessary that they face the immense pressures that Italy or Germany confronted after losing the First World War and having to remunerate the victors. This tense environment and sense of national humiliation may have facilitated the rise of authoritarian charismatic leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler, who were followed to yet another war.

A charismatic leader, as defined by Weber, is a person who presents themselves as exceptional, the only person capable of solving all the problems of a collective (Weber 2001). It is not necessary for the whole world or a whole country to believe in them, but for a large number of people to believe in them blindly to have a cult of personality fueling a religious and/or political project.

Tilly talks about how people in extreme poverty lack the time and mental bandwidth to preoccupy themselves with organizing a collective revolt (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, pp. 72–76). It is when extreme economic situations get better and when there is time for leisure and interaction to discover common problems and organize, that rational strategy and collective action emerges, demanding rights for groups that do not have them. A coordinated mobilization happens more rapidly when rights or privileges are taken away, which affects a family's ability to feed themselves and continue their daily routine (Prieto 2018). For Tilly, politics goes beyond rallies or the vote. Tilly understands popular politics as "contentious politics" that include not only voting but also marches, social movements, civil disobedience, resistance, and the use of collective violence for a political end. These processes go beyond labels, ideology, or political agendas. Social movements can be conservative or even fascist. The events on January 6th were not spontaneous or irrational. Quite the opposite, they were rational, planned, and political demonstrations (Select Committee 2022, p. 499). It was collective action to defend an imagined nostalgic view of the United States, which is supposedly under threat. Overtly or not, it was about defending white supremacy.

What the United States went through on January 6th was an attempt at a self-coup, where Trump would use force to stay as head of state even if abandoning democratic practices in the U.S. Some advised Trump to declare martial law to create a state of emergency and use that as an excuse to stay in power. An open armed confrontation between supporters, police, and special violent opponents, (a.k.a. "antifa"), outside of Congress on January 6th, would have set the stage to do so. Ultimately, the leadership of the military forces refused to be complicit, there were no violent confrontations with those on the left, and General Mark Millie and others isolated the military from Trump's worse impulses and intentions to use the army to stay in power (Starr et al. 2021).

So, in the end, it was a coup attempt without the active participation of armed forces, one rather carried out by the "popular" forces. It was not the majority of the people or even a majority of the middle or lower class. Instead, the force consisted of groups of fans, civilians, political members, firefighters, military personnel in a personal capacity, veterans, self-conceived militia members, and people Tilly calls "violence professionals." Some political reactionaries were willing to actively create divisions between categorical groups and call for violence against stigmatized minorities. Congressional police members were physically attacked, and some died. However, given the orders given to the National Guard and other federal forces not to answer the distress calls from Congress, it resulted

in few shots fired and only one death among those attacking Congress. While sad and tragic, this was not enough to argue that a civil war was going on and that the President needed to declare a state of emergency. At the same time, the Congress' guards were able to hold the line while elected officials evacuated the chambers and stayed safe. The improbable result was the best-case scenario where the thousands of attackers that bridged the walls of Congress were not able to injure congresspeople or the Vice President nor to stop the certification of the election later that day. Nonetheless, one can imagine many other scenarios where the opposite could have happened. Had the police, National Guard, or military response been more violent and more MAGA protestors been shot at, some Trump supporters would have been prepared to shoot back, escalating things out of control in a way that could have either created a series of martyrs, created shooting matches in DC and probably in other locations throughout the country, or even been the spark of a civil war as some of the organizers behind January 6th hoped for. On January 5th Bannon said on his podcast that the next day, "It's not going to happen like you think it's going to happen. . . . You made this happen and tomorrow it's game day, so strap in. . . . All hell is going to break loose" (Beitsch 2021).

The attack on congress to contest an election has now become a contentious performance that was used by the equivalent actors in Brazil on January 8, 2023. Both events occurred with the encouragement of Steve Bannon and similar agents of chaos. De-democratization is not unique to the United States and has been happening in many countries for years. There were multiple arrests in Germany in 2022 around a conspiracy to overthrow the government after storming the parliament and establishing a far-right government (Bennhold and Solomon 2022).

The literature also speaks of illiberal democracies, regimes where elections take place but where protections and civil rights are weak (Smith and Ziegler 2008). Democracy and democratic institutions are protected and expand when rights are expanded, political participation increases, and groups of people are more able to express those politics in egalitarian ways. The opposite, of course, is also true.

7. Electoral Design and the Big Lie

To understand January 6th and the weakening of the democratic practice and traditions, it is important to review the manner in which Trump became president. The fact that he was elected through the electoral college votes rather than by the popular vote made it all the more important to justify his removal and preserve the peaceful transition of power after Trump's loss via this same process. This is another reason—beyond pride, attempting to steal the election, and projecting his image as a winner—why Trump and his closest allies cling to "the big lie" that the election of 2020 was stolen from him through voter fraud. It is another way to delegitimize democratic institutions by opening them for "electoral transparency" rules that facilitate his return and that of the Republican majorities in Congress and would enable him to expand executive authority if he is back in the office after the 2024 elections.

Various authors (Hochschild 2016; Miller-Idriss 2020) have signaled that part of what makes Trump attractive is his reflection of the fears and false beliefs held by some working-class Whites, as well as small business owners and old energy companies, over losing privileges—they feel they deserve as White American citizens—as a result of the advancement of people of color. Trump voters include many middle- and upper-class college-educated White men (Bender 2021; Draper 2022).

As early as his first campaign, Trump started saying that if he lost, it would be because the election results were rigged. Nonetheless, the U.S. electoral systems are local and state-run, with each jurisdiction having different rules, systems of control, and security, making it more difficult for fraud to be committed compared to, for example, the centralized, federally managed system of other countries. Nevertheless, as Tilly writes, no democracy can "survive" a generalized belief (no matter how false) that elections are fraudulent and that federal functionaries are incompetent. The true questions are: (1) How do such beliefs

come to be, grow, and diminish the beliefs that sustains democracy? (2) Exactly what relation do they have to the operating system, and is it habitual or not? (Castañeda and Schneider 2017, p. 180). Many years before Trump's political career, Tilly reminds us that democracy is part of an idea, a narrative about what the government is and who it serves. Even in the U.S., it is a goal, an ideal, rather than an institutionalized irreversible reality.

So, while being president, Trump and close advisers were open to an auto-coup, but without the open use of the armed forces or tools from the state, in a certain way masking it as part of a social movement by those who stormed the Capitol. This approach could have been influenced by the contempt that some republicans, libertarians, and businessmen have for the federal government, going hand-in-hand with Trump's big ego thinking that the majority of people would support him staying in the White House by popular acclaim and violent acts, as well as the reluctance of civil servants to go along with the plan. Masking the coup as a social movement would have made it possible for Trump to argue that it was the citizens' will keeping him in power, and not the generals. This outcome would have 'proven' his popularity and provided legitimacy. Therefore, it was not an attempt at a traditional coup d'état, but closer to an attempt to become elected by popular acclaim after a popular revolution, as exemplified by Trump's invitation to DC on January 6th promising that it "will be wild", his charging of the protesters to "fight like hell," and his hours of inaction to stop them (Select Committee 2022, p. 499). Nevertheless, this attempt to stay in power was a miscalculation based on his faith in himself that knows no limits, although not irrational, since these attributes were what brought him to the White House in the first place. This does not necessarily mean that he would not have supported a military coup if it had been possible. What is clear is that he and others were more than open to meddling with the peaceful transfer of power after losing the election.

Either way, on the 6th of January, the United States was a step away from ceasing to be a democratic republic and turning itself into an authoritarian regime with a populist leader in charge of government possibly for life. Neither history, contentious politics, nor social movements in the United States would have ended there, but the peaceful transition of power following the archaic system of the electoral college could have.

8. A Bidirectional Process

The election of Trump and his hold on the Republican Party during his presidency made many pundits and academics warn about the possibility of a fascist or authoritarian regime in the United States of America. Books, such as *On Tyranny* (Snyder 2017) or *How Fascism Works* (Stanley 2020), are scholarly treatises partly meant as warnings and calls to action against complacency or blind faith in the innate strength of American institutions. Nonetheless, the popular discussions of these books pointed to a foregone conclusion where the death of American Democracy and the arrival of fascism had come or were imminent.

Indeed, so far in this paper, we have focused on events as evidence for de-democratization. Scholars have created event catalogs (a method started by Tilly) to document democratic backsliding around the world (Gottlieb et al. 2022). This is important work. Nonetheless, as Tilly argued, democratization is not a linear event, so while some events may move in the way of de-democratization, other events may reinforce democracy. The construction of democracy is a two-way road, and democratization and de-democratization processes can alternate or even coexist.

Democratization is also a dialectical process. The election and reelection of Barack Obama, the son of a White American woman and an African father, was a move away from durable categorical inequality (even if as some argue, Trump's raise was part of a backlash against Obama's election). While Trump won the electoral college in 2016, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote;¹ a first for a woman. Most tellingly, not only did Biden beat Trump in 2020 but the Democrats held on to the Senate in 2022, won a couple of governorships, and narrowly lost their majority in Congress. All this shows signs of the weakening of Trump's popularity and an influence largely limited to his base. It also shows the partial

success of calls to save democracy by voting in high numbers and remaining vigilant about legislative changes and local elections.

However, the risks to democracy are not gone; similar tendencies to those that produced Trumpism remain in place—inequality, corporate welfare, and racist institutions that have largely been untouched since the 1800's. There continue to be reversals of rights, most obviously access to abortion under the previous protection of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision. This takes off back to one of Tilly's arguments of democratization as a process that is not a straight line or leads to an unavoidable future. Democracy can be idealistic, but it cannot be teleological. Democratization and de-democratization are contingent on the constant negotiations of rights and obligations between the governed and those temporarily in power.

This paper is not an argument against populism, understood as when leaders represent the desire of the people, that indeed should be a goal of democracy. The inability to do this is what causes much disenchantment with democracy, and which has led to movements from both the right, as discussed here, as well as from the left, such as the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street (Castañeda 2012, 2014, 2019b). Social democratic policies and a real increase of wages would help increase support for democracy.

9. Conclusions

What if a leader with authoritarian tendencies, their party, and a large part of the population supporting them do not want to give up power, even after losing an election? In the case of January 6th, the institutions of the United States held up, but will they the next time? One of the great virtues of democracy is that sovereignty lies with the people. In a democratized society, individuals from all walks of life can work together to reform the laws that are unjust and to reach compromises to cooperate toward policies for the common good. Money in politics and policymaking, rampant and expanding inequality, and increasing minority isolation and exclusion all cause the situation to get materially worse for those at the bottom and ever better for those at the top—and they make people lose faith in the powers that be.

History shows that social movements and contentious politics are the avenues available for minorities to be included when the electoral route is blocked (Tilly et al. 2020). Nevertheless, before we can work together, we must address prejudice, self-righteousness, ignorance, isolation, divergent worldviews, and apathy. Developing genuinely critical thought is an essential tool for this task. The democratic struggle is ultimately one that we all share—it is a struggle with ourselves and those around us. In the meantime, before we create a strong democracy that is multiracial, intercultural, and distributes power more evenly—we need leaders with wisdom rather than those who feel destined to govern, abuse, and impose their will on others due to feelings of individual and racial superiority.

Democracy survived by a thread when Biden was elected president and inaugurated as scheduled, but this does not mean that the country has not suffered democratic erosion, and indeed, that very democratic erosion brought us to that moment (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Further gerrymandering of electoral maps and legal projects at the state level are taking away the ease of voting for Black citizens and other minorities. At the state level, laws are targeting the transgender population. Millions of immigrants still do not have citizenship or rights, and the Biden administration has continued some of the restrictionist policies of the Trump administration, such as Title 42 (Blitzer 2022; Castañeda 2022). Thus, in accordance with the practical definition of democracy that Tilly proposes, democracy in the United States is still under construction.

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Note

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