



OPINION

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The Year America Lost Its Democracy

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Damon Winter/The New York Times



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The foreign-policy journalist Joshua Keating used to write a series for Slate called [“If It Happened There,”](#) in which he reported on political and cultural developments in the United States in the tone of an American foreign correspondent sending dispatches from a nation on the other side of the globe.

Keating’s series was partly a joke about Western paternalism. But by illuminating the terrifying fragility of our own glass house, the trope also offered Americans the powerful gift of perspective. For instance, see how Keating’s headline on the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia — [“Death of Hard-Line Jurist Throws Regime Into Chaos”](#) — neatly underlined the quaint capriciousness of a political system in which one unelected judge’s sudden demise can call into question fundamental rights across the land.

As an immigrant to the United States from one of the world’s long-troubled regions, I’ve found myself thinking of Keating’s series quite a lot this year. Adopting an outsider’s point of view has helped to clarify the terrible stakes of the political game now playing out across the country — and has filled me with a sense of deep despair and foreboding.

Because if the assaults on democracy that occurred in America in 2021 had happened in another country, academics, diplomats and activists from around the world would be tearing their hair out over the nation’s apparent unraveling. If you were a reporter summing up this American moment for readers back home in Mumbai, Johannesburg or Jakarta, you’d have to ask whether the country is on the brink: A decade from now, will the world say that 2021 was the year the United States squandered its democracy?

If that sounds hyperbolic, consider the year’s many lowlights. Begin, of course, on Jan. 6: “Followers of Ousted President Storm National Legislature.” Then, when Republicans in Congress turned against an independent inquiry into the Capitol attack and punished the few in their party who supported it: “Bowling to Former Strongman, Opposition Blocks Coup Investigation, Expels Dissenters.” Or when, despite turning up no evidence of significant electoral mischief in the 2020 presidential election, [Republican-led legislatures](#) in more than a dozen states [began pushing new laws to restrict voting rights](#), including [several](#) that put partisan officials in charge of election administration: “Provincial Lawmakers Alter Election Rules to Favor Deposed Premier.”

And then last month, when more than [150 academic scholars of democracy](#)

put out a letter urging Congress to pass legislation to protect American elections from partisan takeover. Headline: “Experts Sound Alarm Over Democratic Backsliding in Nuclear-Armed Superpower.” Pull quote: “This is no ordinary moment in the course of our democracy,” the scholars wrote. “It is a moment of great peril and risk.”

I’m a through-and-through lefty, but I want to emphasize that my concern here is not really a partisan one. There are some places where Democrats are also monkeying with electoral machinery in a partisan manner — in Illinois, [Democrats redrew congressional districts](#) to overwhelmingly favor their party. In some ways these efforts anger me more than the Republican tricks, because they undermine the left’s moral standing to uphold electoral integrity. And upholding democratic integrity ought to be a paramount goal — because without it the basic idea of America, that this is a nation of laws by and for the people, would fall apart.

There’s another reason I’m more upset at the left than the right: Republicans are acting unethically, but also rationally, out of political necessity. They see their coalition diminishing. The Republican base is [white and Christian](#) in a nation that is growing more diverse and less religious. The party has lost the popular vote in all but one presidential election since 1992. Its fortunes would seem to depend on reducing access to the polls and, if that fails, on embracing the electoral strategy Donald Trump made explicit in 2020 — when the results don’t go the way you like, push to overturn them.

The Democrats’ survival depends on the very opposite idea: on letting people vote, counting their votes and respecting the count. In this sense Democratic efforts to expand and uphold voting rights ought to be just as urgent as the Republicans’ efforts to restrict them.

Yet that is not the case: While Republicans have put the undermining of democracy at the top of their political agenda, Democrats appear to have put voting rights at the bottom of theirs.

“I regard this as the great political clash of our time,” said Michael Waldman, the president of the Brennan Center for Justice at N.Y.U. School of Law, a policy institute that focuses on democracy and political reform. “On the one hand you have states rushing to restrict the vote or change who counts the vote. On the other hand, you have Congress, which has the power to stop it cold, legally and constitutionally.” The important question, Waldman said, is whether the Democrats have the political will to stop it.

“So far, the answer would seem to be, not yet,” he said.

President Biden offered a strong defense of voting rights [in a speech in July](#). He called Republican efforts to put partisan officials in charge of election results “the most dangerous threat to voting and the integrity of free and fair elections in our history.” He called passing strong federal election rules “a national imperative.”

And then, crickets. Biden has said little in public since then about the issue. The Freedom to Vote Act, the Democrats’ comprehensive proposal to protect voting rights and undo Republican anti-democratic efforts, is stalled in the Senate. In their letter, the democracy scholars called on Democrats to suspend the filibuster in order to pass the bill, but that seems increasingly unlikely — Senators Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have repeatedly said they oppose that idea.

If Democrats fail to uphold the integrity of our elections, what then? I fear total loss. Not for the party, but for the country. If Republicans prevail, America will become one of those faraway, seemingly lawless places where every election is in doubt and no part of our political culture remains above the partisan fray.

“It’s like the Titanic,” said Pippa Norris, a political scientist at Harvard who was a signatory of the letter urging passage of the Freedom to Vote Act. “We know there’s an iceberg out there. We’re looking at it. It’s in our faces and it’s getting closer.”

Democrats have a narrow window now to “recognize the existential threat not just to their party but to the country as a whole,” she said. “But if they don’t do that, then the ship is going to hit the iceberg.” And then we’re all sunk.

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