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Democracy Dies in Darkness

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U.S. democracy slides toward 'competitive authoritarianism'

Analysis by Ishaan Tharoor
Columnist

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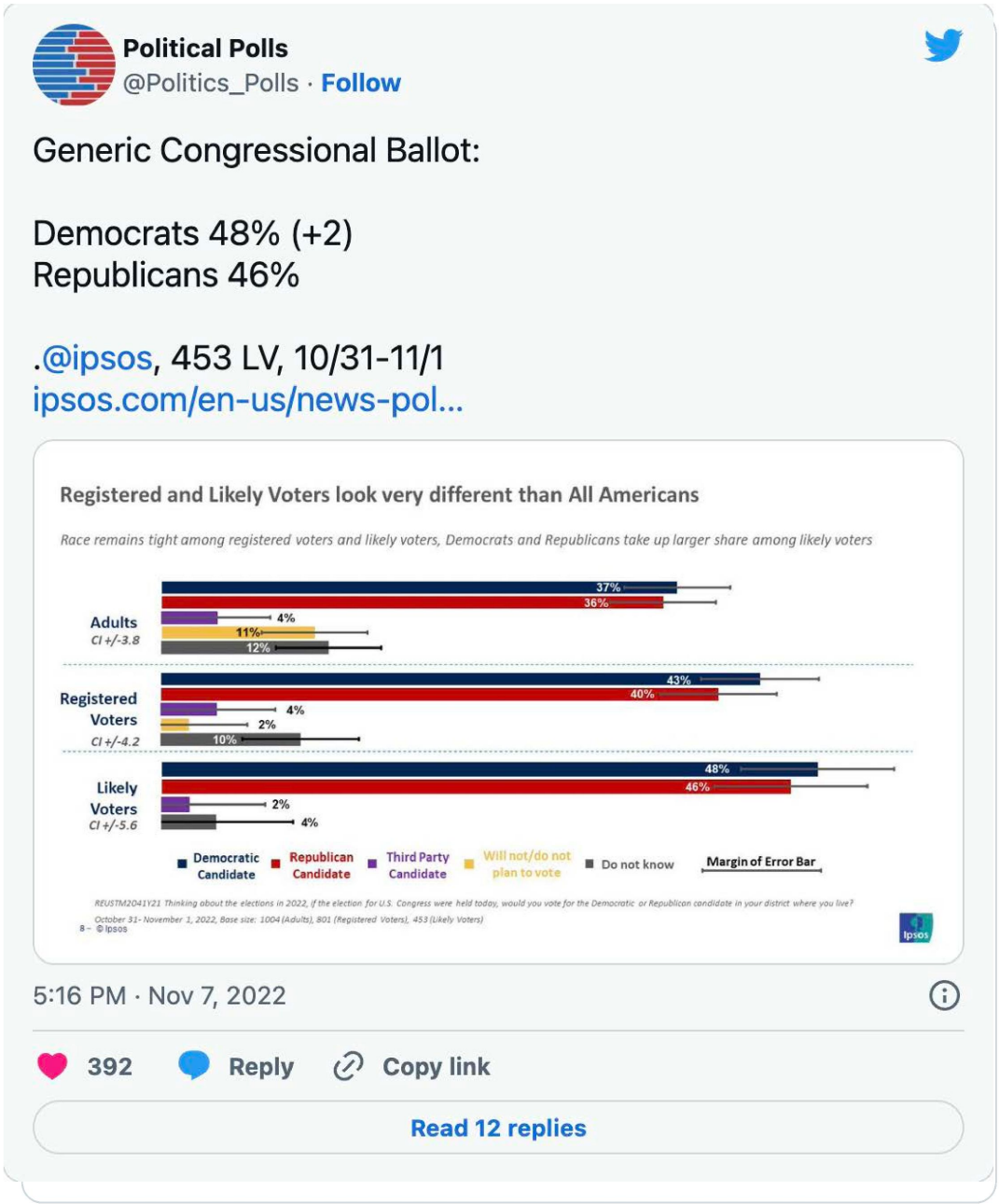
The idea of "competitive authoritarianism" has been around for two decades. It was coined by political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in a 2002 essay in the Journal of Democracy to describe a particular phenomenon of "hybrid" regime that was coming into focus after the end of the Cold War. Bucking the optimistic vogue of the 1990s, the two argued that certain polities around the world should not be seen as countries fitfully transitioning to democracy, but rather where a form of quasi-authoritarianism was entrenched via largely normal electoral structures.

"In competitive authoritarian regimes, formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority," Levitsky and Way wrote, gesturing to governments like that of Slobodan Milosevic in Yugoslavia or Alberto Fujimori in Peru, which stacked the field in their favor through a pliant or cowed media as well as other abuses of state power. "Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy."

In 2020, they updated their work, noting that a good number of the "competitive authoritarian" regimes they had singled out earlier remained as such, while new countries joined the club. Think Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Or the regime built by the late Venezuelan demagogue Hugo Chávez. Or the illiberal dominance of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

"Competitive authoritarianism is not only thriving but inching westward. No democracy can be taken for granted," Levitsky and Way wrote. "Similar tendencies have even reached the United States, where the Trump administration borrowed the 'deep state' discourse that autocrats in Hungary and Turkey used to justify purges and the packing of the courts and other key state institutions."



As Americans vote in midterm elections, the specter of "competitive authoritarianism" looms. That may be disquieting to many in a country that still sees itself as a democracy with no peer, wrapped in myths of exceptionalism and preeminence. But for years, analysts who examine the health of democracies in a global context have been sounding the warning. They point to the toxicity of the United States' polarized politics, the partisan bias of the Supreme Court, the prevalence of gerrymandering that skews electoral outcomes in districts in favor of the party drawing the maps, and the electoral rejectionism of the Republican Party, which has pushed legislation in various Republican-controlled states that critics claim are anti-democratic measures which will undermine popular sovereignty.

It's now entirely conceivable that Republican officials in a number of battleground states will wield enough power — and feel sufficiently empowered — to throw out 2024 election results in their constituencies should the results go against their interests. On the state level, Republicans are gaming the system in eye-catching ways: Even though Wisconsin, for example, is a 50-50 state, a gerrymandered Republican map could give the GOP a veto-proof, supermajority in the legislature. Republican gubernatorial candidate Tim Michels quipped last week that, if elected, his party "will never lose another election" in the state.

This has been achieved by design, argued Rachel Kleinfeld of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Antidemocratic politicians supported by safe seats and polarization have walked through and begun enacting an authoritarian playbook," she wrote. "This playbook has massively accelerated democratic disintegration over the last five years."

The Democrats have played their own part in this polarization, Kleinfeld noted, but the "rapid decline is asymmetric" and "is primarily being driven by a very different Republican Party" than the one that existed, say, under former president Ronald Reagan.

A consensus of scholars of democracy fear that the guardrails protecting the system of American democracy are steadily eroding. U.S. democratic decline has been charted in numerous forms. Freedom House has shown how the United States has had a rapid regression as a "free" society in recent years; the Economist Intelligence Unit listed the United States as a "flawed democracy" in 2017, while Europe's International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance now dubs the United States as a "backsliding democracy."

The Varieties of Democracy index, hosted out of Sweden's University of Gothenburg, has tracked growing "autocratization" in the United States over the past decade, accentuated by Trump's denial of the legitimacy of the 2020 election and the Republican Party's broader embrace of that denial. It separately has mapped on a grid how the Republicans have drifted deeper into the illiberal right, close in kinship to ruling nationalist factions in countries like India and Turkey and far-right parties in the West. (The GOP's traditional conservative counterparts in Western Europe, meanwhile, are closer to the Democrats.)

Seeing all this, Democrats, including President Biden, have made desperate appeals to voters to take to the electoral ramparts and protect the nation's democracy. But these entreaties may prove insufficient, suggested Mark Copelovitch, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, at a time when Republican messaging about gas prices and economic pressures have consumed the conversation. "There's an 'in your face' aspect to this that is much more tangible than 'democracy is about to collapse' or 'Wisconsin's electoral and legislative institutions no longer meet basic criteria of democracy,'" he wrote to me in an email.

Copelovitch pointed to how Polish voters in 2015 delivered a sizable majority to the opposition right-wing populist Law and Justice party after it successfully campaigned off the public's economic anxieties. It has remained in power since, consolidating its hold over the Polish state and judiciary with an illiberal ruthlessness that has seen E.U. officials raise fears over the future of democracy and rule of law in Poland.

"If Republicans win big on Tuesday, it will be, in large part, because some meaningful share of voters switched their votes to or turned out for the GOP — in patterns similar to what we've seen in Poland and elsewhere — in the belief that this will improve their economic prospects," Copelovitch said.

For their part, Levitsky and Way are less fearful of competitive authoritarianism taking hold of the United States. They wrote earlier this year that the United States still possesses a potent civil society, private sector and media scene, a robust political opposition (in their formulation, that's the Democrats) and enough institutional capacity in its decentralized federal system to thwart genuine authoritarianism.

But there's little reason to cheer. "Rather than autocracy, the United States appears headed toward endemic regime instability," they wrote in Foreign Affairs. "Such a scenario would be marked by frequent constitutional crises, including contested or stolen elections and severe conflict between presidents and Congress … the judiciary … and state governments. … The United States would likely shift back and forth between periods of dysfunctional democracy and periods of competitive authoritarian rule during which incumbents abuse state power, tolerate or encourage violent extremism, and tilt the electoral playing field against their rivals."