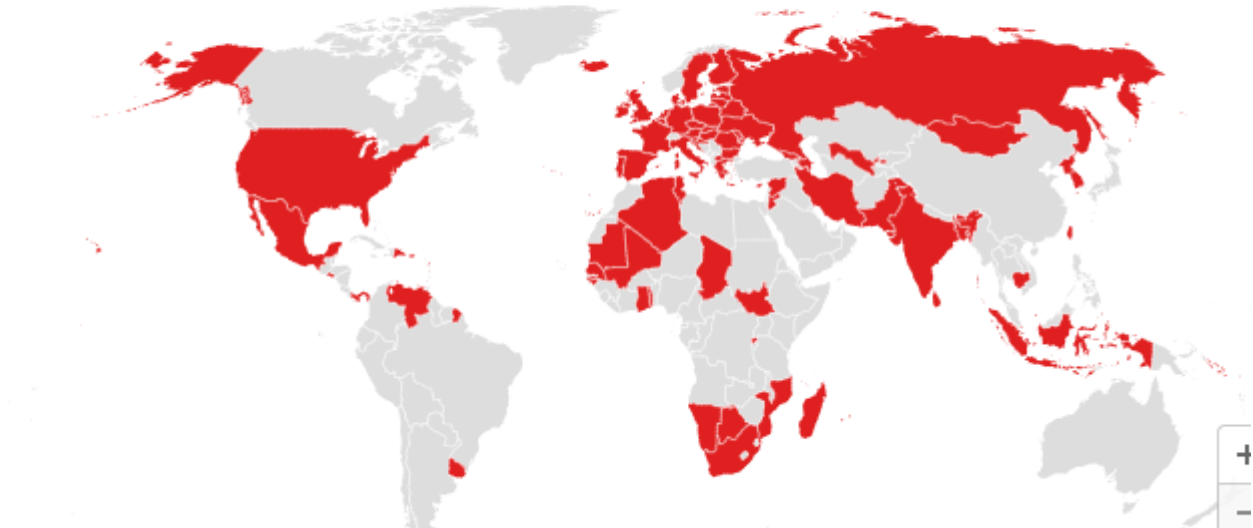


What is at stake?

AROUND THE WORLD

2024: The Ultimate Election Year Around the World

National elections are scheduled or expected in at least 64 countries, as well as the European Union, which all together represent almost half the global population.



See <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/>

Intro - A Make-or-Break Year for Democracy Worldwide

BY ASTHA RAJVANSHI AND YASMEEN SERHAN

TIME, UPDATED: JANUARY 10, 2024

Elections are no guarantee of democracy. That much we know from who holds them. Even full-blown tyrants crave the legitimacy that, in the modern era, can be provided only by the ballot box—margins of victory doubling as one more tool of intimidation.

But it's also true that democracy does not exist without elections, which is why the year ahead carries such significance. In 2024, more than half the world's population will go to polls—4.2 billion citizens across approximately 65 countries in what, from a distance, at least appears to be a stirring spectacle of self-government. At closer range, however, the picture is cloudier, and warning lights flash red from the murk.

“2024 may be the make-or-break year for democracy in the world,” says Staffan Lindberg, the director of the Varieties of Democracy, or V-Dem, Institute, a Swedish think tank that analyzes the “complexity of the concept of democracy.”

Lindberg says that more than the sheer number of elections, or the fact that many of the countries holding them have global influence, the worry is that “so many have now empowered leaders or parties with antidemocratic leanings.”

Around the world, including in some of the biggest and most influential countries, experts have observed that the space for political competition and civil society is shrinking. At the same time, elected but illiberal leaders are cracking down on opponents and critics, eroding democratic institutions like the judiciary and the media that serve

as a check on their power, and, finally, consolidating that power through changes in the constitution. When the leader next stands for office, it's in an election that may ostensibly be free but is no longer fair.

20 The process is already well along in much of the world. Of the 43 countries expected to hold free and fair elections this electoral megacycle, 28 do not actually meet the essential conditions for a democratic vote, according to the Democracy Index from the Economist's Intelligence Unit. And eight of the 10 most populous countries in the world, including India, Mexico, and the U.S.—all of which head to the polls this year—are grappling with the challenge of ensuring voter participation, free speech, and electoral independence while authoritarianism is on the rise.

25 “What does it mean to have a free and fair election? Is it possible to have a free but unfair election? And how unfair does it have to be to no longer be democratic?” asks Yana Gorokhovskaia, a research director at Freedom House who oversees the pro-democracy think tank's annual “Freedom in the World” report, the latest edition of which recorded a 17th consecutive year of global decline.

TEXT 1 - This isn't just an election year. It's the year of elections.

By the Editorial Board, *The Washington Post*, December 31, 2023

For the United States, 2024 is an election year — a potentially historic one. Congress and the White House are at stake; former president Donald Trump is bidding to retake the presidency from President Biden, with all that could entail for the stability of U.S. political institutions.

5 Perhaps less widely appreciated, but no less significant, is that this will be a year of elections for the world. In 2024, votes for president, a national legislature or both are set to take place in dozens of countries — including some of the world's most populous ones (India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mexico); some of those most closely aligned with the United States (eight European NATO members and, probably, Britain); and some 18 of Africa's 54 countries (among them Ghana and South Africa, where the African National Congress is at risk of losing its majority for the first time since the 1994 transition to democracy).

10 *The Economist* — whose count includes not only countries' national elections but also municipal ones, as well as voting in 27 European Union countries for the European Parliament — estimates that 2024 will be the biggest election year ever. Voters will cast ballots in countries accounting for about 4.2 billion people, or about 50 percent of global population.

15 It's difficult to specify the likely impact of all this voting, but it's surely unwise to underestimate it. By the time it is over, power might change hands between incumbents and oppositions in multiple nations; new political generations might come into their own. The shift from the left to the libertarian right in Argentina at the end of 2023 provides a preview of how dramatic such changes can be. Election results could transform key nations' foreign policies and relationships with the United States — whose own policies, of course, could take a radical new direction if Mr. Trump wins the presidency.

20 The stakes might be highest in Taiwan, which votes on Jan. 13. The Kuomintang (KMT) Party, which is relatively conciliatory toward Beijing, is bidding to replace the governing Democratic Progressive Party, whose roots lie in the island's human rights movement and which sees close ties with the United States as Taiwanese democracy's best guarantee against China. There is also a strong third-party contender. China is meddling, mostly by feeding pro-KMT propaganda to Taiwanese voters via social media.

25 Taiwanese institutions so far seem capable of withstanding that pressure. Yet the quantity of 2024's elections is much easier to ascertain than their quality. In Mexico and India, the political process is imperfect in many respects but legitimate enough that the outcomes — in each case, probably, victory for an incumbent populist-nationalist party — will provide fresh mandates for the policy paths the two countries are already on.

30 In Russia, reelection for the incumbent — President Vladimir Putin — is the inevitable outcome of a rigged vote in March. Opponents of his war in Ukraine will have no meaningful opportunity to campaign. In tiny El Salvador, meanwhile, President Nayib Bukele has manipulated the system to allow for his reelection despite constitutional provisions that had appeared to prohibit it. The twist is that Mr. Bukele is so popular — based on his sweeping,

35 legally questionable and, for now, successful crackdown on crime — that few Salvadorans seem inclined to resist his machinations.

El Salvador is one of six Latin American countries slated to hold presidential elections in 2024. This number includes Venezuela, though it is unclear whether the deeply unpopular leftist authoritarian regime in Caracas will permit a free and fair process, as the Biden administration is pressuring it to do. If Venezuela votes legitimately, however, the result could be an inspiring democratic comeback for a country whose economic and political collapse has destabilized the Western Hemisphere.

In short, 2024 will deliver masses of fresh data on democracy's prospects in the world. Many indicators, such as those published by Freedom House, show "backsliding," including in Hungary, India, Israel and, yes, the United States. Still, on one key objective metric — whether losing incumbents accept defeat and leave power — there has been little erosion worldwide over the past decade, according to a recent paper by political scientists Andrew Little and Anne Meng.

Another reason for optimism: the backhanded compliment that autocrats such as Mr. Putin feel they must pay democracy by holding elections, even if they are a sham. Such exercises implicitly concede that, in the modern world, the people's votes are the only universally recognized source of political legitimacy. This norm is the hard-won achievement of centuries, one that the year of elections will surely test but just might reinforce.

TEXT 2 -2024 brings wave of elections with global democracy on the ballot

Analysis by [Ishaan Tharoor](#), Columnist, *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2024

More than 60 countries, with some 4 billion people, are set to stage national elections in 2024. That means roughly half the planet could go to the polls in what could be the greatest rolling spectacle of democracy in 5 human history.

We might not see this number of elections matched until 2048, when the world's political landscape could look considerably different. The "third wave" of democracy — the steady global expansion of 10 democratic governments that surged through the end of the Cold War — has ebbed over the past decade. Elections are still staged, but the underlying political culture seems to be shifting worldwide.

In society after society, illiberal values and politicians 15 who embrace them are gaining ground. Numerous elected governments seem bent on undermining core tenets of the democratic project, from the freedom of the press to the independence of institutions such as the judiciary to the ability of opposition parties to fairly 20 compete against the ruling establishment.

According to Freedom House, a Washington think tank that monitors the health of democracies, global freedom declined for the 17th consecutive year in 2023. The organization's annual report cites a wave of coups that 25 ousted elected leaders in Africa and increasing threats to the rights of journalists in dozens of countries. Separately, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a Sweden-based intergovernmental watchdog, said in its annual 30 report that "across every region of the world,

democracy has continued to contract" and that 2022 marked a sixth consecutive year in which more countries experienced net democratic declines than improvements, per its data. It projects that 2023 will be 35 no better.

The news this year could be more drastic still. The outcomes of pivotal elections in the United States — the world's oldest democracy — and India — the world's largest — may underscore a deepening public 40 appetite for norm-bending strongman rule. In their shadow, elections from Mexico to the European Union to Bangladesh may each offer their own showcase of the growing traction of nationalist, authoritarian politics. "We're electing illiberal leaders democratically," Maria 45 Ressa, a prominent journalist and Nobel laureate from the Philippines, said during an address to the National Press Club in Washington in September. "We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024."

Here's a brief, and hardly comprehensive, rundown of 50 some of the elections to watch in the coming months.

United States

The U.S. presidential cycle will justifiably command global attention. No matter his mounting legal headaches, former president Donald Trump appears 55 poised to win the Republican presidential nomination at a canter. He would face President Biden in a presidential vote in November.

His party's base is falling in lockstep, and many of his party's lawmakers are either staunch Trump loyalists or 60 too wary of harming their own political fortunes by

defying him. A new joint Washington Post-University of Maryland poll found that Republican voters are more sympathetic to those who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, than they were almost three years ago, while more than a third of Americans say President Biden's 2020 election win was illegitimate, no matter the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

"From a historical perspective, these results would be chilling to many analysts," Michael J. Hanmer, director of the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement at the University of Maryland, told my colleagues.

Trump's purveying the "big lie" of 2020 electoral fraud appears to be good politics — as does vowing to pursue immediate retribution if elected against a host of perceived enemies, from Democratic lawmakers to undocumented migrants. Opinion polls of potential Iowa caucuses voters found that the prospect of locking up Trump's political opponents made close to a fifth of those surveyed more likely to vote for him. Parallel to this is heightened risk of political violence, with some Trump supporters openly voicing willingness to take up arms in his name, as they did in 2021.

The toxicity of the moment has spiraling effects for Americans. "Democratic deliberation, but also compromise and coalition-building have become more difficult," Britain's Chatham House think tank noted last month. "Efforts to reduce income inequality have so far failed, and data in the swing states suggests this is worse than ever, according to the Federal Reserve's recent Survey of Consumer Finances. This is the context in which the 2024 elections are unfolding."

Europe

A similar sense of crisis roils European politics. The far right's steady capture of the political mainstream, fueled by public angst over migration and stagnating economies, may see its crowning moment in E.U. parliamentary elections in June.

"It is entirely possible that the various forces of the far right could emerge as the single biggest bloc," John Kampfner wrote in Foreign Policy. "This might not lead to a change in the composition of the European Commission (the diminished mainstream groupings would still collectively hold a majority), but any such extremist upsurge will change the overall dynamics across Europe."

Either in coalition or at the head of a ruling bloc, the far right also appears set to come to power in Portugal in March and Austria in June. In Germany, Europe's economic engine, the surging far right could clinch unprecedented victories in a handful of state elections.

Britain's floundering Conservatives, meanwhile, have made migrants a punching bag in a desperate bid

to stave off what seems an imminent electoral defeat this year to the opposition Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, a political moderate. The vote is not yet scheduled.

Bangladesh

Away from the West, other major ballots show the perilous state of various democracies. Elections this weekend in Bangladesh will extend the mandate of long-ruling Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who critics say has turned the country into a de facto one-party state.

India

Next door in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalists are likely to deepen their stranglehold on power in national elections, expected to be held in April and May, through its dominance in north and central India. A fresh five-year term for Modi will further drift the Indian republic away from the pluralist and secular ethos of its founding.

South Africa

The long-entrenched African National Congress faces its toughest test yet from the opposition, in elections that have not yet been scheduled, amid broader voter disenchantment and frustrations with the country's post-apartheid democracy. Nearly three-fourths of South Africans in a recent poll said they were willing to sacrifice their democracy if a leader could deliver jobs and reduce crime.

Other key elections

The stakes are different elsewhere: Elections in Indonesia in February and Mexico in June could see term-limited outgoing presidents extend their influence through friendly successors, much to the chagrin of rival political elites. And Pakistan, plunged in a rolling political crisis since the 2022 ouster (and later arrest) of populist Prime Minister Imran Khan, is trying to turn the page with elections in February, though Khan's faction remains outraged over alleged attempts to stack the vote against them.

The regime of President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela is expected to hold elections this year, after negotiations with the country's beleaguered opposition. It's unclear how free or fair they will be. In Ukraine, presidential elections are supposed to be held at the end of March, but the ongoing emergency imposed by Russia's invasion may see President Volodymyr Zelensky postpone the vote.

In Taiwan, which holds elections this month, a victory for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party is expected to inflate the possibility of Chinese military escalation over the straits — something that has been highlighted by the opposition Kuomintang, which is friendlier

165 toward Beijing. Whatever the outcome, observed the
Guardian's Simon Tisdall, the vote "will provide a
valuable demonstration of how highly democracy is still

valued — when a determined people are allowed a real
choice amid fierce external pressures."

170

See also:

• Democracy's Super Bowl: 40 elections that will shape global politics in 2024

From Russia to South Africa, India to the US, the coming year's contests could embolden dictators or revitalise democracies

Simon Tisdall, *The Guardian*, Sun 17 Dec 2023

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/17/democracys-super-bowl-40-elections-that-will-shape-global-politics-in-2024>

• The World Ahead | Graphic detail - 2024 is the biggest election year in history

A very good and thorough infographic document

<https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>

• A radio programme 2024 is the year of the ballot box, NPR, JANUARY 3, 2024

<https://www.npr.org/2024/01/03/1198909517/1a-draft-01-03-2024>

IN EUROPE

TEXT 3 - Make or break for the EU? Europeans vote in June with far right on the rise

Jon Henley Europe correspondent, *The Guardian*, Wed 3 Jan 2024

They are elections whose purpose many do not see, for an institution whose role few fully understand; an international ballot still viewed primarily in national terms, by voters who see it chiefly as a low-risk way to vent national frustrations.

5 "They're not really about the EU and they don't really matter" was long the popular take on elections to the European parliament, whose latest edition, from 6 to 9 June, will once more fill the 705 seats of the only directly elected EU body.

That take was never really true.(...)

10 This time, it looks likely to be less accurate than ever. On the upside, polling shows that more of the EU's roughly 400 million voters than ever before believe the bloc is important, are interested in the 2024 elections and intend to vote.

But with nation-first Eurosceptics on the rise across the EU and predicted to make gains – although far from enough for a majority – in parliament, analysts also say this election could come to be seen as a "make or break moment".

15 According to a Eurobarometer poll of 27,000 people published in December, 57% of voters are interested in the elections, six points more than in the run-up to the previous European elections in 2019, and 68% intend to vote – up nine points.

A record 72% think membership has been good for their country, while 70% feel the EU matters in their daily lives. But voters are also worried about the future: 73% fear their standard of living will decline this year.

20 Georgina Wright, a senior fellow at the Paris-based Institut Montaigne thinktank, said voters were increasingly convinced by Covid and a string of geopolitical crises that there are some issues "that clearly can't be resolved at a national level".

Questions tied to Russia's war against Ukraine, such as the EU's role in Europe's security, as well as the cost of living crisis, migration and the green transition and its costs would be paramount, Wright said, although "a lot can change" before June.

25 The European parliament election remains to a large extent “27 national campaigns, and 27 national elections”, she said. “It’s not yet properly pan-European, and its problem remains that many people don’t really know what the parliament does.” But this time they “will be voting with the EU in mind”, Wright said. “Not because they love the EU, but because there’s growing understanding that some matters can only be addressed at EU level. The EU debate is no longer pro or anti, but ‘what kind’”.

30 Most of Europe’s nationalist parties have dropped or rowed back on any plan to follow Britain out of the EU. But in nearly a dozen EU member states, including France and Germany, far-right parties are in government or number one or two in the polls.

Polls suggest Geert Wilders’ anti-Islam party would win even more seats now than when it finished first in November’s Dutch election, and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) is 10 points clear of Emmanuel

35 Macron’s centrist alliance on 28% to 30%.

Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy remains comfortably ahead in the polls on 29%, Austria’s FPÖ is on 30%, and in Germany in December the AfD won its second municipal election in six months and stands at second place on 22%.

Forecasting the results of the European parliament election is hard, because the two organisations that do so

40 – Politico Europe and Europe Elects – rely on extrapolations from national polling, and in the European ballot voters often behave differently.

Both sets of polls, however, predict a clear gain for the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, which includes AfD, RN, FPÖ and Matteo Salvini’s Lega, and could emerge with more than 85 seats from its present 76.

The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which includes Poland’s Law and Justice (Pis), Brothers of

45 Italy, the Finns party, the Sweden Democrats and Spain’s Vox, is also forecast to advance, moving to about 80 MEPs from 61.

Those gains are accompanied by modest predicted losses for the centre-right European People’s party (EPP) and centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), a bigger fall for the centrist Renew group, and a sharp drop for the Greens, who are forecast to lose up to a third of their seats.

50 EPP and S&D are still expected to finish first and second with more than 170 and 140 seats respectively, and with Renew on 83 MEPs and the Greens on 45 the so-called “centrist” bloc in parliament should still have a comfortable overall majority.

That does not look like an earthquake.

Catherine Fieschi of the European University Institute in Florence said: “The far-right parties are not about to take

55 over,” she said.

The EU would still deliver for its citizens, Fieschi said, reigning in the worst excesses of a polarised world, doing what it can on the environment. “It will keep holding the fort at a time of immense geopolitical and economic uncertainty,” she said. “And let’s be honest, that’s not bad. But it would also be a huge missed opportunity.”

TEXT 4 - Shaping the future: What's at stake in the 2024 EU elections?

The upcoming European elections – considered the largest transnational vote in the world – are poised to bring about shifts in policies and leadership that will reverberate across the continent. RFI takes a look at what's at stake.

By: David Coffey, **RFI**, Jan 12, 2024

From 6 to 9 June this year, more than 400 million European voters will choose a new five-year parliament. Elections in the European Union's 27 member states will decide the make-up of the roughly 700-seat assembly,

5 charged with overseeing European legislation.

The Strasbourg-based parliament will also confirm the appointment of Brussels' top officials, including the president of the European Commission.

The EU's last election was held in 2019, with member

10 states choosing a polling day according to their national traditions.

The Netherlands, for example, votes on a Thursday, Malta on a Saturday and France on Sunday.

This year's vote will be the first European election

15 without British candidates, the UK having officially left the EU in 2020.

Balancing the budget

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has said she won't run as an MEP, but is nonetheless

20 expected to seek a second term as head of the Commission – and is likely to retain the backing of centre-right MEPs and key member states if she does.

Whether von der Leyen remains in post or not, the introduction of new policy priorities by the European Council and Parliament – alongside the appointment of new commissioners – will inevitably reshape the political agenda.

The shift comes against the backdrop of crucial issues for Europe and the world, including the war in Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas conflict, the green transition and economic challenges.

The EU is grappling with the aftermath of borrowing approximately €807 billion over the past four years to mitigate the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The extension of EU foreign policy actions – such as providing aid and managing migration in conflict zones like Ukraine and southern European states – is expected to pressure the bloc to disburse an additional €70 billion in 2024.

As the EU budget comes under scrutiny, the bloc is seeking to revive pre-Covid fiscal rules designed to contain debt and deficits, typically a touchy issue among member states.

Decisions on these matters rest in the hands of EU finance ministers and a compromise of sorts was reached in December, when ministers agreed to maintain limits on how much governments can go into the red while giving them more time and flexibility to bring their spending down.

The European Parliament has to sign off on the proposal before it can become law, which its proponents are hoping will happen before the elections in June.

Top issues for Europe

Aside from public spending, incoming MEPs and EU commissioners will have plenty to tackle.

Energy and climate policy

In the wake of the recent Cop28 climate conference in Dubai, the EU is under pressure to reinforce its commitment to sustainable practices and a green transition.

Geopolitics

With the war in Ukraine showing no sign of ending and the Israel-Hamas conflict threatening both regional and international security, key geopolitical concerns – including relations with China, the United States, Russia and the African continent – will demand strategic attention from the EU's incoming leadership.

EU expansion

Progress has been made on the contentious issue of integrating states from the Western Balkans, notably Albania and North Macedonia. But relations between Serbia and Kosovo remain strained and Bosnia and

Herzegovina also has urgent internal issues to address before it can join the bloc.

Security

Emphasis will be placed on security, defence, cybersecurity, data protection and telecommunications.

The spike in hostilities between Israel and its neighbours over the conflict in Gaza has also raised the spectre of radicalisation and Islamist terrorist attacks within the European Union.

Artificial intelligence

As technology advances, regulations surrounding artificial intelligence will likely be on the agenda to balance innovation with ethical considerations. The EU has already positioned itself as the benchmark legislator for regulating AI development.

EU competitiveness

The new Commission will face pressure on issues related to industry, infrastructure, regulations, workforce skills, investments, technology, trade, innovation and the overall economy.

Economic security

Addressing capital markets, health and economic security will be critical to ensure the resilience of the European economy.

Tax regulation and workers' rights

The EU leadership is likely to address tax regulations, workers' rights and income distribution, responding to the evolving needs of the European workforce.

Trade disputes

Within the framework of the World Trade Organization, efforts to resolve multilateral trade disputes are anticipated to be a priority.

Shifting sands

Amidst these challenges, political landscapes across Europe have shifted in the five years since the last EU elections.

The centrist European People's Party (EPP) – to which von der Leyen belongs – faces historic weakening within the European Council, but her candidacy remains a prominent and popular option for EU heads of state and governments.

Meanwhile, like some member states' assemblies, the European Parliament is expected to shift to the right in the June elections.

While the EPP is likely to maintain its position, smaller member states may be key in shaking up the status quo.

Predictions suggest a challenging environment for the centre-left. French President Emmanuel Macron's centrist Renaissance party is losing ground in France and the Greens are facing similar challenges in Germany.

125 Potential outcomes range from a far-right Europe to a conservative coalition; a green and centre-right alliance; or a continuation of the existing centre-left and centre-right coalition.

Whatever the outcome, the 2024 European elections 130 will reshape Europe's politics, policies and leadership.

TEXT 5 - Why are younger voters flocking to the far right in parts of Europe?

Jon Henley and Piotr Sauer in Volendam, The Guardian, Fri 1 Dec 2023

Lunching on a tuna sandwich in the central market of Volendam, a picturesque fishing port north of Amsterdam, Gerald, 24, was lucid about his choice in last week's Dutch election. "I voted for Wilders, and many of my friends did too," he said. "I don't want to live with my parents for ever. I want my own home, and to be able to provide for my 5 family later on. Wilders wants to figure out the housing crisis, and make our healthcare better. Those are the most important topics for me."

If everyone who voted in the election had been aged under 35, Geert Wilders, the far-right populist whose Party for Freedom (PVV) shocked Europe by winning the most parliamentary seats, would have won even more.

In last year's French presidential runoff, Marine Le Pen won 39% of votes from people aged 18-24 and 49% of those 10 aged 25-34. Before Italy's election in September last year, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy was the largest party among under-35s, on 22%.

Across the continent, the image of the radical-right voter – typically white, male, non-graduate and, above all, old – is changing, and studies suggest that in several countries, support for the far right is growing fastest among younger voters.

15 Several factors may explain the phenomenon, analysts say. "We really should be careful about assuming a cultural or ideological alignment between young voters and the far right," said Catherine de Vries, a political scientist at Italy's Bocconi university. "We know in many countries young people are more pro-immigration than older voters. They have not become xenophobic. But their lives are more precarious. These are often votes for what in this Dutch election was called 'livelihood security'."

20 The Dutch word *bestaanszekerheid* translates roughly as an existence with a sufficient and predictable income, a satisfactory home, adequate access to education and healthcare, and a cushion against unexpected eventualities. Issues such as housing, overcrowded classes and struggling hospitals were key to the youth vote, De Vries said. "Wilders may want 'Dutch people first' but he promises to fix these things," she said. "The government parties imposed austerity."

In Volendam, where the PVV won 42.9% of the vote, that was Gerald's point. "Younger people, the woke ones from 25 the big cities, care about the climate and gender stuff but they are ignoring the real problems that we have here and now," he said. "I am not a racist because I voted for Wilders. It frustrates me that migrants receive more help from the government than Dutch people – but I'm not against Islam; I don't want mosques closed. I just think we need to control immigration better." (...)

Far-right parties are not the preferred option – or even second choice – for younger voters everywhere in Europe, 30 analysts caution. The trend appears strongest in countries such as Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark.

Pawel Zerka, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said: "It's a different story in eastern Europe, and often in the south. But it's certainly the case that far-right parties are attracting a lot of support among younger voters." (...)

35 Zerka also identified economic insecurity as the most significant factor. "Young voters haven't moved rightwards on migration, abortion, minority rights," he said. "Far-right parties have convinced them that they offer a credible economic alternative."

Other factors include some far-right parties "managing to position themselves as a 'cool' electoral option", Zerka said. "They are increasingly offering younger voters equally young, often charismatic politicians – people who speak 40 their language."

Jordan Bardella, the president of France's National Rally (RN), for example, was only 23 when he led the party's successful 2019 European election campaign, and 27 when he succeeded Le Pen as the far-right party's official leader last year.

Zerka also cites far-right parties' social media skills: Spain's Vox has a particularly slick operation, and Sławomir 45 Mentzen, the 37-year-old leader of Poland's ultra-liberal far-right Konfederacja (Confederation) party, has 800,000 followers on TikTok.

Several far-right parties have also proposed specific policy initiatives to attract younger voters: Le Pen's 2022 manifesto promised to scrap taxes for the under-30s, provide financial assistance to student workers and boost student housing.

50 And finally, said De Vries, there was "simply, normalisation. For many of these young voters, far-right parties have been part of the political landscape their whole lives. They've grown up with them. There's not the stigmatisation there once was."

IN THE U.K.

TEXT 6 - Rishi Sunak and Sir Keir Starmer: who would actually bring change?

Two men who are not natural brawlers will fight it out for power in Britain's election in 2024



Image: Nate Kitch

The Economist, Nov 13th 2023

At the Labour party's conference in Liverpool in October 2023, Sir Keir Starmer spoke at a breakfast for business leaders. His host asked the Labour leader for predictions for the year ahead.

5 First, Sir Keir said, his party would be ready to fight a general election in May 2024. The election must be held by January 2025, and the date is in the gift of Rishi Sunak, the prime minister. Many in the Conservative Party think October is their best option as that would
10 allow inflation to abate and incomes to recover. But Labour officials think Mr Sunak is more likely to want to align with the local-government elections in May, because a bad result for the Tories in those would hobble it for an autumn campaign.

15 Second, said Sir Keir, it will get dirty. That looks a safe enough bet. The Tories portray Sir Keir as an indecisive metropolitan who is soft on crime and migration. Labour portrays Mr Sunak as a weak, aloof moneybags who surveys the country from a helicopter.
20 Neither man—a teetotal banker and a pescatarian human-rights lawyer—is a brawler by disposition. They will slug it out nonetheless.

Third, he said the election will be dominated by the economy. No great surprise there, either. The state of

25 the economy overtook health as voters' most important issue in January 2022. Labour will focus on the cost-of-living squeeze. Rachel Reeves, the shadow chancellor, likes to riff on Ronald Reagan's question from the American presidential election in 1980, asking: "Ask
30 yourself this: are you and your family better off than you were 13 years ago?"

Labour has outlined a programme of subsidies and home-building deregulation which it claims can kick-start growth. It has held a lead in polls as the best party
35 to manage the economy since Liz Truss's disastrous mini-budget of October 2022. But the lead is hardly hegemonic. Expect the Tories to hammer away at voters' lingering doubts about Labour's fiscal rectitude. A proposed programme of £28bn (\$34bn) a year in
40 green subsidies, announced by Labour in 2021 when borrowing costs were low, has become a liability the Tories will seek to exploit.

The state of public services will figure heavily, too. Waiting lists for the National Health Service continued
45 to rise throughout 2023, despite Mr Sunak's pledge to bring them down. The courts are still overloaded and there is a backlog of urgent repairs to school buildings. Yet do not expect either party to propose radical public-

service reforms. Keen to avoid racking up spending
50 commitments, the Labour Party has announced only a
handful of small tax-rises on its favourite bogeymen
(private schools, oil giants, rich foreigners) to fund
narrow programmes.

Mr Sunak knows that voters overwhelmingly tell
55 pollsters that they want change. He will therefore
attempt to shake off the past 13 years of Conservative
rule and position himself as the “change” candidate, and
paint Sir Keir as an agent of a failing status quo. One
by-product is to turn Britain’s net-zero pledges into a
60 battleground. Mr Sunak has said that deadlines to phase
out internal combustion engines will be deferred. It is a
carefully calibrated message: voters in Conservative-
held seats in the formerly left-leaning “red wall” of
northern England are particularly reliant on their cars.
65 Sir Keir, for his part, thinks tackling climate change is a
vote-winner, and says Labour will “speed ahead” with
green industries.

This will be the first election since 2010 without the
crosswinds of Europe and Scotland. Labour will
70 propose only modest changes to Britain’s deal with
the EU, the Tories probably none. And with the Scottish

National Party’s popularity sliding, the prospect of a
second independence referendum is slim. In swathes of
foreign and defence policy—such as support
75 for NATO and Ukraine, relations with China and
America, and trade—the difference between Labour
and the Tories is only in emphasis.

Sir Keir’s party enjoyed a consistent double-digit
poll lead in the first year of Mr Sunak’s tenure. If that
80 holds, it will create an asymmetric contest. With nothing
to lose by gambling, it will be in the Tories’ interest to
fight an agile campaign, pivoting between issues until
they find an attack that lands.

Labour will be cautious and disciplined. Its leaders
85 know all about complacent centre-left parties that throw
away a winnable election before they acquire the
ruthlessness to win: Labour losing in 1992 before finally
winning in 1997; the Democrats losing to Donald
Trump in 2016 before winning in 2020; the Australian
90 Labor Party, too, in 2019 and 2022. Sir Keir’s task, they
say, is to win without tasting the bitterness of an
unnecessary first defeat. Quibble with the selection bias
behind this thesis, but do not discount the psychological
effect it will have on a campaign.

TEXT 7 - The fear of a looming Trump dictatorship

Analysis by [Ishaan Tharoor](#), Columnist, December 4, 2023

Former congresswoman Liz Cheney of Wyoming is the poster child of a Republican establishment abandoned by the party's far-right base. Now, she's billboarding what may come next: In an interview with CBS aired Sunday, Cheney lamented the extent to which the Republican Party had been "co-opted" by Trumpism and said she feared the potential of a vengeful Trump presidency in 2025.

"One of the things that we see happening today is a sort of a sleepwalking into dictatorship in the United States," Cheney said.

Cheney's refusal to accept former president Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 election had been stolen from him — and her decision to publicly rebuke Trump for his role in stoking the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot — got her ostracized from the GOP and cost her the House seat. She has spent the months since campaigning against his potential reelection, to little avail. Trump is the heavy favorite to emerge as the Republican presidential nominee, no matter the slew of legal cases against him and even the prospect of imprisonment.

In her CBS interview, Cheney said a Trump victory could mark the end of the American republic. "He's told us what he will do," she said. "It's very easy to see the steps that he will take."

This isn't mere hyperbole. As my colleagues have reported over the past year, Trump has made clear his stark, authoritarian vision for a potential second term. He would embark on a wholesale purge of the federal bureaucracy, weaponize the Justice Department to explicitly go after his political opponents (something he claims is being done to him), stack government agencies across the board with political appointees prescreened as ideological Trump loyalists, and dole out pardons to myriad officials and apparatchiks as incentives to do his bidding or stay loyal.

In election rallies, Trump has vowed punitive action on all perceived enemies. "I am your retribution," he told supporters at one event. In another, he promised to "root out the Communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical-left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country, that lie and steal and cheat on elections."

Scholars of 20th-century fascism are less than impressed. "Trump is also using projection: note that he mentions all kinds of authoritarians — communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left — to set himself up as the deliverer of freedom," Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian at New York University, told The Washington Post last month. "Mussolini promised freedom to his people too and then declared dictatorship."

Jennifer Mercieca, a historian of American political rhetoric at Texas A&M University, underscored the point over the weekend after Trump cast President Biden at an Iowa rally as "the destroyer of American democracy." "Trump's Iowa speech continues his use of fascist rhetoric: it's us versus them, he tells his supporters, and 'they' are enemies who cheat," Mercieca told my colleagues. "Authoritarians have a lot of rhetorical tricks for explaining away anti-democratic actions as actually 'democratic.'"

Some commentators are looking squarely at Trump and Trumpism as a direct existential threat to the future of U.S. democracy. In a widely circulated opinion essay for The Post, Robert Kagan charted how, "in just a



few years, we have gone from being relatively secure in our democracy to being a few short steps, and a matter of months, away from the possibility of dictatorship.”

45 Kagan sees a scenario where Trump’s mounting legal challenges galvanize his push for power, rather than check his rise. “Indicting Trump for trying to overthrow the government will prove akin to indicting Caesar for crossing the Rubicon, and just as effective,” he wrote. “Like Caesar, Trump wields a clout that transcends the laws and institutions of government, based on the unswerving personal loyalty of his army of followers.”

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50 Not for nothing have a bevy of Trump-inclined, right-wing intellectuals floated the idea of “Caesarism” — an embrace of a strongman to flush out the perceived weaknesses and failures of the republic — as a necessary political solution for the moment. In Kagan’s view, the institutional checks and balances of the United States are failing to arrest this authoritarian drift.

In the event of a return to the White House, Trump and his allies have already said they would marshal more

55 executive power than his predecessors. A Trump election victory could also boost Republican congressional control, and many members of the GOP seem content to march in lockstep with Trump. Then there are the courts, which the former president stacked with a huge number of loyalists.

“A conservative litigant can guarantee a sympathetic judge by filing their lawsuit in a federal court in Texas, where a handful of hard-right judges have exclusive control over the docket,” noted the New Republic’s Matt Ford.

60 “From there they go on to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, where conservatives have a clear majority — Trump alone appointed almost half of its members. And then the last stop is the Supreme Court, where half of the conservative supermajority are also Trump appointees.”

Among traditional allies of the United States, there’s no shortage of trepidation over what might be around the corner. “Whoever comes to the White House, one case would be a catastrophe, the other case would be much

65 better,” German defense minister Boris Pistorius told reporters last week.

But while European policymakers are fretting about Trumpist disturbances to transatlantic ties, the future of the NATO alliance and U.S. support for the war in Ukraine, they are more circumspect about the threat to American democracy itself. Far-right movements are in the ascendant in many countries in Europe, including Germany, but the continent’s parliamentary structures may restrain them more effectively than an anachronistic U.S. system that seems

70 primed to usher in minority rule.

“The Trump dictatorship will not be a communist tyranny, where almost everyone feels the oppression and has their lives shaped by it,” wrote Kagan. “In conservative, anti-liberal tyrannies, ordinary people face all kinds of limitations on their freedoms, but it is a problem for them only to the degree that they value those freedoms, and many people do not.”

75 Indeed, as my colleague Philip Bump observed last month, recent polling shows considerable numbers of Americans, and a plurality among right-wingers, endorse the idea that the country needs a strong leader who may bend the rules. “For many Americans, a turn toward authoritarianism isn’t seen as a negative,” Bump wrote. “Many Americans support that idea.”

TEXT 8 - La démocratie, enjeu du scrutin américain de novembre 2024

ÉDITORIAL, Le Monde, 6 janvier 2024

Trois ans après, le traumatisme de l’assaut du Capitole par les partisans de Donald Trump, le 6 janvier 2021, continue de marquer le paysage politique et pèse sur la campagne électorale pour le scrutin présidentiel américain du 5 novembre. A la veille de cet anniversaire, vendredi 5 janvier, le président Joe Biden a donné un puissant coup d’envoi à son nouveau duel électoral avec Donald Trump en présentant le scrutin à venir comme un test pour la survie de la démocratie aux

5 Etats-Unis. Dans un discours passionné aux accents visionnaires, le président démocrate a très clairement posé l’alternative qui, selon lui, s’offrira à l’automne aux électeurs : le maintien du régime démocratique aux Etats-Unis ou le chaos politique.

Quelques minutes plus tard, la Cour suprême fédérale faisait savoir qu’elle examinerait la question de l’inéligibilité de Donald Trump à partir de février. Cette question est posée depuis la décision de deux Cours suprêmes d’Etats fédérés,

10 le Colorado et le Maine, qui considèrent que, en vertu du 14^e amendement de la Constitution, interdisant la fonction publique aux citoyens ayant participé à une insurrection, l’ancien président ne peut pas se présenter à l’élection du

12

5 novembre. Des procédures similaires visant à empêcher M. Trump d'être candidat ont été déposées devant les Cours suprêmes de plus de trente autres Etats.

Décision à haut risque

15 Il était donc urgent que la Cour suprême fédérale, devant laquelle l'ancien président républicain a fait appel de la décision de la Cour du Colorado, se prononce sur cette question, alors que s'ouvre la saison des élections primaires au sein des partis. Pour la plus haute juridiction du pays, dont trois des neuf juges ont été nommés par Donald Trump, c'est une décision à haut risque : on ne peut pas exclure que, en cas de jugement confirmant que le 14^e amendement s'applique à la candidature de l'ex-président républicain, ses partisans aient de nouveau recours à la violence et mettent en cause 20 la légitimité de la Cour. Autre danger : une décision prise par une trop courte majorité des neuf juges, révélatrice de la division de la Cour suprême, aggraverait la polarisation du pays.

Actuellement donné favori par les sondages, Donald Trump, qui continue de contester le résultat de l'élection de 2020, ne fait aucun mystère de son soutien aux émeutiers du 6 janvier 2021. Il rend régulièrement hommage à ceux d'entre eux qui ont été condamnés par la justice à des peines de prison et qu'il qualifie d'« *otages* » ou de « *prisonniers* 25 *politiques* ».

Joe Biden, qui a déjà fait savoir qu'il était candidat à un second mandat malgré son âge (81 ans) essentiellement pour faire barrage à Donald Trump, a donc décidé de présenter l'enjeu de cette élection en termes existentiels pour la démocratie aux Etats-Unis. Vendredi, il avait choisi pour cadre de son discours un lieu symbolique : Valley Forge, en Pennsylvanie, où George Washington, accompagné de La Fayette, avait installé ses troupes pendant l'hiver 1777 pour 30 résister aux Britanniques.

La démocratie américaine, a averti le président, ne résistera pas aux nouveaux assauts de Donald Trump et à la « *violence politique* » qu'il encourage. « *Nous savons tous qui est Donald Trump*, a-t-il dit. *La question qui se pose est : qui sommes-nous ?* » C'est aussi à cette question, aux conséquences lourdes pour le reste du monde démocratique, que d'une certaine manière vont devoir répondre les neuf juges de la Cour suprême.

TEXT 9 – The Long Read

'Sitting on a powder keg': US braces for a year, and an election, like no other

Amid fears of authoritarianism, oldest US president likely to face off against first president to be criminally charged

David Smith in Washington, *The Guardian*, Wed 27 Dec 2023

The 60th US presidential election, which will unfold in 2024, will be quite unlike any that has gone before as the US, and the rest of the world, braces for a contest amid fears of eroding democracy and the looming threat 5 of authoritarianism.

It will be a fight marked by numerous unwanted **firsts** as the oldest president in the country's history is likely to face the first former US president to stand trial on criminal charges. A once aspirational nation will 10 continue its plunge into anxiety and divisions about crime, immigration, race, foreign wars and the cost of living.

Democrat Joe Biden, 81, is preparing for the kind of gruelling campaign he was able to avoid during 15 coronavirus lockdowns in 2020. Republican Donald Trump will spend some of his campaign in a courtroom and has vowed authoritarian-style retribution if he wins. For voters it is a time of stark choices, unique spectacles and simmering danger.

20 "It feels to me as if America is sitting on a powder keg and the fuse has been lit," said Larry Jacobs, the director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. "The protective shield that all democracies and social orders rely on – 25 legitimacy of the governing body, some level of elite responsibility, the willingness of citizens to view their neighbors in a civic way – is in an advanced stage of decline or collapse.

"It's quite possible that the powder keg that America's 30 sitting on will explode over the course of 2024."

US politics entered a new, turbulent era with Trump's shocking victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. The businessman and reality TV star, tapping into populist rage against the establishment, was the first 35 president with no prior political or military experience. His chaotic four-year presidency was scarred by the Covid-19 pandemic and ended with a bitter defeat by Biden in a 2020 election that was itself billed as an unprecedented stress test of democracy.

40 Trump never accepted the result and his attempts to overturn it culminated in a deadly riot at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, and his second impeachment. He has spent three years plotting revenge and describes the 5 November election as “the final battle”. But he is 45 running for president under the shadow of 91 criminal charges in four jurisdictions, knowing that regaining the White House might be his best hope of avoiding prison – a calculus that could make him and his supporters more desperate and volatile than ever.

50 Allan Lichtman, a history professor at American University in Washington, said: “This is the most astounding election I have ever seen.

“We have never had an election where a likely major party nominee is indicted for major felony charges of 55 the most serious nature; this is not shoplifting. He’s being charged with an attempt to destroy our democracy and subverting our national security. Both in terms of Trump’s personal morality and his incredibly serious crimes, we have never seen anything remotely like this.”

60 ■ **First Trump must win the Republican primary against Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley, putting the electoral and legal calendars on a collision course.** On 16 January, a day after the Iowa caucuses kick off the Republican nomination process, 65 Trump faces a defamation trial brought by the writer E Jean Carroll, who has already won a \$5m judgment against him after a jury found him liable for sexual abuse and defamation.

On 4 March, Trump is due in court in Washington in a 70 federal case accusing him of plotting to overturn the 2020 election result. The following day is Super Tuesday, when more than 15 states are scheduled to hold Republican primaries, the biggest delegate haul of the campaign.

75 On 25 March, Trump also faces state charges in New York over hush-money payments to an adult film star, although the judge has acknowledged he may postpone that because of the federal trial. On 5 August, prosecutors have asked to start an election fraud trial in 80 Georgia, less than three weeks after Trump is likely to have been nominated by the Republican national convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Trump is hard at work to flip his legal troubles to his political advantage, contending that he is a victim of a Democratic deep state conspiracy. He frequently 85 tells his supporters: “In the end, they’re not coming after me. They’re coming after you – and I’m just standing in their way.” His Georgia mugshot has been slapped on T-shirts and other merchandise like a lucrative badge of 90 honor.

It seems to be working, at least according to a series of opinion polls that show Trump leading Biden in a hypothetical matchup. A survey in early December for the Wall Street Journal newspaper showed Trump ahead 95 by four points, 47% to 43%. When five potential third-party and independent candidates were included, Trump’s lead over Biden expanded to six points, 37% to 31%.

■ **To Democrats, such figures are bewildering.** 100 Biden’s defenders point to his record, including the creation of 14m jobs, strong GDP growth and four major legislative victories on coronavirus relief, infrastructure, domestic production of computer chips and the biggest climate action in history. He has also led 105 the western alliance against Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Lichtman added: “He gets credit for nothing. It’s just amazing: I’ve never seen a president do so much and get so little mileage on it. He has more domestic 110 accomplishments than any American president since the 1960s. He’s presided over an amazing economic recovery, a far better economy than was under Donald Trump even before the pandemic in terms of jobs, wages, GDP. Inflation has gone down by two-thirds.

115 “It was Biden who single-handedly put together the coalition of the west that stopped [Vladimir] Putin from quickly overtaking Ukraine. He seems to get no credit for any of this whatsoever and that’s partly his own fault and the fault of the Democratic party.

120 The president’s approval rating has been stubbornly low since around the time of the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. He is grappling with record numbers of migrants entering the country – an issue that increasingly aggravates states 125 beyond the US-Mexico border. His refusal to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza is costing him some support among progressives and young people.

The latest Democratic messaging salvo – “Bidenomics” – appears to have been a flop at a moment 130 when many voters blame him for rising prices and a cost-of-living crisis. For all the barrage of positive economic data, Americans are lacking the feelgood factor.

Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory 135 University in Atlanta, Georgia, said: “People feel that Biden overpromised and underdelivered and ultimately what it came down to was he didn’t make me feel good while he did it and he didn’t make it look easy.”

140 Biden still holds a potential ace in the hole. Democrats plan to make abortion central to the 2024 campaign, with opinion polls showing most Americans

do not favor strict limits on reproductive rights. The party is hoping threats to those rights will encourage millions of women and independents to vote their way next year. It is also seeking to put measures enshrining access to abortion in state constitutions on as many ballots as possible.

The issue has flummoxed Republicans, with some concerned the party has gone too far with state-level restrictions since the supreme court overturned the landmark 1973 Roe v Wade ruling last year, ending constitutional protection for abortion. Trump has taken notice and is conspicuously trying to be vague on the issue.

■ The Wall Street Journal poll found Biden leading Trump on abortion and democracy by double digits. But it gave Trump a double-digit lead on the economy, inflation, crime, border security, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza and physical and mental fitness for office. Biden still has time to reshape perceptions but even close allies concede that he is not an inspirational speechmaker like Bill Clinton or Barack Obama. How can he turn it around?

Tara Setmayer, a former Republican communications director on Capitol Hill, said: “My advice would be to be aggressive, go on offence and set the narrative. They must make the contrast between a Biden America and a Trump America and ask people which America do they want to live in. (...)

■ **Should Trump prevail, numerous critics have warned that his return would hollow out American democracy and presage a drift towards Hungarian-style authoritarianism.** In a recent interview on Fox News, Trump was asked: “You are promising America tonight, you would never abuse this power as retribution against anybody?” He did not give an outright denial but replied airily: “Except for day one.”

Should Biden serve a second term, he will be 86 when he leaves office. Dean Phillips, 54, a congressman from Minnesota, mounting a Democratic primary challenge, is calling for a new generation of leadership. Some Democrats privately wish that Biden had declared

mission accomplished after the 2022 midterm elections and stepped down to make way for younger contenders such as Pete Buttigieg, Kamala Harris, Gavin Newsom and Gretchen Whitmer. It now appears too late.

Frank Luntz, a prominent consultant and pollster, said: “Democrats should be apoplectic. Donald Trump has been indicted in felony after felony. The economy is relatively OK and yet Biden is sinking every week and it’s because of something that no soundbite and no messaging can fix: his age.”

Biden’s potential for gaffes was limited during the pandemic election; this time he will be expected to travel far and wide, his every misstep amplified by rightwing media. The social media platform X, formerly Twitter, is now owned by Elon Musk and populated by extremists such as Tucker Carlson and Alex Jones. This has also been dubbed the first “AI election”, with deepfakes threatening to accelerate the spread of disinformation – a tempting target for foreign interference.

■ **It is unfolding in a febrile atmosphere of conspiracy theories, polarisation**, gun violence and surging antisemitism and Islamophobia. Political opponents are increasingly framed as mortal enemies. Violence erupted on January 6 and again last year when a man broke into the home of the former House speaker Nancy Pelosi and attacked her husband with a hammer.

Henry Olsen, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center thinktank in Washington, said: “If you have something like the last couple of elections where it’s razor thin, and people who don’t understand the American electoral process see malfeasance and misfeasance where there is none, we have a very non-trivial chance of violence.”

Luntz does not foresee violence. But nor is he optimistic about the future of a nation torn between hope and fear. “What I do expect is a fraying no longer at the edges but at the heart of American democracy,” he said. “I’m afraid that we are reaching the point of no return.”

TEXT 10 - Elections and Disinformation Are Colliding Like Never Before in 2024

A wave of elections coincides with state influence operations, a surge of extremism, A.I. advances and a pullback in social media protections.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/09/business/media/election-disinformation-2024.html>

By Tiffany Hsu, Stuart A. Thompson and Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2024

Billions of people will vote in major elections this year — around half of the global population, by some estimates — in one of the largest and most consequential democratic exercises in living memory.

5 The results will affect how the world is run for decades to come.

At the same time, false narratives and conspiracy theories have evolved into an increasingly global menace.

10 Baseless claims of election fraud have battered trust in democracy. Foreign influence campaigns regularly target polarizing domestic challenges. Artificial intelligence has supercharged disinformation efforts and distorted perceptions of reality. All while major social
15 media companies have scaled back their safeguards and downsized election teams.

“Almost every democracy is under stress, independent of technology,” said Darrell M. West, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank. “When you add
20 disinformation on top of that, it just creates many opportunities for mischief.”

It is, he said, a “perfect storm of disinformation.”

The stakes are enormous.

Democracy, which spread globally after the end of the
25 Cold War, faces mounting challenges worldwide — from mass migration to climate disruption, from economic inequities to war. The struggle in many countries to respond adequately to such tests has eroded confidence in liberal, pluralistic societies, opening the
30 door to appeals from populists and strongman leaders.

Autocratic countries, led by Russia and China, have seized on the currents of political discontent to push narratives undermining democratic governance and leadership, often by sponsoring disinformation
35 campaigns. If those efforts succeed, the elections could accelerate the recent rise in authoritarian-minded leaders.

Fyodor A. Lukyanov, an analyst who leads a Kremlin-
40 aligned think tank in Moscow, the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, argued recently that 2024 “could be

the year when the West’s liberal elites lose control of the world order.”

The political establishment in many nations, as well as
45 intergovernmental organizations like the Group of 20, appears poised for upheaval, said Katie Harbath, founder of the technology policy firm Anchor Change and formerly a public policy director at Facebook managing elections. Disinformation — spread via social
50 media but also through print, radio, television and word of mouth — risks destabilizing the political process.

“We’re going to hit 2025 and the world is going to look very different,” she said.

Aggressive State Operatives

55 Among the biggest sources of disinformation in elections campaigns are autocratic governments seeking to discredit democracy as a global model of governance. Russia, China and Iran have all been cited in recent months by researchers and the U.S. government as
60 likely to attempt influence operations to disrupt other countries’ elections, including this year’s U.S. presidential election. The countries see the coming year as “a real opportunity to embarrass us on the world stage, exploit social divisions and just undermine the
65 democratic process,” said Brian Liston, an analyst at Recorded Future, a digital security company that recently reported on potential threats to American race. The company also examined a Russian influence effort that Meta first identified last year, dubbed
70 “Doppelgänger,” that seemed to impersonate international news organizations and created fake accounts to spread Russian propaganda in the United States and Europe. Doppelgänger appeared to have used widely available artificial intelligence tools to create
75 news outlets dedicated to American politics, with names like Election Watch and My Pride.

Disinformation campaigns like this easily traverse borders.

Conspiracy theories — such as claims that the United
80 States schemes with collaborators in various countries to engineer local power shifts or that it operates secret biological weapons factories in Ukraine — have sought

to discredit American and European political and cultural influence around the world. They could appear in Urdu in Pakistan while also surfacing, with different characters and language, in Russia, shifting public opinion in those countries in favor of anti-West politicians.

The false narratives volleying around the world are often shared by diaspora communities or orchestrated by state-backed operatives. Experts predict that election fraud narratives will continue to evolve and reverberate, as they did in the United States and Brazil in 2022 and then in Argentina in 2023.

95 A Cycle of Polarization and Extremism

An increasingly polarized and combative political environment is breeding hate speech and misinformation, which pushes voters even further into silos. A motivated minority of extreme voices, aided by social media algorithms that reinforce users' biases, is often drowning out a moderate majority.

"We are in the middle of redefining our societal norms about speech and how we hold people accountable for that speech, online and offline," Ms. Harbath said. "There are a lot of different viewpoints on how to do that in this country, let alone around the globe."

Some of the most extreme voices seek one another out on alternative social media platforms, like Telegram, BitChute and Truth Social. Calls to preemptively stop voter fraud — which historically is statistically insignificant — recently trended on such platforms, according to Pyrra, a company that monitors threats and misinformation.

The "prevalence and acceptance of these narratives is only gaining traction," even directly influencing electoral policy and legislation, Pyrra found in a case study.

"These conspiracies are taking root amongst the political elite, who are using these narratives to win public favor while degrading the transparency, checks and balances of the very system they are meant to uphold," the company's researchers wrote.

A.I.'s Risk-Reward Proposition

Artificial intelligence "holds promise for democratic governance," according to a report from the University of Chicago and Stanford University. Politically focused chatbots could inform constituents about key issues and better connect voters with elected officials.

The technology could also be a vector for disinformation. Fake A.I. images have already been used to spread conspiracy theories, such as the unfounded assertion that there is a global plot to replace white Europeans with nonwhite immigrants.

In October, Jocelyn Benson, Michigan's secretary of state, wrote to Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York and the majority leader, saying that "A.I.-generated content may supercharge the believability of highly localized misinformation."

"A handful of states — and particular precincts within those states — are likely to decide the presidency," she said. "Those seeking to sway outcomes or sow chaos may enlist A.I. tools to mislead voters about wait times, closures or even violence at specific polling locations."

Lawrence Norden, who runs the elections and government program at the Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy institute, added that A.I. could imitate large amounts of materials from election offices and spread them widely. Or, it could manufacture late-stage October surprises, like the audio with signs of A.I. intervention that was released during Slovakia's tight election this fall.

"All of the things that have been threats to our democracy for some time are potentially made worse by A.I.," Mr. Norden said while participating in an online panel in November. (During the event, organizers introduced an artificially manipulated version of Mr. Norden to underscore the technology's abilities.)

Some experts worry that the mere presence of A.I. tools could weaken trust in information and enable political actors to dismiss real content. Others said fears, for now, are overblown. Artificial intelligence is "just one of many threats," said James M. Lindsay, senior vice president at the Council on Foreign Relations think tank.

"I wouldn't lose sight of all the old-fashioned ways of sowing misinformation or disinformation," he said.

Big Tech Scales Back Protections

In countries with general elections planned for 2024, disinformation has become a major concern for a vast majority of people surveyed by UNESCO, the United Nations' cultural organization. And yet efforts by social media companies to limit toxic content, which escalated after the American presidential election in 2016, have recently tapered off, if not reversed entirely.

Meta, YouTube and X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, downsized or reshaped the teams responsible for keeping dangerous or inaccurate material in check last year, according to a recent report by Free Press, an advocacy organization. Some are offering new features, like private one-way broadcasts, that are especially difficult to monitor.

The companies are starting the year with "little bandwidth, very little accountability in writing and billions of people around the world turning to these platforms for information" — not ideal for safeguarding

democracy, said Nora Benavidez, the senior counsel at Free Press.

Newer platforms, such as TikTok, will very likely begin playing a larger role in political content. Substack, the 190 newsletter start-up that last month said it would not ban Nazi symbols and extremist rhetoric from its platform, wants the 2024 voting season to be “the Substack Election.” Politicians are planning livestreamed events on Twitch, which is also 215 hosting a debate between A.I.-generated versions of President Biden and former President Donald J. Trump. Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, said in a blog post in November that it was in a “strong position to protect the integrity of next year’s elections 200 on our platforms.” (Last month, a company-appointed oversight board took issue with Meta’s automated tools and its handling of two videos related to the Israel-Hamas conflict.)

YouTube wrote last month that its “elections-focused 205 teams have been working nonstop to make sure we have

the right policies and systems in place.” The platform said this summer that it would stop removing false voter fraud narratives. (YouTube said it wanted voters to hear all sides of a debate, though it noted that “this isn’t a 210 free pass to spread harmful misinformation or promote hateful rhetoric.”)

Such content proliferated on X after the billionaire Elon Musk took over in late 2022. Months later, Alexandra Popken left her role managing trust and safety 215 operations for the platform. Many social media companies are leaning heavily on unreliable A.I.-powered content moderation tools, leaving stripped-down crews of humans in constant firefighting mode, said Ms. Popken, who later joined the content 220 moderation company WebPurify.

“Election integrity is such a behemoth effort that you really need a proactive strategy, a lot of people and brains and war rooms,” she said.

See also

● The Reith Lectures 2023 – The Global Story: How artificial intelligence could upend 2024’s many elections

BBC Radio 4, 09 Jan 2024

Deepfakes, distrust and democracy: Billions of people will have the chance to vote this year in elections around the world. There will be campaigns in eight of the 10 most populous countries, including India and the Biden/Trump race for the White House in the US. Given the stakes, the chance for AI shenanigans is high. Sam Altman, founder of ChatGPT, has warned “of a new kind of interference that was just not possible before AI.”

It raises two basic questions: How that might work? And, what might it mean? For answers, Katya speaks with leading experts in AI and democracy, each of whom have delivered the prestigious BBC Reith Lectures:

- Stuart Russell, Professor of Computer Science and founder of the Centre for Human-Compatible Artificial Intelligence at the University of California, Berkeley
- Ben Ansell, Professor of Comparative Democratic Institutions at Nuffield College, Oxford University

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0h3zrlf>