



OUR NATION IN THE BALANCE: ISSUE BRIEF NO. 1

**2020 AND THE SEEDS OF INSURRECTION:
TRUMP'S YEAR LONG CAMPAIGN TO UNDERMINE
THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ELECTION BEFORE
THE FIRST VOTES WERE EVEN CAST**

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2020 AND THE SEEDS OF INSURRECTION

TRUMP'S YEAR LONG CAMPAIGN TO UNDERMINE THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ELECTION BEFORE THE FIRST VOTES WERE EVEN CAST

From the earliest days of 2020 Trump and his allies began plotting to undermine the legitimacy of the election and overturn the results if they lost. They engaged in an open campaign to undermine the administration of the election, threatening the USPS and suing to block mail in voting. Trump even suggested that he would delay the election all together. In September, Trump and his MAGA allies in the Senate rushed through the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court as an insurance policy so the court would rule in his favor in any election disputes. Trump pointedly never committed to accepting the results of the election and a peaceful transition of power and right wing threats of violence surged in the weeks before Election Day with Trump's tacit approval.

Trump and his compatriots began spreading lies and misinformation about the election months before Election Day, and as soon as the votes were counted and Joe Biden won, they launched a criminal conspiracy to overturn the results and ensure that he remained in office.

Trump Spent Months Attacking The Legitimacy Of Mail-In Voting

From The Earliest Days Of The Coronavirus Pandemic, Trump Waged War On Mail-In Voting. In the midst of a devastating pandemic that had already caused thousands of American deaths as states scrambled to establish safe ways to conduct elections, Trump began a relentless assault on the concept of mail-in voting. As early as April 8, 2020, Trump [attacked mail-in voting](#) saying, "it doesn't work out well for Republicans." Trump's disinformation about voter fraud and mail-in voting were so egregious that by May 26 Twitter began putting a [warning label](#) on his tweets.

Trump Blocked Covid Relief Grants For The Post Office And Threatened To Yank Federal Funds From Swing States That Expanded Mail Voting. In addition to regular verbal attacks on mail-in voting, Trump was working to [dismantle the post office](#) to make vote-by-mail difficult or impossible. Trump said he would [veto](#) the first massive coronavirus relief package if it included grants to the USPS, and he [threatened](#) to withhold federal funds to the swing states of Michigan and Nevada if they expanded access to absentee voting. In August, Trump [publicly admitted](#) that he was blocking funding for the USPS in order to stop mail-in voting.

Trump's Lies About Mail-In Voting Laid The Groundwork For Him To Question The Legitimacy Of The Entire Election. On June 24, 2020, the [New York Times](#) reported, "The president's assertions about widespread fraud have little or no basis in fact but are resonating with his supporters and give him the option of raising doubts about the legitimacy of the outcome."

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Summer 2020: Trump Began Using The Levers Of Presidential Power To Attempt To Subvert The Election

Trump Tried To Delay The Election. In July 2020, Trump [threatened](#) to [postpone](#) the election, something that has [never happened](#) in American history, even during times of war,

Trump Began Filing Suits Challenging Election Practices In Swing States Months Before The Election. In June 2020, the Trump campaign, the RNC, and four Republican members of Congress [filed a lawsuit](#) trying to force changes to how Pennsylvania collects and counts mail-in ballots after the state expanded mail-in voting eligibility due to the pandemic. The campaign filed a [similar suit](#) in Nevada in August challenging the state's plan to send absentee ballots to all registered voters.

Trump Never Committed To Accepting The Results Of The Election And A Peaceful Transfer Of Power. Trump [repeatedly](#) and explicitly refused to commit to accepting the results of the general election. At a September press conference at the White House, he again [refused to commit](#) to a peaceful transfer of power, and told a reporter, "Get rid of the ballots and you'll have a very peaceful — there won't be a transfer, frankly. There will be a continuation." He accused Democrats of "rigging" the election and [told crowds](#) of his supporters that the only way he would lose is through fraud.

Retired And Current Military Officers Warned That Trump Might Try To Use The Military To Stay In Office. Trump's use of military force during the BLM protests of summer 2020 began to raise [public questions](#) about whether he would attempt to use the military to stay in office if he lost the election. In August 2020, Defense One published an "[an open letter to General Milley](#)" from two retired Army officers urging Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley to commit to removing Trump from office should he lose and refuse to vacate on January 20th. Later that month Gen. Milley [told Congress](#) that the military would not resolve disputes if the election was contested.

Attorney General Bill Barr Joined Trump In Making Baseless Attacks On Mail Voting. In September 2020, Attorney General Bill Barr joined Trump in launching a [broadside attack](#) on mail-in ballots. Barr made baseless claims that absentee ballots are prone to undue influence and coercion and that mail-in ballots impinge on the historic American tradition of the secret ballot.

Trump Openly Stated That He Wanted Amy Coney Barrett On The Supreme Court So She Would Rule In His Favor In Any Election Disputes. After the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in September 2020, Trump demanded that Republicans move quickly to confirm a new [conservative justice](#) so that election disputes could be settled in his favor. Trump claimed that Democrats were trying to rig the election. "This scam that the Democrats are pulling — it's a scam — the scam will be before the United States Supreme Court," said.

Right Wing Violence And Intimidation Increased In The Weeks Before The Election

August 2020: Trump Called His Supporters Engaged In Violent Attacks On Protestors "Great Patriots" While Launching A Federal Crackdown On Social

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Justice Protests. Throughout the summer of 2020 Trump relentlessly attacked Democratic mayors and governors for failing to quell protests, and he dispatched federal law enforcement authorities into cities to help arrest demonstrators. In August 2020, a group of Trump supporters held a “Trump cruise rally” through downtown Portland, Oregon firing paint and pellet guns at protesters. Trump [tweeted a video](#) of the caravan on the move calling the participants “GREAT PATRIOTS.”

September 2020: Trump Called On The Proud Boys Militia To “Stand Back And Stand By” And Refused To Condemn Violence Committed By His Supporters. At a presidential debate in September, Trump [refused to denounce](#) white supremacists turning a question about right-wing extremist violence in Charlottesville and Portland into an attack on “left-wing” protesters. Pressed to condemn, “white supremacists and militia groups,” Trump said, “Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I’ll tell you what. I’ll tell you what. Somebody’s got to do something about antifa and the left because this is not a right-wing problem. This is a left-wing problem.” Trump also [embraced](#) the QAnon conspiracy claiming that he didn’t know much about the movement, but he appreciated that the conspiracy enthusiasts “like me very much.”

October 2020: Gun Sales Surged Before The Election And Watchdogs At DHS And ACLED Issued Warnings About White Supremacist Violence. Gun sales [surged](#) in the weeks leading up to Election Day . The FBI conducted more than 3.3 million background checks for gun sales in October 2020, one of the strongest months in a pandemic year that was already breaking records. That same month, the [Department of Homeland Security](#) and [ACLED](#) issued warnings about rising threats from right wing militias and warned of the potential for violence tied to the election. The former head of the DHS intelligence division [accused](#) the agency of trying to suppress and downplay reports on white supremacist violence in order to boost Trump’s political prospects.

October 2020: Right Wing Militias Began Openly Threatening Violence Tied To The Election. Stewart Rhodes, the leader of the Oath Keepers militia, told the [Washington Post](#) that his group was going to “be ready” on Election Day to combat “Marxists.” On the night of the vice presidential debate on October 6, the individual known as “Q,” to the conspiracy theorists in the QAnon movement [sent out messages](#) calling for “irregular warfare” and a “color revolution” and “insurgency” in the United States.

October 2020: Trump And His Allies Recruited An “Army” Of Poll Watchers To Intimidate Voters In Key States. In [repeated](#) tweets, speeches and paid advertisements, Trump and his campaign called for an “army” of poll watchers to monitor contested election areas. The ads exhorted supporters to “Fight for President Trump,” and promoted the website “ArmyForTrump.com.” In Minnesota, a [private security company](#) said it was recruiting former U.S. military Special Operations personnel to guard polling sites on Election Day, an effort the chairman of the company said was intended to prevent left-wing activists from disrupting the election.

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November 2020: Trump Warned That A Supreme Court Ruling Allowing Extra Time For Mail In Ballots To Be Counted Would Result In “Violence In The Streets.”

The night before Election Day, Trump [attacked](#) the Supreme Court for its decision to allow an extended count of Pennsylvania mail-in ballots postmarked by Election Day. “The Supreme Court decision on voting in Pennsylvania is a VERY dangerous one,” Trump tweeted. “It will allow rampant and unchecked cheating and will undermine our entire systems of laws. It will also induce violence in the streets. Something must be done!”

The MAGA Conspiracy To Overturn The Results Of An Election Trump Lost Started Before The Polls Were Even Closed On November 4

#StopTheSteal Was Already Trending In Trump-Affiliated Social Media Circles

Before Election Day. The #StopTheSteal hashtag [began trending](#) weeks before Election Day, created in a now-deleted September 7, 2020 Tweet from right wing social media personality and OAN correspondent Jack Proboscie who claimed, ““#StopTheSteal 2020 is coming...” By October, a group of Harvard researchers called the [growing attacks](#) on mail-in voting by Trump and his allies “a highly effective disinformation campaign with potentially profound effects ... for the legitimacy of the 2020 election.”

November 4: Trump Falsely Alleged Fraud In The Election And Claimed Victory While Votes Were Still Being Counted. Election Day was relatively uneventful with record numbers of voters voting by mail. At the end of the night on November 3, several states remained in the process of counting votes and neither candidate had won enough electoral votes to claim victory. At 2:30 AM on November 4, [Trump appeared](#) in the East Room at the White House and called for vote counting to halt, falsely describing the situation as a “major fraud in our nation” and vowing to take his case to the Supreme Court. Trump claimed victory in the election saying, “To me, this is a very sad moment, and we will win this. And as far as I’m concerned, we already have.” Trump’s declaration fired up his supporters to [begin organizing](#) to overturn the legitimate results of the election and left [social media platforms](#) and [media outlets](#) scrambling to assert that the election had not been called yet.

November 4: Trump And His Allies Start Pushing A Series Of Unfounded Conspiracy Theories About The Election While Filing Dozens Of Lawsuits Seeking To Halt Vote Counting. On the day after Election Day, Donald Trump,, Eric Trump, and top members of his campaign began promoting a series of [unfounded conspiracy theories](#) about the vote-tallying process to claim that Democrats were rigging the final count. Eric Trump tweeted a QAnon video purportedly showing someone burning ballots cast for his father. Eric Trump, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany and other Trump allies claimed falsely that the president had won Pennsylvania. And Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh falsely claimed that crowd control at a ballot processing center in Detroit was part of an effort to thwart Trump’s victory, while the campaign was also tacitly endorsing disruptive protests in Philadelphia and Detroit aiming to “stop the steal.” At the same time, the campaign [simultaneously](#) attempted to use the courts to halt vote-counting in Pennsylvania and Michigan, sought a recount in Wisconsin and challenged the handling of ballots in Georgia.

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November 7: Joe Biden Wins Pennsylvania And The Presidency, Trump's Extra-Legal Campaign To Overturn The Election And Remain In Office Begins In Earnest. On November 7, Joe Biden was declared the winner of Pennsylvania and the presidency. Trump [refused to accept the results](#) or concede, claiming that the election was “far from over” and that his campaign was “prosecuting our case in court to ensure election laws are fully upheld.” That afternoon Trump’s legal team, led by Rudy Giuliani, held a [bizarre press conference](#) at a landscaping business in Philadelphia to advance more conspiracy theories about the election and lay out the plot to overturn the election results.