

The Texas Lawsuit and the Age of Dreampolitik

[nytimes.com/2020/12/12/opinion/sunday/trump-texas-election-lawsuit.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/12/opinion/sunday/trump-texas-election-lawsuit.html)

December 12, 2020

When it comes to Donald Trump's efforts to claim victory in the 2020 presidential election, there are two Republican Parties. One G.O.P. has behaved entirely normally, certifying elections, rejecting frivolous claims and conspiratorial lawsuits, declining to indulge the conceit that state legislatures might substitute their votes for the electoral outcome.

The other G.O.P. is acting like a bunch of saboteurs: insisting that the election was stolen, implying that the normal party's officials are potentially complicit and championing all manner of outlandish claims and strategies — culminating in the lawsuit led by the attorney general of Texas that sought to have the Supreme Court essentially nullify the election results in the major swing states.

What separates these two parties is not necessarily ideology or partisanship or even loyalty to Donald Trump. (Nobody had Brian Kemp and Bill Barr, both prominent members of the first group, pegged as NeverTrumpers.) It's all about power and responsibility: The Republicans behaving normally are the ones who have actual political and legal roles in the electoral process and its judicial aftermath, from secretaries of state and governors in states like Georgia and Arizona to Trump's judicial appointees. The Republicans behaving radically are doing so in the knowledge — or at least the strong assumption — that their behavior is performative, an act of storytelling rather than lawmaking, a posture rather than a political act.

This postelection division of the Republican Party extends and deepens an important trend in American politics: The cultivation of a kind of "dreampolitik" (to steal a word from Joan Didion), a politics of partisan fantasy that so far manages to coexist with normal politics, feeding gridlock and stalemate and sometimes protest but not yet the kind of crisis anticipated by references to Weimar Germany and our Civil War.

The cultivation is a bipartisan affair. When conservatives defend their fight to overturn the election as an answer to the way Democrats reacted to Donald Trump's victory in 2016, they are correct in the sense that most of their arguments and proposed tactics have antecedents on the liberal side. The attempts to scrutinize swing-state data for anomalies that prove the fix was in recapitulate similar attempts by early #Resistance pioneers. The state-legislature fantasy is an answer to the "Hamilton elector" fantasy, in which faithless electors were going to deny Trump the White House. The widespread Republican belief in voter fraud is akin to the widespread Democratic belief that Russian hacking changed vote totals.

The difference, though, is that the right's fantasy has been embraced from the start by a Republican president (Hillary Clinton was a follower rather than a leader in calling Trump "illegitimate"), and it has penetrated much faster and further into the apparatus of Republican politics. In January 2017, only a handful of Democratic backbenchers objected to Congress's certification of Trump's election. But you can find the name of the House minority leader, Kevin McCarthy, on a brief supporting the ridiculous Texas lawsuit.

That brief did not persuade the Supreme Court, Biden will be president, and the Republicans who signed up for the fantasy have been protected from their folly, once again, by Republicans with actual responsibility — in this most recent case, Brett Kavanaugh, Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch and John Roberts.

But it's reasonable to wonder how long this can go on — whether dreampolitik and realpolitik can continue permanently on separate tracks, brushing up against each other from time to time without a serious collision, or whether eventually the dreamworld narratives will force a crisis in the real one.

One possibility, which I explored in my recent book, is that political fantasy can actually be a substitute for radical action in the real world. There are ways in which the internet, especially, seems to contain and redirect the same extremism it nurtures — pushing it into memes and hashtags and social-media wars rather than actual revolutions, giving us Diamond and Silk tweeting about a military coup rather than the thing itself.

In this theory, certain kinds of partisan fantasy might actually be stabilizing forces, letting people satisfy their ideological urges by participating in a story in which their side is always on the verge of some great victory, in which Trump is about to be exposed as a Manchurian candidate or removed by the 25th Amendment (I participated in that one), or alternatively in which Trump is about to order mass arrests of all the pedophile elites or get the Supreme Court to put him back in office for another four years. Or, for the apocalyptically inclined, a fantasy in which your political enemies are poised to do something unbelievably terrible — like all the right-wing militia violence that liberals expected on Election Day — that would vindicate all your fears and makes you happy in your hatred.

Crucially, as in certain famous cults, the failure of these prophecies doesn't undo the story. It just requires more elaboration and adaptation, more creative fantasizing — and meanwhile the gears of normal politics grind on, choked with sand but still turning steadily enough.

I am certain this analysis fits the career of Trump himself, who has conjured wild fantasies among his friends and enemies alike, but who clearly doesn't have the capacity to bring the real world into alignment with his own reality-television imagination, to suborn the custodians of institutional legitimacy — whether the military or the Supreme Court or his own attorney general and the governor of Georgia. And while Trump may get one more great performance in 2024, I'm not sure that any

plausible successor will be able to achieve his mind-meld with the right's dreampolitik — in which case this postelection fight might be a unique convergence between reality and fantasy, rather than a foretaste of the two collapsing disastrously into each other.

On the other hand, we saw over the summer how amid the unique combination of pandemic, lockdown and Trump's provoking presidency, the fantasy politics of the left could slip free of the dreamworlds of academia and online activism, contributing to violence and purges in the real world — from the streets of the Twin Cities to the board of the Poetry Foundation. Police abolition and apologies for rioting belonged to the realm of ideological fantasy politics until they didn't, and if certain left-wing impulses have gone back to being fantastic in the months since, the memory of May and June remains.

The Texas lawsuit didn't torch any city blocks, but all those congressional signatures on the amicus brief did make it feel like something more than just another meme. The crucial question it raises is whether people can be fed on fantasies forever — or whether once enough politicians have endorsed dreampolitik, the pressure to make the dream into reality will inexorably build.

The last month of 2020 won't resolve that question. But we can look forward, in the next decade if not sooner, to discovering whether my confidence in the separation of political fantasy and political reality was the greatest fantasy of all.