

ISSN (Online) 2162-9161



# EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 11 | ISSUE 1

## **Democratic Isolation, Thin Citizenship, and In- surrection: A Theory**

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**Abstract**

Citizens are deeply cynical of the institutions and practice of representative democracy, resulting in increased isolation and extremism rather than nuanced public debate and democratic involvement. Three interrelated background conditions have led to this inevitable cynicism: the erasure of political citizenship by neoliberalism, the ability of technology (especially social media) to provide perfect information filtering, and the resulting fragmentation of civic experience. In this article, the authors outline a theory of democratic isolation that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, exploited by populist politicians, and ultimately led to the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection.

*Keywords:* January 6<sup>th</sup>, democratic isolation, neoliberalism, perfect filtering, civic engagement, populism, COVID-19

American cynicism has grown in recent years. This cynicism has both been precipitated by and caused recent events, most notably the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, when a combination of isolation, distrust, and emotion culminated in violence. The events of January 6<sup>th</sup> were not entirely unexpected. Three interrelated background conditions led to this inevitable point: the erasure of political citizenship by neoliberalism, the ability of technology to provide perfect filtering, and the resulting fragmentation of civic experience. These conditions were exploited by populist politicians and exacerbated by a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that not only set the stage for January 6<sup>th</sup>, but also opened the door for future unrest due to a lack of connection among citizens, the state, and each other.

Many Americans have become deeply cynical of political power and the institutions where it is vested in a representative democracy (e.g., Lawless & Fox, 2015). Instead of nuanced public debate and democratic involvement, the new norm is increased isolation, deep cynicism, and political extremism. Citizens are routinely told that they alone hold the power to express the political will of the nation while also being stripped of economic opportunities that would allow them to exercise that power and the political skills to do so effectively in favor of a thin description of citizenship under neoliberalism. The resulting resentment is reinforced by dismissal of the importance of a common set of civic experiences, leading to distrust of institutions and intermediaries alike, and breeding deep cynicism and conspiratorial thinking.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the market rules that have come to dominate political discourse means not only that all discourse is equally valued and amplified, but also that it is both easy and wise for citizens to filter out anything but those views that reinforce and sometimes radicalize their own beliefs.

In this article, we offer a theory of democratic isolation that was building long before January 6, 2021. Neoliberalism has shifted the expectations that citizens have of both their own civic involvement and the legitimacy of the state and political processes more broadly. Technology has allowed the remaining civic conversation to move online and into the shadows, eliminating the possibility of any marketplace of ideas to filter out more extreme and violent viewpoints. The COVID-19 pandemic further isolated people physically while radicalizing many through online platforms in unprecedented ways. Moreover, populist politicians and pundits seized the moment and exploited the isolation, despair, and deepening distrust in intellect, science, and democratic norms that ultimately led to insurrection.

### **Neoliberalism and the Lament of the Individual Left Behind**

The marketization of all facets of life has been ongoing throughout a major portion of the American experiment, especially in the last 100 years. Neoliberalism has, in sum, marketized every part of our lives, from education to healthcare and from war to charity. As Foucault (2010) posited, neoliberalism is distinct in that it works by “taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, projecting them on to a general art of government” (p. 131). This mode of governance reaches into all facets of life, pushing out the civic engagement of citizens not just in governmental activities, but in the general way of being, working, learning, and existing within society. For our purposes here, the most important

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<sup>1</sup> Data on political and social trust is readily available from both the Pew Research Center and the General Social Survey (GSS; available at [https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/home](https://gssdataexplorer.norc.ohio-state.edu/home)). In particular, the Pew Research Center offers an overview of Americans’ declining trust in government since the 1950s (Pew Research Center, 2021) and a more recent take on political trust and governmental performance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020). The GSS and Pew Research Center (Rainie et al., 2019) have also noted a parallel decline in social trust, or trust Americans have toward their fellow citizens, over the past several decades.

marketization has been that of democracy. When democratic citizenship falls victim to the rise of *homo economicus*, extremism becomes mistaken for patriotism, and distrust in institutions becomes mistaken for liberty. This has had two important effects on civic participation. First, individuals who do not or cannot invest in themselves as capital through education and experience become left behind and disenchanting with society, including its institutions and those in power. Second, neoliberal rhetoric has diminished the role of citizen for individuals, making it a lower order concern that often falls to the wayside for more market-driven activities.

Neoliberalism has made it so individuals have to compete in new ways to maintain the ability to earn and provide for themselves and their families. Classical liberalism holds that individuals should be free actors to make choices within the marketplace. Neoliberalism inverts that. A neoliberal subject “is human capital for itself and the state” and as such is at constant risk of becoming redundant and abandoned—a fear driving much of the political discourse in populist movements (Brown, 2015, p. 110). *Homo politicus*, the political citizen, ceases to exist in favor of a streamlined *homo economicus*, who not only is focused on their own market value as capital, but who, over time, loses the skills necessary to be a political actor. The American experiment relies on democratic values no longer practiced in neoliberal times. The philosophical tenets relied on at the Founding—from Aristotle to Locke and Rousseau—presuppose not just market forces that necessitate a state to mediate them but a citizenry “simultaneously rooted in individual sovereignty and [signaling] the promise of social, political, and legal respect for it” (Brown, 2015, p. 109). With the contemporary state now governed by neoliberal rationality, citizenship today is a thin facsimile of what the Founders expected would be needed to make such an experiment work. In an era when there is no room for regular civic order and individuals are forced to prioritize economic growth and self-investment over collective well-being, the modern citizen is an economic actor first and foremost. Any attempt to act as *homo politicus* is met with fierce opposition from the neoliberal order, which requires individuals to invest in their own capital, valued in market terms, leaving behind democratic participation that simply cannot be measured in terms of return on investment. The problem is that democracy cannot ever measure up under market terms.

The metrics of the market in neoliberalism, coupled with an animosity over sanctioning by growing social justice movements, have created a great deal of anxiety, particularly among those who have either not sought to improve themselves as capital in the new neoliberal order or have been or are at dire risk of being deemed useless in the neoliberal marketplace. Factory workers, coal miners, and blue-collar workers truly *are* feeling the pressure of the neoliberal rhetoric that has come to dominate both market and polis. The result is new fissures in society that are often aimed at those in power, those appearing to escape immediate market concerns, as well as state institutions that presumptively allowed or abetted their situation to deteriorate. When commentators underscore “economic anxiety” as a root cause of populist tendencies, it is code for not only racial resentment, but also a visceral fear of being left behind in neoliberal society. This fear is often consciously and subconsciously coupled with racist and xenophobic rhetoric.

It is impossible to fully disentangle these two strains of thought, as they so often work hand in hand with the misogyny that runs deep within them (Bracewell, 2021). In fact, these two anxieties co-create a sense of loss that encompasses both lost market and social capital. While the market loss may be real, the perceived social loss is often molded by racial resentment and those who evoke populist rhetoric to undermine a presumed set of elites. These elites,

particularly those with specialized expertise or experience, along with communities of color are framed as receiving an unjust economic or social advantage. Aggrieved individuals caught up in these populist movements—right-wing or left-wing—are “effectively saying that neoliberalism isn’t working, that there’s something deeply wrong with the present way of organizing life and doing business, and that we need to replace it with something dramatically different” (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 194), but they are doing so by undermining civil society.

In recent years, this has led to a great deal of distrust not only in state actors, but also in the idea of civil society itself. Under neoliberalism, state institutions are not worthy of trust because they fail to act like the marketplace and seemingly violate the rules of society. The more extreme versions of this kind of thought convert distrust into a form of patriotism. No longer is the goal rehabilitation of the state or society but rather an active campaign to undermine both as illegitimate. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the Q-Anon movement, in which conspiracists have latched on to this pervasive sense of distrust to create a narrative about a government overrun by a cabal of unsavory establishment politicians who are, quite literally, trying to steal children and prevent the rise of the “true patriot.”

### **Neoliberalism, the State, and Political Liberty**

Democratic values in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem incapable of finding merit on their own as part of a larger common good, instead needing to be justified as requiring some additional market value at best and not being worth the return on investment in market terms at worst. Neoliberalism “governs as sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation” (Brown, 2015, p. 35). While liberal democracy may not be perfect and may “fall short of [its] promise and at times cruelly invert it,” still, “liberal democratic principles hold, and hold out, ideals of both freedom and equality universally shared and of political rule by and for the people” (p. 18). Neoliberalism erases the shared ideals of freedom and equality and, in their place, substitutes a notion of market governance—a notion that necessarily eschews civic engagement in any traditional sense in favor of a thin form of citizenship and a conceptualization of freedom as market freedom, not political freedom.

Neoliberalism and its rationality are omnipresent throughout the course of one’s life, economizing previously “noneconomic spheres and practices ... [that] may not always involve monetization” (Koray et al., 2009, as cited in Brown, 2015, pp. 30–31). Formal education—a cornerstone of developing a democratically-minded citizenry—has shifted in purpose from a normative good that can provide for better citizens and skilled workers to one that can only be justified by the production of skilled workers, and any attempts to revitalize the civic component of education are met with great resistance as being futile, unworthy, or unsound. In fact, the post-World War II United States undertook one of the largest public education projects of its kind, reaching all social strata but especially making available a quality liberal arts education to the middle class for the first time in history, largely at the cost of the state (e.g., Newfield, 2008). However, individuals now bear that cost, and a liberal arts education is increasingly out of reach, undervalued, and shunned in favor of pure job-training programs (Brown, 2015, p. 180). The resulting resistance to formal and informal education forecloses an important route to imbuing citizens with democratic skills and values.

In this way, outward hostility to democratic activity—not just benign neglect—is at the heart of the movement behind January 6<sup>th</sup>. A schism between those who appear from the outside

to be doing well under neoliberalism (i.e., the educated, the white collar, the “elites”) and those who have visibly suffered at its hands becomes the defining political fault line. The lack of trust on either side of the equation results in increased isolation and the labeling of those most immediately left behind by neoliberalism as unsavory, angry, and unworthy of having a voice. This reinforced the conspiratorial thinking that ultimately sparked the Capitol insurrection. The insurrectionists saw their activity as patriotism come to life.

### **Technology and “Perfect Filtering”**

The dominance of *homo economicus* and market governance reinforces and is bolstered by the advent of hyper-filtering technology, or what some scholars have termed the “daily me.” As Sunstein (2018) noted, the “daily me” provides citizens the opportunity to filter out (or “narrow”) information they do not wish to be exposed to—and it goes far beyond just social media posts from annoying friends or family members. Indeed, today’s technology provides precise filtering that extends into our civic, public lives, too. The ability to filter gives rise to group polarization, especially among those who are more sophisticated in their ideological identities and partisan affiliations. Today’s filtering infrastructure makes it “easier for people to surround themselves (virtually) with the opinions of like-minded others and insulate themselves from competing views” (Sunstein, 2018, p. 71). While such enclave deliberation (or deliberation within groups with a shared identity) is not necessarily a bad thing on a societal scale (i.e., groups deliberating within a larger sea of different groups), it can, individually, give rise to extreme thinking. If enough people are simply looking to confirm their preexisting beliefs and views, they can likely do so by walling themselves off to anything critical or different.

Filtering endangers social capital development. Democracies without sufficient bonding and bridging social capital are destined to fail—or at least have serious civic acrimony, making political deliberation, decision making, and societal harmony more difficult (Putnam, 2000). Intense filtering undercuts individual and collective abilities to generate social capital, including bridging capital, or connections with “outside” groups that are not one’s own. In a sea of groups that emphasize internal identity over shared societal values, policy problems are often interpreted differently, with definitions using differing facts, ultimately rendering them incapable of easy or complete resolution. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, the facts between those inside the U.S. Capitol and the insurrectionists outside (with notable exceptions) were largely at odds, making any potential attempt to find a mutually satisfactory solution impossible. More than that, it bred complete incivility to the point of violence.

Violence does not appear from nothing but is the result of repeated gaps in politeness and civility in public discourse. Politeness and civility are how individuals demonstrate their respect for opposing viewpoints (Mutz, 2006b). However, the media’s (and individuals’) increasing need to highlight incivility and extreme emotional expressions of politics undermines any mutual respect. This makes for compelling political drama on televisions and elsewhere, but it also reinforces negative feelings toward political opponents—and this effect cuts across partisan and ideological divides (Mutz, 2006b, 2015). The turn to anger triggers a physiological response that makes it extremely difficult for a person to deliberate since they get too worked up to engage in a civil exchange (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016, 2018; Mutz, 2015; Webster, 2020). It is much easier to retreat to an echo chamber, especially when one feels like the terms of the game have been rigged against them and their ideas, which is exactly what many who ultimately participated in or supported the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection did.

Pertinent to our discussion is the lack of these cross-cutting political conversations, or discussions that challenge existing political beliefs and opinions through exposure to the “other side.” Such conversations are critically important for democratic deliberation, although they come with a cost of their own: greater ambivalence and decreased political participation (Mutz, 2006a). However, *not* having cross-exposure to competing ideas and groups may be worse. Homophily on social media, spurred by filtering, means that those persons more ideologically charged are less likely to “see” information from the other side, let alone share differing viewpoints within their community or echo chamber (e.g., Colleoni et al., 2014; Himelboim et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2014). The result is constant exposure to one set of opinions, inducing greater confirmation bias, permitting falsehoods to spread more easily, promoting extremism in viewpoint and action, and making cooperation on shared problems more difficult (Sunstein, 2018).

Inability to hold cross-cutting conversations, especially when one can filter them out, may permit individuals to avoid feeling uncomfortable, but it comes with significant civic penalties and reinforces political polarization. On the one hand, those who are walled off may actually be the more politically engaged, given their strongly held beliefs (i.e., lack of ambivalence), emotive energy (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Mutz, 2006b; Webster, 2020), and increasing compartment between social identities and partisan identification (Mason, 2015, 2018). As Abramowitz and Webster (2016) noted, though, anger is not irrational; disagreement with another’s ideological and policy orientations can result in an emotional response. Yet, that dynamic between anger and engagement among the most polarized or ideologically extreme is what precisely is animating American political discourse and elections, with explosive effect. Webster (2020) noted that politicians and candidates seek to reinforce anger in voters—through claims that are precisely directed at “stoking anger” among supporters—because it wins elections: An angry voter is a loyal (partisan) voter. The logical conclusion for addressing anger is to deal with its source. In electoral terms, this means the opposing party. Thus, voters are increasingly making political decisions not on merits but rather on who they dislike more (thus, “negative” partisanship; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). Coupled with an environment that emphasizes incivility and homogeneity of information, it becomes quite easy for extreme beliefs, falsehoods, and conspiracies to breed and influence political debates.<sup>2</sup> In fact, recent evidence has demonstrated that cross-cutting conversations on topics of policy do work to lessen hyper-partisan tension (Fishkin et al., 2021). These conversations, however, are hard to coordinate and no longer happen without intense intervention.

### **Lack of Common Experiences**

A third compounding issue concerns the lack of shared experiences—political and social—that unite individuals. A polity requires points of common experience to serve as a defense against factional divides. True, there are still many experiences common to all Americans. We celebrate national holidays, presidential elections have not lost their ability to command the nation’s attention, and the COVID-19 pandemic certainly has provided a basis for shared struggle. However, these events are increasingly becoming common in the simplest sense: experienced by many. Shared meaning or effect from these common experiences is fleeting.

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<sup>2</sup> This is despite Americans holding relatively moderate issue positions (Fiorina et al., 2011). Nonetheless, there is increasing ideological partying sorting in the American electorate (Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Levendusky, 2009; Mason, 2015), and it is especially pronounced amongst the more extreme elements of American society (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018).

Worse, some shared experiences have become, much like social identities, intricately linked with political identities (Mason, 2018).

Disagreement is a hallmark of all democratic societies, and it would be a nonstarter to seek to end political disagreement (one is reminded of Madison's thoughts in *Federalist 10* regarding innate factional spirits). Arguably, these common experiences help promote societal trust and reciprocity, vital ingredients needed for a functional society that allows for such political debate by an engaged citizenry (Hetherington, 2005; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Collective decision making relies on a measure of trust and a sense of shared outcomes. Sociopolitical, cultural, and crisis events on a national, or societal, scale can provide these common enterprises that serve catalysts for not only serendipitous exposure to cross-cutting information (Sunstein, 2018), but also conversations about shared societal problems.

There is another, perhaps more important, common experience that has atrophied to the point of catastrophe: civil society. Common civic experiences have become another means of emphasizing disagreements rather than appreciating the commonality of the event. Indeed, most Americans prefer democracy by "stealth"—"Let politicians and, even better, independent experts make decisions so long as I do not" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002)—although people certainly want these decisionmakers to be egalitarian and empathetic to their interests. Similarly, many have stopped learning the habits of democracy through participation in civil organizations that not only teach civic skills but also provide common experience and forums for cross-cutting conversations.

As Applebaum (2018) and Putnam (2000) described recently (in stark contrast to what de Tocqueville saw back in the 1830s; see also Almond & Verba, 1963; Skocpol, 1996), the United States is no longer a nation of joiners or participants in civil society groups. Through these civic engagements, Americans internalized norms of democratic governance: the importance of rule of law, deliberation, participation, and exposure to differing viewpoints. While not easy, democratic governance's value lies in "harmonizing discordant interests and empowering (citizens)" (Appelbaum, 2018). Neoliberal subjects coming together to act politically no longer do so as democratic actors but instead as a discordant symphony of lost souls. Without any social impetus to create and maintain shared civic values outside of the market, individuals become increasingly isolated. With perfect filtering, isolated individuals become increasingly dangerous to a system built on republican values and imbued with liberalism's goals of equality and justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores this point. This commonly shared national (indeed, global) experience does not mean universal agreement in its effect. Shared experiences—even negative ones—have been known to foster interactions that permit mutual understanding, building coalition, and even limiting animosity between opposing groups. With COVID-19, though, it appears that this shared experience is another means of fostering partisan anger, exploiting filtered information streams for political gain, and any discussion of shared problems related to COVID-19 breakdown, predictably and unfortunately, along partisan lines. Scientific consensus was already in a state of declining trust pre-pandemic and has suffered more with the shifting guidance due to better understanding of COVID-19. To an already distrusting individual, these shifts appear chaotic and provide evidence of fallibility. Moreover, the policy determinations based on scientific consensus, from masking to stay-at-home orders, feel intrusive, buttressing any preexisting notion that government cannot be trusted in Americans' personal affairs. They also often have real economic consequences to those more vulnerable to market failure—those who have already been sidelined by neoliberalism. Despite sharing the



world with COVID-19 and its effects, the experience has only served to create division rather than unity.<sup>3</sup>

Americans are still experiencing common events, but they are not *sharing* them in the proper sense of the concept. In fact, the rise of *homo economicus* has meant that the “sharing” around common experiences is often based on rational, self-interested, and zero-sum definitions. Competition being the norm of the marketplace turns these shared experiences into acrimonious ones rather than allowing them to reinforce a sense of shared destiny. Lost is the commonality of the event; all experience it, and all should take meaning from it. As a result, the public’s involvement in politics, from pandemics to local government, is more minimalist than many democratic theorists would prefer or admit (for a review, see Collins, 2021, pp. 790–791). Elections, despite being perhaps *the* most common experience in a democratic polity, have become just another event to prime the populace along sociopolitical fault lines. The citizenship that results is increasingly devoid of any depth of discussion or debate, and this thin citizenship is easily broken under the weight of crisis, conspiracy, and partisan politics. “A nation of passive observers,” argued Applebaum (2018), “watching others make decisions is a nation that will succumb to anger and resentment—witness the United States.”

Anger and resentment are certainly the net effect here. As Webster (2020) noted, anger may motivate partisan voters, but it produces significant *distrust* in voters, too. This distrust permeates not only in social relationships, but also in terms of governmental institutions. Trust in government has declined significantly since the 1950s, dropping from 73% in 1958 to 17% in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, resentment is widespread in American political debate, exacerbated by the rise of populist rhetoric that divides society into “us versus them” (Mudde, 2004). Indeed, diversity is considered a barrier to the “good life,” both politically and personally. Otherwise, democratic-based populist movements still “deemphasize differences among the group on whose behalf they claim to speak, depicting group members as wholly equivalent with each other and utterly different than those outside the collective identity” (Lowndes, 2017, p. 242), a tactic not unlike what Donald Trump weaponized during his presidential campaigns (Mason et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, such “othering” of ethnic and racial minorities serves a twofold partisan purpose: It induces resentment and stokes anger.

Significant societal and political strife is boiling over. Relying on governmental institutions to “hold” is wishful thinking, too, given the decline in trust that builds up such institutions (Hetherington, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Shared experiences once provided the means of creating sociopolitical bonds between diverse segments of society in order to transcend policy disagreements. Previously, Americans’ engagement in civil society groups attempted to foster at least a degree of mutual respect and democratic norms—however imperfect—for sustaining civic society. Deliberation over shared governance problems provided some minimal guardrails to keep American politics on track. As we describe in the next section, though, a long-festering decay in American society became acute due to an unprecedented public health crisis breaking

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<sup>3</sup> While the pandemic did bring isolation, it was still a shared experience, and surrounding messaging emphasized both a united front and a common experience in the same way that previous unifying events have. We are grateful for an anonymous reviewer’s comment making this observation.

<sup>4</sup> Trust somewhat recovered in 2021, with about a quarter (24%) of Americans saying they trust the federal government to do what is right *always* or *most of the time*, but nonetheless remains historically low (Pew Research Center, 2021).

out at the moment when American society was least equipped to come together around a shared experience in the face of adversity.

### **The Ultimate Inflection Point**

The lost language of democratic values, the perfect filtering of dissenting opinions, and the lack of common experiences to create shared values led to January 6, 2021. The reliance on the marketplace of ideas to filter out the “bad ideas” failed because competition necessarily has to give equal hearing to every potential opinion and, like any market, is subject to market failure. A “crisis of inequality” (Vermeiren, 2021) that follows the neoliberal subject intensified the feeling of isolation and distrust already felt by those who see institutions and elites as newly found enemies. Forced to echo chambers and message boards, there was no check on the extreme nature of the claims, and a sense of being left behind reinforced the feeling that these things could be true.

Throughout most of 2020, COVID-19 removed people from their daily lives outside of the home—often the only place where their filtering was not perfectly attuned—and forced them to stay home with ample time to see not only the government but COVID-19 itself as a conspiracy to undo any safety they had left. In fact, COVID-19 became a sort of training ground for anti-government armed protest. State capitols across the country were faced with armed persons who lacked trust in the science and the government, demanding the reopening of businesses, schools, and more in the face of growing infections and death. These protests were not all armed and high-tension, but the frequency with which guns and violent rhetoric appeared was not coincidental. In many ways, the COVID-19 protests in state capitols honed the performative and dangerous rage that would soon be in the nation’s capital. More than that, it helped build the online and word-of-mouth networks that would be key to facilitating an unprecedented breach of the U.S. Capitol building.

Civic values fall prey to the economization of all facets of life and can only survive if they produce measurable benefits in the marketplace. Currently, there is no reward for being a good citizen of the like that Madison and the other Founders envisioned. Instead, there is ample incentive to rely on anger and division since they, at the very least, provide an outlet for growing resentment and antagonism. The aggrieved are aggrieved for a reason—and their anger spilled over on January 6<sup>th</sup> into bloodshed. The intense feeling of being ignored has been happening for quite some time as the state has worked to support the market while “democratic commitments to equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism are now subordinate to the project of economic growth, competitive positioning, and capital enhancement” (Brown, 2015, p. 263). This competition that has left them behind seems coordinated as the attack that was carried out on January 6<sup>th</sup> through their anger and lack of connection.

On January 6, 2021, the individuals who would soon become insurrectionists—now trained and well-connected from 8 months at home dealing with anti-governmental protests over COVID-19—were gathered in person and face-to-face to grieve their case of government corruption and fraudulent election results. The anger that led them there is not simple to understand. While former President Trump himself had a role to play, the fact is that he was more symptom than disease. Capitol insurrectionists were convinced that the 2020 presidential election was being stolen, making Trump’s rhetoric a call to action rather than political hyperbole. Trump’s unwillingness to concede and his battle cry for others to confront Congress in person was just the match that lit the kindling and stoked the fuel that had saturated it.

Confronted with the belief that the election and the state governments across the country that conducted it—the very state governments that were already deemed to be inept and overbearing throughout the pandemic—were in coordination was not a far leap to make when the deck already seemed so stacked by the same actors. Pushed to isolation, these actors were armed with little to help imagine, let alone attain, a robust democratic life where their concerns are heard by system actors and reflected by public policy. In many ways, January 6<sup>th</sup> was not only predictable but almost inevitable.

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