

ARGUMENT

This Is a Coup. Why Were Experts So Reluctant to See It Coming?

A political scientist explains why some experts have clung to “It can't happen here” for too long.

BY PAUL MUSGRAVE | JANUARY 6, 2021, 4:14 PM

Wednesday morning, like most mornings, I woke up to the usual round of politics news sites and newsletters: *Politico* Playbook, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. Most of the day's news concerned Tuesday's runoff elections in Georgia, which apparently delivered control of the Senate to Democrats; other articles concerned the ongoing pandemic and the future of commuting in the post-pandemic world.

One article caught my eye: a *Washington Post* [article](#) by David Nakamura about whether the protests and petitions against the counting of Electoral College votes added up to a coup attempt. The piece quoted several liberal commentators and historians as saying that it obviously was, but the thesis was that what we were seeing as of Tuesday did “not yet meet the formal academic definition of an attempted coup.”

[The political scientist Naunihal Singh argues that Wednesday's violent invasion of the U.S. Capitol is not a coup. To read why, [click here](#).]

Some of the experts quoted in the piece urged calm and even insinuated that being alarmist about the indications that protesters aimed to cause severe unrest could be self-fulfilling. I filed this, and another incident, away and set about my daily business of testing and interpreting theories about politics. I looked forward to spending the day tapping out code in the data analysis tools Stata and R and occasionally checking in to make sure that the counting of ballots was going on as automatically, if a little more dramatically, as expected.

As I write this a few hours later, rioters incited by President Donald Trump have stormed the Capitol building. Both the House and the Senate have suspended their counting because of security threats. Reportedly, shots have been fired. A photograph of a rioter occupying the House speaker's chair shows that the Capitol is, essentially, being

occupied. C-SPAN is reporting that senior members of leadership of the legislative branch are being held in an “undisclosed location.” Reporters are refusing to divulge their locations on the grounds—entirely reasonable—that doing so could endanger their safety. The National Guard has been deployed.

It’s undeniable at this point. The United States is witnessing a coup attempt—a forceful effort to seize power against the legal framework. The president has caused the interruption of the process that would certify his removal from office. The mechanics of constitutional government have been suspended. Americans are in danger of losing constitutional government to a degree unmatched even during the Civil War, a period when secession itself did not postpone either the holding of elections or the transition of power between presidents.

The moment we face as Americans, in other words, compares more closely to the August 1991 coup that attempted to remove President Mikhail Gorbachev from the head of the Soviet Union or the 1993 armed standoff between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian legislature.

Yet right up until this moment a chorus of voices was telling us not to worry.

The past several years have been a boom industry for political scientists who work on topics like coups and democratic erosion, including several of the experts quoted in the *Post* piece. As the United States has entered seemingly uncharted democratic waters, journalists and readers alike have decided that standard horse-race journalism is not up to the task of interpreting politics.

As tensions have risen, however, there has been a profound divide between those who believed that, in the end, institutions would save us—that the United States’ democratic traditions would be preserved—and those who were clear that we faced a period that could end with a **standoff of this magnitude**.

So what went wrong?

Partly, there was an admirable devotion to scholarly integrity—that we as scholars had rules about what counted as a coup. The Center for Systemic Peace (CSP) coups **codebook**, for example, specifies: “Social revolutions, victories by oppositional forces in civil wars, and popular uprisings, while they may lead to substantial changes in central authority, are not considered coups d’état.” And until Wednesday, true, nothing like that had quite happened.

But Wednesday's events qualify as a coup attempt (so far). The CSP codebook defines a coup as a "forceful seizure of executive authority and office by a dissident/opposition faction within the country's ruling or political elites that results in a substantial change in the executive leadership and the policies of the prior regime (although not necessarily in the nature of regime authority or mode of governance)." Well, we are seeing that right now, as Trump and his loyalists have consistently sought to thwart the legal casting, counting, and certifying of votes, including by bizarrely trying to suborn Vice President Mike Pence into choosing the next president. It can be difficult to determine intent with mobs and their instigators, but the organizers of the pro-Trump movements in online forums have been consistent and clear in their desire to overturn the results of the election and keep Trump in power, as has Trump himself in his tweets.

(And, no, you don't have to have military involvement to make it a coup—although the **recent op-ed** by all 10 living former U.S. defense secretaries warning the military to remain in its barracks and support civilian government suggests that there may be reasons to worry about that.)

Mostly, though, the optimists' reluctance to see what's in front of their faces has had less to do with scholarly integrity and more to do with wish-casting—making predictions because you want them to be true, not because the evidence supports it. For U.S. political scientists, coups and paramilitary political forces are axiomatically things that happen out there. Their study fits in the mainstream of comparative politics, which studies foreigners, not U.S. politics (except for the small tribe of specialists in U.S. political development, who are well aware of the **history of violence** in the country's **political history**). Until Wednesday, Americanists modeled what election outcomes would be, not whether their results would matter—those questions mattered for others.

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The United States is entering a dangerous phase. The monthslong transition, which those aware of how fragile U.S. democracy is **tagged as perilous months ago**, still has weeks to go. The president remains in power. If there is an inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, it will likely have to be held in a more secure location than the once sacrosanct steps of the Capitol.

As paranoid as I have been about the likelihood of serious problems breaking out, even I succumbed. Wednesday morning, after I read the *Post* article, I took my dog on a walk in my D.C. neighborhood (and, yes, I'm going to avail myself of the privilege of not revealing my location). We passed a hotel where some out-of-towners, not wearing masks, were standing. One of them complimented my dog for being beautiful. I thanked them. It was another fine morning in America.

Wearing their Trump hats, they headed off to the Capitol.

Paul Musgrave is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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