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US Universities Face A Red Tide and A Precipice: A Neo-Nationalism and University Brief

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**US UNIVERSITIES FACE A RED TIDE AND A PRECIPICE**  
**A Neo-Nationalism and University Brief\***

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The United States retains many aspects of a healthy open society. But there are indicators of trouble and deep divisions around the meaning and importance of democratic values. This debate has significant repercussions for universities and their academic communities.

In the most-simple terms, there is a red and blue state divide over the role and importance of public institutions, including universities – red representing largely rural states in which most voters vote Republican and blue being majority Democratic voters, often with one of the two parties having majorities in their respective state legislatures. Then there are so-called purple states in which both parties are vying for dominance, but they are fewer in number.

The following discusses this contemporary dynamic and its implication for higher education, and science policy. This divisive political environment and the coming presidential election in 2024 provides a window into a possible scenario that would be cataclysmic for universities, for academic freedom, for global science networks, not to mention civil liberties in a nation once exalted as example of a functional democracy: the return of Donald Trump to the presidency and continued Republican control of at least one branch of Congress.

This precipice is purely speculative, and indeed there are many reasons to predict that Trump will never return to the presidency, discounting the strange stipulation in law that he could win an election and occupy the White House even if he is convicted of a federal crime.

In the meantime, the Biden administration has brought back a sense of stability in federal higher education policy and funding. There have been marginal increases in Pell Grants for low-income students, new flows of funding for academic science thru the \$280 billion CHIP and Science Act and budget increases in basic science funding agencies like the NIH and NSF. There have also been efforts, thus far marginally successful, to mitigate student debt levels.

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\* Selected contributors to the book *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, [Open Access via Project Muse](#)) were asked to provide brief updates to their cases studies.

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Just as important, federal agencies have rebuilt their capacity to manage their affairs and align their efforts with national priorities such as climate change, alternative energy, and areas of technological innovation. Even with the stormy aftermath of a pandemic, and wars in Ukraine and in and around Israel, Biden has brought a stronger sense of international cooperation and leadership among allies that have benefited universities and their global networks.

But what if Trump returns and unites with the red tide in many key states? Or perhaps a Republican Trump clone, running and winning the presidency with probably significant similarities in intentions, yet perhaps a milder scorched earth agenda.

Thus far, Trump has no detailed domestic policy agenda. His current campaign is largely a set of grievances regarding his election loss to Joe Biden, promises to slash non-military discretionary federal funding that includes higher education, to pursue massive regulatory cuts, and plans to gut federal agencies of civil servants and to install loyal adherents to his cult of personality.

He and his followers cling to an isolationist, American first foreign policy. In this agenda, and a plot to consolidate unprecedented powers in the presidency, lies an existential threat to universities, and civil society. Beyond the repetitive theme of universities as bastions of liberal extremism, the Trump campaign has made few significant statements on his plans for higher education beyond now two proposals.

First, to replace “radical left” college accreditation agencies – independent, self-regulated and largely regional accreditors, but that need official recognition by the US Department of Education to allow students access to federal grants and loans at specific colleges and universities.

And Second, Trump just announced plans for a [tuition-free national online college](#) to be funded by taxing the endowments of wealthy largely private universities, as well as fines, and imagined federal lawsuits. It is probably a nonstarter, but good for the campaign trail as another pathway for breaking up the liberal leaning higher education marketplace.

### **A Tale of Two Political Cultures**

As implied, with relative stability provided by the Biden administration much of the action in higher education policymaking by lawmakers and the public is currently at the state level.

In the US, there is a tale of two divergent political cultures, boosted by social media and culture wars. Among the 50 states, Republicans control 23 state legislative bodies, Democrats 17, with ten we can label purple states: states in which no one party has a significant majority of votes and that, for instance, might have a Democratic governor and a Republican majority in the state legislature. At the same time, Republicans hold 28 out of 50 governorships.

With caveats, there are significantly different views on the merits, culture and need for universities between the red and blue states that reflect different cultural and political “tribes.”

Most red states are rural and more homogenous in population with a high proportion of Christian fundamentalists, and conservative values focused on limited government and low taxes. Blue states, and the Democratic party, are characterized by the concentration of their population in more liberal and diverse urban centers and increasingly liberal suburban populations. Blue states tend to have higher educational attainment rates, including those with a bachelor’s degree. With some exceptions, they are also the hubs for technology and other growth economic sectors.

Most blue states, and their lawmakers, have a general sense of the value of public universities and colleges as engines of opportunity and economic growth, and are seeking paths to re-invest in them after the severe ebb of state funding before and during the Great Recession and the onset of the COVID pandemic.

In contrast, a [Pew Research Center survey](#) found that some 59 percent of Republicans feel that colleges and universities have a negative effect on American society; they profess low esteem for professors who, perhaps not so inaccurately, or portrayed as political leftist activist, hostile to conservative viewpoints.

Red state politicians see an advantage in attacking universities as a tool that reinforces the “deep state,” with academic communities portrayed as obsessed with race and gender fluidity and hostile to conservative views. To varying degrees, the Republican lawmakers have embraced many of the [characteristics of right-wing neo-nationalism](#) found in other parts of the world: anti-immigrant, nativist and isolationist, prone to anti-science rhetoric and policies, seeking ways to gerrymander and control elections, and finding subtle and sometimes overt ways to attack political opponents and gain greater control of public institutions, including universities and the judiciary.

### **Like an Autocrat**

What are the real consequences of this tale of two political cultures? In most red states the higher education community faces a pattern of attacks on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Efforts to stack university governing boards with loyalists (and, in turn, influence the selection of presidents and other senior administrators) are becoming more common, as is criticism of the agencies that accredit colleges and universities, which have long been relatively free of government interference.

A growing number of states have passed bills that ban the teaching of “critical race theory,” and have defunded or banned diversity initiatives, and weakened or eliminated tenure.

In a manner reminiscent of Xi’s surveillance tactics, some states now also allow students to record class lectures without the professor’s consent, and conservative groups have established “watchlists” of faculty members who are perceived as leftists. Similarly, state-level legislation to end funding for gender and minority studies and research focused on climate change and the environment follows the pattern of President Orbán’s of Hungary’s attacks on certain fields of study in Hungarian universities.

Florida and Texas are leading this movement, with Florida’s governor Ron DeSantis using culture-war issues to bolster his campaign for the Republican nomination for president in 2024. Apparent fear of political retribution led Kent Fuchs, the president of the University of Florida, the flagship state university, to initially [ban faculty from testifying](#) against a DeSantis-backed legislative effort to limit voting rights of minority groups who are more likely to vote Democratic.

Fuchs subsequently resigned. DeSantis then appointed a former Republican senator from Nebraska, Ben Sasse, as president of the University of Florida, despite significant protests from the faculty. DeSantis also has re-shaped the governing boards and leadership of several public universities and colleges. A report from the Association of American University Professors’ Special Committee on Academic Freedom published in May 2023 noted, “Academic administrators throughout Florida’s public university and college systems, from the highest to the lowest levels—without exception—not only have [failed to contest these attacks](#) but have too frequently been complicit in and, in some cases, explicitly supported them.”

Florida is an important battleground for higher education, but legislatures in Mississippi, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, and other states have passed or introduced similar bills. In Texas, the lieutenant governor voiced a common critique among conservatives regarding the flagship University of Texas

campus in Austin: “Tenured professors must not be able to hide behind the phrase ‘academic freedom’ and then proceed to poison the minds of our next generation.”

Democracy (V-Dem), a project housed at the University of Gothenburg declared that the US was now part of a larger global “democracy recession.” V-Dem also offers an assessment of the presence of academic freedom, or lack thereof, throughout the world using five metrics: the freedom to research and teach in a country’s universities, the freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, the institutional autonomy of higher education institutions, campus integrity, and the freedom of academic and cultural expression. “After a long period of relatively high academic freedom levels,” states their report, “four out of five indicators visibly declined in 2021—the year after President Donald Trump, who repeatedly made statements highly critical of science and academia, was voted out of office.”

### **The Precipice**

Unlike virtually every other country, the US has no federal ministry of education that can issue edicts and demands that would, for example, have greatly empowered Trump and his administration’s attempts to eviscerate the funding of academic science. Federal higher education policy in the US is largely limited to funding and managing student aid under the US Department of Education and supporting academic research through federal agencies.

But that is not to distract from the tremendous importance of federal leadership in supporting the nation’s universities and its scientific prowess, including the State Department’s enforcement of visas for foreign students and faculty that are a vibrant part of America’s academic communities.

Taking the Trump administration’s [last proposed federal budget](#), we can get a sense of the financial damage to higher education and science if he were to return to the White House. It included a 7.8 percent or \$5.6 billion cut in the Department of Education’s budget, much of it focused on ending a public service loan forgiveness program and reduction in federal Pell Grants for low-income students, and transitioning other financial aid grants into loans.

The National Institutes of Health would be cut 7 percent, or \$2.942 billion, the National Science Foundation (NSF) 6 percent, or \$424 million, the Department of Energy’s (DOE’s) Office of Science would lose 17 percent of its budget, or \$1.164 billion, and NASA science would face an 11 percent reduction in its budget, or \$758 million.

Many other agencies that fund academic research were slated for large budget cuts, including the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service (12 percent reduction), the Environmental Protection Agency (31 percent), and the US Geological Survey (30 percent). Trump repeatedly attempted to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts.

Trump’s current agenda and that of other MAGA Republicans is to severely cut the funding and influence of all federal agencies. One could imagine must larger proposed budget cuts to higher education and science.

A recent proposed budget in the House by the Republican majority outlined a 30 percent cut for all discretionary funding that includes higher education. The rationale? Concerns with the growing national debt. Congress and the president to need to act to better align expenditures with revenue. But any reasonable analysis, would mean both cuts and new taxes. Taxes, however, are always off the table with Republicans.

What is going on?

The traditional Republican theme of a smaller role for government generally in society has morphed into a “kill the beast” mantra by starving federal programs and agencies of funding, no matter what the consequences. This political view just led to a continuing threat of a federal government shutdown by the Republican led House of Representatives by failing to pass a budget bill that raises the nation’s allowable debt level to simply pay for spending already approved by Congress (a strange anachronism that offers an opportunity for multiple points of budgetary chaos).

After a long internal battle within the party, and with a thin majority in the House, MAGA Republicans recently ousted their Speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy, for not being conservative enough. His replacement: a little-known congressman, Mike Johnson, an extreme Christian conservative, Trump ally, who was the “mastermind” of the legislative effort to deny Biden the presidency. Culture wars, budget uncertainty, and isolationist impulses, are sure to continue and play a role if Republicans retain their majority going into 2024.

Another part of the precipice scenario: plans to fire or mute federal civil service professionals with expertise in areas such as climate change, including replacement of the leadership of various federal agencies with Trump adherents who refuse to enforce federal laws and policies related to the environment and regulation of industry. This was a significant pattern during the Trump administration, reversed by the Biden administration, but still with lasting damage.

There also was a pattern of limiting the ability of existing civil servants, including scientists, to do their job. This included censoring scientists for researching and speaking about climate change, restricting participation and presentations at scientific conferences, restricting access to federally collected scientific data, and simply not appointing individuals to key government positions.

The anti-immigrant rhetoric and an isolationist policy agenda would likely bring a return to barriers for international students and scholars visiting or collaborating with US scholars, and perhaps new restrictions on collaborative research and knowledge diplomacy efforts with international partners.

In an indicator of things to come, Trump and other Republican candidates for the presidency have [urged the deportation](#) of international students who express support for Palestinians or criticize the Israeli government’s military response in Gaza. Conservative media has also used campus protests related to the Israel-Hamas war, including peaceful calls for a cease-fire, as a proof of leftist leaning universities as anti-Israel.

Biden’s already compromised efforts to reduce student debt would, obviously, be out of the question. There would likely be no efforts to restructure loans or seek some form of mitigation.

The US Supreme Court is also a potential Trump ally in key court decisions affecting higher education. The court majority is conservative and has already stepped in to reject some forty-years of precedent by overturning the use of affirmative action, eroding the autonomy of universities to set criteria for admitting students, and previous student rights for reproductive freedom.

The scenario gets even darker.

One theme explored in my chapter on the Trump presidency in the [Neo-Nationalism and Universities](#) book was the inept nature of Trump and his administration. Along with the decentralized organization of

funding for science through multiple federal agencies, the ignorance of Trump appointees and Trump himself on how the federal government operates buffered and protected higher education. A second term will include is a more coherent game plan, what the *Economist* calls a “meticulous, ruthless preparation.”

Last July the Trump campaign outlined a strategy to expand the power of the presidency if he is elected. Formulated by right-wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the “[Project 2025](#)” plan includes ending the independence of the Justice Department, mass de-regulation, new powers to fire and hire civil servants in federal agencies, from the NSF and NIH to the federal Forest Service, with the intent of eviscerating the federal government’s role in American society, and attacking the “deep state.”

Part of that dismantling attack includes an already announced plan to revise the nation’s college and universities accreditation process, noted earlier. The stated intent is to reclaim these public and private institutions from the “radical left,” and to enforce new standards on their admissions standards, curriculum, as well possibly revising what federal funding is available to campuses. Part of the motivation is for greater accountability related supposedly to student learning and costs; but it also portends an unprecedented level of federal influence and control over colleges and universities.

Then there is Trump’s politics of personal retribution. Trump has made it clear: with new assumed powers he will go after his real and imagined enemies. In the initial weeks of his presidency, Trump sought publicity after several days of conflict between Antifa and pro-Trump activists on the Berkeley campus, Trump famously tweeted his desire to remove federal funding from the campus. That was an empty threat then, because funding agencies like the NSF have a level of administrative autonomy, with allies in Congress.

But if the power of the president was redefined and expanded, what then? And by harnessing the powers of a subjugated Justice Department to go after dissent, one can only image the scope of attacks on the academic community.

In short, it all adds up to an existential threat to universities, to civil society, while providing an encouraging message to current and wannabe autocrats of the world.

Keep in mind the strange anomaly that even if Trump is convicted of a federal crime, he can still serve as president, perhaps while in prison or with an ankle bracelet? More uncharted territory. Then there are the threats of Trump pardoning Trump for any convicted federal crimes.

This possible scenario, of Trump returning to the presidency (in the White House or elsewhere), would be cataclysmic for universities, for academic freedom, and for global science networks, not to mention civil liberties in a nation once exalted as a great example of democracy. And there is the likely detrimental realignment of the international order.

America’s much touted universities could enter a sort of dark ages.

### **It Can’t Happen Here?**

The scenario is, of course, conjecture. It assumes a Trump return to the presidency, as well as control of at least one house in Congress, and that the past is an indicator of the future.

There are many barriers to this doomsday scenario at the federal level, although politics at the state level are another matter, buttressed by gerrymandering by Republican legislatures, conservative social media, and culture wars.

For example, and despite Republican control of the House and the Senate for two years, President Trump's yearly draconian budgets targeting deep cuts in financial aid and science were rejected by congressional leaders. In the end, funding increased marginally for some financial aid programs. Science agencies like the NIH and NSF had good sized increases.

Why? A partial answer is that traditional Republicans have long largely valued federal investment in basic research largely conducted in America's universities as a useful form of corporate welfare and a source of economic innovation – with selected exceptions to play to their political base, like attempts to limit or halt research on stem cells, climate change, and gun violence.

One can also see an electoral college path for Biden, or any other Democrat, to win the presidency, and even for Democrats to gain a majority in the House and retain their slim majority in the Senate. Polling currently does not look good for Biden, but they are ephemeral this early in the lead-up to the election.

Trump's legal and other woes may eventually take a toll with his base and his stranglehold on the Republican Party. And then there are [legal challenges](#) in some states to Trump even being on their presidential ballot. The 14th amendment to the US Constitution makes ineligible candidates who took an oath to uphold the constitution and then “engaged in insurrection or rebellion.”

Even if Trump survives as the Republican nominee, Biden is the moderate, and stable, candidate, with an ability to win both the popular vote and the electoral college – even with concerns about his age. And then there is the scenario of a Trump-like alternative emerging as the Republican nominee, and winning, but ultimately governing moderately.

Generally, I have faith that the United States will avoid the “Trump returns” scenario. But I think most practical people do understand that, unfortunately, to paraphrase Sinclair Lewis's 1935 [dystopian novel](#) about the rise of a demagogue who becomes president and then engineers autocratic powers, that *it can happen here*.

### **Universities and Their Political Environs**

There are stories in almost all the corners of the world of universities under attack and facing new forms of political pressure. The war in Ukraine, systematic suppression of faculty and student voices in Russia, jailing of the same in China and Turkey, restraints on academic freedom in Hungary and elsewhere, and now the horrific events in Israel and Gaza—all bring home the reality that academics must navigate through the political and harsh realities of the world.

There is also the reality of rising international tensions, including worsening relations with China, a renewed alignment of illiberal and autocratic nation-states, and isolationist impulses in many liberal democracies, that are creating a new academic cold war.

Universities and their academic communities are often caught in the middle. And it is not always simply a matter of external political forces. Here at home, for example, there is consternation over the proper response and role of American universities to voice a determined opinion on the seemingly intractable conflict in the Middle East.

We have the juxtaposition of largely student-led demonstrations and anger that demands unequivocal support of Israel and its military response in the aftermath of Hamas's brutal assault, and at the same time adamant pro-Palestinian actors and sympathizers worn out by decades of diplomatic failures



regarding a two-state solution and concerned over the havoc now unfolding in Gaza. Hate crimes by perpetrators on both sides of the pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian divide are on the increase. As noted previously, Republican presidential candidates are already calling for the deportation of openly pro-Palestinian international students.

Add to this mix the fact that alumni and others are pressuring university leaders and faculty to make pronouncements of unconditional support for Israel's military response in this moment of tragedy. This has been accompanied by demands to censor faculty and student-organized events and speakers not properly aligned with their views, even threats to withhold donations at several US universities.

If one believes that universities should be open spaces for civil and informed discussion and debate, then this is not a good development. Thus far, one result is that the nuances of a complex geopolitical conflict, and the tragic human consequences, are seemingly lost, and, one might say, intolerance tolerated—at least at the time of writing this blog.

These incidents are different from right-wing, DeSantis-style attacks on universities but with similar consequences: chipping away at the autonomy that serves as the basis for academic freedom, trading open debate with threats of ostracism, and pressure for universities to choose sides.

Universities and their academic communities need to, where possible, cabal and strategize on how to fight illiberal tendencies, assert their role as engaged and rational sources of information and expertise, and promote democracy. They also need to navigate often contentious political environments that are shaped by both external and internal forces. It seems that in the US and elsewhere, the challenges will only get more complex.