

# How Do We Stop a Coup?

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This position paper from the anti-State communist collective *Unity & Struggle* was drafted before Trump caught coronavirus. We share it here as a good piece to illustrate the state of mind of our comrades fighting on the so-called United States of America's territory. We hope it encourages revolutionaries in the U.S. and everywhere else to debate what we can expect in November, and begin making plans, as what happens obviously has an influence worldwide.

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A month out from the election, it's obvious Donald Trump may attempt a coup. He won't have the military march in and overthrow Congress. But he could use the technicalities of the constitution and a combination of official and unofficial channels to secure his hold on power. The contours of this kind of "constitutional coup" are coming into focus.

Trump has said repeatedly, out loud, that he won't concede the election. He has framed mail-in voting as rife with fraud. He has ordered federal police into cities to disappear protesters off the street. Trump doesn't rule by fiat—he merely steers a loose coalition of forces within and outside the state. But these forces have still managed to lay the groundwork for a power grab. They've packed the courts with incompetent judges with bizarre and disturbing beliefs, purged the Republican Party of dissidents through retirements or primaries, and flexed in the streets.

For its part, the GOP has obviously devolved into a power-hungry, racist, authoritarian mess. Whether this unfolded over 40 years or 4, whether it represents nascent fascism or your run-of-the-mill authoritarianism, these nuances won't matter so much in the coming weeks. It's enough that Trump is a self-obsessed kleptocrat surrounded by a party of sycophants, doomsday evangelicals, regular racists and some fascists. They pursue overlapping goals and punish common enemies, and have little interest in checking Trump's authoritarian desires. So whether out of cynical self-interest or true belief, the GOP and its networks are primed to support a stolen election with constitutional veneer.

If the Democrats have a plan for securing power, they haven't shared it with their supporters. Most likely we'll see a series of legal challenges matched by Trump's own and mired in his judiciary. We need only look to the so-called Brooks Brothers Riot of 2000 for an example of the spinelessness we can expect from them. Biden is probably only prepared to fight in the courts, while telling his base to stay home and let him iron out the details. If Trump fills Ruth Bader Ginsburg's seat, Biden will face an even steeper battle.

In the meantime, Trump's coalition is able to alter the balance of forces on the ground. Trump doesn't have the full support of the military, but he may not need it. The uprisings this summer revealed a secure base within the state: Homeland Security and police rank-and-files across the country will gladly carry out voter intimidation or repress protests. Efforts to rein in these forces have proven toothless, even in cities with Democratic leadership. We should expect similar independent police action during the election.

Outside the state, Trump's base of QAnon paranoiacs and militiamen are ready to take matters into their own hands—rallying around the call to "stand back and stand by." Kyle Rittenhouse was a Trump fan more than anything else, living in the unreality created for him by Republican outfits and outlets. In a power grab, others like him will follow the lead of the Patriot militias. As Matthew Lyons noted, the alt-right supported Trump as a way to accelerate the development of the right but still viewed him skeptically, while the Patriot movement has aligned with him in a more committed way. Militias bring along greater capacity for vigilante repression, and

they've been active for months defending their country small businesses from an imagined antifa takeover.

The capitalists are split. Billionaire libertarians like Peter Thiel are supportive or at least neutral toward Trump. Lobbying groups like the Chamber of Commerce are divided about hedging toward Democrats. In a pinch, capitalists might flock to Biden because they want stability and can stomach regulation, or flock to Trump because they want to crush the left and can stomach volatility. A lot depends on whether Trump makes himself the only viable option.

And what about the left? The uprising this summer showed a vast potential for street action, but lasting organizations in neighborhoods and workplaces—socialist, anarchist, Black radical, whatever—are few by comparison. Trump can't name a communist group in the U.S. and has no clue what "antifa" is, but he'll use these boogeymen to attack all of us in a second term. A constitutional coup might be just one building block in the emergence of fascism. But it's a muscle we shouldn't permit the right to exercise.

How do we stop a coup? And how do we do it without legitimizing the Democrats, and instead establish conditions for a more autonomous movement going forward?

## Two Scenarios

**Scenario One:** Biden leads and wins by a wide enough margin that a constitutional coup becomes untenable.

In this timeline, Trump challenges the results in court, and his base mobilizes in the streets, potentially leading to violence. But these actions remain isolated, and the judicial and legislative branches plus majority public opinion treat the election as decided. In this scenario, Biden's zombie centrism still offers no solution to the economic, social and ecological crises. Far-right forces still grow in commitment and violence, and the potential for civil war or revolution continues to ripen. But we get a few years of (sort of) favorable conditions to prepare.

**Scenario Two:** the election is too close to call, sparking a prolonged constitutional crisis and unrest in the streets.

This scenario assumes some successful voter suppression and harassment. Let's say the GOP employs monitors to intimidate voters at polling sites, as it's now legally free to do. Or a "red mirage" takes shape, with initial votes swinging to Trump before mail-ins are counted. In this kind of scenario, Trump's base declares victory, and imagines Biden is trying to steal the election through fake mail-ins. The Trump campaign tries to clinch it by stopping uncounted ballots in court, or redirecting electoral college votes like in 1876, or forcing a congressional vote like 1825. Legal battles drag on for weeks.

If a scenario like this develops, cycles of dueling protests may emerge in states whose votes are contested, for example at state capitols or in recount counties. Take the "reopen" protests this spring as an example: militias stormed state capitols, Trump and his cronies gave them full-throated support, and Republican legislatures intervened on their side against Democrat governors. The Floyd uprising also showed the deadly methods that both federal and rightwing forces are willing to use to assert control. These forces are all likely to hit the streets during the election and after, pressing courts to block ballots, legislatures to redirect electoral college votes, and repressing the left.

The bitterest confrontations will likely be in the states most central to Trump's battle to remain in power. But in cities nationwide where left and right factions are well organized, fistfights or gunfights could erupt. Progressive democrats might support nonviolent rallies against voter suppression. But Trump will be happy to sanction—even call for—violent ones. If militias don't scare people off the streets, Trump could act on his threat to put down “insurrection” and deploy federal police or the National Guard. The military might comply at this point, while trying to stay out of the limelight.

In this scenario, forces on the ground will influence how narratives come to dominate public discourse. Is this an uprising against an antifa coup, or a Trump coup? Whichever story fills the streets, city centers, capitol buildings, press conferences and news cycles will determine which kinds of elite coalitions take shape to try to end the shitstorm.

## The Response

We see mass action as key to controlling the streets and shaping the narrative, on election day and in whatever follows.

First, we don't believe the armed left is in a position to defeat the militias militarily, though armed self-defense should play a role. Second, we don't think a battle between armed specialists is politically desirable. Third, and most important, we know mass mobilization can dwarf the armed right in a throw down: 15 to 26 million people participated in Floyd protests, compared with 35,000 to 47,000 in anti-lockdown protests, or the combined membership of an estimated 576 Patriot militias. Armed fascists dominate by caravaning to a few hot spots as protests dwindle. They can't match a mass upsurge.

In a constitutional coup, the left's role will be to fuel mass, militant direct action that overwhelms the far right and multiplies points of resistance in the institutions of the state and economy. The more this happens as Biden tries to send people home, the longer it continues in the face of rogue federal and police crackdowns, the more we will lay the conditions for class autonomy in the future. Against calls for passivity and nonviolence, the left should celebrate and spread resistance, linking it with the long history of labor and freedom movements in this country.

If you agree with our assessment, here are some proposals for what to do:

**From now until election day:** strengthen the networks that will respond in the case of a constitutional coup, and build their capacity to take the initiative. This doesn't just mean forming coalitions between existing groups, but also giving a shot of adrenaline to organizing in neighborhoods and workplaces, where people learn to work collectively and take militant action.

In the time we have left, we can establish direct contacts, signal boosting networks and carools among regional groups, and develop action plans for election week. We can facilitate training for marches, street medics and other key skills. We can link with the bases of NGOs (1,2) and the trade union rank-and-file fighting voter suppression—not to join their efforts, but to find others who, in a crisis, might take action independent of the Democratic party. We can share agitational materials with friends and family in the military or National Guard. We can rack up our memes beforehand, and circulate calls for “day after” rallies.

**On election day:** expose voter intimidation and harassment by the right. If it appears a constitutional coup is taking shape, our networks can call day-after rallies in response. The general approach should be to establish a narrative of popular resistance to a Trump coup, power to the

people, etc. Knowing the right will try to goad protesters into confrontations and pose as victims, we should try to avoid physical confrontations unless attacked. Our power and safety will lie in numbers, and in setting the terms of the ensuing political crisis.

**In the weeks that follow:** we can use far right actions in any part of the country as an occasion for counter-mobilizations in all parts of the country, and especially in battlegrounds. For example, in the case of a leap in fascist violence like Charlottesville or Kenosha, we should be ready to take part in a nationwide response. Assuming mass actions overwhelm the ability of militias to intimidate people, we should expect to sustain protests in the face of federal interventions like those seen in D.C. or Portland. At this point dissent within the National Guard, or political job actions in key sectors of the economy, could prove decisive, and prepare a deeper break with bourgeois rule.

Rightwing authoritarianism is a pressing threat. The left is broad and diffuse. However, the forces of the right aren't fully developed either, nor are they overwhelming. Let's seize the time.

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