

# ‘We are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe,’ new study says

Dana Milbank – *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2021

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If you know people still in denial about the crisis of American democracy, kindly remove their heads from the sand long enough to receive this message: A startling new finding by one of the nation’s top authorities on foreign civil wars says we are on the cusp of our own.

Barbara F. Walter, a [political science professor](#) at the University of California at San Diego, serves on a CIA advisory panel called the Political Instability Task Force that monitors countries around the world and predicts which of them are most at risk of deteriorating into violence. By law, the task force can’t assess what’s happening within the United States, but Walter, a longtime friend who has spent her career studying conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Rwanda, Angola, Nicaragua and elsewhere, applied the predictive techniques herself to this country.

Her bottom line: “We are closer to civil war than any of us would like to believe.” She lays out the argument in detail in her must-read book, [“How Civil Wars Start,”](#) out in January. “No one wants to believe that their beloved democracy is in decline, or headed toward war,” she writes. But, “if you were an analyst in a foreign country looking at events in America — the same way you’d look at events in Ukraine or the Ivory Coast or Venezuela — you would go down a checklist, assessing each of the conditions that make civil war likely. And what you would find is that the United States, a democracy founded more than two centuries ago, has entered very dangerous territory.”

Indeed, the United States has already gone through what the CIA identifies as the first two phases of insurgency — the “pre-insurgency” and “incipient conflict” phases — and only time will tell whether the final phase, “open insurgency,” began with the sacking of the Capitol by Donald Trump supporters on Jan. 6.

Things deteriorated so dramatically under Trump, in fact, that the United States no longer technically qualifies as a democracy. Citing the Center for Systemic Peace’s [“Polity” data set](#) — the one the CIA task force has found to be most helpful in predicting instability and violence — Walter writes that the United States is now an “anocracy,” somewhere between a democracy and an autocratic state.

U.S. democracy had received the Polity index’s top score of 10, or close to it, for much of its history. But in the five years of the Trump era, it tumbled precipitously into the anocracy zone; by the [end of his presidency](#), the U.S. score had fallen to a 5, making the country a partial democracy for the first time since 1800. “We are no longer the world’s oldest continuous democracy,” Walter writes. “That honor is now held by Switzerland, followed by New Zealand, and then Canada. We are no longer a peer to nations like Canada, Costa Rica, and Japan, which are all rated a +10 on the Polity index.”

Dropping five points in five years greatly increases the risk of civil war (six points in three years would qualify as “high risk” of civil war). “A partial democracy is three times as likely to experience civil war as a full democracy,” Walter writes. “A country standing on this threshold — as America is now, at +5 — can easily be pushed toward conflict through a combination of bad governance and increasingly undemocratic measures that further weaken its institutions.”

Others have reached similar findings. The Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [put](#) the United States on a list of “backsliding democracies” in a report last month. “The United States, the bastion of global democracy, fell victim to authoritarian tendencies itself,” the report said. And a new [survey](#) by the academic consortium Bright Line Watch found that 17 percent of those who identify strongly as Republicans support the use of violence to restore Trump to power, and 39 percent favor doing everything possible to prevent Democrats from governing effectively.

Early on Jan. 6, The Post's Kate Woodsome saw signs of violence hours before thousands of President Trump's loyalists besieged the Capitol. (Joy Yi, Kate Woodsome/The Washington Post)

The question now is whether we can pull back from the abyss Trump's Republicans have led us to. There is no more important issue; democracy is the foundation of everything else in America. Democrats, in a nod to this reality, are talking about abandoning President Biden's Build Back Better agenda in favor of pro-democracy voting rights legislation. Republicans will fight it tooth and nail.

The enemies of democracy must not be allowed to prevail. We are on the doorstep of the “open insurgency” stage of civil conflict, and Walter writes that once countries cross that threshold, the CIA predicts, “sustained violence as increasingly active extremists launch attacks that involve terrorism and guerrilla warfare, including assassinations and ambushes.”

It is no exaggeration to say the survival of our country is at stake.