



The Capitol Putsch reminds us that it's not immigrants undermining our institutions

Alex Nowrasteh

January 22, 2021

Many people fear that immigrants will undermine America's economic and political system. That fear has animated opposition to immigration for centuries but has gone unexamined by social scientists until recently. This prompted me and Benjamin Powell to write a book examining that topic in detail. We found no evidence that immigrants undermine those systems and plenty that shows they support them more strongly than natives do.

Hold on to that last point.

The mob that attacked the Capitol in a violent Putsch attempt on Jan. 6, 2021, were virtually all native-born supporters of President Trump and his policies. The most significant and distinguishing policy of his administration was his opposition to immigration. In other words, the subset of people most concerned about immigrants overturning our economic and political systems tried to overturn our political system in a violent Putsch.

Many of Trump's most fervent supporters have displayed their desire to overturn the American political system since before the violent Capitol Hill Putsch of when they challenged the election, made absurd legal arguments, and agitated for martial law based on laughably absurd conspiracy theories. The reasons were so bad that they *must* be a cover for a naked power grab. Many still denied the obvious because, after all, the president does have the right to sue in court.

But no one can deny it anymore in the wake of the Putsch.

Immediately before the Putsch, President Trump criticized his own vice president to an angry mob and convinced them to walk down to the Capitol building to pressure Congress to overturn the election. Many of them started toward the Capitol even before Trump stopped speaking. Whether Trump intended it or not, it was reasonable for him and his administration to understand that some of his biggest fans would take that as permission to commit violence just as he suggested numerous times before at his rallies and other events.

The mob then illegally entered the Capitol, and some of its members went looking for Pence with nooses while others were looking for Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other prominent

Democrats. Some Republicans are now asking for mercy to build national unity in response to those criminal actions, which contrasted with the Trump administration's zero tolerance policy for those who violate American immigration laws.

When Trump started to talk to the soon-to-be-mob, somebody placed large pipe bombs next to the Democratic National Committee and the Republican National Committee offices. The caravan of Putschists into D.C. carried some "bad hombres" with it who were intent on committing acts of terrorism targeted at important political institutions. Trump and other nativists said that caravans of Central American migrants travelling to the United States were full of terrorists, but they weren't.

The confused military and police reaction to the Putsch has even prompted the Joint Chiefs of Staff to make a statement to the rest of the military that their job is to uphold the Constitution, to reject extremism, and to stay out of politics.

This is how governments in third world countries behave. In our book "Wretched Refuse? The Political Economy of Immigration and Institutions," we wrote about the claim, often cited by American nativists, that immigrants from those countries would bring with them an affinity for the bad political and economic systems they fled, thus undermining our systems over time. We found the opposite, however, with strong evidence pointing to immigrants valuing our institutions more than natives do.

Specifically, immigrants have much more trust in the courts and legal system than native-born Americans do according to responses in the General Social Survey, the largest biennial opinion survey in the United States. Trump sued 62 times in an attempt to overturn the election results in different states and lost 61 times, likely reducing native-born Trump-supporters' already low confidence in the courts and legal system. Immigrants also have more confidence in Congress, the Supreme Court, and the executive branch in general. After all, only people with supremely low confidence in these institutions would join a Capitol Hill Putsch to overturn the election results.

Trump is like the stalker in the famous urban legend of the babysitter. She keeps receiving phone calls from the stalker who is threatening the children. The babysitter is the American electorate and the children she's watching are our political and economic systems. Heeding the stalker's calls, she locks the doors and calls the police, sure that the stalker is outside somewhere. When the police trace the call, it's coming from inside the house.

Likewise, today's threat to our political and economic system is coming from inside the house, right where it has always been. These threats of institutional degradation don't come from outside of the country, and it's not something foreign that a border wall could keep at bay. It's a threat that was inside of the country the entire time, inside of the hearts and minds of millions of our fellow citizens. The Founders knew this, which was why they created a Constitution in the first place.

Like the babysitter in the urban legend, we only just realized that the call to destroy our economic and political system is coming from the inside. But it's not immigrants threatening our political and economic systems, nativists and those aligned with them are at fault and it's going to be a lot harder to fix.

Alex Nowrasteh is Cato's director of immigration studies.

