

by [Stephen Zunes](#), October 26, 2020

Is the U.S. Prepared to Resist a Coup?

If Trump refuses to step down, we must be ready to not cooperate.

President Donald Trump's [refusal to agree](#) to a peaceful transfer of power has raised concerns that the Republicans may try to steal the 2020 Presidential Election.

If Trump and his Republican allies attempt to invalidate the election results, would enough Americans be able to mobilize to stop it?

And while the courts may be insufficient to hinder a Trump coup—especially after the Supreme Court [nomination](#) of Amy Coney Barrett—a growing network of organizations is already [preparing to launch](#) a large-scale civil resistance movement to defend American democracy.

But if Trump and his Republican allies attempt to invalidate the election results, would enough Americans be able to mobilize to stop it? Could they actually rise up in a massive unarmed insurrection that would enable the legitimate winner of the presidential race to assume office?

In considering these questions, it's helpful to look at the examples provided by other countries where peoples' movements successfully reversed the tide of a stolen election. As someone who's studied pro-democracy civil insurrections around the world, there are plenty of parallels—as well as differences—between what could happen in the United States after November 3, and how ordinary people responded in four other countries during similar crises.

In an [article](#) recently published by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, I examined the cases of the Philippines (1986), Serbia (2000), Ukraine (2004), and Gambia (2016). I noted that what they have in common is:

- Meticulous election monitoring and related efforts which enabled the opposition to make a convincing case that there was indeed fraud, and that there had not been a full and accurate count of the vote;
- Mobilization of a large number of supporters within days as it became apparent that there were efforts underway to steal the election, building on networks of oppositionists which had been active for years;
- Large-scale noncooperation challenging the legitimacy of the incumbent government, including popular contestation of public spaces, strikes, civil disobedience, and establishing an alternative center of power;
- Strict nonviolent discipline by the opposition, even in the face of violent repression;
- The support of both the centrist political grouping whose candidate had been robbed of victory as well as grassroots elements of civil society to their left;
- Loyalty shifts among regime allies, including noncooperation, defections, and desertions by government officials and security forces.

Can the people of the United States make these things happen here? That's a good question.

On the one hand, the United States has a longer democratic tradition than these other countries, as well as an impressive history of nonviolent resistance. Americans have enjoyed stronger democratic institutions, less overt repression, and greater individual liberties than the four countries I've highlighted, which had each been under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule for many years prior to their attempted coups.

It's uncertain whether Joe Biden would endorse an extra-legal civil resistance campaign on the streets of U.S. cities and towns.

However, there are many reasons why mobilizing successful mass resistance in the United States might be more challenging than in the Filipino, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Gambian cases.

One is that in those countries—like most countries with presidential systems—the candidate who receives most of the votes is declared the winner. By contrast, the U.S. President is selected by the Electoral College and the U.S. Constitution contains a number of obscure provisions that could result in Donald Trump being declared the winner, despite losing the popular vote by a large margin.

For example, federal courts—which are dominated by Republican appointees—could allow for Republican-led states to reject large numbers of absentee ballots or empower state legislators to appoint Republican electors regardless of the results of the statewide popular vote.

While undeniably unfair, such actions could be seen as “legal” and constitutional.

In such a scenario, it's uncertain whether Joe Biden, a cautious and centrist Democratic nominee, would be willing to endorse an extra-legal civil resistance campaign on the streets of U.S. cities and towns.

The Filipino, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Gambian uprisings were supported and even led by opposition parties. It's unlikely that an American coup could be reversed if, for example, Biden told protesters to give up and go home. This is essentially what happened in 2000, when Al Gore [conceded](#) to George W. Bush after the Supreme Court's [decision](#) to disallow a Florida recount.

Nevertheless, a popular uprising may lead Democratic leaders to reconsider.

California and New York are both overwhelmingly Democratic states, and they account for [nearly a quarter](#) of the U.S. economy. If Gavin Newsom and Andrew Cuomo, the states' respective governors, endorsed a general strike, and democracy-minded executives in Silicon Valley and Manhattan joined in, it would provide the economic pressure and momentum that could convince national Democratic leaders to sign on, too.

In the four countries where there were successful uprisings against stolen elections, the police and military showed at least some level of restraint. This included an unwillingness to carry out orders for large-scale killings.

U.S. military leaders have [expressed opposition](#) to interfering in domestic political disputes; Democratic mayors (who control most of the country's major cities) may be reluctant to use police to suppress peaceful pro-democracy protesters; and Democratic governors would be unlikely to deploy the National Guard.

While Trump could [utilize](#) strike teams from ICE and the federal prison system, these units are too small to cover the large-scale resistance activities likely to spread nationally. If American pro-democracy activists

maintained a strict nonviolent discipline, it is extremely unlikely that there would be large-scale massacres conducted by uniformed security forces.

But unlike other countries, [tens of millions](#) of U.S. civilians own guns, including military-grade weaponry, with a [disproportionate number](#) of those being strong Trump supporters. Even if the police and the military refrained from shooting into unarmed crowds, rightwing extremists may not have such hesitation.

The defense of a society under threat of a de-facto coup relies on widespread mobilization, building alliances, nonviolent discipline, and a refusal to recognize illegitimate authority.

For an anti-coup to work in the United States, there would need to be plans for specific kinds of mobilizations, including blocking and occupying key governmental, commercial, transport, and other facilities. Such mass actions are important, as they help galvanize the opposition, encourage participation, prevent business as usual in critical urban centers, and provide excellent footage for sympathetic news coverage.

Fundamentally, the defense of a society under threat of a de-facto coup relies on widespread mobilization, building alliances, nonviolent discipline, and a refusal to recognize illegitimate authority.

Indeed, maintaining nonviolent discipline is critical to success. Rioting, arson, vandalism, throwing projectiles at police, and similar activities would just play into the hands of Trump, who would underscore the need for “law and order.”

Most successful movements in this country which have engaged in nonviolent direct action have [recognized the importance](#) of nonviolence training beforehand. Training workshops for resisting a stolen election, such as those offered by [ChooseDemocracy.us](#), are critically important in better enabling participants to maintain a nonviolent demeanor in the face of provocations.

[Waging Nonviolence](#) has published a series of articles with important analysis and tips for resisting a coup. [Protect the Results](#) is a large coalition of civil liberties and human rights organizations “committed to upholding the rule of law and safeguarding the final, legitimate results of the 2020 election.” They have local groups mobilizing in scores of cities and are organizing a series of actions in the coming weeks. The Chicago-based Voices for Creative Nonviolence also offers a [list of resources](#) on their website.

While the odds of Trump leading a de-facto coup have decreased with Biden’s [steady lead](#) in the polls, it is still a real possibility.

If the President refuses to concede should he lose the election, we must be ready to not cooperate. As the Filipinos, Serbians, Ukrainians, and Gambians—along with other pro-democracy movements around the globe—have demonstrated, governments are only as powerful as the willingness of people to obey them.

If necessary, we can prove this as well.

Tags

[Civil Rights](#) [Republicans Resist Democrats Trump Coup Activism](#) [Stephen Zunes Dispatches](#) [Civil Liberties](#) [Democracy](#) [Politics](#) [Elections](#) [Voting In the News](#)

[Stephen Zunes](#), a professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco, is currently serving as the Torgny Segerstedt Visiting Professor at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. [Read more by Stephen Zunes](#)