

Twitter Thread by [Ezra Klein](#)



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So I've been reporting a story about how you'd fix the impeachment process. It doesn't work for removal, as currently designed. Impeachment was built for a political system without parties. It fails in a system with polarized parties.

The one time it functioned as intended, confusingly, was the time it didn't happen: Richard Nixon wasn't impeached! But the impeachment process, which came at the low ebb of party polarization in American history, convinced his party to force him to resign.

Would Republicans force Nixon to resign today?

Oh, you're cute. Thank you. I needed that.

The problem of impeachment is pretty simple: Presidents are leaders of parties. Parties are tied to the political fortunes of presidents. You're asking a party to basically wreck its immediate political future for the good of the system.

This doesn't just have the effect of making impeachment ineffective as a remedy. It's worse than that. It makes impeachment dangerous to the president's party, and gives them a reason to defend him and either normalize or minimize his crimes. As we are seeing right now.

One thing [@GeneHealy](#) reminded me of is that conviction was almost a majority vote in the Senate. It got switched to 2/3rds at the last minute, and it's not clear why. But if it was a majority vote, it'd be a lot easier to convict. So maybe that would help.

But there's never been an impeachment process when the president's party controlled congress. A method of executive accountability that cannot function when the president's party is in charge is not a reliable method of accountability.

You can imagine taking it out of Congress's hands and giving it to, say, the Supreme Court. But would they take that responsibility on? Under what circumstances?

I spent a long time talking to [@LilyMasonPhD](#) about this and basically talked myself out of the idea this is fixable.

In a party-based political system, there may just not be a good answer for the problem of a bad leader who is popular within his own party.

One thing this did convince me of is that Democrats are using the impeachment process right now for what it's actually for, rather than what it pretends to be for.

Impeachment is not, historically, a way we convict and remove wayward presidents, and it never reliably will be.

Impeachment is a way of sanctioning a president. Of shining light on things they did. Of putting an asterisk — or, in Trump's case, a double-asterisk — next to their name in the history books. Of warning their successors not to repeat their crimes.

This is not very satisfying. It seems we should have checks beyond just elections on presidential behavior. But we don't. What we have is this process that is, in effect, a super-censure, and its main operation is to recast how a president is remembered.

Which makes this impeachment process true to impeachment's actual role in our system. What Trump did, in the waning days of his presidency, should bring shame on his presidency forever. Impeachment doesn't work for removal, but it can work for shame. And so here we are.