

An Authoritarian America: What it Would Mean for the U.S. and the World

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“Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free.”



Washington's Farewell Address (1794)

- “However combinations or associations of the above description may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely, in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion ...”
- “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism. But this leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty.”



View of the State of the U.S. Government from POLITY

NOTE: The USA dropped below the "democracy threshold" (+6) on the POLITY scale in 2020 and was considered an anocracy (+5) at the end of the year 2020; the USA score for 2021 returned to democracy (+8). Beginning on 1 July 2024, due to the US Supreme Court ruling granting the US Presidency broad, legal immunity, the USA is noted by the *Polity* Project as experiencing a regime transition through, at least, 20 January 2025. As of the latter date, the USA is coded EXREC=8, "Competitive Elections"; EXCONST=1 "Unlimited Executive Authority"; and POLCOMP=6 "Factional/Restricted Competition." *Polity* scores: DEMOC=4; AUTOC=4; POLITY=0.

The USA is no longer considered a democracy and lies at the cusp of autocracy; it has experienced a Presidential Coup and an Adverse Regime Change event (8-point drop in its POLITY score).

Democracy, Authoritarianism, & Competitive Authoritarianism

- **Liberal Democracy** - political system that **both** protects individual rights and translates popular views into policy
 - Madison recognized the central tension here
- **Authoritarianism** – system with high concentration of power, lack of accountability where leaders are not chosen through free & fair elections
- **Personalist regime** – concentrates power in a single leader with few constraints
 - Unrestrained by rule of law
 - Incentives: personal enrichment, patronage
- **Competitive authoritarianism** – “a system in which meaningful democratic institutions exist yet the government abuses state power to disadvantage its opponents.” (Mickey, Levitsky, & Way 2017)
 - Holds elections where incumbent party can lose
 - Courts, legislatures still present
 - Elections tilted, courts politicized, legislature restrained
 - Targeted & marginalized press



Democratic Backsliding

- Process entailing “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime” (Waldner and Lust, 2018)
- A series of incremental steps, not one dramatic shift
 - Makes elections less competitive
 - Loosens government accountability
 - Erodes democratic norms
- Hallmark: ***executive aggrandizement*** – leaders amass power by undermining constraints on their authority both vertically & horizontally

Characteristics of Executive Aggrandizement

- Establish leader as dominant over the executive branch
 - Diminish leader accountability & control
 - Remove potential opponents & barriers
- Make executive branch dominant over other branches of government
- Diminish constraints on executive power

What Would Executive Aggrandizement Look Like in the U.S.?

- Undermine independence of executive branch agencies & civil service
- Defy, ignore, circumvent judicial rulings against the administration
- Circumvent, capture, & undermine Congress
- Attack non-compliant state governments
- Attack media and civil society opponents

6 Red Flags on the Path Toward Authoritarianism

Red Flag 1: Autocratic Legalism

- “For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.” – Peruvian General Omar Benavides
- American constitutional democracy is built around equality under the law (notably 5th & 14th amendments)
 - Fourteenth Amendment: “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”
- In competitive authoritarian systems, the leader uses the law to benefit themselves & their supporters and punish their opponents
 - Russia has its legal system to bar Putin opponents from running for office
 - Ecuador used regulatory rules and anti-libel laws to sue opposing media outlets

Could Autocratic Legalism Work in the U.S.?

- We have courts & juries that can reject charges made by the government, doesn't this protect Americans?
- The federal government has a vast scope of information about Americans and enormous resources at its disposal. Think about the consequences of:
 - An IRS audit
 - Criminal charges that are ultimately dismissed
 - Imposition of regulations and/or regulator interpretations that impact your business

Some Examples of Autocratic Legalism in the U.S.

- January 6th pardons
- Defamation lawsuit against CBS (settled \$16M)
- Defamation lawsuit against ABC (settled \$15M)
- Defamation lawsuit against the *Wall Street Journal*
- Suit for “brazen election interference” against *Des Moines Register* & pollster Ann Selzer
- Threats to use Federal Communications Commission power against media outlets, block mergers
- Justice Department investigation of Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook for dual first home mortgage claims
 - ProPublica reports 3 current cabinet secretaries have similar issues

Red Flag 2: Capture & Exploitation of State Institutions

- Governments have a wide variety of institutions to investigate & punish government officials & citizens
- Challenge & opportunity for authoritarians
 - Expose and punish government abuses and malfeasance
 - Potential weapons against regime opponents
- Incentivizes purging of career civil servants and replacement with partisan loyalists
 - Targets: Bureaucracies involved with investigations, intelligence, adjudication, economics
 - Venezuela, Russia, Turkey, Hungary, India, El Salvador
- Government entities that cannot be easily purged can be controlled in other ways
 - Public vilification
 - Bullying, blackmail, bribery

What Can Captured State Institutions Do?

- Shield regime from investigations, lawsuits, criminal charges, & permit unconstitutional actions
- Politicized security forces can target opposition while tolerating violence by pro-regime actors
 - Venezuela
- Politicized intelligence agencies can spy on regime opponents and gather blackmail material
 - Malaysia's Anwar Ibrahim
- Selectively enforce the law

Capture of State Institutions in the U.S.

- Firings

- **Military**: Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chief of Naval Operations, Head of Coast Guard, Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, U.S. military representative to NATO, top judge advocates general from Air Force, Army, and Navy
 - Chair of Joint Chiefs of Staff replaced by a then-retired 3 star general who had never held a major combatant command or been a service chief
- **Department of Justice**: Hundreds of officials fired, including the director of Departmental Ethics Office, FBI director, scores of senior FBI officials, and 20 staffers who worked under Jack Smith
- **Intelligence** – hundreds of staff cuts at CIA and NSA, 40% ODNI cut
- **Federal Reserve**

Other Efforts at Institution Capture in the U.S.

- Fired:
 - IRS commissioner
 - Equal Employment Opportunity Commission members
 - National Labor Relations board chair
 - More than a dozen inspectors general
- Stripped job protections from large portions of the civil service
- White House demanded a list of FBI workers who participated in the January 6th investigation
- Senior FBI officials were asked about their voting record and length of support for President Trump

Red Flag 3: Concentration of Power in the Executive

- Consolidation of power by undermining previously independent institutions
- Attacks on checks and balances from other institutions
 - Courts
 - Legislature
 - Media
- Centralization of authority in the executive

U.S. Examples of Concentration of Power

- Presidential appropriations withholding – presidential effort to rescind appropriations made by Congress
 - Under U.S. law, president must ensure an appropriation is spent for its mandated purpose during its time of availability once an appropriation becomes law
 - President Trump sought to cancel billions of dollars in foreign aid appropriations without Congressional approval
 - In July, Trump administration withheld \$7 billion in federal funding to states that had been approved by Congress

Red Flag 4: Efforts to Tilt Elections

- Competitive authoritarian leaders face a unique challenge:
 - Authoritarian regimes tend to stoke public dissent – democratic opponents, performance of the regime undermined by loyalty over merit
 - Competitive authoritarians need to win elections to maintain power
- Solution: Make efforts to tilt elections for maximum advantage
 - Inequitable party & candidate penalties – fine parties; disqualify candidates
 - Vote counting manipulation
 - Manipulate election timing
 - Efforts at voter suppression
 - Alter voter registries and districts for advantage

How Do Authoritarians Justify Election Changes?

- Election reforms are typically justified as efforts to (Mickey, Levitsky, & Way 2017):
 - Combat corruption
 - Clean up elections
 - Strengthen democracy
- Reforms are instead motivated by a goal of creating an un-level playing field for opposition parties in an election

Checks on Authoritarian Election Efforts in the U.S.

- Elections administered by states, not a central agency under the president's control
- Timing of vast majority of elected positions are not manipulable

Examples of Efforts to Tilt Elections in the U.S.

- January 6, 2021
- Efforts to undermine vote counts or refuse results
- Midterm gerrymandering
- Mail-in voting issues
- Voter roll purges & barriers to registration

Red Flag 5: Normalization of Anti-Democratic Behavior

- Tolerance or encouragement of violence
- Expansive use of emergency powers
- Politicization of security forces – target political opponents & dissidents with surveillance, prison, violence
- Efforts to undermine truth, challenge independent sources, or foster disinformation
- Cult of personality



'I love the smell of deportations in the morning...'

Chicago about to find out why it's called the Department of WAR 🚁🚁🚁



897 1.73k 5.15k



Examples of Normalization of Anti-Democratic Behavior in the U.S.

- Imposition of tariffs are a constitutionally-delegated authority given to Congress; Trump administration imposed blanket tariffs in April based upon International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. Stating:
 - “to address the national emergency posed by the large and persistent trade deficit that is driven by the absence of reciprocity in our trade relationships and other harmful policies like currency manipulation and exorbitant value-added taxes (VAT) perpetuated by other countries.”
- Head of Defense Intelligence Agency Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kruse fired after DIA report suggested limited impact of strikes on Iran
- Bureau of Labor Statistics Commissioner Erika McEntarfer fired after poor July jobs report





August 27th Cabinet Meeting

- “Mr. President, I invite you to see your big, beautiful face on a banner in front of the Department of Labor, because you are really the transformational president of the American worker” - Labor Secretary Lori Chavez-DeRemer
- “There’s only one thing I wish for: that the Nobel committee finally gets its act together and realizes that you are the single finest candidate since the Nobel Peace, this Nobel award was ever talked about” - special envoy to the Middle East and Russia, Steve Witkoff
- “This is the greatest Cabinet working for the greatest president. And I just want to say thank you” - Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick
- “Our country has never been so secure thanks to you ... [You] brought us back from the edge.” – Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent
- “Not only are carjackings down, muggings down, homicides down, everything down, morale is through the roof. You have breathed life back into the profession of law enforcement.” – Interior Secretary Doug Burgum

Red Flag 6: Marginalize Potential Civil Society Opponents

- Civil society – “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (Diamond 1994).
- Competitive autocracies typically do not eliminate political opposition completely
- Mickey, Levitsky, and Way (2017) argue that competitive autocracies instead “attempt to co-opt, silence, or hobble groups that can mobilize it”
 - Media outlets
 - Business leaders
 - Labor unions
 - Religious associations
 - Universities

How Do Competitive Authoritarians Silence Civil Society?

- Cooptation & punishment
- Friendly press outlets get preferred access; unfriendly media outlets are denied access and may face legal harassment
 - Self-censoring - Turkey
- Business leaders can be offered bribes or favorable business deals with government; unfriendly businesses can face investigations & penalties
- Speech at universities can be targeted and punished; Government contracts can be threatened and cut

Recent Civil Society Patterns in the U.S.

- Businesses
 - Law firm federal bans; others reach deals
 - U.S. government stake in Intel
 - NVIDIA given right to sell sensitive AI chip deal
 - Amazon tariff labels called a “hostile and political act”
 - Companies hiring lobbying firms employing White House Chief of Staff Susie Wiles’s daughters (Rubin, Turnbull, & Associates and Continental Strategies)
- Media:
 - Associated Press White House press pool banning; Wire service rotation ended
 - Administration-friendly media outlets added: The Daily Wire, The Epoch Times, Merit Street Media, Zero
- Universities
 - \$6 billion in frozen federal funds to 9 universities due to accusations of antisemitism
 - Harvard, Columbia, Brown, Cornell, Princeton, Duke, Northwestern, Penn, UCLA

An Authoritarian America: Implications for the World

Global Consequences 1 – Less Predictable & Reliable U.S.

- Foreign policies of authoritarian regimes are more contingent on whims of the leadership
- Personalist authoritarian regimes are more likely to act aggressively & initiate conflicts
 - Less constrained by institutions
 - Higher risk tolerance
 - “Yes-men” & policy mistakes
 - Diversionary incentives
- Example: Shifting U.S. policies toward India, Russia, and Europe

Global Consequences 2 – Re-Ordered Balance of Power

- Shift from *Pax Americana* to spheres of influence?
 - International post-war order built upon norms, rules, and institutions
- View that post-World War 2 level of U.S. global engagement is too costly and does not serve U.S. interests
 - Exploitation by U.S. allies
 - Diversion of resources
- Problem: spheres of influence have historically been unstable
 - Shatter zones
 - Consequences of economic shifts

Global Consequences 3 – Implications for Democratic Norms & Human Rights

- "The strength of all free peoples lies in unity; their danger, in discord. To produce this unity, to meet the challenge of our time, destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world's leadership." – President Dwight Eisenhower (1957)
- "America's support for human rights and democracy is not a political agenda; it is the very essence of who we are as a nation." – President Ronald Reagan (1986)
- "The United States will always stand firm for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, free speech, freedom of worship, equal justice, respect for women, religious and ethnic tolerance, and respect for private property." – President George W. Bush (2002)
- Democracy and human rights promotion likely to fade as a foreign policy priority by an authoritarian U.S.
- Secretary of State Rubio describing U.S. policy on comments on foreign elections, they will be "brief, focused on congratulating the winning candidate and, when appropriate, noting shared foreign policy interests."
- Democracy promotion efforts by USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy eliminated
- DOGE recommendations the RFE/RL & Voice of America be shuttered

Global Consequence 4: Fading Emphasis on Soft Power

- Since World War 2, American power has been projected not just through military and economic power, but also through values
- Programs like the Marshall Plan, USAID, Emergency Plan for AIDS relief sought to simultaneously advance American influence and reduce international upheaval and turmoil
- Shift toward more of a transactional view of foreign policy
 - Fewer partnerships
 - Less trust in international institutions
 - Zero-sum view of international politics

Winner: China

- Soft power is a key instrument to get others to want to do the things that you want them to do
 - Diminishment of U.S. soft power will necessitate
- U.S. withdrawal from bodies like the World Health Organization and other UN bodies boosts China's influence over the UN
- Eliminating USAID provides China with opportunities to grow its influence in the developing world

Global Consequence 5 - Economics

- Authoritarian regimes tend to have lower, less stable economic growth
 - Focus on patronage tends to encourage short-term, extractive economic strategies
 - Lower levels of transparency and predictability undermine foreign investment
- Authoritarian regimes are less supportive of free trade
 - More likely to pursue beggar-thy-neighbor policies
 - More likely to use economics and trade as a weapon
- A more isolated, protectionist United States will likely encourage a more protectionist world
 - Undermine overall global prosperity and economic development

Discussion