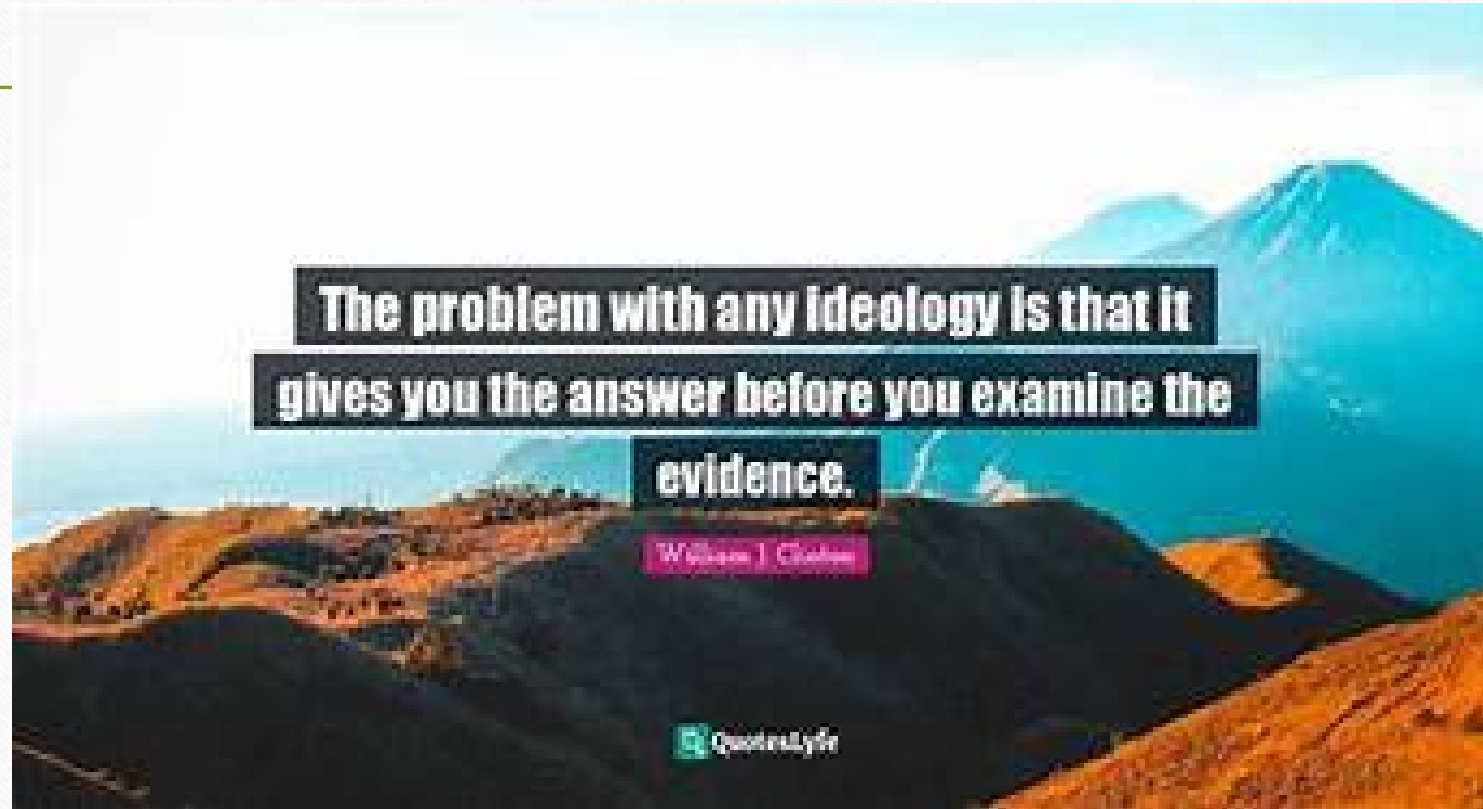


Fighting for Truth:

OLLI –Spr 2026: Dr. Rob Demski

What you know controls what you think,
how you perceive, how you interpret.

Ideology and Evidence



The problem with any ideology is that it gives you the answer before you examine the evidence.

William J. Clinton

QuoteLyft

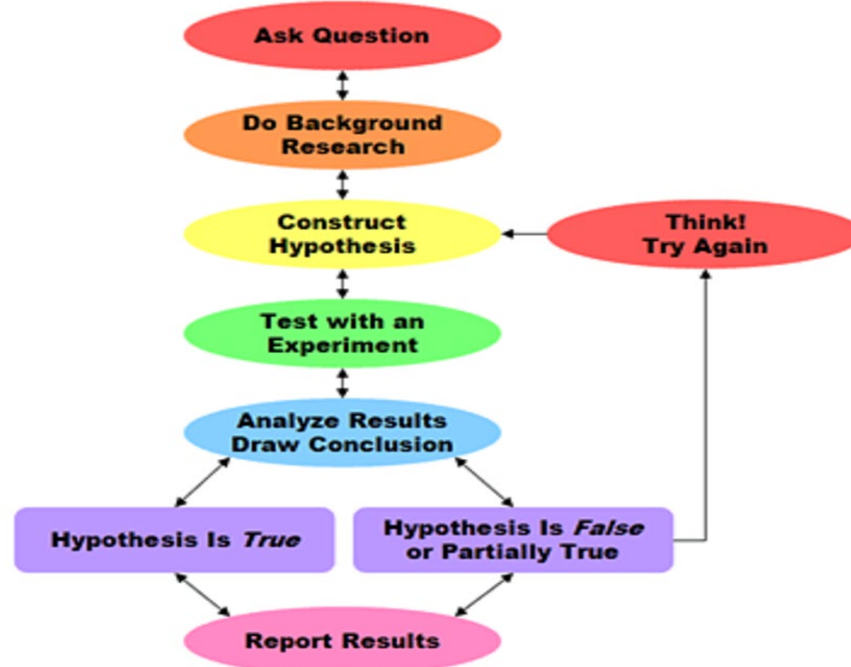
Truth Claims & Levels of Certainty

Collins, F. S. (2024). *The road to wisdom*.

- Necessary Truths: universal & inescapable
- Firmly Established Facts: overwhelming scientific support, true in the aggregate
- Uncertainty: potentially true, supporting evidence currently insufficient
- Opinion: facts & evidence are irrelevant, subjective opinion

Scientific Process & Truth Claims

Scientific Method



Two Rules of Reality-Based Institutions

Rauch, J. (2021). *The constitution of knowledge*.

- 1. Fallibilist Rule: no one has final say on what is true
 - a. truth is provisional
 - b. claims must be debunkable, stand up to checking
- 2. Empirical Rule: the validity of the claim must be based on evidence & not not who makes the claim

Five Reality-Based Institutions

Rauch, J. (2021). *The constitution of knowledge*.

- Professional Research Organizations: develop scientific expertise, gather evidence, peer-review, compare findings
- Journalism: gather facts, do investigations, triangulate viewpoints, check stories
- Government Agencies: gather intelligence, perform research, compile statistics, develop regulations
- Legal System: gather facts & evidence to resolve disputes, build cases, respect precedent, deceit is misconduct
- Libraries & Museums: promote research, educate the public, preserve cultural heritage, foster engagement & reflection

Six Professional Research Organizations & Climate Change

- **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** - A UN body that provides comprehensive assessments of climate science, emphasizing human influence.
- **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)** - States that human activities, especially fossil fuel burning, are the primary drivers of climate change.
- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)** - Highlights the significant role of human activities in altering the climate system.
- **World Meteorological Organization (WMO)** - Reports on climate change impacts and stresses the human contribution to global warming.
- **American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)** - Affirms that climate change is largely driven by human actions, particularly greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** - Acknowledges that human activities are the main cause of climate change, impacting air quality and ecosystems.

Six Major Journalism Organizations

- **American Society of News Editors** - Advocates for the interests of news editors and promotes quality journalism.
- **National Press Club** - A professional organization for journalists that provides a platform for news and information.
- **Society of Professional Journalists** - Focuses on promoting ethical journalism and providing resources for journalists.
- **Investigative Reporters and Editors** - Supports investigative journalism through training and resources.
- **Radio Television Digital News Association** - Represents electronic journalism and advocates for freedom of information.
- **Pew Research Center** - Conducts research on journalism trends and public perceptions of the media.

Six Govt. Agencies that Gather Information

- **U.S. Census Bureau** - Collects demographic and economic data about the population.
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation** - Gathers crime statistics and national security information.
- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** - Monitors weather, climate, and oceanic data.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** - Collects health-related data and statistics.
- **Bureau of Labor Statistics** - Provides data on employment, wages, and inflation.
- **Environmental Protection Agency** - Gathers information on environmental quality and regulations.

Six Major Law & Jurisprudence Organizations

- **American Bar Association** - The largest professional association for lawyers, promoting legal education and ethics.

- **National Lawyers Guild** - A progressive organization dedicated to the defense of human rights and social justice.
- **Federal Bar Association** - Focuses on the interests of federal practitioners and the federal judiciary.
- **American Association of Law Schools** - Promotes legal education and scholarship among law schools.
- **National Association of Attorneys General** - Represents state attorneys general and addresses legal issues affecting states.
- **American Law Institute** - Develops and publishes restatements of the law to clarify legal principles.

Six Major Museums & Libraries

- **The Metropolitan Museum of Art** - One of the largest and most comprehensive art museums in the world.

- **The Smithsonian Institution** - A group of museums and research centers, including the National Museum of American History.
- **The Library of Congress**- The largest library in the world, with millions of books, recordings, and manuscripts.
- **The American Museum of Natural History** - Renowned for its exhibitions on natural history and science.
- **The Getty Center of Los Angeles** - Features an impressive art collection and beautiful gardens.
- **The Art Institute of Chicago** - Home to a vast collection of artworks, including Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pieces.

Scientific Research Under Pressure?

NYTs: 5/22/25 NSF-grants-Trump-cuts

- NSF grants funded through May 2025:
-

2015 – 2024 yearly avg = \$2 billion

2025 funding = \$ 989 million

- NYTs: Trump Cuts Science Funding to Lowest Level in Decade

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/05/22/upshot/nsf-grants-trump-cuts.html>

- Denial of reality-based findings:

<https://scienceexchange.caltech.edu/topics/sustainability/evidence-climate-change>

Journalism Under Pressure?

- A reality-based information gathering institution
- Decline in trust is not universal:
<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/657239/five-key-insights-americans-views-news-media.aspx>
- Partisan increase: 3 reasons: <https://www.pew.org/en/trend/archive/fall-2024/media-mistrust>
 1. accelerating polarization
 2. new media platforms
 3. news industry declines
- Washington Post curries favor?

Govt Agencies Under Pressure?

Election Commissions: Brennan Center for Justice: www.brennancenter.org

- Function of election commissions
- How prevalent is voter fraud?
- Brennan Ctr website: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/debunking-voter-fraud-myth>
- What functions does the myth serve?
- Other challenges to govt reality-based institutions

Legal System Under Pressure?

<https://time.com/7272466/law-firms-trump-wilmerhale-jenner-block-paul-weiss-covington-burling/>

- WilmerHale
- Jenner & Block
- Paul Weiss
- Others pressured:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Targeting_of_law_firms_and_lawyers_under_the_second_Trump_administration



Libraries & Museums Under Pressure?

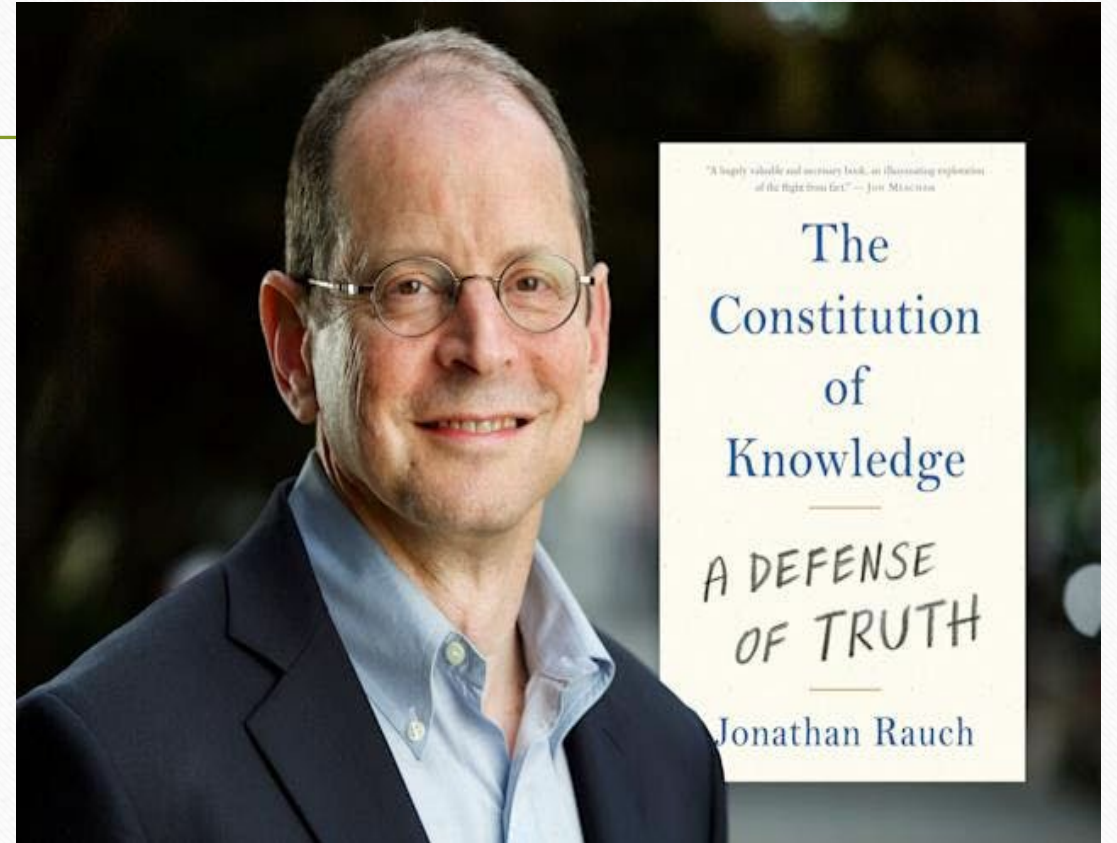
museumsassociation.org

- Smithsonian funding threats
- George Washington plaque
- National Park bookstores
- DOD removes 600 books



Recap of Session 1

- Evidence-based truth claims are vital
- Authoritarian-leaning actors seek to cast doubt
- Necessity of evidence-based institutions
- Institutions are under threat

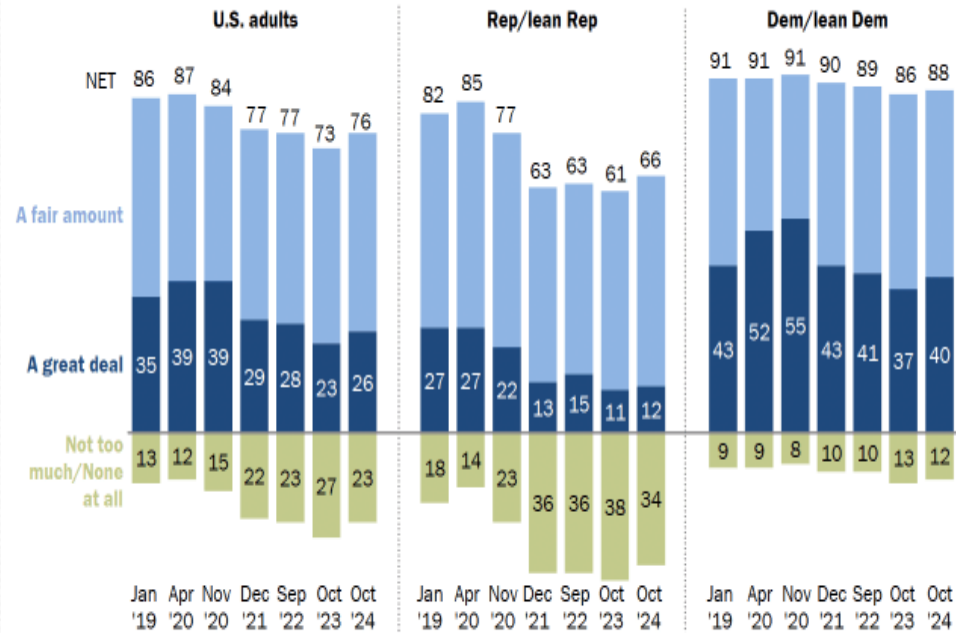


Public Perceptions of Science

pewresearch.org/science/2024/11/14/public-trusts-in-scientists . . .

Confidence in scientists remains higher among Democrats than Republicans

% who have ___ of confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public

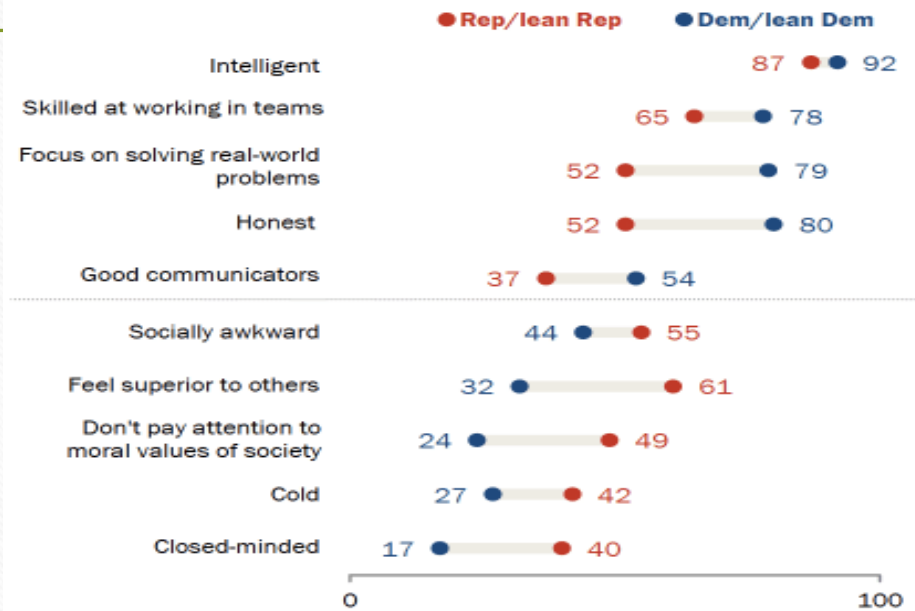


Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 21-27, 2024.
 "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Republicans and Democrats differ in views of research scientists' traits, including honesty

% who say each of the following statements describes most research scientists well



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 21-27, 2024.
 "Public Trust in Scientists and Views on Their Role in Policymaking"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Other Challenges to Reality-Based Institutions

- Normalized lying & disinformation

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mG_SG6T91fo

- Some parts of the internet & social media
- Epistemic trolls
- Cancel cultures; left & right

Norms Authoritarianism vs. Democracy

Stanley, J. (2018). *How fascism works.*

Authoritarian
Leadership
Style

SlideSalad.com



Truth in the Hands of Authoritarians

Synder, T. (2017). *On tyranny*.

- 1. Open hostility to verifiable reality
- 2. Endless repetition
- 3. Open embrace of contradiction

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/donald-trump-2016-contradictions-213869/>

- 4. Self-deifying claim
- To abandon fact is to abandon freedom

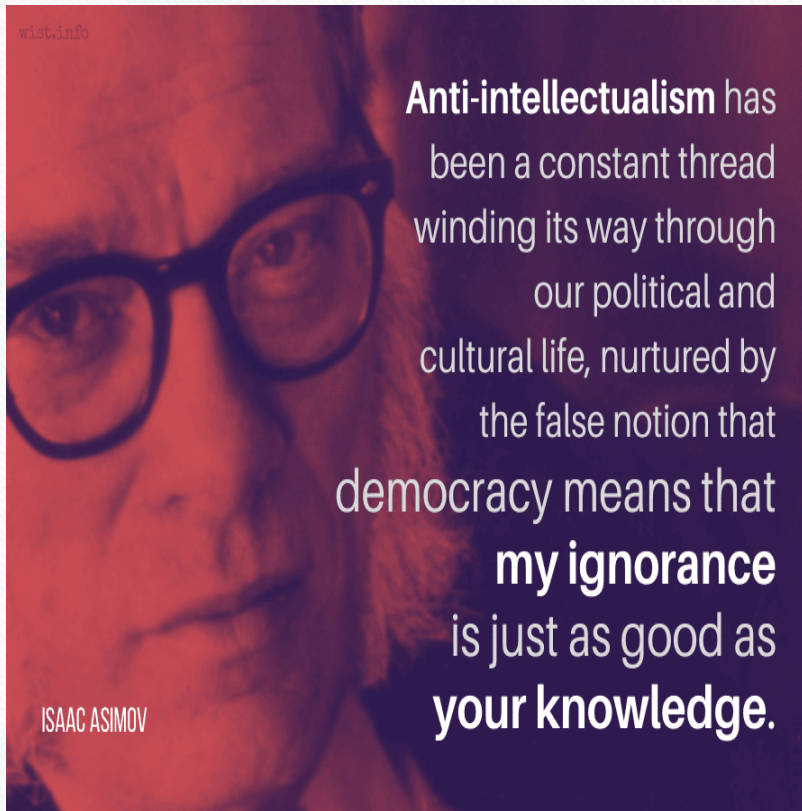
Weaponizing Common Sense

Rosenfeld, S. (2011). Common sense: A political history.



Anti-intellectualism & Expertise

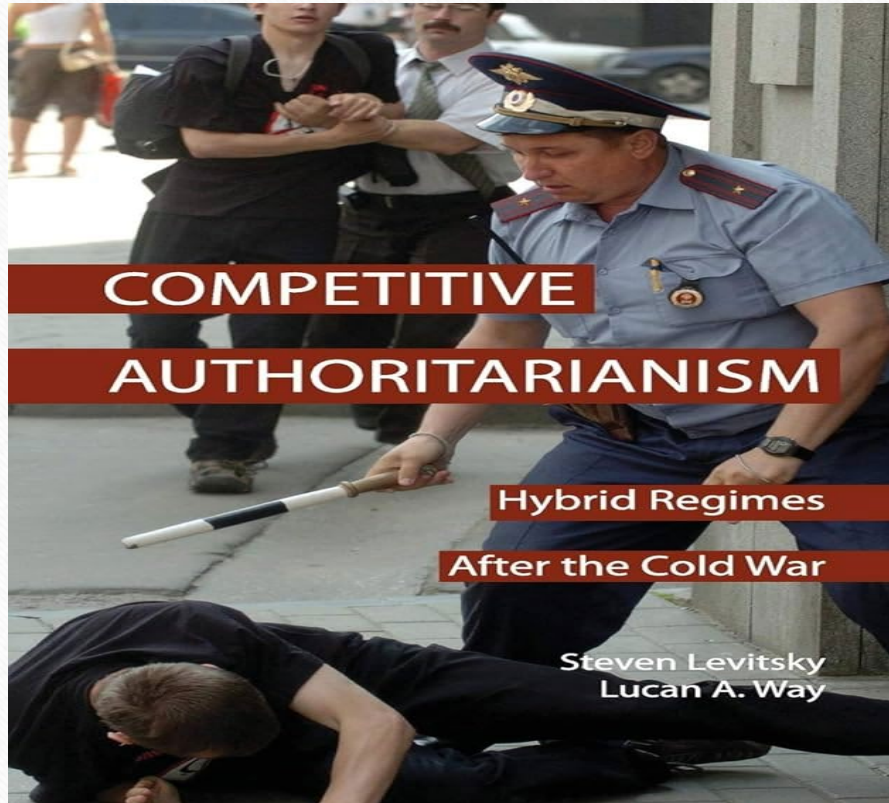
Jacoby, S. (2009). *The age of American Unreason*.



- **Implications for Evidence-Based Institutions**
- Erodes critical thinking
- Stagnation of progress
- Polarization of society
- Undermines democracy
- Decline in educational quality
- Increased vulnerability to manipulation

Authoritarianism in Democracy?

Levitsky, S. & Way, L. A. (2002). *The rise of competitive authoritarianism*.



- A conversation with Levitsky & Way, National Endowment for Democracy, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1drTNx-FrA>

Patrimonialism in Democracy?

Hanson, S. E. & Kopstein, J. S. (2024). *The assault on the state: How the global attack on modern government endangers our future.*



- An interview of Stephen Hanson by the European Center for Populist Studies, March 2025

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlR8uCzNpJA>

Democracy Needs Evidence-based Institutions

- For good policy development & oversight
- For having a civilized political debates & critical thinking
- To foster innovation & economic growth
- To settle civil & criminal legal disputes
- To preserve the culture & history of its people
- To ground ideologies in the truth claims of the actual world

Evidence-Based Institutions Need Democracy

- Both institutions have the same values and needs
 1. Openness, debate, critical inquiry
 2. Exploration of a wide variety ideas, solutions, approaches
 3. Wide collaboration and participation
- Endangering one institution endangers the other

American Democracy Compared

ourworldindata.org Democracy Index 2024

- U.S. score = 7.85 [1 to 10], 27 countries score higher
-

Norway = 9.81, Denmark = 8.28, Canada = 8.69, Uruguay = 8.67, Russia = 2.03

- 1. free& fair elections = 9.17
- 2. enjoy civil liberties = 8.50
- 3. political participation = 8.89
- 4. preference for democracy = 6.25 [2006 = 8.75]
- 5. have functioning govt. = 6.40 [2006 = 7.90]
- <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu>

Concluding Remarks



- Evidence-based institutions are essential to democracy
- These institutions are under threat
- It's up to us to save these institutions & democracy