

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026 • VOLUME 105 • NUMBER 1

The Price of American Authoritarianism

What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?

STEVEN LEVITSKY, LUCAN A. WAY, AND DANIEL ZIBLATT

The Price of American Authoritarianism

What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?

STEVEN LEVITSKY, LUCAN A. WAY,
AND DANIEL ZIBLATT

When Donald Trump won reelection in November 2024, much of the American establishment responded with a shrug. After all, Trump had been democratically elected, even winning the popular vote. And democracy had survived the chaos of his first term, including the shocking events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Surely, then, it would survive a second Trump presidency.

That was not the case. In Trump's second term, the United States has descended into competitive authoritarianism—a system in

STEVEN LEVITSKY is David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of Government at Harvard University and a Senior Fellow for Democracy at the Council on Foreign Relations.

LUCAN A. WAY is Distinguished Professor of Democracy at the University of Toronto and a Fellow at the Royal Society of Canada.

They are the authors of *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*.

DANIEL ZIBLATT is Eaton Professor of Government and Director of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University. He is a co-author, with Steven Levitsky, of *How Democracies Die*.



which parties compete in elections but incumbents routinely abuse their power to punish critics and tilt the playing field against their opposition. Competitive authoritarian regimes emerged in the early twenty-first century in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, Viktor Orbán's Hungary, and Narendra Modi's India. Not only did the United States follow a similar path under Trump in 2025, but its authoritarian turn was faster and farther-reaching than those that occurred in the first year of these other regimes.

The game, however, is far from up. The fact that the United States has crossed the line into competitive authoritarianism does not mean that its democratic decline has reached a point of no return. Trump's authoritarian offensive is now unmistakable, but it is reversible.

Two things can be true at once. First, Americans face an authoritarian government. In 2025, the United States ceased to be a full democracy in the way that Canada, Germany, or even Argentina are democracies. Second, as the Democratic Party's success in the November 2025 elections shows, multiple channels remain through which opposition forces can contest—and potentially defeat—Trump's increasingly authoritarian government. Indeed, the existence of avenues for contestation is in the very nature of competitive authoritarianism.

Reversing the United States' slide into authoritarianism will require democracy's defenders to recognize the twin dangers of complacency and fatalism. On the one hand, underestimating the threat posed to democracy—believing that the Trump administration's behavior is simply politics as usual—enables authoritarianism by encouraging inaction in the face of systematic abuse of power. On the other hand, overestimating the impact of authoritarianism—believing the country has reached a point of no return—discourages the citizen actions required to defeat autocrats at the ballot box.

OPERATION WARP SPEED

A year ago in these pages, two of us (Levitsky and Way) predicted that the United States would descend into competitive authoritarianism during Trump's second term. We anticipated that Trump, like elected autocrats elsewhere, would move quickly to weaponize state institutions and then deploy them in a variety of efforts to weaken or intimidate his political rivals.

Indeed, the Trump administration has done exactly that, going after multiple targets and shielding allies from accountability. To

weaponize the state, elected autocrats must purge and then pack it. Following the blueprint created by authoritarian governments in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Venezuela, the Trump administration removed professional civil servants from the Justice Department, the FBI, and other key government agencies and put loyalists in charge who were committed to using those agencies to attack opponents. When sitting officials balked at doing what was asked of them, they were summarily removed and replaced with more pliable officials (including, in the Justice Department, personal lawyers of Trump who had little relevant experience).

These newly weaponized public agencies were then quickly deployed against the president's past and present opponents. Under orders from Trump, they launched or have threatened to launch investigations into dozens of public figures he views as political enemies, including Letitia James, the New York state attorney general; Senator Adam Schiff, a California Democrat; Jack Smith, who served as a special prosecutor in the Justice Department during the Biden administration; the philanthropist George Soros; civic watchdog organizations such as Media Matters; and former Trump officials turned critics James Comey, John Bolton, Christopher Krebs, and Miles Taylor.

Most of those singled out have faced petty charges, such as the accusations of mortgage fraud levied against James, Schiff, and the Federal Reserve governor Lisa Cook. As every autocrat knows, if determined investigators look long and hard enough, they can invariably find some infraction—a mistake on a tax or mortgage form, a violation of a little-enforced regulation—committed by a person he wants to target. When rules or regulations are enforced selectively, targeting political foes, the law becomes a weapon.

Even if few prosecutions result in convictions or prison time, such investigations are themselves a powerful form of harassment. Targets are forced to spend their savings on lawyers and to devote substantial time and mental energy to their defense. They may be required to take leave of their jobs, and their reputations often suffer.

A weaponized justice system can be used to protect government allies, too. Trump's justice system has shielded government officials and supporters from prosecution. Even as it pursued critics for petty infractions, for example, it halted the prosecution of the "border czar" Tom Homan, whom undercover FBI agents had recorded accepting a \$50,000 cash bribe in September 2024, before his appointment.

More generally, Trump's unrestrained use of the presidential pardon—above all, his pardoning of nearly all the participants in the January 6 attack on the Capitol, including those convicted of assaulting police officers—sent a clear signal that illegal and violent acts undertaken on his behalf would be tolerated, even protected.

The Trump administration also turned its sights on individuals and groups that finance the opposition and civil society. Trump ordered the Justice Department to investigate ActBlue, a Democratic Party

Fear of retribution has begun to tilt the political playing field.

fundraising platform, and the Open Society Foundation, a major funder of civil society organizations; according to an October 2025 report in *The Wall Street Journal*, the administration plans to direct the Internal Revenue Service to target Democratic Party donors. And like elected autocrats in El Salvador, Hungary, India, Turkey, and Venezuela, Trump has bullied independent media. He

has sued *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has opened investigations into a raft of establishment media outlets, including ABC, CBS, PBS, NPR, and Comcast, which owns NBC.

Such actions have been accompanied by a broader attack on civil society. Like competitive authoritarian governments in Hungary, India, Mexico, and Turkey, the Trump administration has attacked institutions of higher learning, launching investigations into dozens of universities, illegally freezing billions of dollars of their congressionally approved research funding, and pressing for the removal of several of their leaders. The administration has also effectively barred the federal government from hiring leading law firms with ties to the Democratic Party, such as Perkins Coie and Paul, Weiss, suspending their employees' security clearances and threatening to cancel their clients' government contracts.

Ominously, the Trump administration has also sought to politicize the armed forces. To prevent the weaponization of the military for partisan ends, the United States and other established democracies have developed professionalized security forces and elaborate laws and regulations to shield them from political influence. Autocrats often seek to break down those institutional barriers and weaponize the security forces. They do so by either creating new security agencies or radically

transforming existing ones to evade established legal frameworks and oversight mechanisms. The Trump administration's expansion of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and its transformation of the agency into a poorly regulated paramilitary force is a clear example.

At the same time, Trump has crossed redlines with the regular armed forces. In a June 2025 speech at Fort Bragg, he goaded a crowd of army soldiers in uniform to jeer at elected Democratic officials. Moreover, the deployment of the National Guard in U.S. cities (on flimsy pretexts and, in some cases, against the will of elected local and state governments) has raised a serious concern that the administration will intimidate citizens and crack down on peaceful protests. Then, in September 2025, Trump told top U.S. military officials to prepare to deploy in U.S. cities and fight a "war from within" against an "enemy from within." This is language reminiscent of the military dictatorships that ruled Argentina, Brazil, and Chile in the 1970s.

One form of authoritarian behavior that we did not anticipate a year ago was the Trump administration's routine subversion of the law—and even the U.S. Constitution. Although the Constitution gives Congress, not the executive branch, the authority to appropriate funds and set tariffs, Trump has usurped that authority, freezing or canceling spending appropriated by legislators and dismantling entire agencies established by Congress. He has also repeatedly imposed tariffs without legislative approval, usually by declaring national emergencies that did not exist (neither Canada nor Brazil posed an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to U.S. security). Indeed, most of the administration's signature policy initiatives in 2025, including the establishment of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, the imposition of sweeping tariffs, and military assaults off the coast of Venezuela, were all carried out illegally, undermining Congress's authority.

MISSING THE FOREST

Many Americans still do not view the Trump administration's behavior as a major departure from the practices of previous U.S. administrations. This interpretation is wrong. Modern U.S. history is indeed replete with examples of antidemocratic behavior and blatant violations of rights, including nearly a century of Jim Crow rule in the South, the Red Scare of 1919–20 that led to the arrests of purported radicals without due process, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, the McCarthy-era blacklisting of suspected

communists in the 1950s, the FBI's surveillance and harassment of civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s, and President Richard Nixon's well-documented efforts to spy on and harass his political rivals.

But overtly authoritarian abuse largely disappeared in the United States after the civil rights reforms of the 1950s and 1960s and the post-Watergate reforms of the 1970s. Since 1974, no government, Democratic or Republican, has engaged in anything remotely like the Trump administration's politicized attacks on critics and rivals. None of Trump's three predecessors—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden—politicized the FBI. All three left existing FBI directors in place until the end of those directors' terms despite their links to partisan rivals. And all three presidents subsequently appointed experienced, professional FBI directors with whom they shared no strong personal or political relationships. Obama, for example, appointed James Comey, a longtime Republican who went on to make a statement about an FBI probe involving the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton that may have cost her the election.

Likewise, Trump's predecessors did not seriously politicize the Justice Department. Under Bush, Obama, and Biden, politicians whom the department investigated and prosecuted were widely viewed as having committed serious crimes, and crucially, were both Republicans and Democrats. Bush's Justice Department investigated the Republican representative Mark Foley as well as the Democratic representative Jim Traficant. Under Obama, the department investigated the Democratic representatives Jesse Jackson, Jr., and Anthony Weiner, as well as the Republican representative Michael Grimm. Under Biden, the Justice Department investigated Senator Robert Menendez, a Democrat, as well as the president's own son, Hunter Biden.

In fact, Bush, Obama, and Biden bent over backward—sometimes at great cost—to avoid the appearance of political interference. Biden's attorney general, Merrick Garland, hesitated to prosecute Trump for his attacks on democracy in the weeks following the 2020 election, only doing so after the House committee investigating the January 6 attacks on the Capitol uncovered overwhelming evidence of criminal activity. Rather than risk weaponizing the law, Garland's Justice Department slow walked other criminal cases against Trump as well.

The Bush, Obama, and Biden administrations did not attempt to politicize the military, reorient its mission to target domestic

“enemies,” or deploy the National Guard to cities against the will of elected local officials. None of them sued major media outlets, used the FCC to threaten media companies if they did not alter their programming or other content, or attempted illegal extortion against law firms, universities, or other civil society institutions. Finally, Bush, Obama, and Biden never questioned the results of elections, tried to overturn election results, or sought to exert federal control over local and state election processes. In each of these critical areas, the Trump administration stands alone in its authoritarianism.

WITHDRAWAL SYNDROME

The Trump administration’s authoritarian offensive has transformed American political life, perhaps even more than many of its critics realize. Fearing government retribution, individuals and organizations across the United States have changed their behavior, cooperating with or quietly acquiescing to authoritarian demands that they once would have rejected or spoken out against. As Senator Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska, put it, “We are all afraid. . . . We’re in a time and place where I have not been. . . . I’m oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice because retaliation is real.”

Fear of retribution has begun to tilt the political playing field. Consider how the U.S. media landscape has changed. Numerous outlets have engaged in political realignment or self-censorship: *The Washington Post* has altered its editorial line, shifting markedly to the right, and Condé Nast gutted *Teen Vogue’s* influential political reporting. CBS canceled the Trump critic Stephen Colbert’s prominent late-night comedy show and imposed tighter controls on its most influential news program, *60 Minutes*; its parent company, Paramount, then restructured CBS to bring in a more conservative editorial staff. According to a May 2025 report in *The Daily Beast*, the CEO of Disney, Bob Iger, and the president of ABC News, Almin Karamehmedovic, told the hosts of the country’s leading daytime talk show, *The View*, to tone down their rhetoric about the president.

What makes self-censorship so insidious is that it is virtually impossible to ascertain its full impact. Although the public can observe firings and the cancellation of programming, it can never know how many editors have softened headlines or opted not to run certain news items, or how many journalists have chosen not to pursue stories out of fear of government retribution.

As in other competitive authoritarian regimes, changes in media coverage have also been driven by government measures to ensure that key media outlets are controlled by supporters. In Hungary, the Orbán government took a series of steps to push independent media outlets into the hands of political allies: for example, it leveraged its control over licensing and lucrative government contracts to persuade Magyar Telekom—the parent company of the country’s most-read news website, *Origo*—to fire the site’s editor and later put it up for sale. Flush with cash from government-allied banks, a private company with ties to Orbán easily outbid competitors and gained control of *Origo*. Like the more than 500 other Hungarian news outlets now owned by Orbán loyalists, *Origo* ceased critical coverage of the government.

A similar process is underway in the United States as Trump’s allies move to take over major news outlets with assistance from the administration. Skydance Media’s acquisition of Paramount—greenlighted by an FCC that until recently tended to disapprove of big media mergers—gave the pro-Trump Ellison family control of CBS, which subsequently shifted its programming to the right. The Ellisons have sought to acquire a newly formulated U.S. version of TikTok in addition to Warner Bros. Discovery, which owns CNN. Given that Fox News and X are already owned by wealthy right-wing figures, these moves have the potential to place a considerable share of legacy and social media platforms in the hands of pro-Trump billionaires.

Fear of retaliation has also affected political donors’ behavior in ways that could tilt the electoral playing field against the opposition. Faced with a government that has explicitly declared its intent to use the Justice Department, the IRS, and other agencies to investigate people who finance the Democratic Party and other progressive causes, many wealthy donors have retreated to the sidelines. One of the Democrats’ largest donors, Reid Hoffman, has scaled back his political contributions as well as his public criticism of Trump since the president began his second term, saying he fears retribution. Other major donors have similarly held back funds from the Democratic Party, helping to generate a marked fundraising advantage for Republicans ahead of the 2026 midterm elections.

Business leaders, foundations, and other wealthy donors have quietly distanced themselves from progressive causes they once

supported—including civil rights, immigrant rights, and LGBTQ rights—to stay out of the federal government’s cross hairs. According to *The New York Times*, the Ford Foundation is now scrutinizing grants it has distributed that officials “fear could be criticized” as partisan. The Gates Foundation, meanwhile, has halted grants administered by a major consulting firm with ties to the Democratic Party.

For individual donors, steering clear of certain causes to avoid a costly confrontation with the government is an act of prudence. But such inadvertent collaboration with an authoritarian administration can have a devastating impact on civic and opposition groups as they are simultaneously targeted by the government and shunned by erstwhile supporters.

Fear of direct government retribution has also led major law firms, universities, and other influential institutions to pull back, weakening the United States’ civic defenses. Major Washington law firms have hesitated to hire former Biden administration officials and limited or ceased their pro bono work for causes that the Trump administration opposes. According to *The Washington Post*, plaintiffs in roughly 75 percent of the lawsuits challenging Trump’s executive orders during his first term were represented by large top-tier law firms. Only 15 percent of such plaintiffs were represented by top firms in 2025. With the most powerful law firms on the sidelines, opponents of the administration have struggled to find legal representation, turning to smaller firms that lack the personnel and deep pockets to effectively challenge the administration in the courts.

Universities and colleges across the country, for their part, have responded to government threats by dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and restricting students’ right to protest. And institutions and organizations have complied with government pressure to crack down on free expression. Dozens of teachers, university professors, and journalists were suspended or dismissed for social media commentary they posted after the right-wing commentator and activist Charlie Kirk was gunned down in September 2025. Although some were punished for expressing approval of Kirk’s killing, others—including the *Washington Post* columnist Karen Attiah—were apparently targeted simply for criticizing his work.

The gravest danger is not repression but demobilization.

TURNING BACK THE TIDE

None of these developments, however alarming, should be cause for fatalism or despair. The United States has entered an authoritarian moment. But there are multiple legal and peaceful ways out. Indeed, a defining feature of competitive authoritarianism is the existence of institutional arenas through which the opposition can seriously contest power. The playing field might be uneven, but the game is still played. The opposing team remains on the field, and sometimes it wins.

The most important arena for contestation in competitive authoritarian regimes is elections. Although they may be unfair, elections are not mere window-dressing. Competition is real, and outcomes are uncertain. Take India. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of an emergency in 1975 brought widespread repression. Within 24 hours, 676 opposition politicians were in jail. Her government imposed strict media censorship and ultimately arrested more than 110,000 critics and civil society activists over the course of 1975 and 1976. When Gandhi called elections in January 1977, many opposition leaders were still in prison. Yet the opposition Janata Party—a hastily formed coalition of Hindu nationalists, liberals, and leftists—managed to win the March vote, remove Gandhi from power, and restore Indian democracy.

In Malaysia, the long-ruling coalition Barisan Nasional controlled virtually all traditional media, maintained a massive advantage in resources (few businesses dared donate to the opposition), and used gerrymandering and manipulation of voter rolls to tilt the electoral playing field. Opposition forces nevertheless managed to win a parliamentary majority in 2018, putting an end to more than half a century of authoritarian rule.

After 2015, Poland descended into competitive authoritarianism as the governing Law and Justice party weaponized the state by packing the courts, the electoral commissions, and publicly owned media with loyalists. Nevertheless, left and center-right opposition parties forged a broad coalition and won back power in the 2023 elections.

The governments of competitive authoritarian regimes often rig elections, but these efforts can backfire. In Serbia, egregious fraud in the 2000 presidential election triggered a massive protest movement that toppled the country's autocratic president, Slobodan Milosevic. In Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in

2004 after Viktor Yanukovich used large-scale ballot stuffing to steal the presidential election. The protests forced a new election, which the opposition won.

The U.S. opposition, moreover, enjoys several advantages over its counterparts in other competitive authoritarian regimes. First, although American institutions have weakened, the United States retains powerful institutional bulwarks against authoritarian consolidation. The judiciary is more independent—and the rule of law generally stronger—than in any other competitive authoritarian regime. Likewise, notwithstanding the Trump administration's efforts to politicize the military, the U.S. armed forces remain highly professionalized and thus difficult to weaponize. Federalism in the United States remains robust and continues to generate and protect alternative centers of authority; ambitious and powerful governors are already pushing back against Trump's efforts. Finally, despite worrisome signs of media self-censorship, the United States retains a more vibrant media landscape than Hungary, Turkey, and other similar regimes do. Even though the Trump administration has tilted the playing field, the persistence of these institutional constraints will likely enable the opposition to continue to contest seriously for power. The Democratic Party's big victories in the 2025 off-year elections showed that U.S. elections remain highly competitive.

The United States also possesses a well-organized and resource-rich civil society. The country's enormous private sector has hundreds of billionaires, millions of millionaires, and dozens of law firms that generate at least \$1 billion a year in revenue. The United States is home to more than 1,700 private universities and colleges and a vast infrastructure of churches, labor unions, private foundations, and nonprofit organizations. This endows U.S. citizens with vast financial and organizational resources for pushing back against authoritarian governments. Such countervailing power greatly exceeds anything available to oppositions in Hungary, India, or Turkey, let alone in El Salvador, Venezuela, Russia, and other autocracies.

The U.S. pro-democracy movement also benefits from a strong and unified opposition party. Most oppositions in competitive authoritarian regimes are fragmented and disorganized: in Hungary, for example, the opposition to Orban was split between the weak and discredited Socialist Party and the far-right Jobbik, which allowed Orban's Fidesz party to coast to victories in 2014 and 2018.

In Venezuela, the main opposition parties were so discredited and weakened that they could not even field their own presidential candidates when Hugo Chávez ran for reelection in 2000 and 2006. By contrast, the U.S. opposition is united behind the Democratic Party, which—for all its flaws—remains well organized, well financed, and electorally viable.

Finally, Trump's limited popularity may hinder his efforts to entrench authoritarian rule. Elected autocrats are far more successful in consolidating power when they enjoy broad public support: Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, Chávez in Venezuela, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Vladimir Putin in Russia all had approval ratings above 80 percent when they imposed authoritarian rule. Trump's approval rating is stuck in the low 40s. Less popular authoritarian leaders, such as Yoon Suk-yeol in South Korea, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Pedro Castillo in Peru, often fail.

It remains unclear how far Trump will go to manipulate future elections. Given that he attempted to overturn the 2020 election and his allies have sought to distort the 2026 midterms by openly pushing for mid-decade gerrymandering in Republican-controlled states, some manipulation seems likely—for example, measures to restrict ballot access, voter intimidation, or a refusal to accept results in some districts. Because the last few U.S. presidential elections have been so close and the margins of control in Congress are so tight, even relatively modest manipulation could be decisive in 2026 or 2028. But that is a risk, not a certainty.

In the United States, then, opposition forces can seriously contest power at the ballot box, in the courts, and on the street. No single arena will suffice. Pro-democratic forces cannot afford to wait for the 2026 and 2028 elections; they cannot simply rely on the courts to defend democracy; and by themselves, No Kings rallies will not restore democracy. Citizens must therefore work through all three channels. Although it is impossible to know how, when, or even if these strategies will succeed, the United States' prospects for returning to democratic rule remain good.

THE COMPLACENCY TRAP

In this context, the gravest danger is not repression but demobilization. Opposition activists who treat a Trump dictatorship as a fait accompli and repression and rigged elections as inevitable risk

creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Democratic erosion accelerates when citizens and elites withdraw from contestation—when, out of fear, exhaustion, or sheer resignation, promising candidates decline to run for office, donors pull back, lawyers stop filing lawsuits, and citizens tune out. The outcome of the United States' authoritarian turn depends less on the regime's strength than on the opposition's willingness to continue playing a difficult game.

If the Republican Party were to retain control over all major branches of government after 2026, the prospects for entrenchment would increase. Further purges and weaponization of the bureaucracy, increased politicization of the courts and the military, and tighter control over the media and universities could follow. Such developments would narrow the existing channels for contestation or close some off, making a return to democracy more difficult. But as events in Argentina, Chile, India, and Thailand show, even sharp authoritarian turns are reversible.

The most likely medium-term outcome in the United States is neither entrenched authoritarianism nor a return to stable democracy. Rather, it is regime instability: a protracted struggle between authoritarian impulses and democratic solidarity. In the absence of a radical transformation of the Republican Party, the most optimistic scenario for the coming decade is probably a slide back and forth between dysfunctional democracy and unstable competitive authoritarianism, depending on which party holds national power. In this sense, American politics may come to resemble Ukraine's in the 1990s and early 2000s, which oscillated between democracy and competitive authoritarianism as pro-European or pro-Russian forces variously controlled the executive branch. As with Poland's rounds of voting during the past decade, the next few elections in the United States will not only be contests between competing policies but involve a more fundamental choice between democracy and authoritarianism, as well.

To navigate this moment, Americans must sustain a kind of double vision, recognizing that their country is confronting authoritarianism while not forgetting that avenues for democratic contestation remain open. Losing sight of either truth invites defeat: complacency if the danger is underestimated, fatalism if it is overestimated. The outcome of this struggle remains open. It will turn less on the strength of the authoritarian government than on whether enough citizens act as though their efforts still matter—because, for now, they still do. 🌐