



## Democratic Authoritarianism

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While differing sharply on the primary locus of the threat, co-authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt agree with Ben Shapiro that democracies are fragile and the United States is at risk of regressing into authoritarianism. (p. 1)

In *How Democracies Die*, they suggest “the fundamental problem facing American democracy [is] extreme partisan division.” (p. 220) Moreover, they argue, “The Republican party has been the main driver of the chasm between the parties.” (p. 222) While decrying extreme partisanship, in truly partisan fashion they themselves absolve the Democratic Party of responsibility for contributing to polarization. (p 226)

By contrast, in *The Authoritarian Moment: How the Left Weaponized America’s Institutions Against Dissent*, Shapiro points out, “For most of human history, authoritarianism manifested in centralized government systems ... The widespread democracy of the post-World War II period is extraordinary, and extraordinarily fragile...” He says, “Democracy is threatened chiefly by [ochlocracy](#): the rule of the mob.” (p. 5)

Re-centralization of power results from such rule, thereby bridging the partisan divide via [democratic authoritarianism](#), as the mob grows capable of crushing dissent. On that risk, Levitsky and Ziblatt appear to agree. While noting that overreliance on centralized gatekeepers is undemocratic by definition, they acknowledge that deferring to the “will of the people” may lead to the election of demagogues who also threaten democracy as well. (p 41)

This article references arguments made in both books, citing the page on which each point is made but omitting the name(s) of the author(s) so as to allow readers more freedom to apply their own biases in judging the merits of each argument. Hopefully, dissonance among those points may stimulate reflective thought. In a few instances, other data and authors are cited to extend and provide additional context to the arguments.

Let’s begin with the observation that, throughout his life, our first (nonpartisan) president, George Washington, learned that he “gained power from his readiness to give it up.” (p. 129)

At the other extreme, Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt's "unprecedented concentration of executive power ... posed a serious challenge to traditional checks and balances. His use of executive orders – more than 3,000 during his presidency, averaging more than 300 a year – was unmatched at the time or since." (p. 138)

Classical liberals may share redistributionist goals with leftists but can be distinguished from them by a simple test – whether they believe those who disagree should be silenced. (p. 40) The American Left has always been attracted by the promise of power. The power of the state is an aphrodisiac. (p. 48) Authoritarians rarely recognize their own authoritarianism. To them, authoritarianism looks like a simple virtue. (p. 9)

FDR combined his utopian government programs with top-down censorship, including fascistic crackdowns on dissenters. As Jonah Goldberg describes in his book *Liberal Fascism*, "it seems impossible to deny that the New Deal was objectively fascistic." FDR aide Harry Hopkins openly acknowledged, "we are not afraid of exploring anything within the law, and we have a lawyer who will declare anything you want to do is legal." (p. 51)

Perhaps the greatest challenge to FDR's unconstrained rule was posed by Huey Long, who was an even greater demagogue and candidly asserted, "I can take this Roosevelt ... I can out-promise him. And he knows it." FDR rightfully viewed him as a serious threat but was spared the prospect of electoral defeat when Long was assassinated. (p. 35)

Common wisdom formerly held that the government should only perform functions that are inherently governmental in nature. Prior to its more liberal interpretation by the activist courts and populist demagogues, the Constitution envisioned a limited role for the Federal government. In *The Magic Formula: The Timeless Secret to Economic Health and Prosperity*, Nathan [Lewis observes](#) the multiplicity of economic regulations requires a highly creative reading of the Commerce Clause amounting to "outright mendacity". (p. 218)

In 2013, like FDR before him, President Obama responded to the lack of consensus in the Senate with norm breaking, in the form of unilateral executive actions. (p. 163) Obama's brew of identity politics and progressive utopianism emboldened an authoritarian leftism that poisoned the body politic. (p. 48) Obama's efforts to circumvent Congress triggered escalation and the Republican Senate leadership publicly encouraged U.S. states to defy the president's authority. (p. 164)

The immense powers of the executive branch create a temptation for presidents to rule unilaterally. The Constitution does not explicitly prohibit such action. (p. 128) However, the [Tenth Amendment](#) reserves to the States and the people powers not expressly granted to the Federal Government. The [founders didn't think such a provision would be necessary](#) since they viewed the role of the government to be limited. Little did they know the extent to which democratic authoritarians might twist their intent in the name of "progress".

Whereas the left views the Constitution as a “living document” to be interpreted as they see fit, conservatives call for its wording to be [strictly construed](#), as literally intended, subject to change by the prescribed amendment process. However, leftists are impatient and unwilling to build the necessary consensus to carry out that process. To them, the ends they choose justify the means. Even as they proclaim allegiance to democracy, they trample not merely on the intent of the founders but also the plain meaning of the words of the Constitution.

“[T]he sorting of the American electorate into liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans cannot alone explain the depth of partisan hostility that has emerged in America. Nor does it explain why this polarization has been so asymmetric, moving the Republican Party more sharply to the right than it has moved the Democrats to the left.” (p. 170) However, that assertion may be more reflective of political bias than reality. A [survey by the Pew Research Center](#) shows that members of both parties have shifted *to the left* but the shift among the Democrats has been fairly dramatic. Perhaps the depth of partisan hostility might be more aptly attributed to the ever-increasing scope of mandates being imposed in absence of [informed consent](#). How could such coercion not be polarizing? Only if meaningful dissent can be crushed.

Republican voters are said to rely more heavily on partisan media outlets than do Democrats. (p. 172) Again, however, that depends upon the framing of partisanship. It is common knowledge that virtually all of the so-called [mainstream media are dominated by the left](#) and so too are academia, members of the civil service, and the social media platforms. So the implication seems to be that conservatives should be denied any media outlets at all, particularly one that [outstrips its competitors](#) in viewership and influence. Indeed, *denial of the right to differ is the hallmark of authoritarianism*. Voting does not make it less so.

The skewing of journalism makes its purveyors, quite literally Fake News. They pretend to be news outlets but are actually partisan activists. (p. 168) So-called “objective” journalists can lie through omission, favor allies through contextualization, and focus on stories most flattering to their own political priors. Bias is inseparable from journalism. (p. 171) Yet the battles in America’s newsrooms these days aren’t between conservatives and liberals. There *are* no conservatives at most establishment media outlets. The battle is truly between authoritarian leftists and liberals – between those who may largely agree on policy preferences, but who disagree on whether robust discussion should be allowed. (p. 173) Liberals are being cowed into submission. (p. 177)

Even in the commercial sector, some tech leaders have suggested the very basis for their companies – free access to speech platforms – must be reversed. Their companies are no longer about free speech for the masses but merely for the members of the New Ruling Class. (p. 197) What’s more, government actors have an interest in upholding the oligopoly; it’s easier to control a market with just a few key players. Media have an interest in upholding the oligopoly as well. They are run by like-minded allies who are either committed to or can be pushed into support for woke authoritarianism. (p. 211) Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter have characterized a related aspect of this dynamic as the *duopoly* comprising [The Politics Industry](#),

in which the two major parties and their partisans implicitly conspire to enhance their power to the detriment of the rest of us.

On the right end of the political spectrum and in opposition to the incumbent political powers-that-be, the Tea Party, Koch network, and other organizations helped elect a new generation of Republicans for whom *compromise* became a dirty word. (p. 173) For example, compromising to raise the debt limit has been a long-standing bipartisan practice. (p. 165) Surely, however, that doesn't mean no amount of debt is too much, does it? To the degree that "compromise" means that politicians get what they want and the taxpayers and those as yet unborn get screwed, might that actually make it a dirty word to those with no say in the matter? Does vocally opposing fiscal irresponsibility make the [Tea Party Patriots](#) a basket of extremist, unilaterally polarizing deplorables? By what institutional logic does that make any sense?

In any event, in light of his party's loss of Congress in 2010, Obama felt the need for a new strategy – one that pits Americans against Americans, race against race, sex against sex. He domesticated the destructive impulses of authoritarian leftism to maintain political power. (p. 47) Subsequently, when the right wing of the electorate rose up against that strategy and stunningly put him in office, Trump claimed his administration was immediately beset by powerful establishment forces. (p. 177) Can there be any doubt that he was? Or that many people fervently believed that he *should* be *vehemently* opposed, based as much on his personality as his policies? In their view, doing so was merely a case of enforcing the "guardrails of democracy" in order to preserve the power of the incumbent, institutional powers-that-be.

For his part, although President Trump waged a war of words against the media and other critics, no journalists were arrested nor did media outlets alter their coverage due to pressure from the government. (p. 183) Indeed, as implied by Gehl and Porter's thesis, the inflamed conflict made for great business and politics for both sides of the gaping partisan divide, particularly the media and political fundraisers. Meanwhile, it is an open secret that members of the media routinely coordinate with leaders of the Democratic party. It may be difficult to place a dollar value on such bias but even a modest effect can be decisive in close elections (p. 185). Worse yet, if the power of the presidency is taken to be unlimited by the Constitution, those effects can be dramatically polarizing. Perhaps the greatest danger facing American democracy is the risk of the president exploiting a crisis to attack political opponents and restrict freedoms Americans take for granted. (p. 193) Some would argue that is exactly what has occurred in light of the COVID pandemic, for example.

Donald Trump's norm violations differed fundamentally from those of his predecessors. Although FDR was by far the greatest abuser, never had a president flouted so many unwritten rules so quickly as Trump. (p. 195) Some of those norms were superficial, but others, such as holding press conferences accessible to all members of the White House press corps, were more significant. (p. 199) That may prompt readers to think of President Biden. However, in the face of widespread deviance, we first become overwhelmed and then desensitized. We grow accustomed to what we previously thought to be scandalous. (p. 201) Even if Donald Trump did not break the hard guardrails of our constitutional democracy, he increased the likelihood that

other presidents will. (p. 203) Does that excuse such behavior by President Biden? Does it absolve predecessors like FDR, Obama, and others from having contributed to the problem?

For example, having played a key role in President Biden's election, James Clyburn (D-SC), who compared Trump to Hitler and Republicans to Nazis, has gone so far as to suggest Biden should follow FDR's lead and act unilaterally via executive action to implement his agenda. (p. 13) Even as they decry the alleged authoritarian instincts of the right, leftists act on such instincts themselves. Fearing defeat in the next election and egged on by the media, Democrats are sparing no norms in their desperation to impose their will on the nation.

Heretofore, two basic norms have preserved America's checks and balances – mutual toleration and forbearance. The former means that competing parties accept each other as legitimate rivals and the latter requires that politicians exercise restraint in deploying the full potential of institutional powers. (p. 9) If Democrats do not work to restore those norms, their next president will likely confront an opposition willing to use any means necessary to defeat them. (p. 217) Indeed, is that not what they themselves already did with respect to the last president, whom they declared to be illegitimate and repeatedly tried to unseat? While the GOP has not yet responded in kind, it appears voters may take it upon themselves to punish the President's party for failing to bring the country together as he promised.

When partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare and institutions are turned into weapons. (p. 212) To the degree that is already the case, on which side do virtually all of our institutions now train their rhetorical guns? If the GOP rather than the Dems are the primary proponents of conflict, why is it that the Dems' party platform contained [more than three times as many fighting words](#) as the GOP's, while the Libertarian party's contained none? Following that train of thought, how can it be that a party calling for less government can be deemed to be authoritarian while the one calling for more is not? How does that calculus work? It just doesn't add up. It is illogical on its face.

On the other hand, Republicans must build a more diverse electoral constituency. (p. 223) And that transformation may be underway. Some [leaders would like to rebrand the GOP](#) as the party of the working class. That prospect is feared by many Democrats but cheered by the elitists who would like to write off the untrammelled masses, in the characteristic belief that only they are smart enough to know what's best for everyone else. Moreover, Trump didn't overperform estimates among Latino and black voters because he was racist. He outperformed because elitists *declare things racist even when they aren't*. (p. 31) Still, Trump underperformed Republicans in nearly all states with competitive Senate races. Republicans swept into power in New Hampshire, where Trump lost by nearly eight points. Trump bled in the suburbs; had he lost the suburbs by the same margin he did in 2016, he would have been reelected. Americans may have rejected Donald Trump personally but the silent majority broadly rejected the Democratic agenda as well. (p. 29)

The left has asserted that America short-changes the poor, e.g., by spending on families only a third of the average for advanced countries. (p. 229) Yet, by some accounts, the [U.S. spends a](#)

[greater share of its GDP on social welfare](#) than any other country except France. The broader frame of reference should be taken into account. What about the effectiveness of those expenditures in achieving the desired results? What about unintended consequences? Are good intentions all that matter? For example, [Thomas Sowell](#) has argued that LBJ's [Great Society programs actually harmed disadvantaged people](#) and other researchers have suggested [FDR's policies prolonged the Great Depression](#).

While those views may be blasphemous to the left and subject to cancellation by the mainstream media, a key question is whether there is any effective limit on the share of the GDP over which [The Politics Industry](#) should be ceded control in the name of progress? What makes politicians and bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., better qualified to address community and family matters than communities and families themselves? At what point can we no longer claim to be the land of the free? By what measure does such exhaustive command and control of society distinguish itself from authoritarianism? Moreover, how many times must we relearn the lessons of history with respect to the [critical success factors for prosperity](#)?

Buried in authoritarianism is a deep flaw – insecurity. If authoritarians had broad and deep support, they wouldn't require compulsion. The dirty secret of our woke authoritarians is that *they are in the minority*. (p. 22) Perhaps the most virulent strain of authoritarianism may not be the paranoia and fear that sometimes manifests on the Right but, rather, the self-assured unearned moral virtue of the Left. (p. 4) All that is required to renormalize an institution is a minority of intransigent, inflexible people. Catering to that base, while preying on the innate compliance of the majority, can lead to wholesale reorientation. Taking a page from the Communist Chinese playbook, the goal of the top-down censorship of the authoritarian Left isn't just silencing dissent but forcing public confession and repentance. (p. 151)

Oppression doesn't start with violence. It begins with dehumanization (p. 214) such as by attempting to brand and stereotype groups of people as "[deplorables](#)". In a perverse abreaction to differences, our institutions have been remade in the mold of authoritarian leftism by elites who deem themselves worthy of holding the reins of power. Although we are individuals by ideology, cohesive action is necessary if we are to mount a consolidated counterattack on the authoritarians. (p. 215)

While Star [Parker calls on Republicans](#) to take responsibility for returning the nation to its core values, she believes the types of behaviors exhibited during the January 6th incident at the Capitol were normalized by the actions from the left, as Democrats refused to condemn violence by their extremist partisans. Indeed, an active imagination is required to conjure up the notion of a looney mob of flag-waving, self-styled patriots assaulting the Capitol had they not seen so many images of leftist trampling on and burning the flag while breaking windows, burning buildings and destroying businesses as well.

Ultimately, however, the issue isn't Left versus Right. It's a matter of upholding the values of a pluralistic democracy – values that should be held in common across the political spectrum, and in direct opposition to the authoritarian left. (p. 219) [Charles Koch, who has been roundly](#)

[criticized by the left for his support of our Constitutional values. suggests](#) that right/left is no longer the operative political paradigm but, rather, top-down versus bottom-up activism. Meanwhile, he is practicing what he preaches by [reaching out to partner with anyone who shares his objectives](#).

Our institutions have been steadily renormalized by an intransigent minority and it's time to renormalize them again. *Courage* is key. In the home of the brave, Americans must be willing to stand up, speak out, and *refuse to acquiesce to the power hierarchy*. (p. 220) In shutting the doors of our most powerful institutions, the authoritarian Left has left those left out with one option – to rebuild them ourselves. Our institutions must be opened up again. Otherwise the social fabric of the country will continue to disintegrate. (p. 225)

The authoritarian moment relies upon the acquiescence of a silent majority and we must no longer be silent. (p. 227) Silence may not be violence, as those on the woke left have asserted, but rather a form of surrender to the intransigent, authoritarian mob, however small a minority they may be. Coalitions of the like-minded are important but they are not enough to defend democracy. The most effective coalitions are those that bring together groups with dissimilar – even opposing – views on many issues. (p. 218)

That assumes dissenting views are tolerated at all. It also suggests that existing political institutions are inherently polarizing and no longer up to the task of bringing people together in pursuit of common objectives. Most countries now hold regular elections but democracies still die, by different means. In this era, democratic backsliding begins at the ballot box. Moreover, many government efforts to subvert democracy are “legal” in the sense they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts. (p. 5)

E.B. White defined democracy as “the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time.” (p. 230) By that math, in as many as three-fourths of the cases, people may be forced to accept policies either with which they disagree or that are simply wrong. Might that be the actual root cause of polarization and thus, ironically, the risk of reinstatement of authoritarianism, which after all has proven to be the most durable form of governance throughout history? Perhaps people may simply be fed up with the normalization of coercion under the guise of democracy, i.e., democratic authoritarianism.

Is that the best that can be done? Have we been desensitized to a new authoritarian norm in the 21st century? Once power has been ceded, it is difficult to reclaim but must we succumb to our mutual, omni-partisan fear in an abreaction institutionalizing the very thing we fear? Or might we be wise and capable enough to try something different than merely more hyperbolic good, old-fashioned politics as usual ([#gofpau](#))? Something much less polarizing and potentially far more sustainable for most of the affairs of polite society?

How about actual *self*-governance embraced by personal responsibility in [Truly Connected communities of results](#) (CoRs)?