

WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN WHEN WE SAY DONALD TRUMP POSES AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO OUR DEMOCRACY

Here we are, two and half years short of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, in the first country in the modern era to proclaim itself a democracy. We are perhaps the oldest democracy in modern times. We live in a land where the system we chose to govern ourselves was embedded in a constitution but has thrived because of near universal acceptance of a set of ideals, beliefs, expectations and norms built on the notion that our democratic culture was the preferable way to order and govern our society. The journey to create the more perfect union has by no means been without some serious flaws and shortcomings, but over time the country has managed to fashion a system of governance underpinned by seemingly resilient institutions that has been the envy of the free world as well as of those yearning to be free.

For some months now, however, political scientists, political pundits, historians, journalists and others have focused extensively on the threats we face in the United States to our democracy. That discussion may be framed in terms of the resilience, and vulnerabilities, of a democracy, with variations among closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, liberal democracies and illiberal democracies, or it may be framed in terms of the flip side of the coin: the slippery slope towards authoritarianism.

Questions about the ability of our institutions and our democratic system to survive authoritarian tendencies of a leader have been posed with increasing frequency since Donald Trump launched his campaign in 2015, but they have now taken on new urgency with Trump's voluminous public statements about his intentions were he to have a second term, including his declaration that he intends to be a dictator but only on Day One. We should not mince words, Trump poses an existential threat to democracy; he is unwilling to respect democratic ideals and norms; he is contemptuous of democratic institutions, the rule of law and the Constitution, and he will rarely pass up the opportunity to attack the foundations of our system of government. We should remember too when we speak of the resilience of institutions that behind institutions are people.

We need not guess what could await us. Hard as it may be to accept, there are countless authoritarian playbooks that can serve as a roadmap for the “parade of horrors” that could befall the United States were Trump given the chance to unleash his administration of revenge and retribution. Yes, it could happen here. Ultimately it would be a cult of personality, with one political party in thrall to him. We do not need to ponder too many imponderables about the consequences of a second Trump administration – we simply need to take Trump at his word. (I last explored this threat in my July 2023 briefing note on [US political risk](#).)

Given what is at stake, it is imperative to drill down below the headline concepts¹ and to set out the real-life consequences of what it could mean to live under an authoritarian ruler. In

¹ There are various indices that measure democracy globally, including: International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Initiative, which tracks four categories of democratic performance – representation, rights, rule of law and participation and recognizes that democracy is a dynamic phenomenon, the specifics of which vary across countries and contexts; the Economist Intelligence Unit, which rates across 60 indicators across five categories, electoral process and

short, an authoritarian ruler – a dictator – can act with impunity. He can act as he wishes without the constraint of the legislative branch or the judiciary, meaning there are no checks and balances. There is no rule of law. The will of the ruler is carried out through a coterie of vetted loyalists placed strategically throughout government, backed by the ability (and willingness) of the ruler to deploy the military against his own citizens.

What It Could Mean in Practice to Live under Fascism

I set out below a non-exhaustive list of examples of what we really mean when we say Trump poses an existential threat to our democratic way of life. This is not, to [quote](#) Republican strategist Charlie Sykes, the product of “Trump derangement syndrome.” These examples are based on actions taken during the Trump presidency (including, but by no means limited to, the efforts by Trump and his enablers to overturn the results of the 2020 election), on statements made recently by Trump or by those currently close to him, and on statements made by former Trump cabinet officials speaking out on the dangers of a second Trump administration ([CNN reporting on statements by Cassidy Hutchinson, Bill Barr, John Kelly and John Bolton](#)). This is a list that takes Trump, Steve Bannon and his other enablers to, [quote](#) Sykes, who are intent on “tearing down the institutions of government – the bulwarks of our constitutional system” at their word.

This list assumes for the purpose of this briefing note that Trump moves back into the White House in January 2025, that the Republican Party (including establishment figures) will not come to its collective senses, reverse course and seek to constrain Trump, but rather will rally fully behind him (*see* Robert Kagan’s “[A Trump dictatorship is increasingly inevitable. We should stop pretending](#)”), and that Trump and his transition team will be successful in filtering out any guardrails.

1. The rule of law is likely to be the first casualty ([Guardian reporting](#); [Fox5 reporting on Trump call to terminate the Constitution](#)). As Kagan [notes](#), a court system that was unable to control Trump as a former president will not be able to do a better job of controlling him if he gets elected as president (despite the indictments, courtroom dramas, jury deliberations and even convictions), and appoints his own attorney general and all of the top officials at DoJ. The only constraint will be impeachment and conviction under Article II, Section 4 of the Constitution, and we all know how well that fared twice before.
2. Loyalists in government, notwithstanding the oath they all are required to take “to support and defend the Constitution,” will be beholden to Trump rather than serving the Constitution ([Axios reporting](#); [Jeffrey Goldberg interview](#)).
3. Trump himself will act without “checks and balances” in Congress and the courts, and without respecting the Constitution; he will be free to break the law ([Jeffrey Goldberg interview](#)). Republicans in Congress will not act as a constraint on Trump or his

pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture (and in its 2021 report rated the United States a “flawed democracy”); and Freedom House, which assigns scores on 10 indicators of political rights and 15 indicators of civil liberties. While these are instructive in framing the issue, and may help in a comparative, academic sense, what we need to halt the slide is a dose of harsh reality.

enablers, and all those in the White House and other political appointees who acted as guardrails in 2016-2020 and mitigated some of Trump's worse excesses will be absent. Trump has shown little respect for court rulings, including [64 cases](#) that found his claims of widespread election fraud to be unsubstantiated, to be without merit. It is important to note too that the president of the United States has significant executive powers that he can exercise lawfully, including using the military and granting pardons.

4. Trump will weaponize what historically has been an independent Department of Justice and the FBI to arrest and prosecute his political opponents simply for opposing him ([Trump interview with Univision](#)). As for that independence, those at DoJ or the FBI opposed to Trump's abuse of power are unlikely to remain in their positions. Trump has already named targets of his ire: retired General John Kelly, former AG Bill Barr, retired General Mark Milley, FBI and CIA officials involved in the Russia probe, DoJ officials who refused to carry out his pleas to overturn the 2020 election; members of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack; and members of Congress who voted for impeachment/conviction. As Kagan [notes](#), a Trump administration will be filled with people with their own lists of targets for revenge – some targets will simply be fired, others investigated and yet others arrested. This will be the 2025 version of McCarthyism, on steroids.
5. Citizens could be subject to arbitrary arrest because of their political views or political statements; First Amendment protections could disappear.
6. Trump will be free to direct his Internal Revenue Service to audit his political opponents simply for opposing him ([New York Post reporting](#)).
7. Trump could use peaceful protests as an excuse to declare martial law and to call out the military to counter those peaceful protests after invoking the Insurrection Act, unless it is amended in this Congress ([Washington Post reporting](#)). As Sarah Ellison noted in her Washington Post article ([Dictator for a day? Scholars say Trump can do damage withing being one](#)"), as Trump showed on June 1, 2020, he might not need to invoke the Insurrection Act or exceed the Constitution, as he could call on Republican governors and their National Guard commanders to mobilize National Guard units. Note too that Michael Flynn, who remains in Trump's orbit and was pardoned by Trump, had urged Trump to declare martial law and suspend the Constitution. Imagine the US military, elements of federal law enforcement or the National Guard in effect serving as Trump's domestic security force.
8. Screenings for general and flag officer promotions could sideline military officers who embrace climate change or social justice initiatives or who worry about domestic extremism in the ranks ([Heritage Foundation Project 2025](#)).
9. Trump could call back to active duty former senior military officers who were critical of his leadership and then have them court martialled ([Stars and Stripes reporting](#)).
10. Media outlets that are not deemed sufficiently loyal to the president could be shut down (by revoking FCC licenses – *see* Ellison [article](#)) and their journalists could be arrested and prosecuted (“[Bannon, Patel say Trump 'dead serious' about revenge on the media](#)”; [Truth Social post](#); “[Is Journalism Ready](#)”). As a result, government transparency and media access to government could be sharply curtailed.

11. Trump will replace civil servants who are not prepared to swear allegiance to him ([Axios Reporting on Schedule F](#)).
12. Teachers could be unable to work in public schools if they are unwilling to embrace “patriotic values” ([Trump Issues](#)).
13. Political violence could become endemic as a means of resolving political disagreements, prompted perhaps by pardons issued to January 6th insurrectionists ([Trump CNN Town Hall](#)). As Mitt Romney noted, as evident in the threats made against those who voted publicly against Jim Jordan for Speaker and as scores of election administrators have learned, Republicans who might otherwise stand up to Trump fear not only for their political futures but for their physical safety and the safety of their families.
14. Undocumented immigrants could be rounded up, held in camps and deported, and to fund this, money could be redirected from the defense budget ([Fox News reporting](#)).
15. Trump could direct his (no longer independent) Federal Trade Commission to weaponize US antitrust rules and create corporate winners and losers based on loyalty to the president ([New Republic reporting](#)).
16. Social media platforms could be prevented from moderating content to mitigate disinformation, causing disinformation to run rampant and unchecked ([Trump Issues](#)). For democracy to function as intended, citizens need to be informed of truth and facts; disinformation is the weapon of choice of the autocrat, as it enables manipulation at scale.
17. The 2020 Big Lie would be perpetuated and a host of defeated political candidates could refuse to accept the results of an election despite the absence of any evidence of widespread fraud – in short, majority votes may be ignored ([Trump CNN Town Hall](#)) – this was as much the playbook of Trump and his enablers, as it was the election deniers in Congress and at the state level, the architects of the fake electors schemes and the 18 Republican attorneys general who ignored the rule of law and submitted legal filings to overturn the election results in four states. Trump will do anything to win the 2024 election – it is his only way of avoiding potential conviction and incarceration. His motivations for gaining power, not to mention his fury and feelings of resentment and grievance, run far deeper now than they did in 2020.
18. A free and fair 2026 election would by no means be a foregone conclusion. Trump was advised in 2020 to direct the military to seize voting machines and ballots ([POLITICO reporting](#)). Access to voting could be further restricted by both legislative fiat and by actions on the ground. As the [Brennan Center](#) has chronicled, despite widespread repudiation of election denialism in 2022, attempts to undermine safe and secure elections continue to evolve. For example, armed poll watchers could be deployed at polling stations to intimidate voters, and other forms of voter intimidation could be unleashed at scale.
19. Trump could decide to remain as ruler for life (after all, all of Trump’s actions between election day 2020 and January 20, 2021 were intended to keep him in office in spite of having lost the election) and the institutions may not stand in his way.

20. Trump could align himself with other autocrats (Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Viktor Orban) at the expense of traditional allies and cut deals based on personal enrichment of the president and his associates.
21. The will of the people on issues ranging from abortion, to healthcare to guns to climate change could be overridden, with potential consequences that include:
 - imposition of a national ban on abortion;
 - backtracking on critical efforts to combat climate change, reversing subsidies and credits provided under the Inflation Reduction Act and shutting down the Department of Energy; and
 - termination of the Affordable Care Act, with 40 million Americans losing access to healthcare, 150 Americans with pre-existing conditions potentially being denied covered, reinstatement of annual and lifetime limits on care, young adults losing the right to be covered by parents' plans to 26, and decimation of access to mental healthcare.

The Voters We Need to Reach

A Trump-Biden rematch will be very close, and will likely be determined by election-day choices (which incidentally could include the choice of sitting out the election) made by a few hundred thousand swing voters in three to five battleground states. These voters comprise a cohort of less engaged, so-called “sporadic voters” for whom politics is an afterthought, falling well below quotidian challenges and concerns. This cohort, I understand, is not paying attention at this point to the election, is resistant to hearing from or about Trump, for doing so triggers chaos in their own lives, is surprised to hear that Trump is running again and, in fact, does not believe he will be the Republican nominee.

For these voters, it will be imperative to define the stakes, highlight the threats, clarify the contrasts and, ultimately, frame in straight-forward terms the choice. These voters will need to be persuaded to vote, and to vote for the Democratic ticket. In this context, it will not be enough to simply warn that Trump is a threat to democracy, that he is a wannabe dictator, an autocrat, a fascist. We need to convey what this means in practice.

Concluding Thoughts

Admittedly I am projecting. Just because Trump could do something does not mean he will do it, and just because he says he will do something does not definitely mean he will do it.

But, we have been warned as I describe above, and there are few mysteries as to what a Trump 2.0 administration would look like and what it could do. The threat is compounded by the broadening ecosystem of enablers willing to further Trump's illiberal goals and help get him elected, by the growing number of Republicans lining up to serve in a Trump administration whose badge of honor is their publicly expressed disdain for our current system of government and the Constitution and whose criticism of Democrats and liberalism veers dangerously closely to extremism, and by a political party that has staked its future on sowing distrust among its base in the system, on eroding the legitimacy of democratic institutions and on making it harder for the voters they view as the enemy to vote. Similarly, the threat is compounded by a system of laws, norms and foundational institutions that had not anticipated the situation we could face in 2025.

The question is whether sufficient numbers of American voters will take the warnings seriously, will recognize that Trump legitimately could win in 2024 and will care enough to stop him when they cast their ballots. Democrats made the preservation of democracy (that is democracy writ large, including reproductive freedoms) a central message of the 2022 midterms and we must do so again, in clear and unambiguous language. As President Biden [said](#) in the run-up to the 2022 midterms in respect of the threat of political violence, “we cannot turn away from it, we cannot pretend it will solve itself.” “We know democracy is at risk, but we also know that it is within our power, each and every one of us, to preserve democracy.”

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