# America’s Zombie Democracy

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We are living in an authoritarian state.

It didn’t feel that way this morning, when I took my dog for his usual walk in the park and dew from the grass glittered on my boots in the rising sunlight. It doesn’t feel that way when you’re ordering an iced mocha latte at Starbucks or watching the Patriots lose to the Steelers. The persistent normality of daily life is disorienting, even paralyzing. Yet it’s true.

We have in our heads specific images of authoritarianism that come from the 20th century: uniformed men goose-stepping in jackboots, masses of people chanting party slogans, streets lined with giant portraits of the leader, secret opposition meetings in basements, interrogations under naked light bulbs, executions by firing squad. Similar things still happen—in China, North Korea, Iran. But I’d be surprised if this essay got me hauled off to prison in America. Authoritarianism in the 21st century looks different, because it *is* different. Political scientists have tried to find a new term for it: illiberal democracy, competitive authoritarianism, right-wing populism. In countries such as Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela, and India, democracies aren’t overthrown, nor do they collapse all at once. Instead, they erode. Opposition parties, the judiciary, the press, and civil-society groups aren’t destroyed, but over time they lose their life, staggering on like zombie institutions, giving the impression that democracy is still alive.

Gisela Salim-Peyer: Authoritarianism feels surprisingly normal—until it doesn't

The blurred line between democracy and autocracy is an important feature of modern authoritarianism. How do we know when we’ve crossed it? These sorts of regimes have constitutions, but the teeth are missing. Elections take place, but they’re no longer truly fair or free—the party in power controls the electoral machinery, and if the results aren’t desirable, they’ll be challenged and likely overturned. To keep their jobs, civil servants have to prove not their competence but their personal loyalty to the leader. Independent government officers—prosecutors, inspectors general, federal commissioners, central bankers—are fired and their positions handed to flunkies. The legislature, in the hands of the ruling party, becomes a rubber stamp for the executive. Courts still hear cases, but judges are appointed for their political views, not their expertise, and their opinions, cloaked in neutral-sounding legal terms, predictably give the leader what he wants, endorsing his most illiberal policies and immunizing him from accountability. The rule of law amounts to favors for friends and persecution for enemies. The separation of powers turns out to be a paper-thin gentleman’s agreement. There are no meaningful checks on the leader’s power.

Does an ideology drive these regimes? Would they sacrifice everything for the survival of some almighty ism? Doubtful. Instead of ideologies, they have slogans without much content. Fascism, like communism, was a serious ideology—one that mobilized populations in some of the most advanced countries of the 20th century to throw away their freedoms, go hungry and work themselves to the bone, give their lives in struggle and war. Fascism was serious enough to produce a mountain of corpses.

Today’s authoritarianism doesn’t move people to heroic feats on behalf of the Fatherland. The leader and his cronies, in and out of government, use their positions to hold on to power and enrich themselves. Corruption becomes so routine that it’s expected; the public grows desensitized, and violations of ethical norms that would have caused outrage in any other time go barely noticed. The regime has no utopian visions of a classless or hierarchical society in a purified state. It doesn’t thrive on war. In fact, it asks very little of the people. At important political moments it mobilizes its core supporters with frenzies of hatred,

but its overriding goal is to render most citizens passive. If the leader's speech gets boring, you can even leave early (no one left Nuremberg early). Twenty-first-century authoritarianism keeps the public content with abundant calories and dazzling entertainment. Its dominant emotions aren't euphoria and rage, but indifference and cynicism. Because most people still expect to have certain rights respected, blatant totalitarian mechanisms of repression are avoided. The most effective tools of control are distraction, confusion, and division.

These regimes thrive on polarizing the electorate into us and them. *Us* is defined as the "real" people—often working-class, rural, less educated—who think of themselves as the traditional backbone of the country and the victims of rapid economic and social change: globalization, immigration, technology, new ideas about race and gender identity. *Them* are the elites who benefit from these changes, who have no loyalty to the country and its traditions, along with the aliens and minorities whom the elites use to undermine the national way of life. The leader speaks directly for the people and embodies their will against the people's enemies. As defender of the nation, he claims the right to override any obstacles, legal or otherwise. Whatever he does *is* the rule of law.

Over time, society is hollowed out. Civic organizations that engage in public affairs hesitate to get too political for fear of drawing unwanted attention. Universities, churches, NGOs, and law firms mute themselves to stay in the good graces of the state, which has tremendous financial and regulatory power over them. The press isn't silenced, but it is intimidated by demagogic rhetoric, investigations, and lawsuits, so that journalists are constantly asking themselves what the negative consequences of a particular story or opinion will be. Over time, the major media fall under the control of the leader's friends, leaving a few independent outlets to struggle on in pursuit of the truth.

Authoritarian regimes and their allies flood the internet and social media with such a tide of falsehoods, so much uncertainty about what is true, so much distrust in traditional sources of information, that the public throws up its hands and checks out. While partisans on both sides use incendiary language in the endless battle for algorithmic attention, normal people who aren't particularly engaged or informed grow numb and exhausted. And this social context allows authoritarians to exert control without resorting to terror. Unable to know the truth, we risk losing our liberty. "If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer," the political philosopher Hannah Arendt said near the end of her life. "And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."

These are the features of the modern authoritarian state. Every one of them exists today in this country. Checks on President Donald Trump's power, whether in the framework of law and constitutional government or in the broader society, have grown so weak that he can do pretty much what he wants. He sends masked police to pick people off the streets without probable cause for arrest, disappear them into secret prisons, and ship them off to random countries. He fires experienced, patriotic civil servants and replaces them with unqualified toadies. He takes open bribes from foreign countries and American business interests in the form of a luxury jet or a meme coin. He tells media companies to stop criticizing him, or else—and many of them do.

Some of these acts have been temporarily blocked by lower-court judges, but in case after case the Supreme Court has made itself the firewall against presidential accountability, while the Republican-led Congress embraces its own impotence. It sometimes seems as if the only check on Trump's power is his own attention span.

Steven Levitsky: The new authoritarianism

A small incident can reveal a larger truth about a country's real condition. Last week I was in Ohio to give a talk, and at dinner a professor mentioned a recent letter from the Department of Education announcing that federal work-study funds will no longer cover nonpartisan civic jobs, such as voter registration, because they are "political activity." The government rationalized the ban by stating that work-study jobs should provide "real-world work experience related to a student's course of study whenever possible." But

as the professor put it to me: "Nonpartisan voter engagement *is* 'real-world work experience related to the course of study' of someone majoring in political science—or anyone studying to be an active citizen in a free society." The Trump administration isn't just withholding federal money to blackmail institutions of higher education into suppressing ideas and policies it doesn't like. It also wants to discourage any civic activism it doesn't control.

The next morning, a local librarian told me of a disturbing change at work. The town library was generally a noisy place, but in the days following the assassination of Charlie Kirk, people had suddenly begun speaking in whispers. Across the country, Republican elected officials and online enforcers were creating blacklists of speech criminals. Vice President J. D. Vance suggested that the First Amendment should be suspended for academic wrong-thinkers. Trump threatened journalists and comedians for insufficiently respecting Kirk and him. A palpable chill set in, and even the patrons of a small-town Ohio library worried about being overheard.

This mental atmosphere reveals as much as anything happening in Washington. You can feel the onset of authoritarianism in your central nervous system: shock, disbelief, fear, paralysis. Familiar norms and rules disintegrate every day, but the ultimate consequences remain unclear, and Americans don't know how to assess the danger. We haven't lived under authoritarianism. We haven't experienced this level of sustained polarization and vitriol since the run-up to the Civil War. During the McCarthy era, careers and lives were ruined, but the White House didn't lead the pursuing hounds.

Yet the Founding Fathers warned over and over about the arrival of an authoritarian demagogue. They wrote a Constitution that they thought would be the best defense against one. In 1838, a young Abraham Lincoln said that the republic would never be overthrown from abroad: "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." How did it come to this? How have we *let* it come to this? Because it's not just being done to us. We are doing it to ourselves.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who came here in the 1830s to study this new form of government, wrote that the key to maintaining democracy in America, beyond the country's physical advantages and wealth, beyond the wisdom of its Constitution and laws, was the "mores" of its people: their customs and ideas; their choices; their active participation in civic life; their emotional capacity for restraint, responsibility, and tolerance—what Tocqueville called their "habits of the heart." These habits have to be acquired and practiced, and they're just as easily lost as learned. In many ways democracy is not a natural form of government. Throughout human history it's been the exception. Most societies have been ruled, have allowed themselves to be ruled, by a single class, faction, or person. Self-government by the whole people is counterintuitive, just like freedom of speech for repellent ideas, and it's hard. Walter Lippmann once wrote: "Men will do almost anything but govern themselves. They don't want the responsibility."

Today, in public life, and especially in the hellscape of social media, our habits of the heart tend to be unrestrained, intolerant, contemptuous. With the help of Big Tech's addictive algorithms, we've lost the art of self-government—the ability to think and judge; the skills of dialogue, argument, and compromise; the belief in basic liberal values. Five years ago, in the midst of the George Floyd protests, I helped write a rather anodyne statement in defense of open inquiry, signed by more than 150 writers, artists, and intellectuals. Without using the phrase, it criticized cancel culture. Almost immediately upon its publication in *Harper's*, the statement became the "notorious" *Harper's* Letter—the object of furious condemnation by journalists and academics as the pearl-clutching of elites and an excuse for bigotry. This torrent of abuse came from the left, which no longer believed in open inquiry. Those on the right raged against left-wing puritans and declared themselves militants for free speech, even—especially—hatred and lies.

Since Trump's return to office, and with Kirk's murder, the roles have completely reversed. The left, which not long ago perfected mob-sponsored silencing, is (rightly) outraged at the Trump administration's top-down cancel culture. Meanwhile, those former free-speech absolutists Trump, Vance, and Stephen

Miller have become lord high executioners of thought crime. If a new *Harper's* Letter defending the value of open inquiry were written today, many of the original letter's fiercest critics would rush to sign it. Free-speech hypocrisy is a symptom of the democratic decay that makes authoritarianism possible.

Graeme Wood: The cowardice of open letters

At the same time, political violence is rising like a dark storm around the country—in Pennsylvania and Minnesota, in Washington and San Francisco and Atlanta, and now in Utah. The shot that killed Charlie Kirk as he debated a crowd of college students represented the worst kind of failure in a democracy—a bullet silencing speech. Only the shooter bears the guilt. In a text to his roommate and partner, the suspect wrote about Kirk: "I had enough of his hatred. Some hate can't be negotiated out." So he erased the line between word and deed that keeps us from destroying ourselves.

The relation between our degraded discourse and this epidemic of attacks is not simple or direct. A public square in which a minority of Americans, separated into mutually hateful camps under the malign spell of power-hungry leaders and profit-seeking influencers, routinely dehumanize one another is an obvious setting for a few lost souls to cross the line into murder. But most Americans still know the difference between words and violence. Most responded to Kirk's assassination with horror and grief, along with the dread of an impending downward spiral. Most people are still sane, still decent, don't want to see their opponents killed, don't want a civil war.

Adrienne LaFrance: Strawberries in winter

Yet the logic of algorithmic polarization seems inescapable. Within hours of the assassination, some individuals predictably justified, even celebrated, Kirk's death online. Then the Trump administration did what never happened after JFK and Martin Luther King were killed or Reagan was shot. It used a terrible crime as a pretext to silence dissent and crush the opposition—exactly what you would expect from an authoritarian regime. Last Sunday, when tens of thousands of people from around the country gathered in Arizona to remember Kirk, a religious service turned into a state-sponsored rally for hard-edged Christian nationalism. Kirk's tearful widow, Erika, forgave his killer—but Miller, the president's senior adviser, snarling and flexing his neck, promised revenge against nameless evil "enemies," and Trump himself proudly declared his hatred for his opponents. Whose words mattered more? Was it all just an ugly show, or the start of a campaign of widespread repression?

Perhaps what we're seeing, in this country and around the world, is a return to the norm. Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that, after two and a half centuries—about the length of the Roman republic in its glory—American democracy is disappearing. As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration, the universal ideas of the founding documents no longer seem to have their hold on many Americans, especially younger ones.

For many years prominent figures on the left, especially in colleges and universities, have dedicated themselves to revealing all the ways in which those ideals were never universal: The abstract truths of the Declaration were falsehoods, covers for structures of oppression that endure to this day. On the populist-nationalist right, the greatest words in political history—"all men are created equal"—are now qualified with so many reservations that they might as well be deleted. Vance wants to "redefine American citizenship" as a hierarchy in which the universal ideas of the Declaration count for less than the number of dead generations lying in your family plot. This makes me want to say, as Lincoln said of the reactionaries of his time: "I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."

The philosopher John Dewey believed that democracy is not just a system of government but a way of life, one that allows for the fullest realization of every human being's potential. I was granted more than half a century to benefit from it in the country that practically invented democracy. It makes me heartsick that my children might not have the same chance. What can we do to prevent authoritarianism from becoming our way of life? How can we change the habits of our heart and our society?

Foreigners are baffled that Americans are allowing an authoritarian to rob them of their precious birthright. I'm baffled, too—but I also recognize that we have no experience resisting this kind of government. So we can study what ordinary people living under other modern authoritarian regimes have done. Witness, protest, speak out, and mock in creative ways that catch the popular imagination. Politicians can run for office, lawyers can sue, journalists can investigate, artists can dramatize, scholars can analyze. Americans are already doing these things, but so far none of it has made much difference because the public isn't engaged, and without the public on their side opponents of authoritarianism are too weak to win.

The greatest temptation and danger is to withdraw into some private world of your own and wait it out.

Sam Altman, a co-founder and the CEO of OpenAI, recently appeared on *The Joe Rogan Experience*. When Rogan floated the idea of an AI president, Altman envisioned a system that would be able to talk to everyone, understand them deeply, and then "optimize for the collective preferences of humanity or of citizens of the U.S. That's awesome."

I'm suspicious of anyone who suggests being governed by a machine that's made him a multibillionaire. I remember Mark Zuckerberg's utopian dream of a platform that would create a more open and connected world, uniting humanity across tribal lines, perhaps even ending wars in the Middle East. The unforeseen damage that social media has caused democracy seems likely to be dwarfed by that of artificial intelligence. It won't just substitute an algorithm for our ability to make decisions. It's coming to replace *us*—to be our therapist, our doctor, our teacher, our friend, our lover, our president. But if one day a chatbot writes a poem better than Frost or Bishop, it will still be worthless—because it's only the human intention, the search for meaning and effort to reach others, that give a poem its value. There's no art without us.

Chatbots feed on some longing we must have to be relieved of our humanity, as if being human is too hard, too much trouble to have to think and judge for ourselves, to define who we are and what we believe, to suffer the inevitable pain of consciousness and love for another human being. This longing seems especially acute today.

So artificial intelligence promises to do what an authoritarian regime does: take our place. They're two sides of the same coin—one political, the other technological—both forfeitures of human possibility. We're surrendering our ability to act as free agents of a democracy at the same moment we're building machines that take away our ability to think and feel.

Listen: AI and the rise of techno-fascism in the United States

The Declaration of Independence and the other founding documents were based on a philosophical faith in human reason and freedom. Near the end of his life, Jefferson wrote in a letter, "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their controul with a wholsome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power."

What does it mean to be educated for a free society? This used to be the mission of American schools—to produce a special kind of person, a democratic citizen. In many ways our colleges and universities have failed at this task. They've become prohibitively expensive, while creating a new aristocracy of the credentialed that has worsened economic inequality and political polarization. They've spent their money on administrators and fitness centers while cutting whole programs in the humanities and social sciences. Those programs share some of the blame for their own demise. They grew so opaque and politicized that they seemed irrelevant, if not hostile, to the larger society. Some things are true even though the Trump administration says they're true—the academy has become inhospitable to conservative views. When more than half of your classmates are afraid to say what they think, there's too much orthodoxy and not enough free expression.

To be educated for democracy means hearing different, even disturbing views—seeking them out, engaging and arguing with them, learning from them, maybe letting them change your mind, without giving an inch of ground to democracy’s erosion. It takes practice, and I believe it’s likeliest to happen when we come face-to-face with friends, strangers, and even enemies. There’s no getting away from our phones, just as AI will soon seep into every fold of our lives, no doubt doing both good and harm. But we have to resist their tyranny, which threatens our freedom as much as the authoritarian regime now taking hold.

**Source: Graphica Artis / Getty; Herbert Ponting / Royal Geographical Society / Getty*