



THE STEADY STATE

Assessment

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Accelerating Authoritarian Dynamics: Assessment of Democratic Decline

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This assessment, *Accelerating Authoritarian Dynamics: Assessment of Democratic Decline*, authored by members of The Steady State, all of whom are former U.S. Intelligence Community officers with analytic responsibilities,¹ applies the analytic tradecraft of the U.S. Intelligence Community to conditions inside the United States. It concludes—with moderate to high confidence—that the cumulative effect of multiple reinforcing dynamics is placing the nation on a trajectory toward competitive authoritarianism: a system in which elections, courts, and other democratic institutions persist in form but are systematically manipulated to entrench executive control.

The analysis identifies five interrelated trends driving this process. Executive overreach is being consolidated through governance by decree and weaponization of the state, combining sweeping executive orders and expansive emergency claims with politicized control of the civil service and oversight bodies, the targeting of perceived opponents via justice and intelligence functions, and preferential protection of allies. Erosion of judicial independence has advanced not only through partisan appointments, but through strategic reliance on the Supreme Court’s “shadow docket,” efforts to curtail judicial remedies and intimidate the legal profession, and selective compliance with court rulings. Legislative weakness and abdication have diminished Congress’s capacity to serve as a coequal branch, as delegation, obstruction, and polarization undermine effective oversight. The electoral system is being reshaped not only through structural biases like gerrymandering and voting restrictions, but through partisan control of administration, intimidation of election officials, and efforts to contest certified results—undermining the expectation that elections will be fairly run and their outcomes accepted. Finally, the undermining of public trust, knowledge, and civil society through attacks on the press, academia, watchdog institutions, and dissenting voices has weakened democratic culture and civic resilience.

¹ Founded in 2016, [The Steady State](#) is a nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization of more than 340 former senior national security professionals. Our membership includes former officials from the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of State, Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security. Drawing on deep expertise across national security disciplines including intelligence, diplomacy, military affairs and law, we advocate for constitutional democracy, the rule of law and the preservation of America’s national security institutions.

Together, these trends indicate a restructuring of the constitutional order around personal loyalty rather than adherence to law. Data from international indices—including V-Dem, Freedom House, and Bright Line Watch—corroborate measurable declines in rule of law, checks and balances, and tolerance for pluralism.

Absent organized resistance by institutions, civil society, and the public, the United States is likely to continue along a path of accelerating democratic erosion, risking further consolidation of executive dominance and a loss of credibility as a model of democracy abroad.

SCOPE NOTE

This assessment examines recent indications of democratic backsliding within the United States. Traditionally, our work when we served as intelligence professionals was focused outward—applying the rigor of the U.S. intelligence community (IC) analytic tradecraft to foreign policy and national security challenges abroad. At no point during our service did we assess domestic political dynamics, which fell outside the IC’s mandate.²

Given the stakes of the current moment, however, we have taken the unusual step of directing that same analytic discipline inward. We do so not as representatives of the U.S. Government or in any official capacity, but as former IC officers who believe the tools of structured analysis can shed light on concerning trends within our own democracy.

The objective of this assessment is not to offer policy prescriptions or political judgments. Rather, it is to identify observable indicators of democratic backsliding and authoritarian trends in the United States, place them in a comparative context, and assess their potential implications for the health and resilience of American democracy.

² No one who drafted or coordinated on this document did so at the direction, request, or suggestion of the U.S. government or anyone working for or contracted by the U.S. government, or at the direction, request, or suggestion of any U.S. political party or anyone working for or contracted by a U.S. political party.

KEY FINDINGS

We base these judgments on observable indicators across executive actions, judicial rulings, legislative behavior, electoral administration, media/civil society conditions, security/intelligence politicization, public trust/delegitimization narratives, and longitudinal expert indices.

1. **We assess with high confidence that democratic backsliding in the United States is accelerating, characterized by a consolidation of executive power, erosion of institutional checks and balances, and deliberate weakening of civil service protections and oversight mechanisms.**
2. **We judge with high confidence that the Executive Branch is actively weaponizing state institutions to punish perceived opponents and shield allies. This includes the politicization of the Department of Justice and intelligence agencies, the weakening of oversight and independent institutions—including the dismissal of Inspectors General—and the politicization of the civil service, including the revival of measures such as “Schedule F,” which undermines the neutrality of the federal workforce.**
3. **We assess with moderate confidence that judicial independence is under sustained threat. Partisan-driven appointments have partially reshaped the courts along ideological lines, narrowing space for impartial adjudication. At the same time, increasing reliance on the Supreme Court’s “shadow docket” enables controversial executive actions to be approved without full argument or explanation. The cumulative effect is a judiciary increasingly perceived as partisan and aligned with executive interests.**
4. **We judge with moderate confidence that legislative weakness is compounding the authoritarian trend. Congress’s delegation of core lawmaking functions, combined with partisan obstruction and procedural manipulation, has diminished its ability to provide an effective check on executive power.**
5. **We assess with high confidence that public trust in U.S. democratic institutions is declining, fueled by repeated contrived assaults on electoral integrity lacking evidence, attacks on the press, and efforts to delegitimize dissent. This trend risks producing growing tolerance among segments of the public for authoritarian governance.**
6. **We judge with moderate to high confidence that the cumulative effect of these dynamics places the United States on a trajectory toward “competitive authoritarianism.” While formal democratic institutions such as elections and courts remain in place, the playing field is being systematically tilted to favor incumbents, raising risks for both domestic stability and U.S. global credibility.**

DISCUSSION

We judge that the U.S. drift towards authoritarianism has accelerated this year, a trend characterized not by an abrupt seizure of power but by an erosion of democratic norms and institutional checks and balances. This trajectory is widely described as a shift towards "[competitive authoritarianism](#)," a political system where the formal architecture of democracy—such as regular elections and legal opposition—remains intact but incumbents systematically manipulate the playing field to disadvantage their rivals and consolidate power.

This analysis will argue that the U.S. is becoming more autocratic, detailing how the erosion of checks and balances across the executive, judicial, and legislative branches; the manipulation of electoral processes; and attacks on knowledge, transparency, and civil society facilitate this trend. It will also highlight how declining public trust and tolerance for authoritarian practices compound these risks and will identify the indicators and comparative indices used to track democratic decline.

1. EXECUTIVE OVERREACH AND WEAPONIZATION OF THE STATE

We judge that the primary driver of the U.S.’s increasing authoritarianism is the increased frequency of Executive Branch overreach. President Donald J. Trump has leveraged emergency powers, executive orders, federalized military forces, and bureaucratic politicization to consolidate control and weaken checks and balances. These actions extend into undermining independent oversight and weaponizing justice and intelligence agencies for partisan ends. Taken together, they go beyond traditional executive discretion, setting dangerous precedents that future presidents could exploit.

1.a. Unprecedented Reliance on Executive Orders

Executive orders (EOs) are legitimate tools, but sustained reliance on unilateral directives—especially for major policy—hollows out democratic forbearance. It normalizes doing by order what should be negotiated in Congress, concentrates power in the executive, and creates openings that can be exploited to tilt toward authoritarian practices.

President Trump is on pace to issue approximately 275 [EOs](#) this year, one of the highest rates in American history, and more than five times greater than his first term. These directives go beyond routine management, frequently bypassing Congress and testing constitutional limits.

Examples include purporting to end [birthright citizenship](#), orders [limiting](#) judicial remedies such as nationwide [injunctions](#), and regulatory suspensions issued without normal notice-and-comment procedures.

Some orders have directed agencies to “[sunset](#)” or rescind entire classes of regulations en masse. Legal analysts warn this strategy risks bypassing the Administrative Procedure Act’s (APA) safeguards for public input, weakening transparency and accountability.

While presidents have long used EOs to manage executive functions, the scale and legal justification for several 2025 orders make them a more atypical and aggressive use relative to normal practice. Notably, Trump has leaned heavily on EOs despite his party holding congressional majorities—a choice that sidelines the legislative process and further erodes the separation of powers.

1.b. Emergency Powers and Deployment of Federal Forces

The president has recently invoked emergency powers to federalize National Guard troops over the objection of governors. Deployments to California, Washington, D.C., Oregon, and Illinois occurred despite ongoing litigation and state resistance.

In Chicago, Portland, and Los Angeles (LA), these deployments escalated tensions. Trump has since floated deploying the Guard to additional cities—including New York, Baltimore, Oakland, San Francisco, and Seattle—and has openly suggested invoking the Insurrection Act to override state opposition.

These actions undermine the balance of power between state and federal authority and risk normalizing domestic military deployments as a tool of political control. Courts have already enjoined or narrowed several deployments, underscoring persistent legal uncertainty over domestic military use.

1.c. Politicization of Civil Service

The Trump Administration has intentionally worked to remove career and political bureaucrats whom it perceives to be disloyal to the President or obstructionist to his agenda.

All administrations bring in political appointees, but this administration’s approach goes far beyond what is required to implement a president’s agenda and undermines the ability of federal agencies to perform their inherently governmental functions.

President Trump issued an [EO](#) on his first day in office—which multiple groups are challenging in court—to reinstate "Schedule F" as a category of federal employment. First created by EO in [2020](#) and revoked in January 2021, Schedule F would make thousands of career officials “at will” employees, eliminating civil service protections. Civil service laws and protections promote the political neutrality of the federal workforce. Schedule F, if upheld, would render thousands of employees more vulnerable to political pressure and would have a chilling effect on whistleblowing and deter the reporting of fraud, waste, abuse, or unlawful directives.

These reclassification schemes did not occur in isolation but were paired with broader efforts to ensure loyalty and ideological conformity across the federal bureaucracy. In preparation for Trump’s incoming administration, the Heritage Foundation’s 2025 Presidential Transition Project authored the “[Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#),” produced under Project 2025. In it, the principle “[personnel is policy](#)” was promoted, and a database was created to vet potential federal hires on ideological grounds. While Trump originally distanced himself

from Project 2025, he recently (in October 2025) [tweeted](#) about meeting with Russ Vought, “of Project 2025 fame,” to discuss which agencies to cut, underscoring the project’s practical role in shaping his administration.

These proposals moved from theory to practice, with the Heritage blueprint’s emphasis on loyalty over expertise reflected in new federal hiring policies. Under the Administration’s Office of Personnel Management (OPM) “[Merit Hiring Plan](#)” (rolled out in early 2025), agencies are directed to ask new applicants (GS-5 and above) to write short essays explaining how they would “help advance the President’s Executive Orders and policy priorities”—a move widely [criticized](#) as a loyalty test. Officials later cautioned that these responses must not be used to disqualify candidates. OPM subsequently put out [guidance](#) clarifying the EO stating, “The questions also must not be used to impose an ideological litmus test on candidates.”

Senior officials who have conflicted with the Administration’s narrative have faced consequences. In August 2025, Trump [fired](#) Lt. Gen. Timothy Haugh, head of Cyber Command, without an official explanation, reportedly at the urging of far-right activist Laura Loomer. Around the same time, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [fired](#) the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kruse, with no stated cause, amid speculation that DIA’s bomb damage assessment following the Iran strike contradicted preferred Administration claims. Similarly, both the Chair and Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) were [dismissed](#) shortly after the NIC reported no evidence to support claims that the Venezuelan government directs or coordinates with the Tren de Aragua gang—a conclusion directly at odds with assertions from senior political officials.

Additionally, President Trump issued [two EOs](#) exempting agencies deemed to have a national security function from federal collective bargaining rules and has begun to terminate those agreements, further reducing civil service protections.

As a result of these combined actions, at stake is the core of civil-service effectiveness and government efficiency: the ability to provide independent, nonpartisan, and candid advice to the government without fear of retaliation and to implement policies and laws across administrations.

[1.d. Weakening Oversight and Independent Institutions](#)

The Trump Administration has pursued structural changes that strip away independent checks and reduce the autonomy of agencies designed to operate outside direct presidential control. By undermining internal watchdogs and centralizing authority over independent regulatory commissions, the Administration has consolidated control over functions traditionally insulated from partisan command.

In January, President Trump [fired](#) the Inspectors General from 17 Federal Agencies, without the legally required advance notice to Congress. The following month, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Inspector General was [dismissed](#) the day after his office

released a report critical of efforts to dismantle USAID. Together, these dismissals eliminated a key layer of independent oversight that was designed to hold the government accountable.

The Administration has also restricted congressional oversight of federal agencies, for example, by limiting congressional access to intelligence agencies and tightening requirements for member visits to detention facilities well beyond prior practices.

In addition, a February 2025 [EO](#) subjected independent regulatory commissions such as the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to centralized White House review through the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), eroding their statutory autonomy and giving the president veto power over agency rulemaking.

Together, these moves weaken the watchdog institutions that provide accountability, while consolidating presidential influence over agencies meant to function with independence. The overall effect reduces transparency, diminishes oversight, and concentrates power at the expense of institutional balance.

[1.e. Unequal Treatment of Political Expression](#)

The Administration has applied political expression standards unequally, targeting some forms of speech and association with targeted groups or individuals for punishment while protecting others, and the Administration's emphasis on political loyalty and retribution against perceived Executive Branch enemies is enabling it to further weaponize government agencies against political opponents and critics.

The Trump Administration has invoked earlier controversies to justify this retaliation. Trump officials often point to the Department of Justice's (DOJ) [memo](#) on conservative parents at school board meetings or Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [engagement](#) with social media platforms on misinformation, for example, claiming they are merely turning those same tools back on their opponents.

Of paramount concern, the Administration has attempted to criminalize dissent through new directives. Trump's [EO](#) designating Antifa as a domestic terrorist organization and National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 ([NSPM-7](#)) treat broad categories of political belief as grounds for investigation and punishment, blurring the constitutional line between criminal conduct and constitutionally protected speech.

[1.f. Weaponization of Justice Against Rivals](#)

The Administration has weaponized the justice system to pursue political rivals, treating opposition figures as targets for prosecution. In September, the DOJ secured an [indictment](#) against former FBI Director James Comey only days after President Trump publicly pressured his Attorney General to go after enemies, explicitly naming Comey, New York Attorney General Letitia James, and others. Shortly after, the department also brought [charges](#) against James,

despite resistance from career prosecutors. In both cases, the indictments advanced only after Trump's newly [appointed](#) U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia overrode internal objections, including the [resignation](#) of Erik Siebert, who resigned in protest rather than bringing charges against Comey. These prosecutions reflect a broader pattern in which federal law enforcement has been pressured not towards neutral justice but towards retaliating against individuals involved in investigations or litigation adverse to the president.

Trump and his administration have repeatedly threatened to indict others, including former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John Brennan, former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper, and former President of the United States Barack Obama, signaling intent to use the justice system as a tool of political retribution. Recent prosecutions of former officials, including indictments brought after public statements by the President and over internal objections within the Department of Justice, have prompted concern about adherence to established norms of prosecutorial independence.

[1.g Preferential Treatment of Allies](#)

While targeting their perceived enemies, the Administration has also shown preferential treatment toward allies, shielding them from scrutiny and extending clemency when politically advantageous.

President Trump's [pardon](#) of participants in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, for example, including those convicted of violent crimes and seditious conspiracy, suggests "violent or antidemocratic actors will be protected" if they support his agenda.

Emerging allegations such as the so-called '[Homan tape](#)'—in which reporting indicates Trump's border czar was allegedly recorded accepting money from purported contractors—underscore concerns that loyalty and political alignment may secure immunity from scrutiny. Even absent adjudication, the perception of impunity reinforces authoritarian use of the executive.

In addition to giving clemency to his allies, Trump has retaliated against those who pursued accountability, [firing](#) attorneys and others involved in the prosecutions of the January 6th rioters and other cases targeted against Trump himself. Many have been stripped of their clearances, eliminating their ability to obtain future employment in the national security arena.

The Administration's punishment of professionals who worked on genuine investigations has a "chilling effect," where many who would normally oppose or question potentially illegal actions may choose to retreat to the sidelines due to the increased risks to their livelihoods, safety, and reputations. Furthermore, the firings and resulting departures that may arise from a likely fear of future purges of anyone who would oppose the Administration also deprive the government of vital subject matter expertise and institutional experience that places national security at risk.

1.h. Indicators of Corruption and Self-Dealing

We judge that corruption and self-dealing are emerging as core tools of executive consolidation, rewarding loyal insiders while normalizing the erosion of anticorruption norms. These practices do not represent isolated scandals but suggest a structural feature of Trump's consolidation of power: creating financial incentives for alignment.

Political and donor funds continue to flow into Trump Organization properties, prompting concerns among ethics observers about pay-to-play access. According to watchdog [investigations](#), foreign governments have also reportedly directed millions to Trump-owned businesses. Separately, the launch of [World Liberty Financial](#), a cryptocurrency venture reportedly linked to Trump family interests and allied financiers, including U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick Zach Witkoff, son of Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, illustrates how political branding may be leveraged for private gain and limited financial transparency.

In September 2025, Trump announced a direct-to-consumer platform, [TrumpRx](#), developed with Pfizer. The deal includes discounted drug offerings and favorable tariff and regulatory terms. While publicly framed as lowering costs, analysts note that it appears structured to safeguard corporate profits while delivering political advantage to Trump. Even absent evidence of direct personal enrichment, the arrangement highlights the blurring of public policy and private gain.

Jared Kushner's private equity firm also secured a [\\$2 billion](#) investment from Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund shortly after he left government after Trump's first term. The timing and scale of the deal underscore the risks of foreign actors potentially purchasing long-term influence through family networks close to the presidency.

1.i. Politicization and Purging of the Intelligence Community

We judge the Administration is undertaking a concerted effort to undermine national security and intelligence agencies, portraying them as bureaucracies needing streamlining, discipline, and alignment with the president's narrative. Internal dissent is treated as "sabotage," and leaks the Administration perceives as politically motivated are "aggressively pursued," while others are downplayed or ignored. Compounding these internal cuts, the Administration has also curtailed intelligence sharing with traditional Five Eyes partners, reducing access to U.S. insights and weakening reciprocal trust.

In January 2025, President Trump issued an [EO](#) directing the immediate revocation of security clearances of 49 former intelligence officials who coordinated the 2020 "Hunter Biden laptop letter" and former National Security Advisor John Bolton, citing improper political interference and disclosure of sensitive government information. In March 2025, President Trump issued a presidential [memorandum](#) ordering the revocation of security clearances for former President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco, former Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton, New York Attorney General Letitia James, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, and other political opponents. The memo declared it “no longer in the national interest” for these individuals to have access to classified information or secure government facilities and specifically barred them from future access as former officials. In 2025, President Trump issued executive [orders](#) stripping security clearances from major law firms and independent attorneys who represented intelligence and national security officials in cases against his administration, including Perkins Coie, WilmerHale, Paul Weiss, and [others](#). These orders barred affected lawyers from accessing classified information, severely restricting their ability to litigate national security cases involving the Trump Administration.

In August 2025, DNI Tulsi Gabbard revoked security clearances from 37 current and former national security officials, who she [claimed](#) “betrayed the public trust” by politicizing intelligence for partisan ends, mishandling classified information, failing to meet professional analytic tradecraft standards, or engaging in other conduct she argued undermined the trust required for access to national security information. Many of the 37 officials were directly involved in producing or reviewing the 2016 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) on Russian interference in the U.S. election. Despite multiple investigations—including a bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee inquiry—over several years finding no evidence of political weaponization, Trump, Gabbard, and CIA Director John Ratcliffe have repeatedly attacked the ICA’s credibility, dismissing it as biased or politically motivated.

Gabbard also [announced](#) plans to cut the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) staff by approximately 40%, and the IC’s budget is expected to be cut by \$700 million annually as well as moved to eliminate ODNI’s Foreign Malign Influence Center and the National Intelligence Council’s Strategic Futures Group, alongside the External Research Council. In addition, Secretary of Defense Hegseth [disestablished](#) DoD’s Office of Net Assessment.

These actions collectively hollow out the nation’s intelligence capacity, weaken its independence, and leave U.S. national security more vulnerable to both foreign threats and domestic political manipulation.

[1.j. Overall Effects of Executive Overreach](#)

Taken together, these developments reveal a deliberate weaponization of the state: rule by EO, expansion of domestic military authority, politicization of the civil service, weakening of oversight institutions, selective use of justice against enemies and protection of allies, and systematic efforts to purge and reshape the IC.

Notably, coordinated state and local pushback—through litigation, refusals to consent to deployments, and oversight by state attorneys general—has created episodic friction that slows, but does not halt, these trends. Despite pushback, however, this pattern erodes the checks and balances designed to keep executive power within democratic bounds and places national security at risk by sidelining expertise and undermining trusted partnerships.

As James Madison warned in Federalist No. [47](#), "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny." These developments bring that warning close to present-day reality.

2. WEAKENING JUDICIAL INDEPENDENCE

We judge the erosion of judicial independence as another critical facet of the US's autocratic shift. The judiciary, which plays a vital role in upholding democratic norms and protecting rights, is increasingly viewed as being "reshaped" and "captured."

2.a. Court Capture and Ideological Stacking

The Trump Administration has wholly embraced the long-standing Republican Party's strategy of court capture, stacking constitutional courts with loyalists to erode judicial independence and transform judges into "mere political instruments." This campaign has been amplified by outside groups like the [Federalist Society](#), which has cultivated pipelines of ideologically aligned judges to shape the judiciary's direction for decades.

Trump Administration officials have prioritized filling federal and state court vacancies with candidates vetted for ideological alignment rather than judicial independence. The group has created a structured pipeline to groom and advance judges committed to specific conservative interpretations of the Constitution. This strategy effectively reduces judicial autonomy, aligning courts with partisan objectives rather than neutral application of the law.

2.b. Supreme Court's Expanded Role Under The "Shadow Docket"

Although lower courts have blocked many of the Administration's actions, the Supreme Court has repeatedly allowed them to proceed under its emergency or "[shadow docket](#)," normally with little explanation. In the first 20 weeks of the Administration, they sought emergency relief [19](#) times, about the same number of requests made by the Biden Administration over four years.

These rulings included major issues, such as the partial [stay](#) of injunctions against the EO seeking to rescind birthright citizenship—narrowing lower-court blocks without deciding the policy's constitutionality—and the Court's stay in [Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo \(2025\)](#), which lifted restrictions on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), allowing greater latitude in considering race, language, employment, or location in immigration stops in LA. The rulings have overwhelmingly been on a partisan basis.

2.c. Weakening Judicial Remedies and Legal Defenses

The Administration has worked to restrict the tools courts and the legal profession can use to check executive power. By limiting judicial remedies and targeting lawyers who represent causes the Administration opposes, they have narrowed the avenues through which citizens and institutions can hold the government accountable. The Administration has also pressed for expedited reviews and procedural limits that undermine the courts' capacity to examine constitutional claims before executive policies take full effect. In [Trump v. CASA, Inc. \(2025\)](#),

the Supreme Court restricted the ability of lower courts to issue nationwide injunctions, reducing one of the judiciary's most effective means of restraining unlawful executive actions.

Additionally, law firms and attorneys representing migrants, protesters, or political opponents have reported experiencing government pressure, reputational attacks, and threats to their security clearances, creating a [chilling](#) effect on robust legal defense.

2.d. Executive Attacks on Judicial Legitimacy

President Trump and senior officials have repeatedly disparaged judges who ruled against them, labeling them biased or illegitimate. These attacks seek to delegitimize independent arbiters of law. Chief Justice John Roberts' limited responses have left many judges feeling vulnerable amid growing threats to their safety.

In early October, Stephen Miller, White House Deputy Chief of Staff, publicly criticized federal judges who blocked President Trump's deployments of National Guard troops. He described their rulings as "[legal insurrection](#)." Miller's remarks followed a [decision](#) by U.S. District Judge Karin Immergut (a Trump appointee) that temporarily blocked Trump from sending National Guard troops to Portland. Miller's framing of the judicial decision went beyond mere disagreement, characterizing it as an attack on legitimate authority. Additionally, Miller asserted that President Trump holds "[plenary authority](#)" under Title 10 to federalize National Guard forces—a position legal commentators characterize as exceeding established statutory limits. Legal analysts warn that such language escalates rhetorical attacks on the judiciary into direct delegitimization, increasing risks to norms of separation of powers, judicial independence, and public confidence in the courts.

Beyond rhetoric, the Administration has also sought to [intimidate](#) the broader legal community. Law firms that have represented causes the Administration dislikes have faced government pressure, reputational attacks, and in some cases the revocation of security clearances for attorneys, effectively punishing firms for providing adversarial defense. These actions extend the campaign against judicial legitimacy into the legal profession itself, chilling robust representation and narrowing avenues for lawful challenge to executive power.

2.e. Non-compliance with Judicial Rulings and Selective Enforcement

Instances have emerged of the Executive Branch delaying or failing to implement judicial rulings. For example, including removals to Ecuador, federal authorities deported individuals [despite](#) a judge's explicit stay order—carrying out expulsions before courts could intervene. Selective enforcement signals that compliance with the courts is optional, eroding the principle of judicial supremacy. Non-compliance with court orders threatens to hollow out judicial authority, leaving constitutional rights contingent on executive discretion.

2.f. Overall Effects of Weakened Judicial Independence

Taken together, structural capture, procedural shortcuts, and political intimidation weaken the judiciary's capacity to act as an independent check. What once threatened the public perception of partisan justice now risks producing an actual two-tiered system, where judicial authority depends on executive willingness to comply rather than constitutional mandate.

3. LEGISLATIVE WEAKNESS

We assess Congress's ability or willingness to act as a check on executive power is also diminished. Established in Article I of the Constitution, Congress was deliberately designed as the 'first branch of government'—the primary and most representative branch—and a vital check on executive authority. Yet its willingness and capacity to perform this role have eroded, creating openings for authoritarian exploitation.

Longstanding trends of delegating lawmaking power to the executive, escalating obstructionism, declining transparency, weakened oversight, partisan manipulation of legislative processes, and abdication during emergencies have collectively hollowed out Congress's role as a coequal branch. These dynamics not only diminish accountability and effective governance but also normalize a concentration of power in the presidency.

3.a. Delegation of Authority to the Executive Branch

Congress has increasingly delegated its lawmaking power to agency bureaucracies, which makes the federal government less constitutionally accountable and grants significant power to federal agencies and the White House. This dynamic, while often justified as administrative efficiency, creates vulnerabilities that authoritarian actors can exploit.

Major policy questions are increasingly decided by executive agencies rather than through legislation, shifting authority away from elected representatives. Delegation blurs responsibility between Congress and the executive, reducing transparency for voters and shielding lawmakers from accountability for controversial policies.

A presidency inclined toward consolidation can use this delegated power to govern by decree, bypassing the deliberative process Congress was designed to uphold. By steadily ceding its core lawmaking role, Congress has hollowed out one of the most fundamental checks on executive authority.

3.b. Partisan Capture of the Legislative Process

Rather than serving as a check on executive dominance, Congress is increasingly subordinated to partisan loyalty, undermining institutional independence.

In [gerrymandered](#) districts, entrenched safe seats reduce incentives for compromise and embolden hyper-partisan behavior. Because of discipline to party, lawmakers face pressure to align with executive preferences, even when they conflict with congressional prerogatives.

Control of agenda-setting and committee hearings is leveraged to shield allies and punish opponents. Funding deadlines and continuing resolutions are used to bundle unrelated priorities, reducing scrutiny and forcing take-it-or-leave-it votes. Leadership accelerates confirmations and curtails hearings when politically advantageous, weakening deliberation and oversight.

This partisan capture transforms Congress from a coequal branch of government into a vehicle for consolidating executive and party power.

3.c. Legislative Obstruction as a Political Weapon

"Legislative obstruction" has emerged as a tactic where opposition parties exploit parliamentary procedures to block key reforms, paralyzing lawmaking and leveraging the resulting dysfunction to strengthen their political position. What was once a tool of debate has become a strategy for undermining government itself.

Filibusters, holds, and other procedural tools are used not to refine policy but to halt it altogether. The inability of Congress to act is framed as proof of government failure, even when the paralysis is deliberately engineered. Once in power, obstructing parties may dismantle the very institutional checks they relied on to ascend, transforming political competition from a "good faith" rivalry into a struggle where the aim is to "dismantle the system itself."

The normalization of obstruction as a partisan strategy corrodes the legislative process, shifting incentives away from governance and toward institutional sabotage.

3.d. Decline in Transparency and Deliberation

As political polarization has deepened, legislative negotiations are increasingly conducted "behind closed doors," reducing transparency and limiting opportunities for public debate. Constituents and the press have fewer opportunities to evaluate lawmakers' positions or hold them accountable for compromises. Sharp partisan divides discourage open deliberation, as leaders rely on secrecy to prevent internal dissent or external criticism. The result is a lawmaking process less accountable to citizens and more susceptible to partisan manipulation.

3.e. Erosion of Congressional Oversight

Congress's oversight role—essential to checking the executive—has been weakened by partisan obstruction and executive resistance, leaving critical actions under-scrutinized.

The Administration has limited members' access to detention facilities and intelligence agencies, curbing oversight capacity. Executive officials frequently stall or refuse to comply with congressional subpoenas, diluting enforcement power. Oversight committees are hampered by polarization, with minority members often excluded from meaningful participation.

In 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [restricted](#) congressional visits to immigration detention centers, requiring members to provide a weeks' notice and limiting access to staff and cameras. This went beyond prior practice, when visits were often allowed on short

notice to ensure unannounced oversight. The Administration also curtailed intelligence briefings for certain committees, requiring White House approval before agency officials could testify or provide documents. For example, ODNI [restricted](#) classified briefings on election security threats, citing “executive privilege,” despite the longstanding practice of direct briefings to congressional committees.

Oversight has also been weakened internally. In 2024–25, majority party leadership excluded minority members from witness lists and document access in certain House oversight hearings, effectively [limiting](#) bipartisan scrutiny. This practice departs from the traditional norm that both parties could call witnesses and review investigative material.

Taken together, these practices erode Congress’s ability to act as an independent watchdog, enabling executive overreach to proceed with minimal accountability.

3.f. Emergency Powers Abdication

Congress has increasingly ceded authority over national emergencies, allowing the executive-wide discretion with little review.

Statutory frameworks like the National Emergencies Act grant sweeping authority with few limits. Although Congress is supposed to review emergency declarations, in practice, it rarely acts to curtail them. The executive can invoke emergencies to bypass Congress, reshaping policy unilaterally under the cover of urgency. By failing to assert its constitutional role in regulating emergency powers, Congress enables the presidency to govern outside normal democratic checks.

In September and October 2025, for example, the Trump Administration carried out multiple [strikes](#) on vessels off the Venezuelan coast. The Administration justified the actions under a patchwork of claimed authorities and broad assertions of self-defense and constitutional authority. Officials described the strikes as part of a “non-international armed conflict” with drug cartels, but legal experts widely dispute whether any clear statutory basis exists, noting that neither the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) nor traditional emergency powers cover such actions. Critics argue the operations highlight Congress’s failure to rein in executive emergency powers, enabling the presidency to unilaterally escalate force abroad without meaningful oversight.

3.g. Overall Effects of Legislative Weakness

Taken together, these trends leave Congress less able—and often less willing—to function as a coequal branch, effectively abdicating its constitutional duty and enabling the steady expansion of executive power.

4. SYSTEMIC ELECTORAL FLAWS

Beyond legislative dynamics, the U.S. electoral system itself is structurally favoring political extremism and contributing to the autocratic trend. Features such as the winner-take-all

system are criticized for "exaggerating one party's electoral wins," "diluting minority voting power," and "weakening competition between the major parties." These systemic distortions, coupled with partisan manipulation of election rules, gerrymandering, intimidation of election officials, and weak guardrails against money and disinformation, collectively weaken electoral legitimacy while preserving the façade of democratic process.

4.a. Structural Bias in the Electoral System

The design of the electoral system creates manufactured majorities that distort representation. Features such as the winner-take-all system exaggerate one party's electoral wins, dilute minority voting power, and weaken competition between the major parties. The systemic issues are leading to "manufactured majorities," where ruling parties manipulate electoral laws and processes—such as strict voter identification (ID) laws—to inflate their representation and diminish the power of genuine opposition voices.

4.b. Manipulation of Electoral Laws and Processes

Changes in election law are increasingly used to entrench power. Strict voter ID requirements, voter roll purges, and reduced polling access disproportionately restrict minority and low-income voters. Mail-in and early voting have been curtailed in multiple states despite their broad public use.

Trump has repeatedly called for and threatened executive action to mandate voter ID for every vote—a demand he says will leave “no exceptions.” He also stated he would sign an order to eliminate mail-in voting except for the “very ill” or military personnel.

4.c. Partisan Gerrymandering and Restricting Abuse

Redistricting has become a deliberate instrument of partisan advantage. In August, Texas—at the urging of President Trump—[adopted](#) a rare mid-cycle map specifically intended to increase the number of Republican seats by five. In response, California created a ballot measure that would overturn a nonpartisan redistricting effort in order to create more Democratic seats. The President is pressing other Republican-led states to engage in redistricting also.

4.d. Criminalization of Legislative Dissent

Opposition protests within legislatures have been met with threats of criminal sanctions, undermining the principle that dissent is a legitimate part of democratic deliberation. In August, when Democratic members of the Texas state legislature left the state in an effort to block gerrymandering, for example, the state of Texas issued arrest warrants. Trump publicly endorsed such measures, praising Republican efforts to criminalize walkouts and framing opposition legislators as “lawless” for resisting Republican Party (GOP) redistricting and voting bills. This rhetoric normalizes the use of criminal law to punish legitimate political dissent. By encouraging criminal sanctions against dissenting lawmakers, these moves transform legislative protest from a democratic safeguard into a prosecutable offense, weakening the space for lawful opposition.

4.e. Erosion of Election Administration Independence

Election oversight is increasingly politicized, weakening the expectation that administrators act neutrally and professionally. Several state legislatures have transferred certification powers to partisan bodies, undermining the independence of nonpartisan officials. Local election administrators are pressured to align with partisan narratives rather than act neutrally. Trump has amplified this trend by pressuring state boards to adopt rules reflecting his fraud claims and by calling on states to eliminate mail and electronic voting, signaling an intent to bend administration toward partisan control. At the federal level, his [EO](#) requiring independent agencies (including those with election functions) to submit major regulations for White House review erodes institutional independence and centralizes partisan oversight.

Together, these moves shift election administration away from neutral rule enforcement toward partisan loyalty, further corroding public trust.

4.f. Threats and Attrition Among Election Workers

Harassment and intimidation of election officials are weakening the electoral infrastructure. Trump's repeated false fraud claims have fueled a wave of harassment: election officials have received death threats, warnings of violence, and sustained intimidation, contributing to a climate of fear and resignations. The loss of institutional knowledge from qualified workers stepping down under threat leaves election systems less resilient and more vulnerable to disruption in future cycles.

4.g. Attacks on Vote Counting and Certification

Post-election processes are increasingly targeted for partisan advantage. Trump and allied Republicans have repeatedly attempted to delay, block, or overturn certification of results they oppose, most prominently in 2020 and again in state-level contests during 2022 and 2024.

Coordinated campaigns—often led or amplified by Trump himself—encourage distrust in vote counting regardless of evidence, normalizing suspicion of legitimate outcomes and fueling partisan efforts to subvert certification.

Trump has not only attacked methods of voting, such as mail-in ballots, but is also signaling he may reject unfavorable outcomes outright. His recent statements about “rigged” vote counting and calls to eliminate mail voting altogether lay the groundwork for preemptive contestation of 2026 results.

Additionally, Trump has openly stated “I’m not joking” about potentially serving a third term, hinting there are “methods” to circumvent constitutional term limits, such as having Vice President J.D. Vance run and then handing over power. While the 22nd Amendment bars any individual from being elected president more than twice, legal scholars widely reject loophole theories as implausible and contrary to the amendment’s purpose.

4.i. Overall Effects of Systemic Electoral Flaws

The U.S. electoral system increasingly tilts the playing field toward incumbents and partisan advantage. Structural biases such as winner-take-all rules and gerrymandering distort representation, while restrictive voting laws, partisan control of election administration, and intimidation of election officials weaken electoral integrity. Harassment of workers, threats to certification, and persistent disinformation have further eroded public trust, creating conditions where elections formally remain but function less as a genuine democratic safeguard.

5. UNDERMINING PUBLIC FAITH IN U.S. INSTITUTIONS

We assess that the Trump Administration has continued an assault on democratic institutions, including elections, the courts, and the IC portraying them as corrupt, partisan, or fundamentally rigged. By normalizing suspicion towards democratic institutions, the executive fosters a political environment where unfavorable outcomes can be rejected as illegitimate, and extraordinary measures can be justified in the name of restoring “fairness.” Limited to this purpose, even the press is framed not as a source of information but as another institution conspiring against the people, reinforcing the narrative that no neutral authority can be trusted.

5.a. Delegitimizing Elections and Voting Processes

The Administration has intensified efforts to cast doubt on the integrity of elections, alleging fraud and foreign manipulation without evidence. In [August 2025](#), Trump claimed that mail-in voting was a “scam” that allows the opposition to cheat and thus must be ended, alleging that Vladimir Putin told him this during their August 2025 meeting in Alaska to discuss Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine. Trump [backed](#) away from signing an EO demanding an end to mail-in voting but promised to pursue legislation that would ban mail-in ballots.

An October 2024 [survey](#) by the World Justice Project found that only 34% of Republicans and 67% of Democrats trusted election officials, and half of Republicans (46%) and over a quarter of Democrats (27%) said they would not accept election results as legitimate if the other party’s candidate won.

By asserting that unfavorable outcomes are fraudulent by definition, the Administration has laid the groundwork for both preemptive contestation of future results and punitive measures under the guise of “election security.” This not only undermines trust in election security but justifies restrictive voting measures that disproportionately affect political opponents.

5.b. Politicized Investigations and Retaliation Against Opponents

As also discussed above, the Administration has escalated its use of federal investigative and prosecutorial powers to punish perceived opponents, blurring the lines between law enforcement and political retribution and undermining faith in these processes. Trump vowed during his election campaign to seek retribution against his opponents.

In July, Trump’s DOJ threatened to open investigations into former intelligence officials he claims were responsible for the “Russia Hoax,” among them Brennan, Comey, and Clapper, accusing them of “treason” despite a lack of evidence of wrongdoing. Multiple investigations over several years—including a bipartisan Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) inquiry—found no evidence of such criminality. Even [a June CIA tradecraft review](#) released by Ratcliffe, which criticized some of the process for the 2016 ICA on Russian election interference, concluded that much of the ICA's tradecraft was robust and consistent with Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, “Analytic Standards,” the primary guiding document for evaluation of analytic products for the IC.

By September, these threats escalated into action. The DOJ secured a criminal indictment against Comey, proceeding over objections from career prosecutors and following Trump’s public [calls](#) to go after those who investigated him. Soon after, federal prosecutors also brought charges against New York Attorney General Letitia James, whom Trump had repeatedly targeted after she secured a civil fraud judgment against him. Earlier, in [August](#), the DOJ subpoenaed New York Attorney General Letitia James over the civil judgment she won against President Trump for fraud. Also in August, the Office of Special Counsel confirmed it had opened an investigation into Jack Smith’s prosecution of President Trump. President Trump and his allies have also implicitly threatened the nationality of certain potential political opponents. In July, Trump threatened to arrest New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani and [added](#) that “a lot of people are saying he’s here illegally.”

Together, these actions demonstrate an evolving use of state power not merely to defend the Administration but to actively intimidate and neutralize opposition actors through the machinery of justice.

[5.c. Delegitimization of Oversight and the Free Press](#)

The Administration has expanded its campaign to discredit institutions responsible for scrutiny—targeting not only the press, but also inspectors general and other oversight mechanisms. By portraying these bodies as partisan or hostile, the executive seeks to redefine both oversight and public truth-telling as forms of political persecution.

President Trump has repeatedly labeled mainstream media outlets as the enemy, dismissing factual reporting as “fake news.” This rhetoric goes beyond criticism and aims to erode the concept of neutral journalism. Reports critical of the Administration are routinely framed as deliberate sabotage, conditioning supporters to distrust all sources outside approved partisan channels. This assault on the press operates in parallel with efforts to delegitimize non-media oversight institutions. Trump and senior officials have depicted inspectors general, congressional investigations, and even career law enforcement officials as “Deep State” actors engaged in conspiracies against the Administration. Investigations, subpoenas, or adverse findings are recast not as lawful inquiry but as institutional betrayal. Collectively, when the press, investigators, and

other oversight bodies are depicted as illegitimate, the executive positions itself as the only credible source of truth, eroding the foundation of democratic accountability.

5.d. Exploiting Conspiracy Narratives to Discredit Institutions

The Administration and its allies have increasingly relied on conspiracy narratives that discredit core democratic institutions. These claims are used to justify opposition to the legitimacy of elections, courts, Congress, and federal agencies. For example, administrative-aligned figures and media surrogates have invoked foreign adversaries as hidden manipulators of U.S. political outcomes. Prominent figures within the Administration and allied media amplified [claims](#) that Dominion voting systems were designed for Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez and that ballots were secretly counted overseas—narratives rejected in court proceedings and independent audits. As discussed above, the Administration has also targeted the legitimacy of federal investigations themselves. Administration figures frequently dismissed inquiries into Russian election interference, for example, as a fabricated “Russia Hoax,” alleging that prosecutors and intelligence officials acted in concert against the presidency. In this framing, institutional oversight is not an exercise of constitutional authority but evidence of internal betrayal—reinforcing the belief that core democratic institutions are controlled by hostile forces rather than governed by law.

Similarly, domestic political opponents—particularly Democratic leaders—are increasingly depicted not as rivals within a constitutional system, but as agents of internal extremism. Senior officials and aligned media figures have described the Democratic Party itself as a “[domestic extremist organization](#),” echoing language used in NSPM-7, which frames ideological opposition as a security threat. These claims are often coupled with accusations that mainstream political actors support violent groups or are aligned with Antifa, which the Administration has labeled a domestic terrorist organization.

These narratives serve a deliberate strategic purpose: by casting institutions as infiltrated or corrupt, the Administration preemptively delegitimizes any adverse decisions or investigative findings. Judicial rulings, congressional inquiries, and intelligence assessments are discredited not on substantive grounds but as products of enemies acting against the executive’s interests. The Administration’s assertion that a “Deep State” controls these institutions, for example, reframes lawful oversight as an existential threat.

5.e. Noncompliance with Institutional Authority

Rather than contesting outcomes on legal or procedural grounds, the Administration increasingly portrays institutional decisions—whether from courts or investigations—as products of sabotage or internal betrayal. For example, the Administration has sought not only to dispute findings from official investigations, such as the bipartisan congressional [committee](#) on the January 6 attack, but to [replace](#) them with parallel inquiries designed to reframe the event itself. This strategy goes beyond disagreement over interpretation; it aims to discredit the institutional authority to investigate at all. By presenting lawful oversight as illegitimate and positioning only

loyal channels as truth-bearing, the Administration encourages the public to reject any finding not aligned with executive narratives.

5.f. Overall Effects of Undermining Faith In Public Institutions

The cumulative effect of these efforts—to delegitimize elections, weaponize investigations, discredit oversight institutions and the press, promote conspiracy narratives, and selectively discredit institutional authority—is a profound erosion of public confidence in the very institutions designed to mediate political conflict or provide unbiased assessment or advice.

Public opinion data reflects this trend. A notable [minority](#) of Americans express openness to a strong leader who “breaks rules” or to unconstrained executive power, underscoring risks of democratic norm erosion. At the same time, public opinion shows significant resistance to key elements of the executive agenda—[low](#) approval on several initiatives and intense negative partisanship—creating friction.

As institutional legitimacy deteriorates, loyalty to individual leaders—not constitutional norms—emerges as the basis for political authority. In this environment, constitutional checks risk becoming symbolic rather than functional, enabling further executive consolidation under the guise of defending the republic from illegitimate institutions.

6. ASSAULT ON PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

We judge that the Administration’s efforts to control information, suppress expertise, and constrain civil society constitute a parallel front in democratic backsliding—distinct from the delegitimization of institutions, yet reinforcing it. Rather than merely attacking existing institutions, these actions seek to redefine what is knowable and who is permitted to speak with authority. Through political influence over academia, science, media, and non-governmental organizations, the Administration is eroding the independent sources of knowledge that enable democratic accountability.

By promoting ideologically aligned narratives and casting doubt on scientific and journalistic standards, the Administration shifts the public sphere away from evidence-based debate. Independent sources of knowledge—essential for accountability—are redefined as political or hostile. In this environment, institutional dissent is more easily framed as disloyalty, narrowing democratic discourse and weakening societal resilience to authoritarian governance..

6.a. Academic Freedom

The Trump Administration’s use of federal power through executive orders, funding conditions, and direct interventions has reshaped academic freedom in the United States, exerting unprecedented pressure on colleges and universities to conform to its ideological agenda.

In January 2025, Trump issued an [EO](#) that prohibited diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) preferences in admissions, hiring, and campus programming at federally funded institutions. In June 2025, the White House [announced](#) a proclamation suspending entry for foreign nationals

seeking to enroll at or participate in exchange programs at Harvard, citing alleged national security and compliance issues. In August 2025, President Trump issued a [memorandum](#) requiring all colleges receiving federal funds to publicly disclose expanded admissions data, including applicant test scores, demographic details, and selection criteria, described as a transparency and anti-discrimination initiative.

Scholars studying politically sensitive issues, such as immigration, gender, or the Middle East, face harassment and self-censorship. The US, historically a "pioneer in free speech and academic freedom," is now experiencing a "chilling effect" on its scholarly community, with some international scholars expressing concerns about attending conferences in the U.S. due to fears of detainment and deportation. A growing number of American scholars—particularly in politically targeted disciplines—have resigned their positions or relocated abroad in response to attacks on the scholarly community.

The Administration's recently announced [Compact](#) for Academic Excellence in Higher Education also illustrates how federal power is being applied to restructure university governance. By conditioning access to loans, research funding, visas, and even tax benefits on adherence to specific criteria, the compact requires admissions and hiring to be based only on "objective" measures, prohibits consideration of race or gender, mandates ideological "balance" in teaching, and imposes neutrality standards that affect institutional speech. It empowers the DOJ to enforce compliance, including loss of funds or repayment demands for institutions deemed noncompliant. These measures exceed traditional mechanisms and represent a significant expansion over academic autonomy and institutional governance.

The overall effect of these measures transforms American higher education from an arena of independent inquiry into one constrained by political conformity, as partisan laws, federal mandates, and fear-driven self-censorship erode academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

[6.b. Politicization of Science and Public Health](#)

The Administration has extended political control over scientific institutions and public health policy, undermining trust in evidence-based governance. Senior health and research officials have been removed or replaced for perceived ideological misalignment rather than performance.

The Supreme Court has [allowed](#) the Trump Administration to make significant cuts in research grants from the National Institutes of Health that are allegedly related to diversity efforts. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Director, Susan Monarez, was [removed](#) in August 2025 after less than one month on the job for not being "aligned with" Trump's agenda. Several top officials at the agency also resigned in protest. Trump's Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who accused [17 members](#) of a key advisory committee of financial conflicts of interest, has removed all of them and announced plans to appoint new members. According to medical organizations and news reports, several of the announced replacements

have publicly voiced skepticism about vaccine policy or vaccine safety, drawing concern from public health experts.

Compounding these institutional purges, senior administration officials—including Trump—have publicly promoted medical claims that fall outside established scientific consensus, such as links between Tylenol use in pregnancy and autism or calls to split up the MMR vaccine schedule. The elevation of such views from the highest levels of government blurs the boundary between evidence-based public health policy and personal belief, further eroding public trust in scientific institutions.

By reshaping scientific leadership while elevating non-consensus health claims, the Administration is recasting public health policy as an arena of ideological alignment rather than empirical evaluation. This erosion of scientific authority weakens public trust in institutions responsible for health and safety, leaving citizens uncertain about whom to believe in future crises.

6.c. Free Press Under Siege

As also discussed above, the free press is under significant attack. The current administration has sought to shutter media outlets by rescinding public broadcasting funding, pressured the FCC to revoke licenses for media outlets Trump perceives to be hostile toward him and has openly attacked "fake news" media. Nonpartisan outlets have been excluded from White House briefings, while partisan media figures aligned with Administration narratives have been granted privileged access. In September and October 2025, the [Pentagon](#)—under Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth—introduced new press rules requiring credentialed reporters to sign nondisclosure agreements, prohibiting the publication of any information not formally authorized for release, even if unclassified. The policy grants the Department broad authority to revoke press credentials, restrict newsroom access, and relocate outlets that refuse to comply. Major news organizations, press-freedom advocates, and the Pentagon Press Association have denounced the rules as an unprecedented attempt to stifle independent reporting and intimidate both journalists and military personnel.

Administration officials and allied commentators increasingly characterize critical reporting not merely as biased, but as fundamentally illegitimate. Journalists investigating corruption, public health policy, or executive conduct have faced targeted harassment, public doxxing, or accusations of participating in political conspiracies. This environment has coincided with a [rise](#) in press freedom violations, including arrests and physical intimidation of reporters covering protests and federal enforcement operations.

The result is a narrowing of the space in which factual reporting can operate without retaliation. In a democracy, the press serves as an external check; under this paradigm, it is redefined as an internal threat—stripped of its role as an independent chronicle and recast as an adversary to be controlled or replaced.

6.d Suppression of Civil Society and Dissent and the Surveillance and Harassment of NGOs and Activists

The Administration has increasingly targeted civil society organizations, advocacy groups, and dissenting voices. NSPM-7 appears to authorize broad investigations into the “entities, organizations, and funding sources” behind alleged political violence. What were once routine mechanisms of advocacy—public protest, litigation, and investigative reporting—are now cast as forms of subversion or extremism.

Advocacy groups working on voting rights, immigration, or human rights report heightened [scrutiny](#), including threats of audits, investigations, and revoked [tax status](#). Leaders of prominent NGOs, for example, have faced [accusations](#) of aiding “domestic terrorism,” blurring the line between lawful dissent and national security threats.

The psychological impact is substantial. Rather than confronting direct prohibition, many organizations self-censor or withdraw from contested issues to avoid investigative retaliation.

By elevating dissent to the category of suspicion, the Administration shifts civic participation from a democratic right to a potential liability. The result is a civic environment defined less by pluralism than by precaution, where silence becomes the safer course.

6.e. Overall Effects of Assault on Public Knowledge and Civil Society

The cumulative effect of these efforts is the systematic erosion of the public sphere as a site of independent thought, informed debate, and civic resistance. By constraining academic freedom, politicizing science, weakening independent media, and subjecting civil society to surveillance and intimidation, the Administration is replacing evidence-based discourse with loyalty-based narratives.

In this environment, expertise is recast as bias, dissent as extremism, and advocacy as subversion. Competing sources of authority—universities, research institutions, NGOs, and the press—are delegitimized or subordinated to political orthodoxy. Foreign adversaries can exploit these fractures by amplifying disinformation that accelerates mistrust and deepens polarization.

What emerges is not merely public cynicism but epistemic fragmentation: a society in which shared facts are contested, and truth itself becomes a partisan instrument. This transformation weakens the democratic capacity to hold power accountable, as citizens are left with competing realities rather than common ground.

Without credible institutions of knowledge and civic mediation, resistance to executive overreach becomes increasingly isolated, and public consent becomes more vulnerable to manipulation. The integrity of democracy depends not only on electoral procedures, but on a society capable of distinguishing evidence from allegiance—an ability now under sustained assault.

7. FACTORS AND MEASUREMENTS OF AUTOCRATICIZATION

The trend towards autocracy in the U.S. is not merely anecdotal but is supported by various measurements and expert assessments:

Democratic Indices and Expert Surveys: Watchdog agencies and scholars concur in detecting "worrying signs of a global democratic retreat."

- **Freedom House** reports that global freedom [declined](#) for the 19th straight year in 2024 and noted that the U.S. has experienced democratic [erosion](#).
- **The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index** [recorded](#) another global decline in 2024, with the average score falling to its lowest level since 2006.
- **The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project** [indicates](#) that for the first time in over 20 years, the world features more autocracies (91) than democracies (88) as of 2024, with the U.S. showing a decline in its liberal democracy index.
- **The Authoritarian Warning Survey** uses a "Threat Index" (from 1 to 5, where 5 is total dictatorship) and has rated the U.S. at a "Severe Threat" level of [3.3 out of 5](#), based on expert ratings across six key metrics.
- **Bright Line Watch** [surveys](#) political science experts, who in recent years have shown a significant drop (30 percentage points or more) in their ratings of the U.S. for principles such as government agencies not punishing political opponents, the press operating without interference, legislative checks on executive authority, and freedom of law enforcement investigations from political influence.

Public Opinion and Value Shifts:

- [Surveys](#) indicate a significant percentage of Americans are "open to a more authoritarian approach." A worrying **41% of Americans** think "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections" is a "very good or fairly good system." Among Trump's base, [55%](#) of those whose allegiance is primarily to Trump say, "Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress" is a good way of governing.
- [Sixteen](#) percent of Americans in 2024 agreed that "Patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country," with this figure rising to 27% among Republicans.
- Public approval of the Supreme Court has fallen to historically low levels, with 7 in 10 Americans [believing](#) the court places ideology over impartiality.

Examples of Institutional Changes and Practices:

- **Restrictions on Rights and Freedoms:** Attempts to curtail birthright citizenship, Executive Order criminalizing flag desecration, and the increased scrutiny of academia all indicate efforts to narrow individual liberties and constitutional protections.

- **Purging and Packing:** The firing of more than a dozen Department of Justice prosecutors who worked on cases against President Trump, the dismissal of over 17 Inspectors General, and efforts to replace career bureaucrats with loyalists are direct institutional assaults.
- **Electoral Manipulation:** The U.S. electoral system's features, like winner-take-all and partisan gerrymandering, are seen as structurally favoring extremism and manufacturing majorities.
- **Legislative Weakness:** Congress's ongoing delegation of lawmaking power to agencies and instances of legislative obstruction contribute to the weakening of checks and balances.
- **Judicial Support for “Unitary Executive” Undermining Government Expertise:** In May, the Supreme Court—on partisan lines—ruled that the President may remove the heads of independent agencies such as the Merit Systems Protection Board and the National Labor Relations Board without cause. The decision blurred the line between independent and executive agencies while offering no standard for courts to apply, prompting Justice Kagan’s dissent that it dismantled “a significant feature of American governance: bipartisan administrative bodies carrying out expertise-based functions with a measure of independence from presidential control.” This ruling followed the Court’s landmark decision expanding presidential immunity, further shielding the executive from legal and institutional checks. Several related cases now moving through lower courts—addressing presidential authority over personnel, agency budgets, and internal discipline—could, depending on their outcome, consolidate near-total executive control and erode the nonpartisan guardrails of the civil service.

8. OUTLOOK

The United States is indeed becoming more autocratic, exhibiting clear signs of democratic backsliding rather than a direct transition to a traditional dictatorship. The Executive Branch under the Trump Administration is consolidating power, often cloaked in legality, by politicizing and weaponizing government agencies, systematically undermining judicial independence through ideological appointments and rhetorical attacks, and co-opting the legislature, thereby enabling executive overreach.

The erosion of public trust, attacks on academic freedom and the free press, and a growing public tolerance for authoritarian tactics contribute to this slide.

The collective evidence from various democratic indices, expert analyses, and shifts in public opinion indicates a systemic dismantling of the checks and balances designed to safeguard American democracy, pushing the nation towards a "competitive authoritarian" future where the democratic playing field is increasingly tilted in favor of the incumbent. Recognizing this multifaceted attack and actively resisting the erosion of these foundational principles is crucial to defending and restoring liberal democracy in the US.

Annex A

Readers Guide

This assessment is written in the style of a U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) “finished intelligence” product. Because many readers may be new to such documents, this guide provides a short orientation. It also explains how this analysis differs from traditional U.S. intelligence reporting.

How to Read This Assessment

- Start with the key judgments for the bottom line.
- Check the confidence levels to weigh the strength of the evidence.
- Review the scope note to understand the limits of coverage.
- Use the discussion for detail and context.
- Consult the outlook for an informed view of future trends.

What Is “Finished Intelligence”?

Definition: Finished intelligence is analysis that integrates raw information, applies structured analytic methods, and offers judgments about current or future developments of importance to decision-makers.

Purpose: Finished intelligence does not advocate policy choices. Instead, it provides an objective framework for understanding complex problems and anticipating risks.

How This Assessment Differs from Traditional IC Products

Domestic Focus: U.S. intelligence agencies traditionally direct their analysis outward, toward foreign states, threats, and actors. This assessment applies the same analytic tradecraft inward, examining democratic institutions within the United States.

No Classified Information: This document draws solely on open-source information—media reports, public statements, academic studies, and independent watchdog analyses. It does not contain, and is not informed by, classified intelligence reporting.

Authorship: This assessment was prepared by a team of former analysts who previously served in many analytic components of the U.S. Intelligence Community. Their collective experience provides a professional foundation, but the judgments expressed here are made in a private capacity and do not represent the U.S. Government. No one who drafted or coordinated on this document did so at the direction, request, or suggestion of the U.S. government or anyone working for or contracted by the U.S. government, or at the direction, request, or suggestion of any U.S. political party or anyone working for or contracted by a U.S. political party.

Who Are “Analysts”?

In the IC, analysts are professionals trained to collect, evaluate, and interpret information. Their work follows established analytic standards (such as IC Directive 203) to ensure objectivity, accuracy, and transparency of sourcing.

Analysts typically specialize in a geographic region or functional topic and are responsible for integrating disparate sources of information into coherent, policy-relevant judgments.

Key Elements in IC Analytic Products

Scope Note

A short section that defines what the assessment covers—and what it does not. It frames the analytic “lane.”

Key Judgments

The main takeaways of the assessment—concise statements of what the analysts judge to be true or most likely, *given available evidence*.

Confidence Levels

Intelligence assessments express the strength of evidence using confidence levels:

- High confidence – strong evidence and agreement.
- Moderate confidence – some evidence and/or disagreement among sources; plausible but not certain.
- Low confidence – limited or poor-quality evidence; significant information gaps.

Discussion or Analysis Section

The body of the assessment is where evidence is reviewed, arguments are tested, and alternative explanations are considered.

Outlook

A forward-looking section assessing likely trajectories and implications.

Suggested Outside Reading

[Office of the Director of National Intelligence, A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis](#) (2009)

[Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards](#) (2024)

[Richards J. Heuer, The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis](#) (1999)