

Fealty Over Freedom: The Erosion of Democratic Norms Under Donald Trump

Nekorax Vimpe

© 2024 Nekorax Vimpe. Licensed under CC BY 4.0

Fealty Over Freedom: The Erosion of Democratic Norms Under Donald Trump

An Analytical Perspective by Nekorax Vimpe

“Democracies often erode gradually rather than collapsing overnight.”

— Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (2018)

As Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, democratic backsliding rarely appears in the form of overt coups. Instead, it begins with subtle shifts in institutional behavior that gradually undermine the checks and balances critical to a healthy democracy. In the United States under President Donald Trump, these shifts have included repeated demands for personal loyalty—marking a departure from the long-established principle that government officials serve the Constitution, the rule of law, and public interest rather than a single leader’s directives. High-ranking officials who refused to comply with Trump’s personal expectations often faced dismissal or marginalization, underscoring Masha Gessen’s warning that unwavering fealty can supplant expertise and ethics (*Surviving Autocracy*, 2020).

This dynamic, in which loyalty to the leader supersedes loyalty to institutions, forms the core concern of Levitsky and Ziblatt’s *How Democracies Die* (2018). Even well-established democracies such as the United States risk corrosive backsliding when their norms—like institutional independence, rule of law, and respect for factual discourse—come under persistent attack.

1. Historical Precedents and Parallels

U.S.-Specific Episodes

- **Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare (1950s):** McCarthy catalyzed a culture of loyalty tests under the guise of rooting out communist

sympathizers. Congressional hearings and a backlash from the press ultimately curtailed his influence, illustrating that institutional guardrails can halt authoritarian tendencies if they are deployed effectively.

- **Nixon and Watergate (1970s):** President Nixon’s loyalty-driven administration led to the Watergate cover-up, but bipartisan action in Congress—coupled with a free press—forced his resignation. This episode exemplifies how institutions can rally in defense of democratic norms when sufficiently motivated.
- **FDR’s Attempt to Pack the Supreme Court (1937):** Although not motivated by personal loyalty in the same sense, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s bid to expand the Supreme Court threatened judicial independence. Public and legislative backlash reminded Americans that a balance of powers is central to protecting democratic frameworks.

International Comparisons

Beyond the United States, interwar Europe demonstrated how democracies can collapse under the weight of incremental norm violations. In contemporary contexts, nations like Hungary under Viktor Orbán show how executives can consolidate power by weakening courts, targeting independent media, and sidelining critical voices. These patterns resonate with Levitsky and Ziblatt’s thesis that democracies die not from sudden coups but from the gradual chipping away of institutional defenses.

2. Expertise Versus Personal Judgment

Trump’s self-professed expertise on everything from economics to climate science contrasts starkly with the technocratic approach fundamental to informed governance. As Yascha Mounk argues in *The People vs. Democracy* (2018), democracies thrive when leaders balance popular demands with specialist insights. By sidelining career diplomats, questioning scientific consensus, and overriding health experts, the administration undercut the pluralistic model that has historically propelled American innovation and policy consistency.

“Ignoring scientific consensus in favor of personal judgment undermines the pluralistic framework that has long driven U.S. innovation and policy consistency.”

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the consequences of prioritizing personal judgment or political messaging over data-driven strategies. Conflicting statements from the White House and agencies like the CDC caused public confusion and eroded trust in government institutions—damaging both America’s global standing and its domestic ability to manage the crisis effectively.

3. The Role of a Free Press and Social Media

Attacks on the Press

One critical safeguard against autocratic drift is a free and independent press. Freedom House’s annual *Freedom in the World* reports emphasize that credible media outlets help inform the public, scrutinize governmental claims, and hold leaders accountable. Trump’s repeated labeling of mainstream outlets as “fake news” and calling journalists “enemies of the people” (Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy*, 2020) directly undermined this safeguard. Such rhetoric contributes to a fragmented body politic wherein factual reporting must compete with disinformation.

Social Media Amplification

Social media platforms like Twitter accelerated this dynamic, enabling Trump to broadcast unfiltered messages to millions, often bypassing traditional media checks. Timothy Snyder, in *On Tyranny* (2017), warns that when leaders blur reality and sow doubt about credible sources, they erode the shared baseline of facts necessary for democratic debate. Algorithms that amplify sensational or conspiratorial content further complicate the public’s capacity to distinguish truth from propaganda.

4. International Relations and the Diminished Voice for Democracy

Historically, the United States balanced strategic interests with a commitment to promoting democratic values and human rights (Ikenberry, *After Victory*, 2001). Under Trump, however, praise for authoritarian figures—such as Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and certain Saudi leaders—signaled a departure from values America once championed. Author Anne Applebaum notes in *Twilight of Democracy* (2020) that when prominent democracies fail to uphold their foundational ideals, illiberal regimes are emboldened, weakening global alliances and hindering cooperative solutions to major challenges like climate change and pandemics.

Some point to economic successes in authoritarian countries, including Singapore and China (Rachman, *Easternization*, 2017), to argue that a strongman model can deliver prosperity. However, these regimes often achieve growth at the cost of personal freedoms and transparent governance. By contrast, the U.S. has relied on pluralism, open debate, and dissent—attributes crucial for resilience and long-term adaptability.

5. Domestically: Guardrails Under Pressure

Fears of Military Involvement

Though there is no direct evidence Trump intended to use the military against American citizens, Timothy Snyder (2017) stresses that authoritarian-leaning leaders often test the waters with smaller norm violations. If these pass without pushback, they may escalate. While the U.S. Constitution and federal structures remain robust, they are only as strong as the officials, journalists, and citizens who actively defend them (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Institutional Checks

Critics maintain that American institutions—courts, a federalized government, and a tradition of civil liberties—are too entrenched to allow for widespread executive abuse. However, each unpunished erosion of norms—be it firing a dissenting official or denigrating expert opinion—raises the probability of future violations. When congressional oversight is hamstrung by partisan loyalty, and judicial appointments skew toward executive deference, the resilience of these guardrails can wane.

6. Political Culture and Authoritarian Followership

Trump’s populist appeal resonates with voters seeking a strong leader who can cut through “elitist” institutions. Mounk (2018) details how populism exploits frustrations with perceived political gridlock, while John Dean and Bob Altemeyer’s *Authoritarian Nightmare* (2020) explores the psychological traits—such as obedience to authority and fear of outsiders—that predispose certain individuals to follow strongman figures. When these traits merge with partisan echo chambers, it becomes challenging for factual debates or nuanced policy discussions to gain traction.

Authoritarian followership thrives on fear, loyalty, and a desire for quick, decisive action—traits that can undermine the pluralistic debate at the heart of a functioning democracy.

Conclusion: Paths to Reaffirm Democratic Norms

In the end, the path forward depends on revitalizing the institutions and traditions that have upheld America’s democratic character. By:

1. **Re-Centering Policy on Evidence:** Upholding expert counsel in public health, climate science, and foreign policy ensures decisions are data-driven.

2. **Strengthening a Free Press:** Countering “fake news” narratives with robust investigative journalism and public education on media literacy helps restore factual debate.
3. **Re-Engaging with Allies on Shared Values:** Supporting democratic norms internationally sends a clear message to illiberal regimes and encourages emerging democracies.
4. **Fortifying Institutional Checks:** Protecting whistleblowers, preserving the judiciary’s independence, and reinforcing legislative oversight all safeguard accountability.
5. **Implementing Electoral and Structural Reforms:** Addressing gerrymandering, campaign finance, and adopting innovations like ranked-choice voting can dilute hyper-partisanship and lessen the appeal of strongman rhetoric.

If these measures are ignored, the United States risks following the grim trajectory outlined in *How Democracies Die*—sliding from a flawed but functional democracy into a system where truth, accountability, and liberty yield to the dictates of one unquestioned leader.

About the Author



Photo of Nekorax Vimpe

Nekorax Vimpe is a writer and commentator on socio-political issues and technological trends, offering a perspective shaped by a commitment to open discourse, democratic values, and evidence-based policy. For more information, visit nekoraxvimpe.com.

References

1. Applebaum, A. (2020). *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. New York: Doubleday.

2. Dean, J., & Altemeyer, B. (2020). *Authoritarian Nightmare: Trump and His Followers*. New York: Melville House.
 3. Freedom House. (n.d.). *Freedom in the World Reports*. Retrieved from freedomhouse.org
 4. Gessen, M. (2020). *Surviving Autocracy*. New York: Riverhead Books.
 5. Ikenberry, G. J. (2001). *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
 6. Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
 7. Mounk, Y. (2018). *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
 8. Rachman, G. (2017). *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond*. New York: Other Press.
 9. Snyder, T. (2017). *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
-