

THE RED FLAGS OF AUTHORITARIANISM

A Guide on What People & the Press Can Do to Fight for Freedom

The Trump administration's efforts to weaponize executive power, remove democratic checks and balances, silence critics and weaken freedom are dangerous signs of U.S. democratic retreat. This is part of a global trend: Modern democratic backsliding looks less like violent coups and more like singular leaders consolidating power away from institutions — like election officials, legislatures, courts, the media and tech companies. Creeping authoritarianism can be hard to spot. This guide breaks down the red flags of authoritarianism and what we can do to push back:

SUBVERTING REALITY

In a healthy democracy, diversity of perspectives is welcome. Conversely, authoritarian gaslighting subverts reality and quashes dissenting views to favor those who seek to consolidate executive power. Authoritarians attack and twist the truth, contorting the facts to fit specific parameters of “acceptable” information. Many people eventually believe these false narratives are reality, as repeated exposure to lies makes it harder and harder to debunk them.

Examples: Donald Trump has long rejected facts he doesn't like, telling more than 30,000 lies during his first term. Chief among these falsehoods is the claim that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him through voter fraud. Influential global figures, like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, have failed to question this and other lies. They have rejected journalistic fact checking as a standard practice on their social-media platforms and have allowed prominent political figures to spread lies unchecked without experiencing any of the vetting and moderation that everyday users of these networks experience.

CHILLING THE PRESS

The Fourth Estate, imperfect as it has been over the centuries, is an essential bulwark against fascism and can help expose government misconduct while probing issues that matter to the public. Authoritarians mount attacks and censor those they deem critical of their power grabs. They bully journalists, interfere with news' outlets editorial decisions, and remove reporters they dislike from official forums while giving passes to regime-friendly propagandists.

Examples: Donald Trump has called the media “the enemy of the people” and has a history of removing journalists from press briefings when he dislikes their coverage or questions. President Trump has evicted well-established media outlets like the AP, HuffPost and Reuters from accessing White House meetings as part of a growing effort to restrict news outlets that refuse to parrot his propaganda. He is also suing mainstream broadcast networks like ABC, CBS and NBC for billions over their coverage and for covering his political opponents; and he has directed his FCC chairman to investigate these broadcasters and revoke their licenses based on their editorial decisions.

SHUTTING DOWN FREE SPEECH & DISSENT

In healthy democracies, the people are free to raise their voices to protest and engage in other forms of collective action without fear of government retribution. Democracies protect these basic rights as essential while authoritarian powers attempt to override the judiciary, the legislature and other checks on executive power. They do so to minimize freedom of expression, particularly through threats, dehumanizing rhetoric or criminal sanctions against dissenting voices and impacted communities.

Examples: Statehouses across the United States are witnessing a rising tide of legislative proposals to criminalize protected speech — like protests — and limit access to ideas, books and even history. Since 2017, the nation has seen more than 3,000 legislative proposals to criminalize free expression. These largely unconstitutional actions also include surveillance of groups and retaliation against those who disagree with people in power — evidenced by Trump advancing executive orders and using rhetoric to shun ideas and history about progress while leveraging the Department of Justice to cut off civil-rights investigations. Such are the tactics authoritarians use to dehumanize entire groups of people, restrict their rights and delegitimize their very existence.

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CAPTURE OF INSTITUTIONS & COLLUSION BY THE CORPORATE SECTOR

Authoritarians gain power by weaponizing the institutions around them, like federal agencies, the courts and the military. They also gain power when nongovernmental sectors acquiesce without pressure. Corporate actors often seek to shield themselves from liability or expand their wealth and influence by aligning with those in power. In extreme cases — as with Elon Musk — we see a merger of corporate and government power with the aim of further enriching and empowering the few.

Examples: To weaponize institutions, leaders like Trump replace civil servants with loyalists, regardless of their qualifications. President Trump tapped Project 2025 architect and author Russell Vought to head the Office of Management and Budget, and fired top military officials and Pentagon leaders, replacing them with MAGA pundits. Meanwhile, other sectors often fall in line quickly with authoritarian rhetoric. Target, for example, discontinued its own DEI policies following Trump's executive order on diversity, equity and inclusion. Social-media companies including Meta, TikTok, X and YouTube have abandoned safety measures and fact-checking policies to court conservative political favor. Corporate media companies like *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* have even refused to run editorials or other content that would cast doubt and disfavor on Trump.



WAYS TO FIGHT BACK



It may feel like people have no ability to fight back, but we're not powerless against these authoritarian power grabs. If we were powerless, authoritarian forces would not try so ardently to quash our voices.

Communities: Stay vocal about the threats facing our democracy. Learn about your [right to protest](#) and get tips from our guide on how to protest safely and protect your digital security. Call your state and federal representatives, who should convey your interests with their votes at the Capitol. Connect with your community to help others make sense of this urgent moment for our democracy.

Media: Don't back down. Attacks on media come first because of the media's power to help people understand what is happening. Do not obey in advance out of fear of retribution. Pursue diverse storytelling and news coverage; robustly cover and identify threats to democracy for all audiences. Outlets should not penalize journalists trying to hold leaders to account and should instead welcome critical news coverage and uphold their function as a watchdog for democracy.

Politicians: Vote your conscience. Speak like democracy depends on it, because it does. Name and reject political power grabs and the narrowing of acceptable viewpoints in the public sphere. Connect with constituents and protect the most vulnerable communities — especially critics and dissidents — from powerful figures' attacks.

Brands: Be on the right side of history. Put your money where your values are; stand up for human rights; safeguard equity and employee rights in your policies; fight for expression and safety in your corporate social-media practices; and connect with consumers.

Moguls and billionaires: Publicly reject encroaching authoritarian takeover in the private sector, full stop. Leverage your access and dollars to protect vulnerable communities and those fighting on behalf of these groups, including nonprofits and local media.