



PROJECT MUSE®

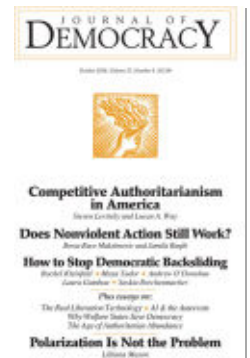
Competitive Authoritarianism In America

Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way

Journal of Democracy, Volume 37, Number 4, October 2026, pp. 5-25
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a1001893>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/1001893>

COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM IN AMERICA

Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way

Steven Levitsky is David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies and professor of government at Harvard University. Lucan A. Way is Distinguished Professor of Democracy at the University of Toronto. Their collaborations include “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism” (2002) and “The New Competitive Authoritarianism” (2020), both published in the Journal of Democracy, and Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (2010).

When we began writing about competitive authoritarianism a quarter-century ago, we never imagined applying the concept to the United States. Our initial study of 35 post–Cold War competitive authoritarian regimes centered overwhelmingly on postcommunist and lower- and middle-income countries with weak states and weak civil societies. But in the early twenty-first century, a set of “new” competitive authoritarian regimes emerged in countries with more established democratic institutions, such as Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey, and Venezuela.¹ The United States joined that group during Donald Trump’s second presidency, which began in January 2025. The U.S. slide into competitive authoritarianism was modest and reversible—but it was real.

Competitive authoritarianism is a regime in which parties compete in meaningful elections but incumbents systematically abuse state institutions to tilt the political playing field against their opponents.² Unlike traditional dictatorships, opposition parties genuinely compete for power. Parties are legal and operate above ground, and they view elections as the principal route to power. Elections are often highly competitive affairs in which incumbents are forced to sweat. Occasionally, incumbents lose—as they did in Malaysia in 2018, Poland in 2023, Botswana in 2024, and Hungary in 2026.

But democracy is more than just elections; it requires protection of civil liberties and fair competition.³ Competitive authoritarian regimes differ from democracies in that the competition is *unfair*. Incumbents

weaponize state institutions and deploy them in ways that weaken or seriously disadvantage their opponents. In Peru under Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

Democracy is more than just elections; it requires protection of civil liberties and fair competition.

Competitive authoritarian regimes differ from democracies in that the competition is unfair.

Hungary under Viktor Orbán, and El Salvador under Nayib Bukele, governments purged judicial, law-enforcement, intelligence, tax, election-administration, and other state institutions and packed them with loyalists. These governments then deployed those institutions systematically against rivals, independent media, and civil society, tilting the playing field against the opposition.

Elections in competitive authoritarian regimes are marked by varying

degrees of unfairness. Incumbents may gerrymander election boundaries nationwide to disadvantage their opponents, restrict opposition parties' ability to raise money and campaign on equal footing, and pack the election administration with loyalists. Packed electoral authorities may then turn a blind eye to incumbent abuse of state resources, acts of voter intimidation, and even fraud.

Weaponization and abuse extend beyond the electoral arena. Incumbents in competitive authoritarian regimes deploy law-enforcement, tax, and regulatory authorities to selectively punish critics. Opponents of the government are investigated and prosecuted, often for petty infractions; businesspeople who finance opposition parties or own independent media outlets are targeted for tax or fraud investigations; independent media are hit with government lawsuits and selective regulatory enforcement; intelligence agencies are used to spy on opposition; and police and other security agents harass opposition activists and repress opposition protest.

When incumbents control the courts, as in Chávez's Venezuela and contemporary Turkey, targeted investigations and prosecutions may land critics in prison and governments may win damaging lawsuits against independent media. But even when courts remain independent, government investigations, prosecution, and lawsuits constitute powerful forms of harassment. Targets must devote time, energy, and resources to defending themselves; their professional careers are often disrupted, and they and their families suffer considerable stress.

Government abuse occurs, on occasion, in democracies; but such incidents are isolated and usually trigger serious efforts to hold those responsible accountable. In competitive authoritarian regimes, incumbent abuse is more widespread and far less likely to be punished.

Weaponized states are also a powerful tool for cooptation. In most

competitive authoritarian regimes, governments use policy and regulatory instruments to reward politically friendly individuals, firms, and organizations—and to punish critics. Business leaders and media owners have much at stake in decisions regarding regulatory enforcement, mergers and acquisitions, and the granting of government contracts, concessions, licenses, and permits. When governments politicize these decisions, making it clear that allies will receive favorable treatment, it creates powerful incentives for CEOs to shift their loyalties or, at minimum, retreat to the political sidelines. This often means abandoning support for opposition groups and directing the media outlets they control to alter their editorial lines or engage in self-censorship.

Finally, weaponized states can serve as a shield, protecting government officials and allies who engage in criminal or antidemocratic behavior. For example, packed courts and public prosecutor's offices may turn a blind eye to acts of political violence or intimidation against opposition politicians and activists, journalists, or protesters. They also provide a layer of immunity to local officials who engage in election manipulation or fraud.

The deployment of state institutions to weaken rivals and coerce business, media, and civil society tilts the playing field against the opposition. When much of the private sector is threatened or coopted by the government, opposition groups have a harder time gaining access to finance and the media. When the referees—judges, public prosecutors, election officials—work for the incumbent, opposition parties cannot compete fairly. Competition persists, but it is undermined.

Competitive authoritarian regimes vary in the nature and extent of government abuse, as well as in the degree to which abuse subverts competition. In some cases, such as early twenty-first century Botswana, Poland, and Hungary, governments use politicized states to tilt the playing field but engage in little outright repression or election fraud. In other cases, such as Zimbabwe in the early 2000s, incumbents have engaged in massive election fraud and large-scale harassment, detention, and even killing of regime opponents. So just as there are both borderline democracies (Peru) and high-quality democracies (Finland) and harder autocracies (North Korea) and softer autocracies (Morocco), competitive authoritarian regimes range from highly competitive near-democracies (Poland in 2015–23) to barely competitive near-dictatorships (late twentieth-century Zimbabwe).

The universe of competitive authoritarian regimes has changed somewhat over the course of the twenty-first century. Most of the competitive authoritarian regimes that emerged in the 1990s arose out of full-scale autocracies in lower- and middle-income countries with weak states. In Albania, Peru, Ukraine, and Zambia, for example, aspiring autocrats inherited states with weak judiciaries and politicized bureaucracies, which made them easy to weaponize. During the last two decades, however,

several competitive authoritarian regimes have devolved from democracies with stronger judiciaries and bureaucracies, such as Hungary, India, Poland, Turkey, and Venezuela. In these “new” competitive authoritarian regimes, weaponization took more work: Authoritarian governments had to purge civil servants from key state institutions and replace them with loyalists before they could deploy those institutions against opponents.

Competitive Authoritarianism Under Trump

The United States descended into soft competitive authoritarianism during Donald Trump’s second presidency. Regime change occurred with striking speed. Immediately upon taking office in January 2025, Trump began to weaponize the state, pushing out career professionals from key positions in the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and even the military.⁴ In these and other government agencies, top positions were filled with loyalists who were committed to weaponizing the state. The newly created Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, forced nearly 300,000 civil servants (about 12 percent of the federal workforce) out of their jobs in early 2025.⁵ The mass—and often illegal—firings terrified much of the federal bureaucracy into compliance, fostering “an ecosystem of fear: those who stay in government self-censor; those who speak out are branded ‘radioactive.’”⁶

The Trump administration quickly deployed state agencies against its opponents. The Justice Department launched politically targeted investigations into dozens of opposition politicians, prominent public critics, and other perceived rivals of the president. Many of them were indicted on flimsy charges or for minor offenses: New York attorney general Letitia James was indicted for alleged mortgage fraud; FBI director James Comey was indicted twice on dubious charges; and Congresswoman LaMonica McIver was indicted (and faced the prospect of seventeen years in prison) for allegedly impeding federal officers during an authorized visit to a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE; a division of DHS) detention center.⁷ The administration sought indictments against Senators Mark Kelly and Elissa Slotkin as well as four House members for “seditious behavior” after they publicly discouraged members of the U.S. armed forces from obeying illegal orders.⁸ The administration also initiated politically motivated investigations into then-Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell, Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook, Senator Adam Schiff, Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey, Minnesota governor Tim Walz, former special counsel Jack Smith, and ex-government officials John Brennan, Christopher Krebs, and Miles Taylor—among others.⁹

The Justice Department launched investigations into Democratic Party donors Reid Hoffman, George Soros, and Alexander Soros, as well as the Democratic Party’s main fundraising platform, ActBlue; in-

dicted the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization, on dubious grounds; and instructed U.S. attorneys to investigate the Open Society Foundations, a major funder of civil society organizations.¹⁰ By late 2025, Reuters had documented 470 individuals, organizations, and institutions that had been “targets of retribution” under Trump.¹¹

Targets of investigations faced possible arrest, unwanted media exposure, online threats and harassment, stakeouts by law-enforcement agents, and massive legal bills.

Due to the independence of the U.S. judiciary, few of the government’s targets are likely to be convicted or imprisoned for long. But the investigations themselves constituted serious harassment. Targets of

investigations faced possible arrest, unwanted media exposure, online threats and harassment, stakeouts by law-enforcement agents, and massive legal bills. Lisa Cook, for example, incurred US\$1.3 million in legal and security costs.¹² Targeted individuals also suffered professional and reputational costs. Justice Department official Ed Martin openly stated that even when the administration could not indict its targets, it would still “name” and “shame” them.¹³ Investigations thus brought enormous psychological strain. As one defense attorney representing individuals targeted by the administration put it, “the process is the punishment.”¹⁴

The Trump administration also attacked prominent law firms, universities, and other civic institutions. In March 2025, the administration issued a series of illegal executive orders that effectively blacklisted top firms—including Perkins Coie and Paul Weiss—with ties to the president’s opponents. By suspending the security clearances of these firms, denying them access to government buildings, and ending their federal contracts (while threatening also to deny contracts to companies that hired them), the executive orders had the potential to cripple targeted law firms.¹⁵ As the *New York Times* observed, the orders left big law firms “looking at their client lists and wondering whether their representation could put them in the president’s crosshairs and endanger their business.”¹⁶ Nine major law firms, including Paul Weiss, capitulated, striking deals with the government in which they pledged nearly a billion dollars in pro bono work for the government in order to avoid government retribution.¹⁷ When a senior Trump aide was told that Paul Weiss’s capitulation had made everyone afraid of the president, the aide replied, “Good. They should be afraid.”¹⁸

The administration also unleashed an unprecedented assault on universities. Federal agencies opened investigations into at least 75 universities over alleged antisemitism, civil rights violations, and student-aid fraud. The administration illegally froze federal funding to top universities such as Columbia, Cornell, Duke, Harvard, Northwestern, the University of

Pennsylvania, Princeton, and UCLA, demanding concessions that would threaten academic freedom and independence. As Jonathan Friedman, the managing director of free-expression programs at the nonprofit PEN America, put it, “It feels like any day, any university could step out of line in some way and then have all of their funding pulled.”¹⁹ Six universities negotiated deals with the government, collectively paying nearly \$400 million in ransom money and surrendering varying degrees of academic freedom. Columbia agreed to extensive federal intervention into its hiring, admissions, internal-governance, and student-discipline practices; the University of Virginia bowed to government pressure and forced out its president. When Harvard University refused to capitulate, the administration froze more than \$2 billion in federal funding, threatened to revoke the university’s tax-exempt status, and launched a flurry of new investigations. According to the *New York Times*, Harvard “faced an astounding 13 investigations by 10 federal agencies” in 2025.²⁰

Trump also attacked the media, weaponizing the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to an unprecedented degree. Under Chairman Brendan Carr, the FCC opened an investigation into the fundraising practices of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) and reinstated previously dismissed complaints against three legacy broadcast-television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, for anti-Trump bias.²¹ In September 2025, Carr briefly forced the late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel off the air by threatening to revoke the broadcast licenses of local ABC affiliates (Carr ominously told ABC, “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”²²). In April 2026, after the president called on ABC to fire Kimmel, the FCC ordered an accelerated review of all local-station licenses owned by ABC. As one former FCC official put it, the move sent a “message to every other network, ‘Watch yourself, you might be next.’”²³ Trump also sued CBS News (just prior to the 2024 election), the BBC, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* for defamation, and his administration orchestrated an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawsuit against the *New York Times*.²⁴

The Trump administration also engaged in widespread civil-liberties violations. The Department of Homeland Security deployed thousands of heavily armed, masked immigration agents in unmarked vehicles in cities across the country, at times abducting individuals without due process. As of October 2025, ProPublica had identified more than 170 U.S. citizens who were unlawfully detained by ICE.²⁵

ICE and border-patrol agents employed considerable repression against U.S. citizens—threatening, harassing, beating, teargassing, and even killing peaceful protesters. There have been no federal charges (nor, it appears, even serious federal investigations) in the January 2026 killings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti, both U.S. citizens, by federal agents in Minneapolis amid anti-immigration sweeps and protests in that city. Instead, Good and Pretti were labeled domestic terrorists, and an effort

was made to investigate Good herself and her widow. After the Pretti killing, DHS launched a covert surveillance operation aimed at protesters and progressive civic organizations, including the environmentalist Sunrise Movement and the Service Employees International Union, the country's largest healthcare workers' union. DHS agents scrutinized organizations' financial records, infiltrated group chats on Signal, spied on meetings in libraries, parks, and churches, and identified meeting participants via their license plates and scoured their social-media accounts.²⁶

Federal authorities cracked down hard on protest against the administration's mass deportation policy, arresting and prosecuting dozens of peaceful anti-ICE protesters on charges of "criminal conspiracy."²⁷ Journalists Don Lemon and Georgia Fort were indicted for covering an anti-ICE protest in a Minnesota church.²⁸ Participants in a violent attack on ICE's Prairieland Detention Facility in Texas received "stunningly severe" prison sentences of thirty to one-hundred years.²⁹ Daniel Sanchez Estrada, who was not even present at the protest, was sentenced to thirty years for simply moving anti-Trump literature at the behest of his wife.³⁰

The crackdown on protest reportedly derived from a September 2025 National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM-7), which directed law-enforcement officials to pursue "domestic terrorists" and defined "domestic terrorism" broadly to include the obstruction of immigration enforcement. The memo associated domestic terrorism with opposition to capitalism and Christianity, as well as "extremism on migration, race, and gender, and hostility toward those who hold traditional American values on family, religion, and morality." The Department of Justice reportedly installed "coordinators" in U.S. attorneys' offices charged with "hounding" federal agents to charge more protesters under NSPM-7.³¹

Tilting the Playing Field

Although an independent judiciary and a well-endowed opposition make it harder to undermine competition in the United States, the Trump administration's weaponization of state institutions appears to have at least modestly tilted the playing field. For one, the administration's abuse of power reshaped the media landscape. Whether it was to avoid government retribution or to secure government contracts or favorable regulatory decisions, several media companies altered their programming, shifted their editorial lines, or engaged in self-censorship during the second Trump presidency.

For example, *Washington Post* owner Jeff Bezos had been critical of the first Trump administration, and Trump had reportedly blocked a lucrative defense contract for his company Amazon in 2019. Bezos's Blue Origin space-technology company had billions of dollars in defense contracts at stake during Trump's second presidency. In an apparent effort to protect those contracts, Bezos overhauled the *Washington Post* soon after Trump's

second inauguration, adopting a more right-of-center editorial line. Condé Nast eviscerated *Teen Vogue*'s influential political reporting team in 2025, and according to the *Daily Beast*, Disney executives asked the hosts of *The View*, which airs on Disney-owned ABC, to tone down their political rhetoric.³² As one veteran television journalist put it, major media companies "have ratcheted back. They've toned rhetoric down . . . because all of these companies can get harassed by the government and Trump has proven that he will use government to punish companies."³³

The most far-reaching transformation occurred at CBS, which was owned by Paramount. In early 2025, as it was seeking FCC approval of a merger with another media-production company, Skydance, Paramount settled President Trump's flimsy lawsuit against CBS over the editing of an interview with his 2024 presidential rival, Kamala Harris, canceled Stephen Colbert's late-night talk show, and imposed tighter editorial controls on CBS's flagship news program, *60 Minutes*.³⁴ The FCC approved Skydance's acquisition of Paramount in July 2025, giving the Ellison family, who have been large Trump donors, control over CBS.³⁵

Skydance, now seeking government approval of its acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery, overhauled the CBS news division, softening its criticism of the administration. In December 2025, for example, CBS abruptly pulled a *60 Minutes* segment on the conditions in El Salvador's Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT, where the U.S. government had sent more than two-hundred deportees in March of that year. According to longtime *60 Minutes* journalist Scott Pelley, "There was a thumb on the scale for the president's version of events." Prior to the airing of a segment on the ICE killings in Minneapolis, for example, Pelley claims that new CBS News's editor-in-chief, Bari Weiss, pressured him to make the protesters "look more violent" and to describe Renee Good's car as driving toward the ICE officer who killed her.³⁶ In mid-2026, the Justice Department approved the Paramount-Warner Bros. Discovery merger, which, if finalized, will bring the cable news channel CNN under Ellison family control.³⁷

Although the sheer size and wealth of the U.S. media market make it harder to capture the private media than in Hungary and other competitive authoritarian cases, the Trump administration's media-packing efforts were nevertheless consequential. As FCC chair Brendan Carr observed, "President Trump is fundamentally reshaping the media landscape. . . . For years, government officials just allowed [the legacy television networks] . . . to dictate the political narrative. And he has fundamentally changed the game."³⁸ Carr went further in a speech at the March 2026 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC):

Look at the results so far. PBS, defunded. NPR, defunded. Joy Reid, gone from MSNBC. Sleepy-eyes Chuck Todd, gone. Jim Acosta, gone. John

Dickerson, gone. Stephen Colbert is leaving. CBS is under new ownership, and soon enough, CNN is going to have new ownership as well. . . . So, we're not at the point yet where we're raising the "mission accomplished" flag, but President Trump is taking on the fake news media, and President Trump is winning.³⁹

Trump administration abuses also skewed access to campaign finance, giving the incumbent party a noticeable advantage. The president's clear signals that he intended to use policy and regulatory instruments to reward friends and punish his detractors brought a flurry of phone calls from Fortune 500 CEOs in the wake of his November 2024 election. Because Trump now had the "power to crush their businesses or reward them if he felt so inclined," he was able to extract unprecedented amounts of money from leading CEOs. According to *New York Times* reporters Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, "Within days, millions of dollars and then tens and hundreds of millions were pouring into Trump's various fundraising accounts." By fall 2025, Trump had reportedly raised \$1.9 billion from corporate donors.⁴⁰ His super PAC brought in five times more money in 2025 than any other president had during his first year in office.⁴¹ The stated objective of pro-Trump super PACs was to retain control of Congress in the 2026 midterm election.⁴² Trump's weaponized fundraising gave the Republican Party an edge. In early 2026, Republican super PACs, together with those of Trump, had more than three times as much money as the Democrats.⁴³

There is also evidence that fear of government retribution affected civic organizations' fundraising capacity. For example, the Gates Foundation, fearful of losing its tax-exempt status, halted grants administered by the consulting firm Arabella Advisors due to the firm's ties to the Democratic Party. Likewise, after the media watchdog group Media Matters was targeted by Elon Musk, many of its donors withdrew support in an effort to avoid retribution, and after the Southern Poverty Law Center was indicted in April 2026 on charges of wire fraud and other alleged misdeeds, two financial institutions—Fidelity Charitable and Vanguard Charitable—stopped processing donations.⁴⁴

Trump's weaponization of the state also affected administration opponents' ability to gain legal representation. The administration's attack on prominent law firms cowed many into abandoning activities—such as immigration and civil rights cases—that might place them in the administration's crosshairs. Indeed, the *Washington Post* found that whereas big law firms represented plaintiffs in 75 percent of the cases challenging Trump's executive orders during his first term, they represented plaintiffs in only 15 percent of such cases in the first nine months of 2025. As a result, smaller firms—some employing a single attorney—were forced to take on a much larger share of cases against the government. These firms had fewer resources to cope with the flood of motions and appeals coming from the government, and in some cases, they were

forced to turn away clients who had suffered considerable injustice at the hands of the Trump administration.⁴⁵

Finally, the Trump administration used gerrymandering to tilt the electoral playing field. Soon after taking office, President Trump pressured Texas and other Republican-controlled states to undertake mid-decade redistricting that would create new Republican seats to offset the Democrats' expected wins in the 2026 midterm elections. Although gerrymandering itself is not new, this was the first time in modern U.S. history that a party launched a national gerrymandering campaign aimed at manufacturing a legislative majority in the face of potential electoral losses. Despite their own counter-gerrymandering efforts, the Democrats could not offset the Republicans' advantage. As of mid-2026, Republicans expected Trump's national gerrymandering scheme to give them an edge in ten more congressional districts than would have been the case absent gerrymandering.⁴⁶ It thus became possible for the Republicans to lose the popular vote, and what would have been a majority of seats under the preexisting maps, but still retain control of the House—hardly a fair election.

Scoring the U.S. Case

Did the United States really cross the line into competitive authoritarianism? To answer this question, we apply the criteria we used to score 35 cases in our 2010 book on competitive authoritarianism.⁴⁷ The eleven criteria are summarized in the Table. Cases need only meet one of the criteria to be scored as competitive authoritarian. During the second Trump administration, the United States met *five* criteria: tilting of the electoral playing field (via national gerrymandering); frequent harassment of the media; attacks on individual civil liberties (via legal harassment of critics); a modest packing of the media; and skewing of campaign finance. The U.S. case is thus broadly comparable to Hungary under Orbán, albeit with greater civil violations and a less tilted playing field. As the table shows, however, U.S. competitive authoritarianism was considerably softer than the regimes in Russia under Boris Yeltsin and Serbia under Slobodan Milošević, both of which were characterized by widespread election fraud and more serious impediments to opposition campaigning.

One potential objection to our argument is that the government abuse we describe here is not new. Arguably, U.S. democracy has *always* been flawed. Without question, U.S. history is littered with illiberal and undemocratic episodes, including the 1917–20 Red Scare, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, McCarthyism in the 1940s and '50s, and the numerous abuses committed by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. More fundamentally, African Americans were denied civil and voting rights in the American South until the 1960s. Indeed, by contemporary

TABLE—INDICATORS OF COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

Indicators	U.S. Under Trump				
	Hungary Under Orbán		Russia Under Yeltsin (Early 1990s)		Serbia Under Milošević (Early 1990s)
					Peru Under Fujimori (Early 1990s)
<i>Unfair Elections</i>					
1. Candidates barred from running for office					
2. Centrally coordinated electoral fraud (e.g., ballot stuffing or falsification of results)			•	•	•
3. Formal/informal impediments to opposition campaigning (e.g., regulation, or progovernment thug violence that effectively prevents campaigning in certain regions)				•	
4. Uneven electoral playing field (e.g., national-level gerrymandering in favor of the incumbent, or election authorities systematically biased against the opposition)	•	•	•	•	•
<i>Violations of Civil Liberties</i>					
1. Frequent harassment of media (e.g., frequent use of libel to suppress critical media, or weaponization of regulation against independent media)	•	•	•	•	•
2. Large-scale attacks on media (e.g., closure of outlets or imprisonment of journalists)					
3. At least occasional attacks on individual civil and political liberties (e.g., use of the legal system to harass critics, or physical attacks on government critics)	•		•	•	•
4. Large-scale attacks on political leaders and associations (e.g., assassination or jailing of opposition leaders, or banning of opposition parties)			•		
<i>Uneven Playing Field</i>					
1. Politicized institutions significantly limit opposition capacity to compete		•	•	•	•
2. Uneven media (e.g., government pressure results in bias of major media, or media packed with government allies)	•	•	•	•	
3. Uneven access to resources (e.g., government successfully dissuades businesses from financing the opposition, or significant illicit financing of the incumbent)	•	•	•	•	•

standards, the United States did not become a full democracy until after the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Because the United States has only met standard procedural minimum criteria for democracy since the late 1960s, we limit our comparison of the Trump administration’s abuses to those of administrations elected during this fully democratic period.

The Trump administration’s abuses were more severe and more

systematic than those of any other U.S. administration in the modern democratic era. The closest comparison, of course, is Richard Nixon's presidency (1968–74). Nixon also attempted to weaponize the state, surveilling perceived enemies and orchestrating break-ins at the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate complex and the psychiatrist's office of Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers. In the words of Nixon's White House Counsel, John Dean, the Nixon administration tried to use "the available federal machinery to screw our political enemies."⁴⁸

Nixon, however, was largely thwarted in his efforts to weaponize the state. Like Trump during his first term, many of Nixon's attempted abuses generated pushback from within his own administration. Although Nixon spoke privately about targeting perceived enemies and White House officials drew up an enemies list, the list was never seriously acted upon. Justice Department officials did not prosecute anyone on the list, and IRS officials refused to weaponize tax audits to harass Nixon's rivals. In 1970, White House aides developed the so-called Huston Plan, in which the FBI and other agencies would use wiretaps, electronic bugs, and the interception of mail to spy on antiwar, Communist, African American, and other left-wing activists, but the president never signed off and the plan was aborted.⁴⁹ Nixon privately told his (then) national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, that "the professors are the enemy"; but he never used state institutions to coerce or punish universities. Nor did Nixon use the power of the state to restructure the media landscape. Finally, Nixon was held politically accountable for his (far more limited) abuses. He was forced to resign in 1974 in the face of imminent impeachment.

Since Watergate, no U.S. administration, Democratic or Republican, has engaged in anything remotely like the Trump administration's weaponization and abuse of the state. Post-Watergate reforms and norms effectively depoliticized the Department of Justice and the FBI. Every post-Watergate president except Trump left existing FBI directors in place, even when they were appointed by presidents of the opposing party. Likewise, with the exception of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales (who was forced to resign in 2007 for the politicized firings of eight prosecutors),⁵⁰ attorneys general did not seek to weaponize the Justice Department or deploy it against political rivals. All of them investigated and prosecuted members of their own party. Under President Bill Clinton (1993–2001), the FBI and Department of Justice aggressively pursued allegations against the incumbent president. Attorney General Janet Reno's appointment of an independent prosecutor eventually led to Clinton's impeachment in 1998. Under Trump's predecessor, President Joe Biden, federal prosecutors indicted and convicted Biden's son, while Attorney General Merrick Garland moved slowly and with extreme caution in investigating Trump.⁵¹

The Trump administration's unparalleled authoritarianism in the post-Civil Rights Era is captured by leading democracy indices, such as Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). The United States' score on V-Dem's liberal-democracy index changes little between the mid-1970s and 2024, remaining steadily above 0.75 (on a scale of 0 to 1) before dipping modestly during the first Trump presidency. The U.S. score then declines sharply—from 0.75 to 0.57—in 2025, falling below the scores of Ghana, Poland, and Suriname. According to V-Dem, then, the antidemocratic behavior of the second Trump administration is without precedent in modern U.S. history.

Why Competitive Authoritarianism Won't Consolidate

Although the United States crossed the line into competitive authoritarianism in 2025, the new regime is unlikely to consolidate. For one, the Trump administration is unpopular. Public opinion weighs heavily in competitive authoritarian regimes.⁵² Broad popular support allows autocratic leaders to win elections without engaging in high-risk fraud; it helps to secure the legislative supermajorities or plebiscitary majorities needed to pass constitutional reforms entrenching authoritarian rule; and it weakens the legitimacy of claims made by prodemocratic forces (how can a government be undemocratic if broad majorities support it?).

Indeed, elected autocrats with approval ratings above 70 or 80 percent, such as Bukele, Chávez, and Fujimori, are more likely to successfully entrench themselves in power than are unpopular presidents. By contrast, Pedro Castillo (Peru) and Yoon Suk Yeol (South Korea) had approval ratings below 30 percent when they launched failed presidential coups in 2022 and 2024, respectively. Likewise, Donald Trump and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro had approval ratings of about 40 percent when they tried and failed to overturn elections in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Given that Trump's approval rating consistently hovered around 40 percent in the first two years of his second term, an authoritarian power play would be a high-risk venture.

The most important obstacles to authoritarian consolidation, however, are structural. Any authoritarian project in the United States is likely to confront robust societal opposition. To a significant extent, this opposition is a product of economic development. As we have argued in these pages, (capitalist) economic development gives rise to bigger cities, larger and wealthier private sectors, more robust civil societies, and more prosperous and autonomous citizenries. These, in turn, generate *countervailing power*—the aggregate financial, organizational, and human resources that exist in society and are available for opposition groups to tap into.⁵³ In societies with extensive countervailing power, opposition parties have greater access to finance; businesses, media, and civil society are less vulnerable to government bullying or cooptation;

and citizens are better equipped to inform themselves, organize, and oppose the government.

Countervailing power cannot prevent the election of illiberal or undemocratic leaders, but it makes it far more difficult for such leaders to entrench themselves in power. In lower-income societies—where private sectors are small, civil societies are underdeveloped, and many citizens depend on the state for their livelihood—even modest levels of repression can be highly consequential. Government cooptation or repression of a few business leaders may leave opposition parties starved for resources; government control of just a few media outlets may leave the independent media landscape barren. In Putin’s Russia, for example, the arrest of a *single* businessman, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, dramatically limited the opposition’s ability to raise money.

By contrast, in wealthy, urbanized societies with robust private sectors, similar doses of authoritarian abuse are less consequential. Powerful private sectors and civil societies are harder to buy off or bully into submission. Wealthier citizens possess the time, skills, and resources to seek out independent news sources and join civic or opposition organizations. These are the bases of vigorous opposition—and democratic resilience. In sum, societies with extensive countervailing power may slide into competitive authoritarianism, but those slides tend to be more modest and more easily reversed than those in lower-income societies.

The United States is far wealthier than any other case of competitive authoritarianism. Its per capita GDP is more than triple that of Taiwan (1990s) and Hungary and Poland (2020s). And American society possesses vast countervailing power. Ten million U.S. households earn at least \$250,000 a year; 62 law firms generated more than \$1 billion in income last year. U.S. civil society includes more than 1.5 million NGOs, an estimated 370,000 churches, and nearly 1,700 private non-profit universities and colleges.⁵⁴ In such a context, the Trump administration must work much harder than its authoritarian counterparts to meaningfully tilt the playing field.

Countervailing power has diluted the impact of Trump’s authoritarianism in ways that would be unthinkable in a low- or middle-income country. For example, the administration’s attacks on big law firms were consequential, as many big firms began to steer clear of progressive causes and cases against the government. However, numerous small firms (including new ones founded by lawyers who left firms that capitulated) stepped in to take up cases that big law firms avoided, defending many of the victims of Trump administration abuse. Likewise, although Trump’s weaponization of policy induced wealthy CEOs to shower him with money in 2025, which allowed him to substantially out-fundraise his opponents, abundant online contributions from America’s massive upper-middle class allowed leading Democratic candidates to compete with, and in some cases, outpace, their Republican rivals in 2026.⁵⁵ Fi-

nally, the cooptation of the *Washington Post* and CBS News may have reshaped the mainstream media landscape, but due to the persistence of numerous alternative media outlets, citizens' access to independent news sources was not as seriously affected as it was in Orbán's Hungary. Indeed, subscriptions to the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic* surged during the second Trump presidency, and the MS NOW cable network saw its ratings increase substantially.⁵⁶

Unlike incumbents in most competitive authoritarian regimes, the Trump administration faces a robust, well-endowed opposition. The Democrats' continued viability, together with Trump's limited public support, increases the probability of redemocratization via electoral turnover, as occurred in relatively wealthy competitive authoritarian regimes in Poland (2023) and Hungary (2026).

Toward Unconsolidated Democracy

If, as we expect, America's slide into competitive authoritarianism proves short-lived, observers will be tempted to retrospectively classify the United States as a democracy during the second Trump administration. Indeed, following Adam Przeworski's widely cited characterization of democracy as "a system in which parties lose elections,"⁵⁷ scholars frequently equate electoral turnover with democracy. Following this logic, observers may interpret a Democratic Party victory in 2028 as evidence that the United States was continuously democratic between 2025 and 2028.

That would be a mistake. One of the principal findings of our research on competitive authoritarianism is that opposition parties can (and do) win unfair elections, and that electoral turnover can (and does) occur in nondemocratic regimes. In Hungary, for example, the ruling Fidesz massively abused state resources and engaged in large-scale gerrymandering, and the opposition Tisza party had limited access to mainstream media. Yet Tisza won. The fact that opposition forces prevail despite unfair elections and authoritarian abuse does not mean the unfairness and abuse did not exist in the first place. When Olympic athletes cheat but lose, they are still punished for cheating. If the U.S. Democrats win in 2028, their victory will not wipe away the administration's persecution of critics, attacks on the media, repression of protesters, or gerrymandering.

If the United States redemocratizes in 2029, it will likely remain an unconsolidated democracy. In consolidated democracies, all major political actors are committed to playing by the democratic rules of the game. Republican leaders' refusal to unambiguously accept the results of the 2020 election, their flirtation with extremist actors, and, crucially, their continued support for a leader who attempted to overturn an election are clear indicators of a party that is no longer committed to play-

ing by democratic rules.⁵⁸ U.S. democracy will not be stable until both major parties commit to its defense.

Rebuilding a stable democracy will also require that Americans confront the institutional wreckage in the Justice Department, the FBI, the Defense Department, Homeland Security, and other public agencies. This will entail reconstructing the civil service, restoring the professionalization of the armed forces and intelligence agencies, and dismantling paramilitary forces. Democratic institutions are easy to break but hard to rebuild.

If democracy is restored, Americans should resist the temptation to downplay or forget this authoritarian interlude. Wedded to a myth of exceptionalism, Americans tend to suppress past democratic failures. But the experience of countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Poland, and South Korea suggests a different lesson: Remembering past authoritarianism is essential to preventing its recurrence. If we are to reclaim American democracy and safeguard its future, we must first acknowledge the extent to which it has broken down.

NOTES

1. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31 (January 2020): 51–65.

2. For a detailed discussion of the concept of competitive authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 1.

3. Our definition of democracy is consistent with the Dahlian or "procedural minimum" definition of democracy that has predominated among scholars since the beginning of the "third wave"; all regimes that are widely considered democracies by contemporary scholars, including the United States between 1965 and 2024, meet our criteria. On fair competition, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "Why Democracy Needs a Level Playing Field," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (January 2010): 57–68.

4. Eric Tucker and Alanna Durkin Richer, "How the Trump Administration Erased Centuries of Justice Department Experience," *PBS NewsHour*, 16 January 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/how-the-trump-administration-erased-centuries-of-justice-department-experience>; Colin Demarest, "The Growing List of Military Ousters Under Trump 2.0," *Axios*, 27 August 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2025/08/27/beck-kruse-pentagon-hegseth-fired>; Sarah Lynch, "About a Dozen FBI Staff Who Worked on Trump Documents Case Fired over 2 Days, Sources Say," *CBS News*, 27 February 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/about-a-dozen-fbi-staff-who-worked-on-trump-documents-case-fired-over-two-days-sources-say>; Nicole Sganga and Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Trump Administration Fires over 400 DHS Employees as Mass Firings Continue," *CBS News*, 16 February 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-administration-fires-over-400-dhs-employees>.

5. Hannah Natanson and Meryl Kornfield, "The Year Trump Broke the Federal Government," *Washington Post*, 21 December 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2025/trump-federal-government-workers-doge>; Elena Shao and Ashley Wu, "The Federal Work Force Cuts So Far, Agency by Agency," *New York Times*, 12 May 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/28/us/politics/trump-doge-federal-job-cuts.html>.

6. Peter Eisler et al., “Trump’s Campaign of Retribution: At Least 470 Targets and Counting,” Reuters, 26 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-trump-retribution-tracker>.

7. Anna Liss-Roy, “Lawmaker Pushes for More ICE Oversight After Indictment for Visit,” *Washington Post*, 12 May 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/05/12/lamonica-mciver-dhs-bill>.

8. Peter Charalambous et al., “Here’s a List of the Individuals, Including Lisa Cook, Targeted by the Trump Administration,” ABC News, 10 July 2026, <https://abcnews.com/US/list-individuals-including-lisa-cook-targeted-trump-administration/story?id=124968309>.

9. Lydia Wheeler and Drew An-Pham, “Here Are the Adversaries Trump Has Threatened and Prosecuted,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-prosecutions-visual-guide-ef488d01>; Charalambous et al., “Here’s a List of the Individuals.”

10. Andrew Goudsward, “US Probes Reid Hoffman Group over Funding Lawsuits Against Trump, Source Says,” Reuters, 29 May 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/chicago-prosecutor-denies-opening-investigation-e-jean-carroll-2026-05-29>; Reid J. Epstein and Shane Goldmacher, “ActBlue May Have Misled Congress on Vetting Foreign Donations, Its Lawyers Warned,” *New York Times*, 2 April 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/02/us/politics/actblue-democrat-fundraising-foreign-donations.html>; Devlin Barrett, “Justice Department Charges Prominent Civil Rights Group with Financial Crimes,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/21/us/politics/southern-poverty-law-center-doj-investigation.html>; Kenneth P. Vogel et al., “Trump’s Targeting of Soros Foundations Elicits Fear and Defiance on Left,” *New York Times*, 26 September 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/26/us/politics/trump-soros-foundations-donors.html>.

11. Eisler et al., “Trump’s Campaign of Retribution.”

12. Andrew Goudsward, “Judge Finds ‘Profound’ Missteps in US Probe of ex-FBI Chief James Comey,” Reuters, 17 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-judge-orders-doj-turn-over-comey-grand-jury-materials-citing-misconduct-2025-11-17>; Matt Peterson, “Trump Bid to Fire Fed’s Lisa Cook Cost Her More Than \$1 Million in Legal, Security Costs: Filing,” CNBC, 18 June 2026, <https://www.cnbc.com/2026/06/18/trump-federal-reserve-lisa-cook-security-filing.html>.

13. Ryan J. Reilly, “DOJ ‘Weaponization’ Group Will Shame Individuals It Can’t Charge with Crimes, New Head Says,” *NBC News*, 13 May 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/justice-department/doj-weaponization-group-will-shame-individuals-cant-charge-crimes-new-rcna206553>.

14. David Kolasky, attorney for Lowell & Associates, interview by authors, 16 June 2026.

15. Michael S. Schmidt, “Trump’s Revenge on Law Firms Seen as Undermining Justice System,” *New York Times*, 12 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/us/politics/trump-law-firms-perkins-coie.html>.

16. Schmidt, “Trump’s Revenge on Law Firms.”

17. Molly Redden, “Trump’s War on Big Law Means It’s Harder to Challenge the Administration,” *ProPublica*, 6 August 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-law-firms-accountability-environment-police-lgbtq>; Jack Newsham, “Big Law Firms Double Down on Their Trump Deals in Letters to Congress,” *Business Insider*, 21 May 2025, reproduced on the website of Representative Dave Min, <https://min.house.gov/media/in-the-news/big-law-firms-double-down-their-trump-deals-letters-congress>; Rebecca Beitsch, “Law firms Divided over Response to Trump Orders,” *The Hill*, 25 March 2025, <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/5211686-trump-administration-targets-law-firms>.

18. Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan, *Regime Change: Inside the Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2026), 236.

19. Michael C. Bender, Alan Blinder, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Investigations and a Billion-Dollar 'Shakedown': How Trump Targeted Higher Education," *New York Times*, 21 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/21/us/politics/trump-higher-education-2025.html>; Sharon Lurye and Jocelyn Gecker, "How U.S. Colleges Are Navigating Cuts to Grants for Research after Trump Restricts Federal Funding," *PBS NewsHour*, 28 March 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/how-u-s-colleges-are-navigating-cuts-to-grants-for-research-after-trump-restricts-federal-funding>.

20. Bender, Blinder, and Schmidt, "Investigations and a Billion-Dollar 'Shakedown.'"

21. Benjamin Mullin and David McCabe, "F.C.C. Chair Orders Investigation into NPR and PBS Sponsorships," *New York Times*, 30 January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/30/business/media/npr-pbs-fcc-investigation.html>; David Shepardson, "FCC Reinstates Complaints over ABC Presidential Debate, Harris TV Appearances," *Reuters*, 22 January 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/fcc-reinstates-complaints-over-abc-presidential-debate-harris-tv-appearances-2025-01-22>.

22. Brian Stelter, "How Brendan Carr, the Attack-Dog FCC Chair, Helped Take Down Jimmy Kimmel with Words, Not Actions," *CNN*, 18 September 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/18/media/brendan-carr-jimmy-kimmel-fcc-first-amendment>.

23. Jim Rutenberg and John Koblin, "FCC Orders a Review of ABC's Broadcast Licenses," *New York Times*, 28 April 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/28/business/media/fcc-abc-television-kimmel.html>.

24. Erik Wemple, "New York Times Accuses Federal Employment Agency of Retaliation," *New York Times*, 10 July 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/10/business/media/new-york-times-eeoc-lawsuit.html>.

25. Heidi Altman, "ICE Is Detaining Indiscriminately. And Releasing Almost No One," *National Immigration Law Center*, 21 October 2025, <https://www.nilc.org/articles/ice-is-detaining-indiscriminately-and-releasing-almost-no-one/>; Nicole Foy, "We Found That More Than 170 U.S. Citizens Have Been Held by Immigration Agents. They've Been Kicked, Dragged and Detained for Days," *ProPublica*, 16 October 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/immigration-dhs-american-citizens-arrested-detained-against-will>.

26. Ernesto Londoño, "Six Prosecutors Quit Over Push to Investigate ICE Shooting Victim's Widow," *New York Times*, 13 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/13/us/prosecutors-doj-resignation-ice-shooting.html>; Alan Feuer and Ernesto Londoño, "U.S. Investigated Left-Leaning Groups During Minnesota Immigration Crackdown," *New York Times*, 13 August 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/08/13/us/politics/dhs-inquiry-immigration-protests-minnesota.html>.

27. Kim Wehle, "How to Resist Trump's Weaponized DOJ," *Bulwark*, 18 June 2026, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/how-to-resist-trump-weaponized-doj-department-of-justice>.

28. Hamed Aleaziz et al., "Federal Agents Arrest Don Lemon over Minnesota Church Protest," *New York Times*, 30 January 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/30/us/don-lemon-arrest-minnesota-church-protest.html>.

29. Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "Alleged Antifa Members Get Decades in Prison over Violent ICE Protest," *Washington Post*, 23 June 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2026/06/23/alleged-antifa-members-texas-get-maximum-sentences-ice-protest/>.

30. Autumn Billings, "Texas Man Gets 30 Years in Prison for Transporting 'Anti-Government' Pamphlets," *Reason*, 25 June 2026, <https://reason.com/2026/06/25/texas-man-gets-30-years-in-prison-for-transporting-anti-government-pamphlets/>; Lex McMenamin,

“‘This Is Injustice’: How Leftist Zines Were Used to Sentence Anti-ICE Protesters to Decades in Prison,” *Guardian*, 24 June 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2026/jun/24/prairieland-texas-ice-protests-zines>.

31. White House, “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence,” presidential memorandum (NSPM-7), 25 September 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence>; Alan Feuer, Alexandra Berzon, and Ernesto Londoño, “‘Go Big and Go Loud’: Inside the Justice Department’s Push to Prosecute Protesters,” *New York Times*, 19 March 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/19/us/politics/justice-dept-prosecute-protesters.html>.

32. Brian Fung, “Amazon Blames Trump for Losing Pentagon Cloud Contract,” CNN, 9 December 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/09/tech/amazon-pentagon-trump-bezos>; Dana Mattioli, Josh Dawsey, and Shane Shifflett, “How Bezos Learned to Love Trump—and Win More Contracts for Blue Origin,” *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/business/jeff-bezos-donald-trump-relationship-7e6a742e>; “Post Owner Bezos Announces Shift in Opinions Section; Shipley to Leave,” *Washington Post*, 26 February 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2025/02/26/washington-post-bezos-opinions-section>; Carter Sherman, “Less Politics, More Make-up: The Unraveling of Teen Vogue Under Trump 2.0,” *Guardian*, 22 November 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2025/nov/22/teen-vogue-closure-feminist-media>; Corbin Bolies, “Disney CEO Told Hosts of ‘The View’ to Tone Down Trump-Bashing,” *Daily Beast*, 21 May 2025, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-view-told-to-tone-down-trump-bashing-by-abc-news-boss>.

33. Jeremy Barr, “Is Donald Trump Winning His War Against the Media?,” *Guardian*, 13 July 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2026/jul/13/trump-war-on-media>.

34. Michael Grynbaum and Benjamin Mullin, “‘60 Minutes’ Rebukes Paramount On-Air over Executive Producer’s Exit,” *New York Times*, 27 April 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/27/business/media/60-minutes-scott-pelley-paramount.html>.

35. Emily Glazer, Annie Linskey, and Jessica Toonkel, “How a \$45 Million Donation Brought Larry Ellison Deeper into Trump’s Circle,” *Wall Street Journal*, 23 June 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/how-a-45-million-donation-brought-larry-ellison-deeper-into-trumps-circle-b3e26c03>.

36. Adeel Hassan, “Five Takeaways from Scott Pelley’s Interview with the Times,” *New York Times*, 7 June 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/07/arts/television/scott-pelley-60-minutes-interview-takeaways.html>.

37. Brian Stelter, “Justice Department Approves Paramount–Warner Bros. Discovery Merger,” CNN, 12 June 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/06/12/media/paramount-wbd-merger-doj-approve-trump-cbs-ellison>.

38. Geoff Bennett and Courtney Norris, “The Politics Behind the \$8 Billion Paramount–Skydance Merger,” *PBS NewsHour*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-politics-behind-the-8b-paramount-skydance-merger>.

39. Tom Jones, “The FCC Chair Is Openly Cheering the Weakening of the Press,” Poynter, 30 March 2026, <https://www.poynter.org/commentary/2026/brendan-carr-mission-accomplished-press-war/>.

40. Haberman and Swan, *Regime Change*, 217–18 (quotes on 217).

41. Ian Vandewalker, “Pro-Trump Super PAC Raises Record-Breaking \$305 Million,” Brennan Center for Justice, 4 February 2026, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/pro-trump-super-pac-raises-record-breaking-305-million>.

42. Haberman and Swan, *Regime Change*, 217. The U.S. Federal Election Commission

defines a super PAC as “a political committee that makes only independent expenditures that may solicit and accept unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, labor organizations and other political committees,” <https://www.fec.gov>.

43. Stephen Fowler, “Money in the 2026 Midterms Right Now, in Four Charts,” NPR, 23 April 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/04/23/nx-s1-5795841/democrats-senate-fund-raising-republican-maga-cash-on-hand-campaign-finance>. Republicans had nearly \$850 million, compared with roughly \$260 million for Democrats.

44. Theodore Schleifer and Stephanie Nolen, “Gates Foundation Is Rattled by Trump’s Threat to Its Mission,” *New York Times*, 30 April 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/30/business/bill-gates-foundation-trump.html>; Kenneth P. Vogel, Kate Conger, and Ryan Mac, “Under Siege from Trump and Musk, a Top Liberal Group Falls into Crisis,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/25/us/politics/media-matters-musk-crisis.html>; Ron Lieber, “Fidelity and Vanguard Won’t Allow Donations to Southern Poverty Law Center,” *New York Times*, 29 April 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/29/business/fidelity-southern-poverty-law-center.html>.

45. Redden, “Trump’s War on Big Law”; Shayna Jacobs, Clara Ence Morse, and Mark Berman, “Nation’s Biggest Law Firms Back Off from Challenging Trump Policies,” *Washington Post*, 26 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/10/26/smaller-law-firms-struggle-trump-administration-initiatives/>.

46. Daniel Bush, “Republicans Gained Edge over Democrats in Redistricting Battle, Internal Party Assessment Finds,” BBC, 10 June 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clye2v78x2yo>.

47. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 365–71.

48. John W. Dean III, “Dealing with Our Political Enemies,” memorandum, 16 August 1971, UNC Libraries, <https://exhibits.lib.unc.edu/items/show/7896>.

49. David Jackson, “IRS Chief Defied Nixon,” *USA Today*, 26 May 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/05/26/irs-chief-defied-nixon/2360951>; Daniel Schorr, “The FBI and Me,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 60th anniversary (2021), <https://www.cjr.org/60th/the-fbi-and-me-daniel-schorr-nixon-watergate-enemy-enemies-list.php>; Jeffrey Toobin, “A Perilous Difference Between the Trump and Nixon Eras,” *New York Times*, 10 October 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/10/opinion/letitia-james-donald-trump-nixon.html>; John Prados, “Spying on Americans: New Release of the Infamous Huston Plan,” National Security Archive, 25 June 2020, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/intelligence/2020-06-25/spying-americans-new-release-infamous-huston-plan>.

50. “Gonzales Resigns Justice Post; Bush Blames Politics,” NPR, 27 August 2007, <https://www.npr.org/2007/08/27/13967342/gonzales-resigns-justice-post-bush-blames-politics>.

51. Carol Leonnig and Aaron C. Davis, *Injustice: How Politics and Fear Vanquished America’s Justice Department* (New York: Penguin Press, 2025).

52. On mass public support and authoritarian success, see Alexander Matovski, *Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

53. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Democracy’s Surprising Resilience,” *Journal of Democracy* 34 (October 2023): 5–20; see pp. 10–13.

54. Kathryn Rubino, “The 2026 Am Law 100 Is Out, and Surprise: The Rich Law Firms Got Richer,” *Above the Law*, 15 April 2026, <https://abovethelaw.com/2026/04/the-2026-am-law-100-is-out-and-surprise-the-rich-law-firms-got-richer/>; Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “Fast Facts on American Religion,” <https://hrr.hartfordinternationa>

tional.edu/fast-facts-on-american-religion; U.S. Department of State, “Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the United States,” <https://2021-2025.state.gov/non-governmental-organizations-ngos-in-the-united-states>; Josh Moody, “A Guide to the Changing Number of U.S. Universities,” *U.S. News and World Report*, last modified 27 April 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-many-universities-are-in-the-us-and-why-that-number-is-changing>.

55. David Thomas, “Lawyer Abbe Lowell Hires First Partner at Firm Defending Trump Targets,” *Reuters*, 16 March 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/lawyer-abbe-lowell-hires-first-partner-firm-defending-trump-targets-2026-03-16>; Theodore Schleifer, “Talarico’s Fund-Raising Haul Offers Democrats Lessons for Taking on Republicans,” *New York Times*, 16 April 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/16/us/politics/talarico-democrats-fundraising-republicans-takeaways.html>.

56. Mark Joyella, “MS WOW: Rebranded Network Sees Double-Digit Growth Since Shedding the MSNBC Name,” *Forbes*, 29 December 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2025/12/29/ms-wow-rebranded-network-sees-double-digit-growth-since-shedding-the-msnbc-name/>; Brian Stelter, “The Atlantic Is Expanding Its Print Magazine as It Surpasses 1 Million Subscribers,” *CNN*, 11 October 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/11/media/the-atlantic-magazine-print-monthly-subscription>; Katie Robertson, “New York Times Added 1.4 Million Digital Subscribers in 2025,” *New York Times*, 4 February 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/04/business/media/new-york-times-earnings.html>.

57. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

58. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, “Toward Consolidated Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 15–16; Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point* (New York: Crown, 2023), 40–44.