

# The Authoritarian Playbook

How reporters can contextualize and cover  
authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual



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# OVERVIEW

Newsrooms are reckoning with how journalists can adequately cover an increasingly anti-democratic political movement in the United States. In covering these events, they face a constant challenge of covering all angles of a story without drawing equivalencies between candidates or politicians who operate within the normal bounds of democratic politics and those who may seek to undermine elections and the rule of law. The media has an essential role to play that is unbiased, but not neutral in applying a consistent standard about threats to democracy.

In light of the authoritarian threat, the ongoing process of media evolution and adaptation necessitates that the media may draw on a different toolkit today than it did in the eras of Walter Lippmann’s “Public Opinion,” the Pentagon Papers, or Watergate.

This briefing is designed to help the fourth estate advance this “unbiased but not neutral” role in a healthy democracy by providing two contextualizing resources: a common playbook of tactics used by would-be autocrats in the U.S. and around the globe, and a framework for distinguishing between these authoritarian tactics and normal political jockeying.

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# INTRODUCTION

Before the 1990s, authoritarian leaders bent on upending democracy typically came to power forcefully and swiftly, often by means of a military *coup d'état*. The moment democracy ceased to exist could be time-stamped and reported on with a block headline.

Yet for at least the last thirty years, the threats to democracy have evolved. Today, democracy more often dies gradually, as the institutional, legal, and political constraints on authoritarian leaders are chipped away, one by one. This has happened—or is happening—in, among others, Russia, Venezuela, Hungary, the Philippines, Poland, Nicaragua, India, Turkey—and the United States.

By using “[salami tactics](#),” slicing away at democracy a sliver at a time, modern authoritarians still cement themselves in power, but they do so incrementally and gradually. Sometimes their actions are deliberate and calculated, but sometimes they are opportunistic, myopic, or even bumbling. There is no longer a singular bright line that countries cross between democracy and authoritarianism. But the outcome is still the same.

**64% of Americans agree that democracy is in crisis and at risk of failing.<sup>1</sup>**

**Only 7% of young Americans view the United States as a “healthy” democracy.<sup>2</sup>**

**The vast majority of Americans (81%) say that, in general, the news media is “critical” (42%) or “very important” (39%) to democracy.<sup>3</sup>**

This presents a unique challenge for journalists, who are committed to providing the public much needed information and context about important news. Contemporary democratic breakdowns are

far more difficult to identify because—in snapshots—they can mimic the typical acts of political jockeying to gain advantage that are routine even in healthy democracies. But especially as these acts accumulate and intensify, hard-nosed politics can cross a line into authoritarian threats.

Unfortunately, there is no simple bright-line answer or mechanical test to distinguish between the two.

At the same time, because authoritarianism—all around the world—tends to follow clear and consistent patterns, we can use these patterns to separate the signal from the noise. This basic framework—the authoritarian playbook—can help isolate clear and immediate dangers to democracy from partisan outrage, political hyperbole, and sensational spin.

<sup>1</sup>Mallory Newall, Chris Jackson, and James Diamond, [Seven in ten Americans say the country is in crisis, at risk of failing](#), NPR/Ipsos (Jan. 3, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, [Harvard Youth Poll](#) (Dec. 1, 2021).

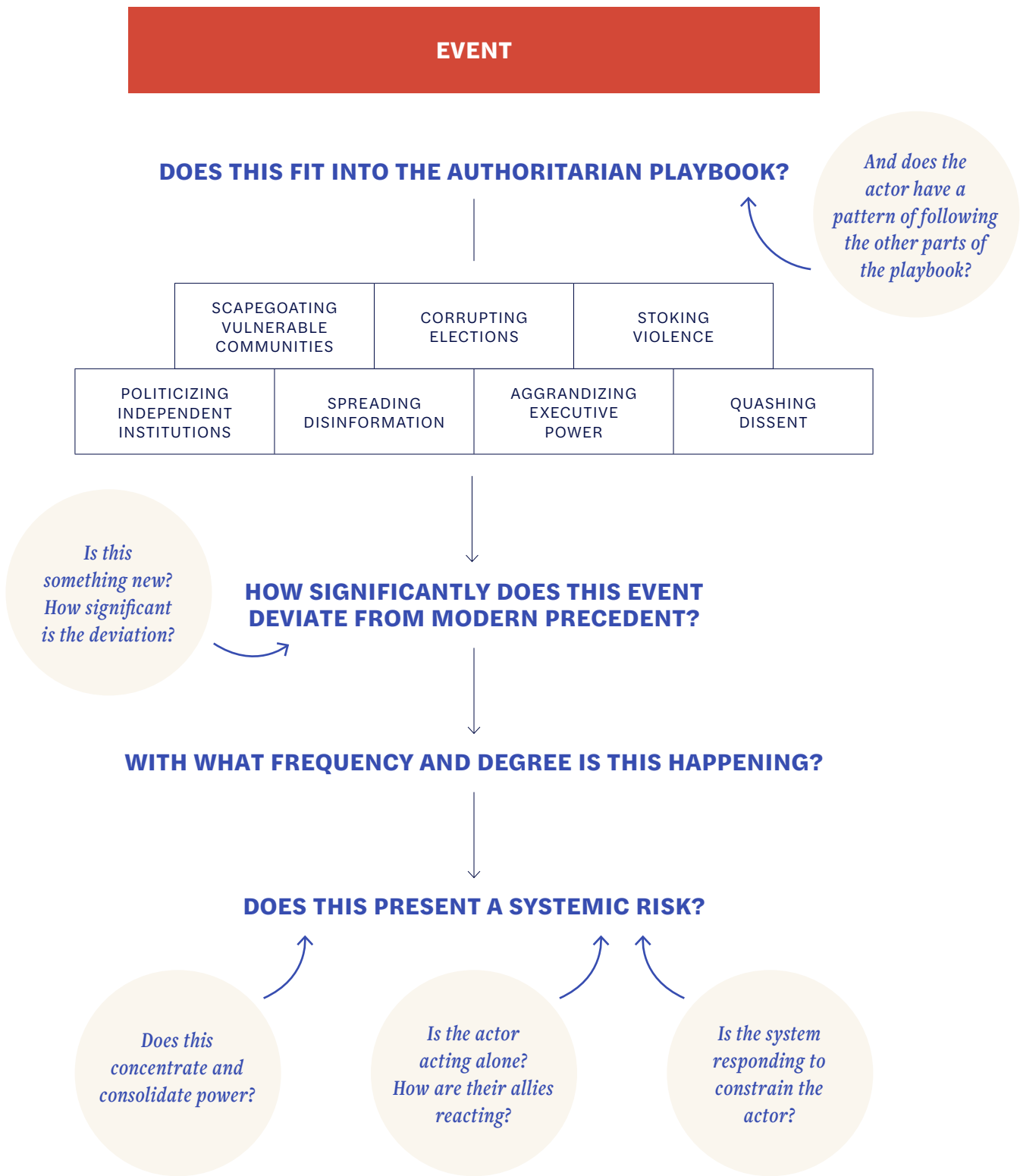
<sup>3</sup>Gallup/Knight Foundation, [American Views 2020: Trust Media and Democracy](#) (Aug. 4, 2020).

The press has a foundational role to play in how democratic systems hold leaders accountable, and doing so requires clarity about the gravity and implications of their actions. Understanding and recognizing the authoritarian playbook as a whole can help journalists not only decide what to cover as threats to democracy, but can also help enrich and contextualize coverage about how the individual components of the playbook fit together. Americans suspect that their democracy is at risk. But by identifying and connecting individual threats

to democracy to the global whole, reporting can help inform voters about more than just what is happening—it can tell them what the news means.

Covering the authoritarian danger requires that the press do two things: understand the interlocking components of the playbook itself, and distinguish between normal political jockeying and genuine authoritarian moves. This briefing is designed to help journalists do just that. For ease of reference, summaries of our suggestions are on page 25.

# How to differentiate authoritarian threats



# IDENTIFYING THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

Various scholars have written extensively about how would-be authoritarians pursue power and how democratic systems backslide towards more authoritarian forms of government. Experts such as Sheri Berman, Larry Diamond, Timothy Snyder, Kim Lane Scheppele, Steven Levitsky, and Daniel Ziblatt have published some of the foremost analyses of these issues. The Authoritarian Playbook we present here draws on all of these insights and offers a holistic framework for understanding the interrelated tactics involved in the process.

According to these leading scholars of democracy, aspiring modern authoritarians tend to employ the same **seven basic tactics in the pursuit of power**.

- 1 **They attempt to politicize independent institutions.**
- 2 **They spread disinformation.**
- 3 **They aggrandize executive power at the expense of checks and balances.**
- 4 **They quash criticism and dissent.**
- 5 **They specifically scapegoat vulnerable or marginalized communities.**
- 6 **They work to corrupt elections.**
- 7 **They stoke violence.**

These strategies are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Any events, stories, and actions that fit at least one of the seven plays is likely best understood in the context of the authoritarian playbook as a whole.

This section introduces and describes the authoritarian playbook with the intention of helping journalists identify specific norm-breaking conduct as part of the playbook. We've also provided suggestions on how to cover each tactic, found on page 25. Throughout, the paper includes guidance from experts on democratic decline around the world, and perspective on what to look out for here in the United States.

# Politicizing independent institutions

All democracies have certain functions that operate with some independence from partisan political actors. Central banking, law enforcement and courts, official statistics, financial accounting and regulation, election administration, intelligence and national security—all only work properly when appropriately protected from politics.

*Because of their potential to cause permanent institutional, legal, and economic damage, even early attacks on independent institutions should be treated as a substantial threat.*

These institutions are ripe targets for capture by autocratic factions, in whose hands they become weapons towards adversaries, shields against accountability, or, worst of all, levers of large-scale manipulation and corruption. Because of their potential to cause permanent institutional, legal, and economic damage, even early attacks on independent institutions should be treated as a substantial threat.

## CASE STUDY: ARGENTINA

In late-2000s Argentina, inflation was a growing political challenge for the authoritarian-leaning president, Nestor Kirchner. Convinced that rising inflation statistics were becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, Kirchner quietly fired the leadership of the official statistics agency and replaced them

with political allies. While the office put out rosier inflation reports from then on, the clearly false statistics had a real impact on actual inflation, with uncertainty helping drive prices up even further. In 2021, inflation in Argentina topped 50 percent.

## IN THE UNITED STATES

Some of the most concerning attempts to politicize independent institutions have involved attacks on law enforcement—especially the U.S. Department of Justice—and election administration. As of December, 2021, attempts to politicize previously independent election oversight and administration roles were underway in at least 7 states. Often, overt politicization efforts are cloaked in language delegitimizing non-partisan and professional civil service, a cornerstone of modern democracy, such as by labeling it “the deep state.”

## SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

### POLITICIZING INDEPENDENT INSTITUTIONS

- » Explain and contextualize the reasons why institutions were designed as independent, the rules and norms that have historically protected that independence, and the potential future consequences of politicization.
- » Rely on experts familiar with each particular institution’s history, including former appointed officials. For example, past Department of Justice employees and professional election officials are generally effective sources on the importance of independence for those institutions.

## Spreading disinformation

All politicians engage in spin, and many outright lie (at least occasionally). But authoritarians propagate and amplify falsehoods with abandon and ruthless efficiency. Often, this disinformation is spread through coordinated networks, channels, and ecosystems, including politically aligned or state-owned media. These lies have two purposes: first, they are political weapons aimed at crippling opponents and shoring up key constituencies through invented false grievances. And second, they are smokescreens for power grabs and abuses, insulating authoritarians against accountability. Often this cover is indirect, through mass doubt and confusion. The goal is not always to sell a lie, but instead to undermine the notion that anything in particular is true.

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### CASE STUDY: RUSSIA

The United States is no stranger to Russian disinformation campaigns. But Russia's campaigns directed abroad—designed to stoke divisions over everything from [elections](#) to [vaccinations](#)—pale in comparison to the disinformation ecosystem Vladimir Putin oversees at home. In addition to repression, Russian state media overwhelms dissent with a cacophony of false claims. According to a [RAND report](#), Putin's "firehose of falsehood" model, which emphasizes loud, multi-channel, inconsistent, and at times surreal disinformation, is surprisingly well-rooted in experimental psychology. This helps explain how Russian leaders are able to act with impunity, both at home and abroad.

### IN THE UNITED STATES

Disinformation is a unique challenge for the United States today, as authoritarian actors have taken advantage of our strong First Amendment

tradition and fragmented online information ecosystem. As a result, over a [third](#) of Americans believe the Big Lie—a coordinated disinformation campaign falsely claiming that the 2020 election was stolen. These lies, and the false sense of grievance they are designed to inspire, are almost certain to drive authoritarian attitudes for years to come. And

in the short-term, the Big Lie is being used as cover to [rewrite](#) election laws and lay the groundwork for potential future power grabs.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS SPREADING DISINFORMATION

- » Beware of the illusory truth effect, wherein disinformation can be inadvertently spread by stories that aim to debunk it. Impressions of truth come from hearing repeated claims, regardless of context.
- » Strictly avoid headlines that repeat false claims, even if contextualized, as disinformation spreads best through momentary impressions.
- » Cover disinformation as a story, not just a statement. Investigate and illuminate the systems, motives, funding, mechanisms, and actors spreading lies.

## Aggrandizing executive power, weakening checks and balances

Authoritarian projects cannot succeed without the cooperation or acquiescence of legislatures, courts, and other institutions designed to provide checks and balances. In some cases, authoritarians explicitly rewrite the rules to strengthen executive power and weaken legislatures, while in others they simply stack these competing institutions with lackeys and compliant allies. Authoritarians also often justify the expansion of executive power with cults of personality and aggrandizement of the trappings of office, while denigrating checks and balances as corrupt obstacles to the popular will.

### CASE STUDY: HUNGARY

When Viktor Orbán was elected Prime Minister for the second time in 2010—after eight years out of power—his first and most aggressive move was to [rewrite](#) the Hungarian Constitution. This new document, rushed through in a matter of months with almost no public visibility, consultation, or ratification, removed almost

all meaningful checks and balances, including by packing and de-clawing the Constitutional Court and other courts, gutting the ombudsman system, and gaining control over the central bank. Orbán also rewrote the [electoral rules](#) to reduce the size of Parliament and distort electoral outcomes in favor of his Fidesz party. (Perhaps ironically, these reforms brought Hungary closer to a U.S.-style electoral system, which systematically [advantages authoritarianism](#).) Taken together, these successful attacks on checks and balances make it less likely that Orbán will again lose power—ever.

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## IN THE UNITED STATES

A particular puzzle in the United States is how to distinguish genuinely authoritarian aggrandizement of executive power from the decades-long and bipartisan trends towards expanding presidential authority and valorizing the presidency. Some historical cases have been fairly clear. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt attempted to circumvent the Supreme Court's opposition to his New Deal legislation by expanding the Court from 9 members to 15, the effort was rejected even by members of his own party. When the administration of Ronald Reagan subverted Congressional restrictions on support to Nicaraguan rebels in the Iran-Contra Affair, the legislative branch was quick to defend its prerogatives. But while such examples reflect how the too-easily abused powers of the president have been exploited over decades by both parties, the Trump administration took this to [new heights](#). Trump especially embraced [emergency powers](#), [pardons](#), and [acting appointments](#) while [ignoring congressional subpoenas](#) and [spending appropriations](#), rejecting legislative oversight, and claiming immunity from judicial accountability.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

AGGRANDIZING EXECUTIVE POWER, WEAKENING CHECKS AND BALANCES

- » Provide context on the role of the executive branch in the governing process and how cutting out other branches and actors—the legislature, judiciary, state governments—can allow for unilateral action.
- » Rigorously investigate violations of process-oriented laws designed to limit executive power, such as the Hatch Act, Federal Vacancies Reform Act, and the Congressional Budget Act.
- » Avoid political intrigue stories that can, by overstating process dysfunction and conflicts, inadvertently help warm voters to executive power grabs.
- » Understand the legal mechanisms, purpose, and reform agendas behind the legal checks and balances between Congress and the White House.
- » Avoid uncritically covering political events and visuals that seem deliberately designed to aggrandize the presidency—regardless of who is president.

## Quashing criticism or dissent

Strong democracies have strong oppositions and an independent press who alert the public when those in power are abusing their positions.

Autocratic movements and regimes tend to weaken not only freedom of speech and the press, but the influence of any public voices (often media or civil society) that could serve as vocal counterpoints to the autocratic faction. In Hungary, for example, powerful allies of Viktor Orbán used their economic muscle to buy up and consolidate the vast majority of independent media, essentially making criticism of the ruling party, Fidesz, financially unviable. Multiple autocrats around the world have adopted the cry “fake news” as a way to

*Autocratic movements work to weaken the influence of any voices that could serve as counterpoints to the autocratic faction.*

delegitimize critical coverage. And while newsrooms are a favorite target, whistleblowers, civil society, activists, and religious leaders also regularly face attacks, jail time, and worse.

### CASE STUDY: THE PHILIPPINES

Historically, autocrats aiming to silence dissent have repressed critics with the threat of violence. That’s still true in the Philippines, where at least eleven journalists have been murdered since president Duterte came to power in 2016. But in addition to overt

force, the Duterte administration (like Russia, Turkey, and others) has relied on the threat of civil and even criminal libel lawsuits to coerce the self-censorship of journalists and dissidents. Even when



libel suits fail on their merits, the prospective costs of lengthy litigation can [stifle underfunded outlets from publishing critical work](#). Libel suits have the added benefit of appearing to adhere to the rule of law, even as their true intent is to constrain the public's access to information and ability to monitor those in power.

## IN THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. has a long tradition of independent media and vibrant dissent. And while the Trump administration's antagonistic relationship with reporters was well documented, the former president went beyond the typical back-and-forth with a critical press corps. He used, or threatened to use, the regulatory and enforcement powers of the state to punish the speech of journalists in at least four ways: initiating a government review to raise postal rates to punish the owner of the *Washington Post*; directing DOJ enforcement actions against media companies including CNN's parent company; interfering with White House press access; and threatening to revoke broadcast licenses.

And criticism and dissent can come from many sectors, not just civil society or the press. Government whistleblowers who report wrongdoing enjoy legal protection in America, but like authoritarian leaders the world over, Trump demonstrated little tolerance for internal dissent. In an attempt to obstruct accountability for his abuse of power, Trump and his allies used [intimidation and retaliatory attacks](#) against Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman to try to prevent him (and scare off others) from testifying before Congress during impeachment proceedings, and then to punish him for doing so.

More recently, several states have introduced or passed new laws, like Florida's "[anti-riot](#)" bill, that increase criminal penalties for protestors in the vicinity of demonstrations that turn violent. Restricting civil society's ability to mobilize dissent is a glaring indicator of democratic backsliding. There have also been—although to a far lesser degree—[proposed laws](#) that attempt to criminalize disinformation, but would do so in a way that violates fundamental rights.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

QUASHING CRITICISM OR DISSENT

- » Pay attention to proposed policy solutions that adopt overbroad standards and fail to consider whether targeted activities are protected fundamental rights.
- » Be especially wary of efforts to silence dissent within federal, state, and local public institutions, including universities and bureaucracies. A politicized bureaucracy or state institution can become a political apparatus rather than a body dedicated to public service.

## Scapegoating vulnerable communities

Democracy in diverse societies depends on protecting the rights of minorities. This includes political minorities who have lost at the ballot box and groups who identify as different from traditionally dominant majoritarian groups along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity. [Research has shown](#) that robust social ties reduce the effectiveness of repression. Therefore, modern-day autocrats use demographic identity as a way to sow division. This tactic also allows autocrats to claim a broad mandate after coming to power with only plurality support. Authoritarian parties in Hungary and Poland—while ascending to power with only plurality support—have demonized immigrants and use claims of representing “[the real Poles](#)” or “[the real Hungarians](#)” as ways of establishing a more legitimate popular mandate. As globalization and looser borders force many nations to grapple with questions about national identity, immigrants and refugees have been the targets of far-right populist parties across many backsliding democracies—including the United States.

### CASE STUDY: INDIA

The Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have used identity-based divisions to build and consolidate power over the course of several decades. From capitalizing on [anti-Muslim pogroms](#) to mobilize electoral support 20 years ago, to the more recent [Citizenship Amendment Act](#) that discriminates against Muslims seeking formal citizenship, the BJP has weaponized religious identity in favor of an [exclusionary identity politics](#) that risks undermining democracy altogether.

### IN THE UNITED STATES

Of course, drawing a hard line between differences in ideological or cultural beliefs and the targeted scapegoating of specific groups can be difficult. That said, autocrats tend to explicitly reject *any* benefits of pluralism or diverse societies. They employ political strategies that target minorities in a way that energizes and reinforces solidarity among their supporters. In the United States, where Black Americans have been marginalized for centuries, the language and rhetoric around voter fraud often nods to this history of racialized politics. But it’s not just about wielding culturally divisive “wedge” issues as political strategy. Authoritarians use state power to target and infringe on minority rights: from Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ [limiting of consent decrees](#), to the rolling back of Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH), and the exempting of certain lenders from the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act. More recently, in the last year in Texas, more than 40 bills were introduced that would [curb transgender rights](#).

### SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

#### SCAPEGUATING VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

- » Avoid narratives that present conflicts between powerful majority groups and more marginalized groups as equal or balanced.
- » Contextualize stories by explaining the centrality of minority rights in sustaining self-government, and in reducing the likelihood of violence, conflict, or repression.
- » Refrain from unnecessarily amplifying political rhetoric targeted at vulnerable communities.
- » Provide context on how authoritarian actors seek to exclude and dehumanize populations to consolidate power.

## Corrupting elections

The biggest innovation of 21st-century authoritarians has been to maintain the facade of democratic elections while at the same time tilting the rules against their opponents. They do this by suppressing votes and biasing, distorting, falsifying, or even overturning the results—either through capturing the referees or by manipulating the electoral rules in their favor.

### CASE STUDY: VENEZUELA

In 2017 and 2018, left-wing autocratic President Nicolás Maduro relied on an undemocratically-convened National Constituent Assembly composed of loyalists to manipulate the rules and timing in a series of elections to keep him in power. The most popular opposition parties and leaders were barred from running against him or the pro-government ruling party. And a series of hastily-held snap elections were scheduled to prevent the opposition from aligning on a unity candidate. Amidst accusations of ballot-tampering and boycotts by voters (fewer than half of registered voters turned up at the polls—a number the opposition claims was inflated), Maduro claimed a second term.

### IN THE UNITED STATES

Even in the face of perhaps the “[most secure election in U.S. history](#),” the integrity and structural features of elections in the U.S. are being tested. We now know an effort to block the certification of the 2020 election results involved [coordination](#) among state and local officials and former president Trump and his advisors. Since 2020, at least 19 states have passed election law changes that both [reduce ballot access](#) and provide [more opportunities](#) for partisan interference in the vote counting and certification process.

*21st-century authoritarians maintain the facade of democratic elections while at the same time tilting the rules against their opponents.*

### SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS

#### CORRUPTING ELECTIONS

- » Explain existing election processes and safeguards. Often, those who attempt to corrupt elections justify their actions by claiming that elections are insecure or vulnerable to fraud.
- » Center election officials and non-partisan experts. Stories that primarily quote partisan actors—including election lawyers—can contribute to false impressions that all aspects of elections are already politicized.
- » Illustrate the diverse ways that elections can be corrupted, ranging from voter suppression (restricting ballot access before an election) and biased electoral rules (such as gerrymandering) to election subversion (attempting to overturn or manipulate an election after the fact). Each strategy undermines free elections in different ways—with compounding implications for the health of democracy.

## Stoking violence

Finally, while healthy democratic actors always eschew civil violence, autocrats either deliberately look the other way or even intentionally inflame politically-useful violence. Such outbreaks can offer political cover for restrictions on civil liberties or the expansion of coercive security measures. They can also suppress voter turnout among opposition and inspire supporters to turn out in competitive areas.

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*As feelings of insecurity rise, social divisions become more salient and politicized and political leaders' incentives shift further towards hardball politics over negotiation and compromise.*

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Stoking violence advances authoritarian efforts in other areas of the playbook, such as quashing dissent, but it also undermines the norms and trust among political elites, as well as the broader population, that underpin democratic stability. As feelings of insecurity rise, social divisions become more salient and politicized and political leaders' incentives shift further towards hardball politics over negotiation and compromise.


### CASE STUDY: NICARAGUA

Though Nicaragua today is categorized as no longer being a democracy by key observers such as [Freedom House](#), its decline into authoritarianism

is a relatively recent phenomenon, one in which violence has played a central role. The 2006 election of President Daniel Ortega was followed by extensive corruption, consolidation of power by the ruling party, and infringements on individual rights and freedoms. It was also marked by violence. While police repression and politicization grew throughout the period of Ortega's presidency, the response to 2018 protests stands out as a stark example of how violence becomes an authoritarian's strategy of choice in the face of threats to their power. Months of protests were met with violence, not only from police, but from [pro-government "shock force"](#) gangs who had also previously been used to quell protests. In all, over 300 people died in the violence over several months, and the ordeal ended with protest activity being effectively banned and [dissidents going into hiding](#).

### IN THE UNITED STATES

The history of the United States includes plenty of violent episodes, particularly around elections and campaigns, as exemplified by years of violent intimidation of Black voters in the South. Recent decades have seen far fewer episodes of political violence, but recently this trend has reversed. Between 2020 and 2021, there were over [1,200 events](#) categorized as political violence in the United States, resulting in more than 150 deaths. The number of [hate crimes](#) reported to the FBI rose 41% between 2015 and 2020. International observers have expressed [deep concern](#) about the tone of American political campaigns and the way that it [raises the risk of violence](#) related to election outcomes. These trends



*The alignment of some political leaders with violent actors and the refusal of others to condemn violence contribute to a perception of impunity.*

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culminated in the January 6th insurrection, in which a violent mob stormed the U.S. Capitol, attempting to disrupt the lawful transfer of executive power following the 2020 election. 140 police officers were injured during the insurrection, and five deaths were attributed to the violence on that day. Yet the alignment of some political leaders with violent actors and the refusal of others to condemn violence contribute to a perception of impunity. This kind of violence both results from and contributes to declines in democratic norms and values.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNALISTS**

##### STOKING VIOLENCE

- » Remain attentive to how political leaders' statements are received by potentially violent actors. Politicians may offer statements with multiple messages, but the way those messages are understood matters.
- » Avoid sensationalizing violent events and inflating risk perceptions.
- » Explain the impact of violent events on democratic norms and processes in clear, concrete terms.
- » Examine policy responses to violence for their impact on other aspects of democracy, such as civil rights or the independence of government institutions.

# HOW TO CALIBRATE COVERAGE

While understanding the authoritarian playbook can help paint a broader, more nuanced picture of authoritarian threats and actions, journalists also have to weigh what to prioritize in a wave of threats. As Steve Bannon told the writer Michael Lewis in 2018, “The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.”

To avoid being swamped by this deluge, there are three balancing tests the media can apply to differentiate performative violations—which are often designed to inflame and distract—from real and grave democratic threats that deserve urgent coverage:

- 1 How much does this action deviate from recent precedent?
- 2 To what degree is this happening?
- 3 Does this action present a systemic risk to democracy?

## How significantly does this action deviate from modern precedent?

The authoritarian playbook empowers would-be autocrats to change the way a political system operates. It enables them to concentrate power in ways that are incompatible with robust, balanced democracy. Yet the day-to-day contestation that is inherent to democracy means that political actors push boundaries all the time. What is standard jockeying for advantage, and what represents

something more alarming? This can be considered in two parts: Is this action something new? And how significant of a deviation from recent practice is it?

Many actions and behaviors that we might perceive to be contrary to democratic principles are (unfortunately) standard practice in American politics. Gerrymandering presents one such example. Though hardly an asset to the strength of American democracy, it is a longstanding aspect of the system that has been practiced by both major parties.

Actions that depart from precedent are far more likely to constitute a component of democratic erosion. Donald Trump’s attempt to mount legal challenges to the 2020 election results through the courts—though unusual—was not without precedent. His refusal to publicly concede the election even once those legal challenges were exhausted and instead push falsified slates of electors constituted both a new and a significant departure from prior precedent. Both the novelty and severity of the action suggest this was a clear authoritarian threat to our democratic system.

Applying this standard requires judgment around two important caveats. First, the departure from precedent—even a significant departure—is not itself sufficient to confirm that an action contributes to democratic erosion. Some precedent is bad precedent—acting outside of it may actually be good for democracy. Challenging the racist practices of the Jim Crow era ran clearly counter to precedent, but was unquestionably pro-democracy. So the

substance of the action (i.e., whether it falls clearly into one of the strategies encompassed by the authoritarian playbook) is as important as its novelty.

Second, not all claims to precedent are equally robust. Some of the most dangerous authoritarian moves may well have nominal, legal, or technical precedents. But upon close examination, these claims to precedent often fall dramatically short. They may be based on entirely different circumstances, or precedent may have evolved over time. For example, when certain Republican legislators offered the election of 1876 as providing institutional precedent for managing a contested election in 2020, they were not entirely inventing the comparison out of whole cloth. Yet [essential differences](#) in the

circumstances of the 1876 election and the 2020 election nullified those claims to be acting based on precedent.

## To what degree is the authoritarian playbook action happening?

Novelty, however, is not the only criteria to assess. The threshold question is whether an action under consideration falls under any of the seven areas of the authoritarian playbook. If so, to what degree is this action happening, both in terms of intensity and frequency? Is the action an extreme abuse of power or democratic norms? Is a legal,

administrative, or political maneuver used only in certain circumstances in the past suddenly being employed far more regularly?

While a healthy democracy can accommodate occasional deviations from norms, the frequency with which an action deviates from prior practice and aligns with the authoritarian playbook is also vital to the analysis. A relatively isolated deviation from standard norms or processes does not necessarily

indicate democratic erosion, while a much more frequent deviation can—particularly when it risks establishing a new norm or legal precedent to normalize future misbehavior.

Take, for example, the Trump administration's response to Black Lives

Matter protests in 2020. In one instance, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Mark Milley, accompanied President Trump across Lafayette Square for a clearly political photo opportunity after a BLM protest. This was a departure from the strong precedent that the armed forces stand apart from partisan politics in the United States and sparked vocal concern. Yet Milley quickly acknowledged that his presence there was inappropriate and reportedly even considered resigning over the incident. The action was not repeated, minimizing the threat.

In contrast, the Trump administration's contemplated use of federal power to respond to Black Lives Matter protests posed a far more significant threat to democracy. Heavy-handed responses to protest,

**“In an authoritarian transition, what everyone thinks is normal is the authoritarian transition. Journalists have a responsibility to ask whether they are doing enough to record the strangeness or novelty of what politicians do.”**

TIMOTHY SNYDER, YALE UNIVERSITY

though contrary to democratic principles, are not without precedent in American history. Some actions considered by the Trump administration—including a proposal to invoke the Insurrection Act—would have risen to the level of **quashing criticism or dissent**. If implemented, such measures would have set precedents for forceful responses to future protests. Even now, we see legislative efforts in several states, such as Florida, that would provide a statutory basis for more heavy-handed responses to protests.

Take, in contrast, the use of vacancy appointments in the United States, or the chief executive's control of the bureaucracy. Even if the routine sidestepping of proper procedure did not speak for itself, the president openly [admitted](#) a preference for acting officials for the exact reasons the Founders imposed the requirement of Senate confirmation: "I sort of like 'acting' [officials]," Trump said. "It gives me more flexibility."

“Because democracies die in more subtle ways today, it is not always easy to tell when it is happening—much less explain it to readers. Because many contemporary assaults on democracy take forms that are legal or constitutional, they are easy to confuse with the bruising battles of normal day-to-day politics. But they are not normal. There are real and consequential differences, to which we must pay close attention.”

STEVEN LEVITSKY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY



# Does this action present a systemic risk to democracy?

To the extent that the authoritarian playbook has a central theme, it is that democratic erosion is a process of **power concentration and consolidation**. While all political actors seek to accumulate power, authoritarians, uniquely, seek to entrench that power and protect it from external checks. Experts generally agree that democracies don't tend to die at the hands of individuals alone. Rather, contemporary attacks on democracy only succeed when they are coordinated, systemic, and undertaken by broad parties or movements. An essential piece of distinguishing genuine risks from everyday politics is to look at the question of whether the democratic system still responds to constrain an individual actor who overreaches.

“The key thing... is how systemic the threat to democracy is. In other words, just as personalistic authoritarian regimes are more fragile than party-based ones (because when the leader disappears from personalistic regimes, the regime tends to crumble), threats to democracy that emanate not from the machinations of a single individual, but are rather rooted in an institutionalized party are much more dangerous.”

SHERI BERMAN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Actions from the authoritarian playbook that require the support of a wide range of powerful actors should be understood as more serious than those where

individuals or small groups appear to be acting alone. In practical terms, this means that authoritarian moves that are supported by institutions or well-established organizations—particularly political parties—are much larger threats than those undertaken by individuals acting alone. So a key question is whether an individual who engages in anti-democratic action is checked by another part of the system (typically their political party), or enabled by it.

Donald Trump's sustained efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election provide the most dire example of this danger. While Trump's individual efforts to undermine the election were dangerous in and of themselves, the large number of Republican members of Congress who voted against certifying the election results represent an even more severe risk. This has been further reflected in the Republican National Committee's censuring of Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their participation in the House January 6 Select Committee.

These examples stand in contrast to the way that the system responded to an earlier attempt at executive overreach during the final period of the Richard Nixon presidency. When Nixon not only engaged in electoral foul play, but also attempted to abuse the powers of his office to hide that fact, the key institutions constraining him did not “play along.” Instead, the institutions intended to constrain Nixon did so. The Saturday Night Massacre, for example, is remembered as an episode of presidential abuse. But it should also be remembered as a moment in

which multiple Justice Department leaders refused to comply with the politicization of their institution. Republicans in Congress similarly checked Nixon's attempts to stay in office by clearly and credibly signaling that he would be removed from office under impeachment. Both unelected and elected actors demonstrated that—despite the grave nature of the situation—the fundamental checks and balances of American democracy were functional.

## Keeping the full playing field in view

The threats to American democracy are real, but they are not always obvious. The authoritarian playbook outlined above can help journalists navigate three crucial challenges.

First, the salami tactics that make up the most common forms of backsliding today are extremely effective in incrementally chipping away at the quality of our democracy. Yet they rarely provide the type of brazen, system-wide threat that is so clear as to motivate a broad response in defense of democracy. As each new transgression normalizes new behavior, it shifts the perceived “red lines” another fraction, raising **the risk that the public will miss the story until it's too late**. The playbook offers journalists a framework for telling stories that might otherwise fly under the radar.

At the same time, though, the affinities between many tactics in the authoritarian playbook and normal political jockeying in a competitive democracy present a different risk. If every attempt to gain political advantage is presented as an authoritarian threat, the press will quickly be

perceived as crying wolf. Journalists run **the risk of losing credibility if coverage is not judicious**. Here again, we have endeavored to provide resources for separating the real threats from the political noise.

Finally, and principally, **context matters deeply to all of these stories**. The threat that any authoritarian action poses to our democracy can only be evaluated against the overall state of the country's political health. This requires a sense of what prior events or actions have intentionally or coincidentally laid the foundation for democratic backsliding. But the would-be authoritarian is not the only actor whose behavior impacts this landscape. Their allies and supporters may have taken steps that amplify the dangers of a given action. Their opposition may have taken steps—even in the name of protecting democracy—that create new vulnerabilities. The public cannot fully appreciate the implications of any threat to democracy without visibility into these key pieces of the puzzle.

Understanding the authoritarian threat today requires clarity and context. The press is always essential to democracy's stability, but never more so than now.

# EXPERTS TO TALK TO

**SHERI BERMAN** Columbia University

**LARRY DIAMOND** Stanford University

**WILLIAM HOWELL** University of Chicago

**AZIZ HUQ** University of Chicago Law School

**DIDI KUO** Stanford University

**STEVEN LEVITSKY** Harvard University

**JENNIFER MCCOY** Georgia State University

**ANNE MENG** University of Virginia

**MICHAEL MILLER** George Washington University

**YASCHA MOUNK** Johns Hopkins University

**KIM LANE SCHEPPELE** Princeton University

**DAN SLATER** University of Michigan

**TIMOTHY SNYDER** Yale University

**SUSAN STOKES** University of Chicago

**DANIEL ZIBLATT** Harvard University

# QUICK REFERENCE FOR REPORTING ON THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

1	<b>Politicization of independent institutions</b>
Explain why institutions are independent, the rules and norms that have historically protected that independence, and the potential future consequences of politicization.	
2	<b>Spread of disinformation</b>
Beware of the illusory truth effect, or the tendency of audiences to believe false information when exposed to it again and again. As such, be careful that disinformation is not inadvertently spread by stories that aim to debunk it. And illuminate the systems, motives, funding, and actors spreading lies, covering disinformation as a story, not just a statement.	
3	<b>Aggrandizement of executive power</b>
Contextualize the executive branch's role in the governing process and how cutting out other actors—Congress, judiciary, state governments—can allow for unilateral action. While doing so, try to avoid political intrigue stories that, if overstating process dysfunction and conflicts, can inadvertently help warm voters to executive power grabs.	
4	<b>Quashing of dissent</b>
Pay attention to proposed policy solutions that adopt overbroad standards and fail to consider whether targeted activities are protected fundamental rights. Be especially wary of efforts to silence dissent within federal, state, and local public institutions, including universities and bureaucracies.	
5	<b>Scapegoating vulnerable communities</b>
Authoritarian actors consolidate power by seeking to dehumanize and exclude certain groups, and it's important to avoid presenting conflicts between powerful majority groups and marginalized groups as equal or balanced. Coverage should also help readers appreciate the centrality of minority rights in sustaining self-government, and in reducing the likelihood of violence, conflict, or repression.	
6	<b>Corrupting of elections</b>
Help readers understand the diverse ways that elections can be corrupted, ranging from voter suppression (restricting ballot access before an election) and biased electoral rules (such as gerrymandering) to election subversion (attempting to overturn or manipulate an election after the fact). What's more, because those who attempt to corrupt elections often justify their actions by claiming that elections are insecure or vulnerable to fraud, continue to vigorously explain existing election processes and safeguards.	
7	<b>Stoking of violence</b>
Remain attentive to how political leaders' statements are received by potentially violent actors. Politicians may offer statements with multiple messages, but the way those messages are understood matters. Also, avoid sensationalizing violence and inflating risk perceptions. And explain the impact of violent events on democratic norms and processes in clear, concrete terms.	

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON THE AUTHORITARIAN PLAYBOOK

## 1 Politicization of independent institutions

- » International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Independent Regulatory and Oversight (Fourth-Branch) Institutions* (2019).
- » Protect Democracy, *No “Absolute Right” to Control DOJ: Constitutional Limits on White House Interference with Law Enforcement Matters* (2018).
- » National Conference on State Legislatures, *Election Administration at State and Local Levels* (2020).
- » Tim Stretton, *Independence of the Federal Reserve*, Project on Government Oversight (Oct. 16, 2019).
- » Charles Stewart III, *Administering Elections in a Hyper-Partisan Era*, MIT Political Science (Oct. 21, 2021).
- » Arch Puddington, *Breaking Down Democracy*, Freedom House (2017).
- » Jack Goldsmith, *Independence and Accountability at the Department of Justice*, Lawfare Blog (Jan. 30, 2018).
- » Rachel Kleinfeld, *The Politicization of Our Security Institutions*, Just Security (Apr. 25, 2018).
- » Ben Berwick and Ariela Rosenberg, *Trump’s Politicization of Law Enforcement is Authoritarian in Nature*, Take Care Blog (Mar. 9, 2018).
- » American Oversight, *Politicization of the Justice Department* (Jul. 31, 2021).

## 2 Spread of disinformation

- » *Law For Truth*.
- » Data & Society, *10 Tips for Reporting on Disinformation* (2020).
- » Shorenstein Center, *Research Initiative: Disinformation*.
- » Susan Benkelman, *Getting it right: Strategies for truth-telling in a time of misinformation and polarization*, American Press Institute (Dec. 11, 2019).
- » Whitney Phillips, *The Oxygen of Amplification*, Data & Society (May 22, 2018).
- » Institute for the Future, *Journalism and False Information* (2022).
- » Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, *Freedom on the Net 2021*, Freedom House (2021).
- » Anton Shirikov, *Fake News for All: Misinformation and Polarization in Authoritarian Regimes* (Sep. 12, 2021).
- » *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*.
- » PEN America, *Disinfo Defense Toolkit* (2020).
- » Andrew Rockway, *Lessons from 2020: How local newsrooms responded to unprecedented challenges*, American Press Institute (Apr. 6, 2021).

## 3 Aggrandizement of executive power

- » *Protecting Our Democracy Act*.
- » Protect Democracy, *Roadmap to Renewal: A Legislative Blueprint for Restoring Our Democracy*.
- » Project on Government Oversight, *Checks and Balances*.
- » The Brennan Center for Justice, *Executive Power*.
- » National Conference of State Legislatures, *Separation of Powers—An Overview* (May 1, 2021).
- » Open The Government, *Accountability 2021*.
- » Citizens for Ethics and Responsibility in Washington, *Restoring Checks on Executive Power* (Dec. 20, 2020).
- » Will Freeman, *Sidestepping the Constitution: Executive Aggrandizement in Latin America and East Central Europe*, Constitutional Studies (2020).
- » International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Global State of Democracy Report 2021* (2021).
- » Tarunabh Khaitan, *Executive Aggrandizement in Established Democracies: A Crisis of Liberal Democratic Constitutionalism*, International Journal of Constitutional Law (Dec. 16, 2018).

## 4

## Quashing of dissent

- » Reporters Without Borders, [United States](#).
- » Freedom House, [Media Freedom](#).
- » PEN America, [United States](#).
- » US-Helsinki Commission, [Tools of Transnational Repression: How Autocrats Punish Dissent Overseas](#) (Sep. 12, 2019).
- » Marcus Michaelsen, [The Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit, and Its Silencing Effects](#), Freedom House (2020).
- » Protect Democracy, [PEN America settles landmark First Amendment lawsuit with U.S. Government](#) (Feb. 18, 2021).
- » Transnational Institute, [Understanding and Challenging Authoritarianism](#) (Nov. 30, 2017).
- » Center for the Protection of Journalists, [Spyware and Press Freedom](#).
- » Knight Foundation-Ipsos, [Free Expression in America post-2020](#) (2022).
- » Floyd Abrams et al., [Symposium: Is Free Speech Under Threat in the United States?](#), Commentary (Jul./Aug. 2017).

## 5

## Scapegoating vulnerable communities

- » Human Rights Watch, [The Dangerous Rise of Populism: Global Attacks on Human Rights Values](#) (2017).
- » Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, [Why Civil Resistance Works](#), Columbia University Press (Aug. 2011).
- » Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, [Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women](#), Foreign Affairs (Mar./Apr. 2022).

## 6

## Corrupting of elections

- » Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, [Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism](#), Journal of Democracy (Apr. 2002).
- » Protect Democracy, [Advantaging Authoritarianism: The U.S. Electoral System & Antidemocratic Extremism](#) (2022).
- » States United Democracy Center, Law Forward, and Protect Democracy, [A Democracy Crisis in the Making](#) (2022).
- » National Task Force on Election Crises, [Covering the Election Before, During, and After Nov. 3](#) (2020).
- » Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, [How to Rig an Election](#), Yale University Press (Oct. 22, 2019).
- » Freedom House, [Election Integrity](#).
- » International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, [Elections](#).
- » Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, [Elections Under Authoritarianism](#), The Annual Review of Political Science (2009).

## 7

## Stoking of violence

- » Rachel Kleinfeld, [The Rise of Political Violence in the United States](#), Journal of Democracy (Oct. 2021).
- » Anjali Dayal, Alexandra Stark, and Megan A. Stewart, [Warnings of 'Civil War' Risk Harming Efforts Against Political Violence](#), War on The Rocks (Jan. 18, 2022).
- » Princeton University, [Bridging Divides Initiative](#).
- » [Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project \(ACLED\)](#).
- » New America, [Preventing Political Violence in America](#) (Jan. 6, 2022).

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