

Is U.S. Democracy Really at Risk? A Framework for Assessing Threats

July 8, 2025



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Feb. 10, 2025

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Trump's moves test the limits of presidential power and the resilience of US democracy

As events and actions arise, how can we—as practitioners, policymakers, and citizens—assess the potential threat to U.S. democracy while minimizing partisan bias?



Aim for today

- Describe an evidence-based approach to evaluating potential threats to democracy.
- Present our plans to create a publicly available US-focused dataset documenting backsliding events since 2000.
- Discuss ways to address partisan bias in order to develop a dataset that is perceived as credible as possible by different parties.

Key Takeaways

- **On legality:** Focusing on legality is inadequate because even legal acts can threaten democracy and courts can become biased.
- **On partisanship:** Partisan blinders make it harder to assess genuine democratic threat. We need to normalize pushing back on partisan bias, using known strategies for effectively countering such bias.
- **On comparisons:** Comparisons are useful, but effective comparison is hard. To understand the U.S., we should compare with liberal democracies, not just to extreme cases where backsliding has occurred.

What is the Democratic Erosion Consortium (DEC)?

- DEC is a partnership of **researchers, students, policymakers, and practitioners** committed to marshaling evidence to understand and counter threats to democracy in the U.S. and worldwide.
- Initiatives include teaching and pedagogy, synthesizing evidence, outreach and network building.
- Additionally, we produce the Democratic Erosion Event Dataset (DEED)
 - Records over 15,000 events since 2000 across 175 countries
 - Complements aggregate indicators like V-Dem and Freedom House

DEED Analytic Framework

- Key value added of DEED is our framework for categorizing events
 - Collaboration with NDI influenced this framework
- Event types:
 - Precursors
 - Symptoms
 - Resistance
- Distinguish between accountability types
 - Vertical vs. Horizontal

Sample Event Codes

	Precursor	Symptom	Resistance	Destabilizing Events
Increases or decreases to Horizontal Accountability	Delegitimizing or weakening the judiciary Delegitimizing or weakening the legislature Delegitimizing or weakening subnational units Manipulation of civil service Coup or regime collapse Horizontal corruption	Reduction in judicial independence Reduction in legislative oversight Weakened civil service or integrity institutions Suspension of laws or the constitution Relaxation of term limits Revision of the constitution Reduction autonomy of subnational units	Check on executive by judiciary Check on executive by legislature Check on central power by subnational units Check on central power by civil service Post-democratic transition to new constitution	Elite infighting Challenge from extremist/populist factions Coup or regime collapse
Increases or decreases to Vertical Accountability	Co-optation of the opposition Mal-apportionment Electoral fraud Electoral violence Increasing control over civil society State-conducted violence or abuse Media bias Lack of legitimacy Polarization Extremist/populist parties Vertical corruption	Repression of the opposition Systemic reduction in election freedom and fairness Curtailed civil liberties Media repression No-confidence votes or decreased voter turnout Foreign military action Discrimination against minorities	Coalitions or elite pacts Increase in electoral integrity Increase in civic capacity Nonviolent protest Violent protest Increase in media protections/media liberalization	Non-state political violence Rejecting election results



Focusing on legality is inadequate.

Many erosion events are legal,
and courts themselves can become biased.



What U.S. law says about Trump's deployment of active duty troops to Los Angeles

Politics Jun 12, 2025 4:15 PM EDT



Explainer: Are Trump's mass firings of federal workers legal?

Trump's Actions Have Created a Constitutional Crisis, Scholars Say

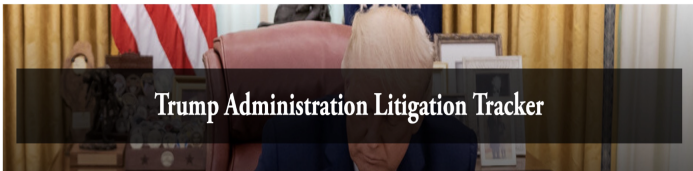


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Litigation Tracker: Legal Challenges to Trump Administration Actions

LAWFARE



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(1) Legal actions can erode democracy

- Hungary: Legislature legally passed laws with democratic implications (independence of the media, judiciary)
- US:
 - Presidential pardons are legal but potentially harm democracy by undermining rule of law, shielding corruption, hurting trust in institutions.
 - Executive orders are (generally) legal but potentially expand presidential power.
- Need to evaluate the events themselves, independent of legality.

(2) Legal processes lag behind political realities

- Only courts can determine whether an action is illegal—but they are often **slow**, and by the time they rule, the damage may be done.
- Focusing on legality can be **demobilizing**: defenders of democracy may wait for courts to act instead of confronting threats directly.
- Legal rulings can create **false reassurance**—people may move on if an action is deemed legal, even when it undermines democracy.

(3) Courts are not necessarily neutral defenders of democracy

- Many examples worldwide of executive capture of the courts through **court-curbing**.
- Courts have become a **rubber stamp** for executive aggrandizement in countries like Turkey and Hungary.
- Supreme Court in **Brazil** may have become *too* powerful:
 - Left interpretation is that the court expanded its power to protect democracy during Pres. Bolsonaro.
 - Right interpretation is that the reforms went too far and are now threats to democracy themselves.

We have to acknowledge partisan bias.

Partisan bias is pervasive on all sides.
Partisan blinders make it impossible to agree on an understanding of democratic erosion. We need strategies to take them off.





Trump signs orders cracking down on
diversity and inclusion at US universities



**Conservatives outraged over Obama transgender
directive to public schools**



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How Trump unleashed executive power

U.S. President Donald Trump was quick to start fulfilling his second administration's agenda, all with a stroke of a pen.



Executive Order tyranny -- Obama plans to rule America with pen, phone



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Strategy 1: Embrace reverse “whataboutism”

- **Whataboutism:** Reflexively defending your side by pointing to the other sides’ transgressions.
 - **Example:** Democrats claim Trump is pressuring universities, Republicans respond: “What about when Obama did this?”
- **Reverse whataboutism:** Questioning your own side when pointing to the other sides’ transgressions.
 - **Example:** Democrats ask themselves “Did Obama ever do this?”
- Media silos make reflection hard by limiting available information – event data can help.

Strategy 2: Apply a “Veil of Ignorance”

- Ask yourself: If you didn't know which party was behind an action, how would you judge its impact on democracy?
 - **Party-specific example:** Trump pressures universities—Republicans should ask, “How would I react if a Democrat did this?”
 - **General example:** A president threatens to cut funding and control hiring at universities for violating civil liberties.
 - **Question:** Is this a legitimate safeguard—or an attack on academic freedom? Would your view change if the party were revealed?

Even without blinders on, resolving partisan conflict is hard

- 2 types of partisan conflict over threats to democracy
 - ① Opposition calls an action erosion; incumbent justifies it on the basis of policy aim
 - Civil liberties vs public health (Covid under Biden)
 - Privacy vs. national security (9/11 under Bush)
 - ② Partisan disagreements constitute trade-offs over different democratic principles
 - Election security vs. broad participation (Voter ID laws)
- Our DEED event framework is more useful in adjudicating the first type of conflict
- For thornier ones like the second, we are organizing cross-partisan expert working groups

Avoid reflexive and extreme comparisons.

It's tempting to compare the U.S. to the most extreme cases of democratic erosion. But meaningful comparisons require casting a wider net—especially to other consolidated democracies.



THE NEW YORKER

IS TURKEY'S DECLINING DEMOCRACY A MODEL FOR TRUMP'S AMERICA?



**'In a real sense, US democracy has died':
how Trump is emulating Hungary's
Orbán**

**GOP senators break ranks on Trump's
military parade - one compares it to
North Korea**

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The challenge of comparison

- It is natural to want to compare, but good comparison is hard.
 - **Country-level:** Is the U.S. becoming Hungary (or Turkey or Brazil)?
 - **Event-level:** Is pressure on universities under Trump similar to pressure on universities under Orban?
- There's a tendency to compare the U.S. to the most extreme examples of democratic erosion.
- In doing so, it's easy to overlook cases where similar events occurred but did *not* lead to erosion.
- Better to evaluate events across a wide range of countries—including liberal democracies in Western Europe—not just eroding ones.



Example 1: Calls to Impeach Judges

- In March 2025, President Trump posted on Truth Social that judges who rule against his administration should be impeached. Where else have we seen this?
- Our data shows:
 - **Argentina (2023):** President Fernández called for Supreme Court judges to be impeached after they struck down one of his decrees.
 - **Brazil (2022):** President Bolsonaro called for judicial impeachment after the court launched an investigation into his election fraud claims.
 - **Western Europe:** No comparable calls in these countries or others with long-standing democratic institutions.
- This pattern suggests such events are more common in less consolidated democracies—and may signal deeper threats to judicial independence.

Example 2: Targeting the Civil Service

- Much criticism of President Trump for targeting the civil service. Where else have we seen this?
- Our data shows similar one-off examples from other consolidated democracies:
 - **Canada 2018:** Trudeau fires attorney general over refusal to protect a Canadian business interest
 - **Czech Republic 2019:** Prime Minister charged with fraud forces Justice Minister to resign
 - **Japan 2014:** The government established a Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs to manage the list of the candidates for high-ranking positions and to administer the civil service

Example 2: Targeting the Civil Service

- Yet, interference with the bureaucracy is often more extreme in severely backsliding countries.
 - **Poland 2015:** In the first 6 months of PiS's power, 96.9% of heads of state-owned companies and managerial positions of public administration were replaced by party loyalists.
- Understanding the severity of the US event should take all these examples into account.
 - How does it compare in extent and duration?
 - Is it part of a larger cluster of events (as in Poland but not in other countries)?

Where do we go from here?

Drawing on our past international work while recognizing the challenges of the US case, how can we build a robust, non-partisan repository of events that represent democratic threats?



Building a U.S. Democratic Erosion Events Datasets

- Address challenges of partisan conflict head-on
 - Document extent of bipartisan agreement over interpretations of potential threats
 - Document nature of conflicting partisan interpretations where they exist (using diverse news sources and AI)
 - Organize thematic cross-partisan expert working groups
 - Convene grassroots debates in collaboration with Braver Angels
- We are interested in your feedback on these plans to develop a dataset that seeks to be credible across partisan groups



So... Is Democracy in the U.S. Really at Risk?

- Our dataset will help answer critical questions:
 - How serious is the threat to U.S. democracy—overall and within key domains (e.g., judiciary, media)?
 - What is the net level of backsliding—i.e., erosion events relative to resistance?
 - How has democratic erosion in the U.S. evolved over time?
- It enables more meaningful cross-national comparisons:
 - Compare the U.S. to peer democracies, not just extreme cases
 - Contextualize U.S. events using global benchmarks
- It improves how we assess events:
 - Evaluate events from both parties using the same standards
 - Assess the cumulative severity of democratic backsliding



How might this framework and dataset be used?

- Generate insights about effective and ineffective measures to counter threats
- Help civil society, funders, activists to identify and prioritize more important democratic threats
- Incorporate findings into media training, public education and civic education programs

Thank you!

We look forward to your feedback...



Have questions or suggestions? Get in touch!

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