

# Trump's Attack on Democracy Is Faltering

Quinta Jurecic

The past year has been an *annus horribilis* for American democracy. Donald Trump launched an assault on any source of authority besides himself—prosecuting his political enemies, punishing dissenters both in and out of government, and following his own impulses regardless of law or norms. As the first year of Trump's second term drew to a close, the administration launched an operation to arrest the Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro without bothering to seek congressional assent, doubled down on its obsession with seizing Greenland, and proclaimed “absolute immunity” for the ICE agent who shot and killed Renee Nicole Good in Minneapolis. Top experts in authoritarianism [now contend](#) that America can no longer be characterized as a democracy.

And yet, the prognosis for democracy in the United States is far better today than it was at the start of Trump's second term, when Elon Musk's DOGE was stripping the federal government for parts and even normally sober observers began talking seriously about the constitutional crises that would follow if Trump defied the Supreme Court. Since then, American democracy has started to show signs of life: The popularity Trump enjoyed after the election has vanished, protesters have marched in record numbers to oppose his one-man rule, and citizens have shown up to defend their neighbors from immigration enforcement and other federal forces. That bravery has helped encourage opposition politicians to take more and more forceful stands. District judges, meanwhile, continue to throw up roadblocks to the president's plans.

None of this means that American democracy as we know it will survive—especially given the threat of Trump's potential interference in the 2026 and 2028 elections—but it has a pulse. As Trump's term goes on, the administration appears less capable of establishing durable authoritarian rule, and the possibility that the nation will find a way through the chaos with self-government intact no longer seems quite as remote. “In normal liberal democracy terms, the United States is in bad shape,” the international-relations scholar Nicholas Grossman [wrote recently](#). But, he went on, considering that the country is struggling against an attempted authoritarian takeover, “we're doing pretty well.”

[Jonathan Lemire: Trump is suddenly looking a lot smaller](#)

Some of Trump's troubles are of his own making: He pushed too far, too fast. During his first term, the president found himself stymied by aides and civil servants who tried to limit the damage caused by his whims. He learned his lesson—this time around, he has staffed his administration with sycophants eager to cast out anyone who objects. Yet this assault on professionalism has also undermined Trump's ability to get what he wants, because nobody left will tell him that what he wants is impossible, deeply unpopular, or both. *Vox's* Zack Beauchamp describes this mode of governance as “[haphazardism](#),” a form of authoritarianism that is “poorly executed and even self-undermining.”

Consider Trump's attempt to bring meritless criminal cases against his political opponents, a longtime desire blocked by Justice Department leadership during his first term. This time, Attorney General Pam Bondi has gone along with efforts to prosecute former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James—but the department handled the cases so sloppily that a district court has already thrown them out. Courts have barred similarly slapdash efforts to [appoint a slate of Trump-friendly prosecutors](#), [harass law firms the president dislikes](#), [withhold federal funding from a range of institutions](#), and [deploy the National Guard to peaceful cities](#) despite opposition from blue-state governors. That said, judicial defiance has been more pronounced in the lower courts. The Supreme Court has proved disturbingly willing to rubber-stamp the administration's actions, with the exception of its recent ruling barring Trump's use of the National Guard.

The administration similarly overreached with its campaign to oust Jimmy Kimmel from his late-night ABC spot over a joke about the Republican Party's eagerness to use Charlie Kirk's death to "score political points." Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr was too enthusiastic in publicly pressuring Disney, ABC's parent company, to suspend Kimmel's show. The heavy-handedness provoked a public backlash, and Disney, faced with skyrocketing rates of subscription cancellations, reinstated the late-night host. On immigration enforcement—Trump's signature issue—the brutality and clumsiness of the mass-deportation campaign has [decreased public support for the president's agenda](#) and increased the number of Americans who [strongly disapprove of ICE](#).

As Trump began to struggle, the opposition [found its voice](#). His military parade in June was countered by millions of protesters who gathered at "No Kings" demonstrations across the country and returned again in October for what may have been the largest [single-day protest](#) in American history. With the National Guard and immigration enforcement moving from city to city, residents—including people not typically among the ranks of demonstrators—have developed and shared tactics of opposition to protect their neighbors. "I've never protested in my life," one man who gathered with others on a Minneapolis street [told the freelance reporter Zach D. Roberts](#).

These are the kind of losses that a would-be dictator still in the early stages of establishing a regime simply can't afford. Successful contemporary authoritarians, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, tend to ride into office on a wave of popular support and then shore up those high approval ratings while chipping away at governing institutions. By the time a substantial portion of the public wants to stop them, it's too late. Trump, though, lacks both the self-control required to move slowly and the connection to reality required to understand what is and isn't popular outside his most committed base. He seems to particularly enjoy the [aesthetics of authoritarianism](#), delighting in the spectacle of armed National Guard members descending on a liberal-leaning city—but those aesthetics are repulsive to many Americans. Likewise, his obsession with tariffs has contributed to economic discontent and dragged down his approval ratings as voters continue to complain about inflation.

Early in 2025, scholars were [horrified](#) by how forcefully Trump appeared to be speeding through the process of establishing authoritarian rule—more quickly than almost any contemporary dictator. It turns out that there might be a reason the other rulers moved more slowly.

Together, these factors create a virtuous cycle of sorts. Trump's malice and incompetence alienates voters, who then publicly voice their discontent, encouraging other political actors and institutions to see him not as a crusading avatar of national destiny but as a weakened figure. The law firms that caved early to Trump have [suffered from a loss of talent and business](#), a development that may encourage other firms to fight back. Many news organizations have continued their aggressive reporting on the administration despite threats to the freedom of the press.

Although Trump remains the dominant force in the Republican Party, he no longer wields the iron authority he once did. He has withdrawn a [record number of nominations](#)—a tacit admission that his administration lacked the votes to force them through the Senate—and failed to persuade Congress to [maintain devastating cuts](#) to government services. Meanwhile, Democratic politicians such as Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker and California Governor Gavin Newsom are taking up the cause of opposition to Trump. After Trump's inauguration, conventional wisdom portrayed that kind of resistance as a political dead end. Today, however, ambitious leaders understand the approach as one that could boost them to higher office. This enthusiasm surged after Democratic candidates overperformed in November's off-year elections. "The period of despair is over," [announced](#) Democratic Senator Jon Ossoff of Georgia after the results were tallied. But, he said, the fight had to continue: "The only way out is victory in the midterms."

[From the November 2025 issue: America needs a mass movement—now](#)

Trump is now in a bind. To avoid accountability for his abuses, he desperately needs the Republican Party to hold on to both houses of Congress in 2026 ("If we don't win the midterms," [he said recently](#), "I'll get impeached"). And yet he refuses to back down from the authoritarian strategies that are sinking his popularity and Republicans' odds, especially in the House. The more unpopular he becomes, the less

effective his efforts to hack his way into a midterm victory will be. His plan to bully red-state Republican-led legislatures into mid-decade redistricting to wipe out Democratic seats is floundering; GOP legislators in Indiana and Kansas rejected his demands, and blue-state Democrats have countered through gerrymanders of their own. And his declining poll numbers also increase the chances that Democrats take the House by a significant enough margin that Trump would have no real means of upending the election results through claims of fraud.

None of this is reassuring, exactly. Trump's second term has been defined by his inability to respond to setbacks in any way except escalation, and the turbulent first few weeks of 2026 are a reminder of just how dangerous that instinct can be. As the political writer Jonathan Bernstein [put it](#), Trump's presidency "is somehow both getting much stronger and much weaker at the same time"—stronger, in the sense that he acts more aggressively when he can; weaker, in the sense that those expressions of pique further box him in politically. Facing a growing and galvanized opposition, and with fewer and fewer options for shoring up his authority, Trump may have already squandered his chance to build a post-democratic America. The question now is how much damage he can do in his waning years of power.