



# Understanding Authoritarianism: *Definitions & Resources*

## What is democracy?

Forms of rights-based representative government in which:

- elected government leadership is constrained by constitutionalism, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the free expression of the people, and the legal protection and moral affirmation of the rights of individuals; and,
- groups and parties that are not part of electoral majorities cannot easily be disenfranchised or suffer loss of rights of association, voice, and legal protection by the electorally determined leadership.

Source: [\*Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century\*](#)

## What is authoritarianism?

A constellation of traits in a political, economic, and/or social system, which often include:

- **The concentration of power in the hands of a small group of people who act in ways that are not constitutionally accountable** to the people they are meant to represent and serve.
- **The misuse of the power of the state to advance the personal and/or partisan desires** of the head of state or a ruling clique (e.g., persecuting political opponents, subverting honest elections).
- **A concerted effort by a network of organizations and institutions** (political parties, legislatures, think tanks, media outlets, businesses, security forces, religious and cultural institutions, etc.) **to legitimize an oppressive system** by providing it social, political, financial, moral sources of power.
- **A system that is willing to engage in a spectrum of undemocratic practices** from sowing lies and conspiracy theories, to using fear and violence to manipulate, divide people, and maintain power.
- **Often emerges “legally”, by democratically elected leaders who subvert democratic norms and institutions** to stay in power. In the US, closely linked to predatory policing and mass incarceration.
- **A slow and quiet advance over a period of years where small battles weaken the foundations of democracy**, which can culminate in a period of rapid democratic losses and decline.

## What is it *not*?

- A single individual or a few individuals, their character, or a presumed lack of morals.
- A partisan policy position that you may find disagreeable.
- A “red”, “blue”, “left”, or “right” phenomenon – any party or ideology is susceptible.

## What are the core attributes of authoritarianism?

- ⇒ Rejecting democratic rules of game.
- ⇒ Denying the legitimacy of opponents.
- ⇒ Tolerating or encouraging political violence.
- ⇒ Curtailing the civil liberties of opponents.

## What are the top elements of the *authoritarian playbook*?

1. **Divide and rule:** Foment mistrust and fear; actively scapegoat and pit groups against each other.
2. **Spread lies and conspiracies:** Actively promote mis/disinfo; undermine the public’s belief in truth.
3. **Destroy checks and balances and undermine institutions:** Quietly use legal or pseudo-legal rationales to gut institutions (bureaucracies, courts, electoral institutions), undermine their independence, and weaken opposition.

4. **Demonize opponents and independent media:** Undermine the public's trust in those actors and institutions that hold the state accountable.
5. **Undermine civil and political rights and criminalize dissent:** Actively suppress free speech, the right to assembly and protest and the rights of women and minority groups; restrict NGO activities.
6. **Blame minorities, immigrants, and "outsiders" for a country's problems:** Exploit national humiliation while promising to restore national glory.
7. **Deploy military forces** to address public security problems and/or declare national emergencies to seize unconstitutional powers.
8. **Reward loyalists and punish defectors:** Make in-group members fearful to voice dissention.
9. **Encourage or condone violence to advance political goals:** Dehumanize opposition and/or out-groups to justify violence against them.
10. **Organize mass rallies to keep supporters mobilized against made-up threats:** Use fearmongering and hate speech to consolidate in-group identity and solidarity.
11. **Make people feel like they are powerless to change things:** Solutions will only come from the top.

#### What can we do to push back against authoritarianism?

- ⇒ **Educate publics** about how authoritarianism works; demystify its allure; and **shine a spotlight on tried-and-true methods of countering hate, violence, and authoritarianism.**
- ⇒ **Form large, diverse, cross-partisan, and cross-ideological pro-democracy fronts or movements** with a shared vision; strategy; and clear, concrete demands.
- ⇒ **Build the capacity of pro-democracy coalitions and movements** to manage constructive tensions, center relationships, and prioritize larger collective goals.
- ⇒ **Train pro-democracy coalitions and movements in nonviolent discipline and violence de-escalation** in the face of authoritarian and paramilitary violence.
- ⇒ **Invest in opportunities for inter- and intra-group dialogue connected to collective action** to develop empathy and understanding and build trust at the grassroots by working together to combat authoritarian practices.
- ⇒ **Diversify the range of nonviolent tactics** to include methods of concentration (protests, rallies, sit-ins), and methods of dispersion (walkouts, stay-aways, consumer boycott, labor strikes); not doing what authoritarians expect and want.
- ⇒ **Engage members of key organizational "pillars"** like cultural and religious institutions, business groups, unions, professional associations, bureaucracies, media institutions, and veterans' groups in pro-democracy mobilization.
- ⇒ **Provide pathways for individuals within key pillars that morally or materially support the authoritarian system to join the pro-democracy cause.**

#### Other Resources:

Ruth Ben-Ghiat: [Writings on Authoritarianism](#)

Erica Chenoweth & Zoe Marks: [Pro-Democracy Organizing Against Autocracy in the United States](#)

Hold the Line: [A Guide to Defending Democracy](#)

Human Rights Watch: [The Future for Autocrats is Darker Than It Seems](#)

Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt: [This is How Democracies Die](#)

Protect Democracy: [The Authoritarian Playbook: A Media Guide](#)

Maria J. Stephan & Julia Roig: [Combatting Authoritarianism: The Skills and Infrastructure Needed to Organize Across Difference](#)

Vesla M. Weaver & Gwen Prowse: [Racial Authoritarianism in US Democracy](#)