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OPINION

# Disinformation and the death of democracy

Societies seem to thrive when there's a balanced mix of folks who monitor the boundaries and guard against the strange and unfamiliar, and others who seek out novelty and variety.

By **Karen Stenner** Updated October 31, 2024, 1:00 p.m.



Supporters sang the national anthem before former president Donald Trump addressed a campaign rally in Greenville, North Carolina, on Oct. 21. RICKY CARIOTI/THE WASHINGTON POST

The United States — like much of Western liberal democracy — is under siege from would-be autocrats, led by Donald Trump, stirring fears of [“American carnage”](#) and creating narratives setting “us” against “them.” Stories like the one [Trump falsely claimed about immigrants eating their neighbors’ pets](#) are weapons, designed to cleave Americans with one stroke into two warring clans — one group, the traitors, guilty of inviting the heathen pet-eaters into God-fearing American neighborhoods, the other group nobly protecting small-town patriots from the intruders’ demonic practices.

That these classic fascist manipulations are crashing onto America’s shores should surprise no one. Across western liberal democracies, about a third of any population [is predisposed to authoritarianism; the United States is no exception](#). This is a universal, [mostly heritable predisposition](#) rooted in a [closed personality](#) and [cognitive inflexibility](#), which [reduce one’s willingness and ability, respectively, to deal with complexity](#). This naturally includes racial/ethnic diversity and what those with authoritarian tendencies see as dissident beliefs and “deviant” behaviors.

The authoritarians’ quest is for unity and conformity. People with authoritarian dispositions can be good, law-abiding citizens. However, when their fears are aroused, they can become cruel and can tolerate and even encourage cruelty in others. If their fears are aroused, they willingly destroy democratic institutions.

Leaders like Trump know how to arouse the fears of authoritarians, often by evoking hordes of “others” (usually dark, dangerous and diseased) who seek to infiltrate the population and upset the nation’s conformity and order. Because American demographics have changed so dramatically over the past few decades as new groups seek to be included, the fears of authoritarians are more easily aroused. Trump is a master manipulator of these fears.

Erich Fromm’s seminal 1941 work [“Escape From Freedom”](#) explained that a portion

of humanity actually finds freedom burdensome. As societies grow noisier, more diverse, and more complex, the authoritarians among us are eager to rid themselves of the burden of freedom. They prefer the protection of a strongman to the burdens of democracy.

Because authoritarians and those who would manipulate them are constantly among us, democracy always contains the seeds of its own destruction. The power to choose includes the power to choose authoritarianism. Authoritarians under the spell of a strongman will use their electoral freedoms to install a leader like Trump who promises to rid them of those freedoms. Hence the Project 2025 manifesto, meticulously applying this promise to every domain of American life, was [greeted by many Americans with a shocking lack of alarm.](#)

The Republican Party as it evolved over the past few decades includes both authoritarians and traditional conservatives (what I call status quo conservatives). But these two psychological ‘types’ are not natural allies. [Conservatives are primarily averse to change \(difference over time\), whereas authoritarians abhor complexity \(difference across space\).](#) So authoritarians and conservatives do share some distaste for difference. But they starkly diverge in whether they find complexity or change *more* objectionable. And this matters at crucial historical moments, like when a strongman is promising to rid society of complexity at the cost of massive social change. This is why true conservatives like former Republican representative Liz Cheney of Wyoming, who are averse to both change and authoritarianism, can be a democracy’s strongest bulwark against the dangers posed by authoritarian revolution at moments like this.

It looks like a good portion of American conservatives are willing to play that role. This election season I was tasked with analyzing a nationally representative sample survey of over 5000 Americans (including appropriately weighted oversamples of minority and newly registered voters). As Vice President Kamala Harris’s “hope and joy”

presidential campaign was getting underway in August, I found almost a third of true conservatives in this representative sample saying they were likely to vote for Harris, turning away from the chaotic autocrat pledging to overthrow established institutions and norms. They appear unwilling to risk massive disorder and violence for the promise of greater oneness and sameness in some uncertain future.

This fearless third of conservatives in the sample have confidence in voting and don't appreciate elections being undermined. They dismiss the notion that Christians and religious liberty are under threat, and worry about destabilizing climate shocks and the culture wars around race and gender. They scoff at ideas about anti-white discrimination and reviving old-school masculinity, and are dismayed at the societal ruptures and harms caused by overturning settled law around a woman's right to choose.

The way to build a prodemocratic coalition, then, is for all democracy-embracing people, whether liberal or conservative, to form an alliance to outvote those who are terrified of the chaos of freedom and the nation's growing diversity.

Again, my survey findings can help dispel some harmful myths by softening the caricatures Republicans and Democrats have of each other. My analyses of these data indicate that both the Democratic and Republican parties are comprised of a variety of psychological types: 39 percent of those who identify as Republican are highly authoritarian, but so are 22 percent of Democrats. Seventy-eight percent of Republicans are true conservatives, as are 47 percent of Democrats. Viewed from another angle: Roughly half of authoritarians are Republican and about a third are Democrats, while the true conservatives are very similarly distributed.

Finally, and perhaps most surprising to many: Authoritarians are by no means irredeemable. They're not inherently evil. Authoritarianism is just a different way of being human.

Societies seem to thrive when there's a balanced mix of folks who monitor the boundaries and guard against the strange and unfamiliar, and others who seek out novelty and variety. Understand that those strange beings frequenting MAGA rallies don't represent the average authoritarian, who in better times is more like your helpful and well-meaning but sometimes intrusive and judgmental neighbor. Those with authoritarian personalities will always be with us. And they are highly malleable, for better or worse.

My recent survey findings reinforce those from my [earlier investigations of voting for Trump in 2016](#): that with the right kinds of appeals and support, a significant portion of authoritarians can reject the strongman who constantly invokes chaos and disorder but who never delivers that promised second act of renewed unity and consensus. They can reinvest their longing for oneness and sameness in an alternative “normative order” — perhaps a new way forward.

My latest survey results suggest that nearly 30 percent of authoritarians who swear they're voting will probably or definitely vote for Harris. They're finding new meaning and belonging in a more joyful, hopeful, optimistic — which is to say, classically American — movement that promises there is “more that unites than divides us.” The rest of us need only to welcome these (reassured and now quiescent) authoritarians back, instead of gleefully mocking and diligently repelling a third of our compatriots — which is not at all democratic, a good strategy for winning elections, or conducive to the stabilization of a 340-million-strong Republic.

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