

Science Tells Us the U.S. Is Heading toward a Dictatorship

The red flags abound—political research tells us the U.S. is becoming an autocracy

-By Dan Vergano

Scientific American, May 2025

As president, Donald Trump pretty much checks all the warning boxes for an autocrat. Last September *Scientific American* [warned](#) of Trump's "[nonsensical conspiracy fantasies](#)," that he "ignores [the climate crisis](#)" and has fondness for "[unqualified ideologues](#)," whom he would appoint should he become president again. It's now May and sadly, that [all checks out](#).

The U.S. is in a bad place and, scholars warn, looks to be headed for worse.

Worse even than Trump's [relentless attacks on science](#) have been his administration's assaults on the law. His officials have [illegally fired federal workers](#), impounded [congressional appropriations](#) and seized people off the street for [deportations to foreign prisons](#), threatening the same for [all U.S. citizens](#). "The depth and breadth of this administration's disregard for civil liberties, political pluralism, the separation of powers and legal constraints of all kinds mark it as an authoritarian regime," law professor David Pozen of the Columbia University School of Law told [the New York Times](#) in April.

We should all be worried that the U.S. is headed toward an autocracy—[government by one person](#)—even without political science offering a warning. [But scholarship](#) on how nations descend into this unfortunate state, seen in places like [Turkey and Hungary](#), might not surprise you with what it suggests about the U.S.

"Since Donald Trump's inauguration, the country has embarked on the slippery slope toward autocracy," concludes political scientist Daniel Stockemer of the University of Ottawa, in [a May report](#) in *Politics & Policy*. Rather than a coup, Trump's attacks [on law firms](#), universities, immigrants and others constitute "a more incremental form of democratic erosion," he writes, one that follows a six-step theory of incremental autocratization based on [research on the democratic backsliding](#) seen worldwide in recent decades. The model arose in major part from the work of political scientist [Marianne Kneuer](#) of the Dresden University of Technology. She looked at the last [quarter-century's collapse in Venezuela](#), examining how states turn from democratic to autocratic in stages, as opposed to a sudden coup.

The U.S. has already breached the first three steps of Stockemer's theory. The first step is one of social turmoil; this originated with the Tea Party movement during the Obama administration. Marked by angry politics, backlash against minorities and immigrants, and distrust in institutions, the U.S. has in the last two decades changed from [a "full" to a "flawed" democracy](#), according to the *Economist's* global democracy index.

The second step requires a “project of radical change,” like [the populist movement](#) of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez in the 1990s, or in the U.S. case Trump’s MAGA movement, which defends [white, male privileges](#) and holds [prime loyalty](#) for many Republicans.

The third step is a “decisive electoral victory,” applicable to Chavez in 1999 or Trump in 2024, the latter a vote that also brought Trump control of a [subservient Congress](#).

That leaves us at the edge of the fourth step, the dismantling of checks and balances on executive power.

“If my theory is correct, the U.S. is still in this transition phase between democracy and autocracy,” says Stockemer, by e-mail. “If they move more in the direction of autocracy, we would see that the administration tries to defy more court orders.” One key part of the fourth step is the declaration of fabricated emergencies, such as the “[red scare](#)” of the McCarthy era, to trample checks and balances, such as the judiciary’s control of the legal system. In May, for example, the White House deputy chief of staff suggested Trump could [unilaterally suspend habeas corpus](#), a legal remedy for unlawful detention that dates at least to [the Magna Carta](#) and is in [the U.S. Constitution](#), to summarily round up immigrants. He cited an imaginary “invasion”—even though [border crossings are at their lowest point in U.S. history](#), according to Trump’s U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency—as a reason. The courts would likely resist such a move, as the Supreme Court did under the Bush administration [in 2008](#), and whether the Trump administration [abides by judicial decisions](#) will determine whether the fourth step has occurred.

Warnings of the fifth step on the road to autocracy, securing long-term power, come in Trump’s musing of seeking [an unconstitutional third term](#) as president. The final step, the infringement of basic rights and freedoms, also is flashing warning signs, says Stockemer. These are already evident in executive orders that disengage the U.S. from the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#), remove transgender service members [from the military](#) and [privilege Christianity](#). He predicts that attacks on minority voting rights in 2026 and 2028 would be an expected outcome of this step.

A simpler “[competitive authoritarianism](#)” yardstick for measuring democratic collapse comes from political scientists Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way and Daniel Ziblatt earlier this month. “We propose a simple metric: the [cost of opposing the government](#),” they write in the *New York Times*. By that measure, they add, the U.S. has already crossed that line, ordering Department of Justice investigations into perceived political enemies, donors to the Democratic Party and news outlets ranging from CBS News to the *Des Moines Register*. “The administration’s authoritarian offensive has had a clear impact. It has changed how Americans behave, forcing them to think twice,” they added.

The good news is that the slide into autocracy [isn’t inevitable](#) for the U.S. The courts may hold, Congress [may start listening](#) to protestors as Trump’s [approval rating slides](#), and the Republican coalition, described as “[Big Tech on one side, white nationalists on the other](#),” in the *Boston Review*, may fracture.

Even so, the damage already done is real: “It is very easy to destroy something [such as USAID](#), but it takes a long time to rebuild it both physically and also in a trust sense, both in America and abroad,” says Stockemer, noting the rapid plummet of Canadian attitudes toward the U.S., from positive to [sharply negative](#). “I can tear down a house in a day, but it will take a year or longer to rebuild it.”

This is an opinion and analysis article, and the views expressed by the author or authors are not necessarily those of Scientific American.