

The Authoritarian Mirror: Why MAGA Can't See What They've Become

How political devotion overrides reality, rewrites history, and redefines democracy.

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Why Authoritarian Voters Don't Recognize Authoritarianism

It has become a paradox of modern American politics: those most drawn to authoritarian leadership are often the least capable of recognizing its presence. When Donald Trump or his administration enacts policies that clearly reflect autocratic tendencies, mass purges of civil servants, loyalty oaths, executive overreach, state propaganda campaigns, his most fervent supporters do not recoil in alarm. They double down in devotion. They do not see these actions as authoritarian; they see them as necessary, patriotic, or even noble.

This isn't simply a political disagreement, it's a psychological phenomenon. Decades of political psychology research offer a clear lens: people who score high on authoritarian predispositions exhibit a strong desire for conformity, obedience to perceived legitimate authority, and social homogeneity. But the most startling discovery isn't just that these traits exist. It's that they are accompanied by an uncanny *blindness* to the very authoritarianism they empower.

Karen Stenner's landmark study, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, explains that the authoritarian personality is not inherently ideological, but rather *reactive*. When threatened, by moral ambiguity, diversity, or perceived disorder, authoritarian personalities do not merely seek security; they seek simplicity, sameness, and a unifying leader who promises to eliminate the complexity of democratic life. However, they are often unaware that the very order they crave comes at the expense of the democratic principles they claim to defend .

More recent studies deepen this insight. Research on **identity fusion** shows that MAGA adherents often conflate Trump's identity with their own, making criticism of him feel like an attack on their *self*. This renders dissent intolerable and elevates blind loyalty as a virtue . Others show that **motivated reasoning**, our tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms our existing beliefs, prevents these voters from processing evidence that contradicts their worldview, even when the authoritarian nature of Trump's actions is objectively clear .

The effect is chilling. You can present a MAGA voter with executive orders that openly dismantle public institutions, suppress dissent, or turn federal science into state propaganda, and they will either rationalize it or refuse to see it. They are not merely misinformed. They are psychologically *compelled* to protect the image of Trump as a benevolent figure, lest they confront the disturbing truth: that their movement has ceased to be about democracy at all.

This article explores how authoritarian voters fail to see the authoritarianism of their leaders. It is not because the signs are hidden. It is because their psychology renders them unable, or unwilling, to see them.

How MAGA Voters See Themselves as Defenders, Not Extremists

To understand the resilience of authoritarian voters' devotion to Trump, we must first grasp how they interpret themselves—and their opposition. Authoritarians do not view their allegiance as ideological or extremist. Instead, they often see themselves as upholders of order, tradition, and common sense. This self-image is

critical: it shields them from criticism, inoculates them against self-reflection, and justifies increasingly illiberal actions as necessary responses to perceived chaos.

Authoritarianism, as defined by Karen Stenner (2005), is not a fixed ideology but a predisposition to seek "oneness and sameness" in the face of normative or existential threat. This makes authoritarian voters particularly sensitive to what they perceive as moral or cultural fragmentation: immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, secularism, racial diversity, and political dissent. But crucially, they don't interpret their intolerance of difference as prejudice, they frame it as defense of the familiar, of "how things should be."

This psychological inversion is why authoritarian individuals often claim to be defenders of freedom, even while supporting actions that suppress it. They support banning books, restricting gender expression, and overriding public institutions with presidential authority, all while insisting they are the true champions of liberty. It's not hypocrisy. It's what political psychologist Bob Altemeyer called the "**double high**" effect—where authoritarian followers and authoritarian leaders reflect each other's values and blind spots, each reinforcing the other's belief in their moral superiority.

Studies show that these voters tend to score high on **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)** scales (Altemeyer, 1996; Feldman, 2003) and correlate strongly with **social dominance orientation (SDO)**, which prioritizes hierarchical group relations and legitimizes inequality as natural or necessary (Pratto et al., 1994). Together, these traits help explain why MAGA supporters can genuinely believe they are centrist, because their worldview filters out dissent as dangerous, immoral, or un-American.

This filtering extends to how they view their political opposition. Liberals and leftists are not just seen as wrong but as threats, agents of decay, disorder, or corruption. This language isn't incidental; it's identity-protective. Research by Frimer et al. (2017) shows that conservatives are more likely than liberals to disengage from opposing viewpoints because doing so helps maintain a stable sense of moral identity.

Thus, authoritarians don't just disagree with others. They cast themselves as victims of a world gone mad and saviors of a society that, without them, will collapse. When they cheer policies that erode checks and balances, they believe they're saving America. When they dismiss critics as "radicals" or "groomers," they believe they're exposing evil. They do not see authoritarianism because they

have convinced themselves, and been convinced by their leaders, that it is everyone else who is extreme.

Why MAGA Blames Others for What It Does Itself

If authoritarian voters don't see the authoritarianism of their leader, it may be because they're too busy projecting it onto everyone else.

Projection is more than a psychological defense mechanism, it is a political survival strategy. In the case of MAGA voters, projection enables a critical inversion: everything they are accused of becomes something they accuse others of first. Call them fascist, and they will declare that *you're* the one forcing ideology on people. Show them a policy that strips away civil liberties, and they'll insist it's necessary because "the left wants to take your freedom." To understand MAGA is to recognize this projection reflex not as irony, but as identity maintenance. It protects the self-image of being "the real American" in a world they feel slipping out of their control.

This isn't random. Decades of psychological research show that people high in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) are particularly prone to moral hypocrisy, especially when it helps preserve group dominance or deflect internal contradiction. Altemeyer (1996) found that those scoring high on RWA scales were far more likely to engage in double standards, allowing cruelty or authoritarian control if it benefited their group but condemning it when others did the same. In short: *it's authoritarianism when you do it, patriotism when I do.*

Karen Stenner's research deepens this, suggesting that authoritarians don't just dislike difference—they experience it as a threat to collective unity and moral order (Stenner, 2005). Thus, calls for pluralism or civil rights are seen as dangerous disruptions, and authoritarian voters respond with what she calls "intolerance born of a need for sameness." Ironically, the very thing they accuse others of, radicalism, divisiveness, control, is a reflection of the fear they themselves are acting on.

This projection is especially visible in the MAGA obsession with "free speech." In MAGA rhetoric, cancel culture and liberal academia are evidence of an Orwellian left bent on silencing dissent. Yet many of the same people support policies that ban books, restrict curriculum, punish teachers, and dictate what topics can be discussed in classrooms. Trump's own executive orders, like the 2025 orders on "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" or "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling"—are exercises in state-sanctioned censorship

disguised as liberation. They don't want less indoctrination; they want their indoctrination.

Projection also disguises prejudice. Studies on symbolic racism and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) show that authoritarian-leaning individuals frequently project their biases outward to maintain a sense of moral high ground (De Zavala et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990). Rather than admit racial or gender resentment, they frame themselves as victims of “woke overreach” or “reverse discrimination,” even as they support policies that harm marginalized groups. This isn't merely dishonest, it's how authoritarian identity survives in a liberal democratic society that still outwardly values equality.

What makes MAGA projection so dangerous is that it justifies the erosion of democratic norms under the guise of defending them. If you believe your opponents are tyrants, then breaking the rules to stop them becomes an act of patriotism. If you're convinced that your identity group is under siege, then policies that would otherwise seem authoritarian are now rebranded as necessary self-defense. As studies on collective narcissism show, threats to group ego are often met with increased support for aggressive and anti-democratic action (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009).

The end result is a political culture where MAGA voters cannot see themselves clearly, because their energy is consumed by mislabeling everyone else.

Why MAGA Rejects Facts and Doubles Down on False Beliefs

Authoritarian voters are not merely misinformed—they are structurally predisposed to resist correction. This isn't incidental ignorance. It's a form of epistemic rigidity deeply rooted in psychological mechanisms that reward conformity, submission to perceived authority, and suspicion of dissenting views. The Dunning-Kruger effect, where individuals with lower competence in a domain overestimate their understanding, plays a central role here, but it does so atop a foundation of psychological authoritarianism.

To understand why MAGA voters often reject correction, even from credentialed experts, we need to recognize the interplay between confidence and ignorance. David Dunning and Justin Kruger famously demonstrated that people who lack expertise are often the least able to recognize their incompetence. But when this cognitive bias is paired with authoritarian predispositions—characterized by preference for order, sameness, and certainty, it becomes a recipe for unwavering devotion to false beliefs.

Research by Karen Stenner (2005) in *The Authoritarian Dynamic* shows that authoritarianism is not primarily driven by political ideology but by a psychological need for cognitive closure and resistance to complexity. These voters prefer simple, categorical answers to complex questions, “build the wall,” “lock her up,” “drain the swamp.” When reality fails to conform to these slogans, it is the facts that are rejected, not the beliefs.

Moreover, studies on motivated reasoning confirm that people interpret evidence in a way that supports their preexisting identity and beliefs (Kunda, 1990). In authoritarian contexts, identity is fused with political loyalty, creating a closed cognitive loop where admitting error is seen not just as intellectual failure but as moral betrayal.

This explains why MAGA adherents often argue with people who are objectively correct. They are not engaging in debate to test their ideas; they are defending a worldview that, if punctured, would unravel their self-concept. As Nyhan and Reifler (2010) demonstrated, fact-checking can backfire, making people double down on false beliefs when those beliefs are central to their identity.

A 2024 study titled *The Power of Trump’s Big Lie* (Pereira et al.) explains how identity fusion with Trump leads to the internalization of misinformation. When voters believe that Trump himself is the truth, they view any contradictory evidence as fake news, a conspiracy, or an elite attack on their identity. This makes them particularly resistant to correction and willing to dispute factual claims by experts or even firsthand evidence.

The result is a political personality incapable of healthy epistemic humility. Rather than revise beliefs in the face of new data, authoritarian voters rely on projection, defensiveness, and groupthink to maintain ideological certainty. Their confidence isn’t derived from knowledge but from loyalty, and it is that loyalty that sustains the illusion of understanding.

How MAGA Maintains Power Through Perpetual Victimhood

In virtually every authoritarian movement, there exists a foundational myth of victimhood. The MAGA ideology is no exception. Far from being a fringe byproduct of conservative thought, this tendency to interpret any opposition as persecution has become a psychological cornerstone of the movement. The narrative that Donald Trump and his followers are under relentless attack from the “deep state,” the media, immigrants, globalists, and liberal elites is not incidental

rhetoric, it is central to how MAGA preserves its cohesion and justifies its excesses.

This sense of perpetual victimhood is not simply a political stance; it is a psychological orientation rooted in authoritarian predispositions. Karen Stenner, in her seminal work *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (2005), explains that authoritarians are not necessarily inclined toward authoritarianism at all times, but rather are activated by perceived threats to normative order. These threats, real or imagined, trigger their need for oneness and sameness, leading to calls for strong, punitive leadership and conformity. Once activated, authoritarians tend to shift responsibility outward. They do not look inward to question their own views, but instead project blame onto external scapegoats.

This psychological mechanism helps explain why MAGA adherents have become increasingly incapable of taking accountability. Whether it's January 6, COVID-19 misinformation, the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, or the erosion of democratic norms, MAGA supporters consistently shift blame to others: the media lied, the courts are corrupt, the Democrats cheated, or the globalists are pulling the strings. Even when actions have clear and documented consequences, such as Trump's delayed pandemic response or the use of executive orders to punish political enemies and reshape education and culture, the response from MAGA is not self-reflection but deflection.

This deflection strategy is not random; it's deeply reinforced by psychological and social dynamics. Studies have shown that individuals high in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) are more likely to engage in motivated reasoning, interpreting facts not as neutral data points but as threats or affirmations of their identity (Kunda, 1990; Osborne et al., 2023). The more invested they are in the belief that they are righteous victims, the less willing they are to acknowledge wrongdoing. As Danny Osborne writes in *The Psychological Causes and Societal Consequences of Authoritarianism* (2023), "high-RWA individuals show strong resistance to disconfirming evidence, especially when it concerns their in-group." In other words, when the authoritarian follower sees their group as morally under siege, accountability becomes not just unnecessary but taboo.

Moreover, victimhood strengthens in-group cohesion. According to research by de Zavala et al. (2009), collective narcissism, a belief in the in-group's superiority coupled with resentment over its perceived lack of recognition, can fuel aggressive reactions to criticism. This makes MAGA's refusal to take accountability not just a

defensive posture, but an offensive political tool. Every criticism is repackaged as proof of persecution, every consequence reinterpreted as an attack, and every lie reframed as necessary resistance.

This creates a vicious cycle: MAGA cannot afford to admit it was wrong, because doing so would undermine the very narrative that justifies its existence. Thus, the lie must be defended, the failure must be reframed, and the truth must be distorted, all in service of maintaining the myth that they are the true victims of a corrupt and godless world.

How MAGA Calls Itself Patriotic While Undermining Democracy

MAGA supporters regularly brand themselves as the true defenders of America, wrapping their ideology in flags, eagles, and Revolutionary War iconography. But beneath the patriotic symbolism lies a worldview steeped in authoritarianism. While they claim to uphold freedom, liberty, and the Constitution, the policies they champion, and the executive actions they applaud, betray the very democratic values they profess to love.

At the heart of this contradiction lies the authoritarian tendency to conflate loyalty to a leader with loyalty to the nation. As Karen Stenner notes in *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (2005), individuals with high authoritarian predispositions are less concerned with abstract democratic principles than with social cohesion, conformity, and obedience to a perceived legitimate authority. This is why MAGA supporters can champion an executive who undermines checks and balances while still believing they are preserving democracy.

We see this clearly in the executive orders (EOs) passed under Trump's second term. These orders aren't just aggressive, they're structurally authoritarian. One EO, *"Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,"* mandates that museums and institutions receiving federal funding present a sanitized, state-approved version of U.S. history. This isn't patriotism; it's historical control that mirrors authoritarian regimes, from Soviet Russia to modern-day Hungary, where history is weaponized to shape national identity in the image of those in power.

Another EO, *"Ensuring Accountability for All Agencies,"* undermines the independence of regulatory institutions by placing so-called "independent agencies" under direct presidential control. It allows the president to dictate their policies, defund programs that don't align with his agenda, and even require agency strategic plans to be cleared by the White House. This not only breaches

the traditional separation of powers, but it effectively neutralizes agency autonomy, an alarming precedent for future leaders.

These authoritarian maneuvers are not seen by MAGA supporters as threats to liberty. Instead, they are rationalized as necessary actions to "drain the swamp," "fight indoctrination," or "restore order." The authoritarian follower's mindset doesn't interpret overreach as tyranny if it's done by someone they see as a moral crusader. In fact, Stenner (2005) shows that authoritarianism is often expressed not through love of authoritarianism itself, but through a desire to eliminate difference, dissent, and disruption. They want simplicity, order, and a leader who will deliver it.

This is why MAGA supporters praise book bans, mass deportations, and ideological purges in education, not in spite of their patriotism, but because of it. Their idea of patriotism is not pluralism, debate, or accountability. It is obedience to a version of America that excludes those they believe do not belong.

Why MAGA's Talking Points Are Built on Half-Truths

One of the most perplexing phenomena to outsiders looking in on the MAGA movement is the sheer volume of arguments built not on facts, but on fragments of truth twisted to serve a particular narrative. From "the election was stolen" to "Democrats want open borders" to "climate change is a hoax," virtually every cornerstone of MAGA rhetoric rests on misinformation, exaggeration, or outright fabrication. But this is not a flaw in the movement; it's a feature. MAGA's misinformation isn't just incidental, it is foundational to its psychological appeal and political durability.

This dynamic is rooted in what Ziva Kunda (1990) called *motivated reasoning*: the tendency to process information in a way that confirms preexisting beliefs and protects one's identity. In MAGA circles, truth becomes secondary to coherence with the worldview that Donald Trump is a righteous savior under siege by a corrupt establishment. New information is not evaluated for its accuracy, but for its usefulness in defending that worldview.

This isn't just an individual bias, it's a socially enforced collective behavior. As Osborne et al. (2023) explain, authoritarianism fosters a group psychology where dissent from group dogma is interpreted as betrayal. The stronger one identifies with the group, the more they internalize its myths. Research by Federico & de Zavala (2009) demonstrates that collective narcissism, the belief that one's in-

group is exceptional yet unrecognized, heightens defensiveness against criticism and increases belief in conspiracies that explain away perceived injustices.

Identity fusion—where one's identity becomes deeply enmeshed with a group or leader—also plays a major role. According to the 2024 study "The Power of Trump's Big Lie," individuals who had fused their identity with Trump were not only more likely to believe the 2020 election lie, but internalized it as an attack on themselves if questioned. Disproving the lie was not merely challenging a belief, it was seen as an existential threat.

This is how MAGA builds its epistemic cocoon: Facts are filtered through identity, and disinformation becomes a protective shell. As Danny Osborne's 2023 review outlines, authoritarian followers are especially susceptible to worldview-protective cognition. They reject information that would cause dissonance, embrace falsehoods that restore clarity and order, and often double down when confronted with contradictory evidence. It's not a misunderstanding of facts, it's a reengineering of reality to avoid ideological discomfort.

This helps explain why virtually no MAGA argument is ever grounded in unfiltered truth. Even when there is a kernel of reality (e.g., crime exists, the border has issues, Hunter Biden owned a laptop), it is immediately wrapped in distortions, context-stripping, and leaps in logic to produce a narrative of victimization, righteousness, or threat. Truth is not something to be discovered, it is something to be bent until it conforms.

The implications are dangerous. A movement that cannot anchor itself to shared reality is a movement ripe for radicalization. As Hannah Arendt warned in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when truth itself becomes malleable, authoritarianism becomes not only possible, but inevitable.

Real-World Evidence of Trump's Authoritarian Agenda

For those still questioning whether the MAGA movement and its leadership are steering the country toward authoritarianism, the headlines of 2025 should silence all doubt. While psychological tendencies and ideological rationalizations explain the *why* behind MAGA's authoritarian loyalty, the *what*, the tangible actions and policies, show us how this transformation is operationalized. The pattern is not theoretical anymore; it is unfolding in real time.

Take Robert F. Kennedy Jr., appointed as Health Secretary under Trump's second administration. In May 2025, Kennedy openly threatened to ban federal scientists

from publishing in the world's most prestigious medical journals, including *The Lancet*, *NEJM*, and *JAMA*, calling them "corrupt" and pledging to replace them with state-run alternatives. This move mirrors textbook authoritarian playbooks: delegitimize independent institutions, then replace them with regime-loyal ones. Just as Stalin created politically loyal scientific academies and Hitler purged Jewish and non-compliant scholars, Kennedy's threat to scientific publishing is a direct attack on epistemic independence.

Simultaneously, the NIH has seen its funding slashed by over \$3 billion, and 20,000 public health employees have been purged. The CDC, under a communication freeze, has been unable to release key data, including *FluView* and its decades-old *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. When a government suppresses public health data, it doesn't just mismanage science—it weaponizes ignorance.

Other developments reveal a broader authoritarian strategy:

- **Student Visa Appointments Halted:** A pretext of "expanded social media vetting" is being used to delay and block visa appointments, effectively suppressing academic exchange and increasing xenophobia.
- **Threats to the Judiciary:** Trump has openly ridiculed the idea of conducting lawful trials, stating, "We're gonna have 5 million trials? It doesn't work. You wouldn't have a country left." His team has labeled dissenting judges "rogue," and discussions of arresting judges have entered the mainstream of right-wing discourse.
- **Executive Overreach:** New EOs target law firms, conditioning their ability to represent clients on ideological compliance. This is a chilling step toward criminalizing dissent and eliminating due process.
- **Attacks on the Press:** Trump has again floated the idea of stripping news organizations of their broadcast licenses, a classic autocratic move to silence critical media.
- **Human Rights Violations:** Trump's EO erasing federal recognition of trans individuals has been condemned by every major human rights organization. But MAGA has dismissed these voices, showcasing a preference for punitive identity politics over inclusion.
- **Pre-Crime Deportations:** Stephen Miller's latest proclamation, that anyone who "preaches hate for America" will be deported, bypasses the First Amendment entirely. It replaces the rule of law with loyalty tests.
- **Mounting Wrongful Detentions and Deportations:** From the Garcia Abrego case to others not yet reported in full, the number of people

wrongfully removed from the U.S. is growing. Each case reflects a broader strategy: erode due process in the name of national purity.

This is no longer a collection of coincidences. These are the markers of what political scientists call *autocratic consolidation*: the deliberate erosion of institutional checks, the manufacturing of parallel truths, and the criminalization of opposition. The authoritarian mindset that shapes MAGA loyalty is now being matched by authoritarian policy.

It is no exaggeration to say the U.S. is in a phase of democratic decay. And it is no accident that this decay is wrapped in flags, cloaked in moral panic, and branded as a restoration of greatness. Authoritarianism rarely marches in under its own name. It enters draped in the symbols of patriotism, escorted by enablers who see obedience as virtue and dissent as treason.

How MAGA Uses Patriotism to Justify Authoritarian Rule

By now, the picture should be disturbingly clear. The MAGA movement is not a fringe anomaly, it is a coherent and well-documented expression of authoritarian psychology, driven by fear, identity, and a compulsive need for order. What makes it particularly dangerous is not just its capacity for deception or its disdain for democratic norms, but its ability to recast these threats as virtues. When authoritarianism drapes itself in the American flag and calls itself patriotism, those who challenge it are labeled traitors, radicals, or enemies.

The refusal to admit wrongness, the weaponization of selective truth, the rejection of pluralism, the projection of guilt onto others, all these are not simply political quirks; they are defining traits of an authoritarian dynamic. As Karen Stenner wrote, the authoritarian disposition is not inherently ideological, it simply wants sameness, predictability, and obedience. And when these desires are activated by perceived threats, they can produce chilling levels of intolerance and repression.

MAGA voters often don't recognize the authoritarianism of their leader because they are not looking for it. They are looking for strength, for validation, for someone who confirms their fears and promises retribution. As long as Trump, and those like him, can cast themselves as victims of a corrupted system, their overreach will be seen not as tyranny, but as justice.

This is the authoritarian trick: not to seize power by force, but to have the people beg for it. And once they do, they will rewrite reality to defend it.

History has shown us where this path leads. The question is whether we are willing to see it now, while we still have the freedom to choose another way.

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