

Opinion Data Points

How steep is Trump's democratic backsliding?

The erosion of established norms has been dramatic but institutions are holding up

JOHN BURN-MURDOCH



President Donald Trump's second term has been marked by shocking acts and events that bypass rather than permanently corrupt institutions © AP

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The speed, scale, flagrance and persistence of the Trump administration's deviations from established legal and constitutional norms during his second term have been so dramatic that it bears stepping back and taking stock.

Within hours of his January 2025 inauguration, Donald Trump had pardoned hundreds of people convicted of political violence — a hallmark of aspiring autocratic regimes — and shown tacit support for violent resistance to electoral setbacks. Days later he removed legal protections from civil servants and fired 17 oversight officials charged with tackling fraud and corruption. By March the administration was in open conflict with the courts, summer saw police firing rubber bullets at protesters and the removal of the labour statistics agency chief in the wake of weak jobs numbers, and this month brought the criminal investigation into Fed chair Jay Powell and the shootings of Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

While US history is hardly free from political violence or maltreatment of disfavoured groups, this blitz on America's citizens, institutions and — by many estimations — the constitution itself ranks as arguably the most rapid episode of democratic and civil erosion in the recent history of the developed world.

Measured using objective criteria spanning 10 domains including the use of state force against civilians, political prosecution and the independence of the judiciary and civil service, I find that the US slide during Trump's second term stands out as the most rapid in contemporary history. It outpaces the early stages of backsliding under Russia's Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Hungary's Viktor Orbán, where similar steps unfolded over several years.

US backsliding under Trump is steeper than any recent precedent

Backsliding score* during notable recent episodes



*Source: 30-point index based on FT research into events across 10 domains including the use of state force against civilians, political prosecution and the independence of the judiciary and civil service. See notes below

The resulting dataset of 139 instances where erstwhile democracies were gradually eroded also allows us to consider a crucial question: is the US under Trump's second term hurtling inevitably towards the same destination as these other cases?

To answer this it is useful to explore *how* the different backsliding episodes have taken place. Specifically, have they been characterised primarily by one-time unilateral executive actions and shows of force, or durable changes to policy and legislation facilitated by weak or co-opted institutions?

And here, a difference emerges. In the cases of Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Venezuela, erosion came about through both channels. The likes of Putin, Erdoğan, Orbán and Hugo Chávez were able to consolidate power by exerting considerable control over the courts, media and electoral and political systems in addition to direct executive actions, locking in durably favourable conditions for themselves and hostile environments for their opponents. In Trump's second term, by contrast, most of the action has taken the form of shocking acts or events that bypass rather than permanently corrupt institutions.

Trump's second term has been a storm of shocking events but few durable changes

Backsliding score* during notable recent episodes, by mechanism of action



*Source: Index based on FT research into events across 10 domains including the use of state force against civilians, political prosecution and the independence of the judiciary and civil service. See notes below for [more details and methodology](#).

FT graphic: John Burn-Murdoch / @jburnmurdoch

This is not in any way to downplay the corruption, brutality or casual disregard for the law that has characterised US government during Trump's second term in office, nor to gloss over the abdication by the US Congress of its responsibility to prevent presidential over-reach. Rather, it is to note a glimmer of hope for the US in the fact that many of its institutions and processes appear far more resistant to takeover than those that have crumbled underfoot elsewhere.

America's institutions have proven more resistant than those of other countries undergoing similar stress

Backsliding score* during notable recent episodes, by mechanism of action



*Source: Index based on FT research into events across 10 domains including the use of state force against civilians, political prosecution and the independence of the judiciary and civil service. See notes below for [more details and methodology](#).

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Another American strength is its electoral system. Voters in Venezuela and Russia had no opportunity to check the power of aspiring autocrats until it was too late, whereas the US midterms offer an opportunity to at least partially defang a rogue administration. And with a [robust](#) and [decentralised](#) media landscape rendering the Trump administration's excesses clear for all to see, this is an opportunity the American electorate [appears](#) keen to take. Indeed, it is possible that one reason Trump's second term has been so fast and furious is that the administration believes it only has two years to act.

It is deeply troubling that Trump and his outriders have been able to do so much damage in such a short time, and events of the past year have laid bare how much of US democracy, freedom and civil rights relied more on norms than rules. There may be worse to come, but Americans should not lose hope.

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Methodology

The Scale of Liberty, Independence and Democratic Erosion (Slide) is an index created by the author, consisting of the following 10 items, each scored from 0 (no erosion) to 3 (severe erosion). Electoral integrity, judicial independence, media freedom, central bank independence, civil service & bureaucratic autonomy, toleration/encouragement of political violence, use of state force against civilians, legislative constraints on executive, targeting political opponents, and civil liberties & human rights. Full definitions and criteria for each score are available [here](#). Special thanks to [Anne Meng](#), associate professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia, for methodological review.

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