

Democracy in 2025:

Harvard professors on rising authoritarianism in the United States

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“Authoritarianism is new to many Americans,” said Steven Levitsky late last month. He and Erica Chenoweth, Professor of the First Amendment at Harvard Kennedy School were in conversation for the third episode of “the Breakdown,” their webinar series on the changing state of the United States’ democracy. (Note: this conversation took place on December 18, prior to the United States’ capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.) Levitsky, Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of Government at Harvard University, recently co-authored an article in *Foreign Affairs* arguing that the United States has entered a phase of “competitive authoritarianism,” in which a leader who is democratically elected acts undemocratically once in office—they might punish critics, remove civil servants, and abuse power to shift the electoral field in their favor. It’s neither full democracy nor full authoritarianism. (1)

Levitsky said that many Americans fall into one of two camps in assessing this moment. One camp doesn’t think it’s possible for the nation’s democracy to be under threat.” The other camp declares “that the game is up, and it’s time to move to Canada.” Levitsky says, “it’s an authoritarianism that can be reversed—and I think likely will be reversed.” (2)

Levitsky described major developments of democratic backsliding¹:

- Powerful people and institutions “backing down² in the face of authoritarian bullying”: Levitsky described “a wave of acquiescence to authoritarian and illegal behavior in the early months of the Trump administration. I’m talking about Jeff Bezos, and I’m talking about Paramount. I’m talking about the U.S. Senate, and Columbia University—just a wave of very influential people and institutions backing down in the face of authoritarian bullying.”
- “Congress abdicating its oversight³ role” Levitsky felt this happened early on in particular with the Department of Justice. He argued, “DOJ was openly breaking the law, was almost certainly violating the Constitution, and the U.S. Congress stood by and did nothing.
- “The politicization of the armed forces”: Levitsky mentioned the expansion of ICE into what he called a “paramilitary force without much regulation or oversight”.
- Characterizing the opposition as “terrorists”. (3)

Chenoweth and Levitsky discussed the role of the Supreme Court in preserving or dismantling democracy in the United States. Levitsky felt that the court is “enabling Trump’s authoritarianism but is not purposefully authoritarian.” Chenoweth pointed to the need for people in power to constrain the executive branch. “It’s easy to forget a lot of the worst dictatorships that came into power over the last hundred years came into power totally legally, and with no one standing in their way—in the courts or otherwise.” (4) (463 words)

¹ To backslide = to revert to bad behaviour (attitude)

² To back down = to give up, to fail to resist, to yield

³ Oversight = the act of watching over to control