

The Atlantic

**The Race to Save America's Democracy
Trump's administration may seem chaotic,
but Americans should not take the integrity
of next year's elections for granted.**

**By Garry Kasparov
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Donald Trump likes to say he doesn't actually lose elections—only the “rigged” ones. Such comments are not mere bluster, like the president's boasts about golf. They are threats to democracy, which is more fragile than many Americans may realize.

At the end of last year, I asked former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Preet Bharara on his podcast whether we should be worried about Trump trying to pursue a third term. No, he assured me, we have the Constitution; that's ironclad. I was uneasy with this answer then. My fears have only deepened.

About a month into Trump's second term, I began warning that the Putinization of America was well under way. Now, after a summer of National Guard deployments in American cities, crackdowns on protests, massive layoffs of federal workers, purges of anyone deemed disloyal in the FBI, immigration raids on workplaces, and unfettered self-dealing, Trump and his administration seem more erratic, unpredictable, and chaotic than ever. But, beneath the breaking-news barrage, we can trace the thread of advancing authoritarianism.

Although Trump himself may operate on instinct, his more disciplined advisers are masterminding a steady accumulation of power. The very bedrock of American democracy—free and fair elections—is under threat. Already there is talk of redrawing district maps, banning mail-in ballots and electronic-voting machines, and rewriting voting rules. If the administration is allowed to continue on this path, Americans should not take the integrity of next year's midterms for granted.

The Constitution is a piece of paper. It is a remarkable and world-changing piece of paper, but its power has endured only because Americans have historically been willing to fight and die for the principles it codifies. Assumptions about the fortitude of America's democracy ignore the uncomfortable truth that democracy is an active process, one that requires constant commitment to its preservation. It is not enough to fall back on what past generations fought for. I worry that Americans have become too complacent about the country's laws and values and the institutions that support them.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt lamented in May “a troubling and dangerous trend of unelected judges inserting themselves into the presidential decision-making process,” as if those judges did not represent a co-equal branch of the government and a crucial check on presidential power. The administration has been duly bending, breaking, and dismantling such checks one by one—and expanding the president’s power in ways previously unimagined.

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Last week, Trump signed an order to send the National Guard into Memphis as part of his administration’s campaign to normalize the militarization of cities and states run by the opposing party. This move is straight from Vladimir Putin’s playbook. But because America’s institutions are stronger and more resilient than those of post-Soviet Russia, the Trump administration has to act quickly if it wants to undermine them. Otherwise, there is a chance it could be stopped.

The looming test of American democracy in the face of these threats will be the midterms. In a special election last month for a seat in Iowa’s state Senate, Republicans lost their supermajority—in a state Trump carried by more than 13 points. His national approval ratings are now below 40 percent, according to polling from The Economist/YouGov. His hold on the electorate is far from secure, so the incentives for meddling are clear. The unwavering fealty to Trump expressed by the appointees in charge of federal law enforcement, including Attorney General Pam Bondi and FBI Director Kash Patel, suggests that electoral subversion in his party’s favor might not be punished.

In his first term, Trump faced pushback from high-level military figures in his administration who objected to the misuse of the armed forces for political gain. This time, Trump’s whims as commander in chief are going largely unchecked. Pete Hegseth, the head of the Department of Defense (it’s not the Department of War until Congress says so, another Trumpian break with reality), has undertaken a purge of the Pentagon to root out anyone who doesn’t prioritize loyalty to Trump.

The harassment and intimidation of voters and officials needn’t be sanctioned by the courts to be effective. On January 6, 2021, Trump had to rely on an amateur rabble to try to overturn an election he lost. Next time he’ll have professionals with plenty of rehearsal time.

Those who want to protect democracy can’t wait until it’s time to vote to combat the threat to the integrity of our elections. We need to start now by challenging the administration’s unlawful assertions of executive power at the expense of the other branches of government. And every time a check on executive power is curbed, it becomes easier to remove the next safeguard, and the next.

In a recent appearance on CNN, Senator John Fetterman chided Americans who call Trump an autocrat, given that he was democratically elected in a safe and secure election. But so were Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Viktor Orbán. There are plenty of examples of elected leaders who have subverted the democratic system that brought them to power in order to rule forever. Trump has already tried to overthrow an election, and he has demonstrated this term that he stops only when the courts or lawmakers make it impossible to go on.

Some pundits, scholars, and activists are waking up to the urgency of the danger: Authoritarianism is on the doorstep. Yet there is still no coherent strategy to defeat it. Trump's opponents must build up forces to withstand the administration on every level, from grassroots protests to legal challenges. Judges, if they are willing to stand up to Trump, may be our last line of defense.

As Trump's inflammatory response to the horrific assassination of the political activist Charlie Kirk has illustrated yet again, his knack for stirring up outrage and his desire for amassing "emergency" powers are limitless. Beyond emergency tariffs and emergency immigration enforcement, we now have what appears to be an emergency crackdown on media companies and the occasional late-night host, with the Kirk assassination and "hate speech" as pretexts.

Every Russian remembers Putin's pernicious curbs on free speech and the media. Threats, lawsuits, and coercion initiated a chilling effect that was as effective as outright censorship. That came, too, in time. But early on, Putin relied on pressuring a few big firms so that the others would fall in line. Which they did.

It's not enough for Trump's critics to call for calm and compromise as the country's democracy collapses. The time to rally Americans to defend the Constitution and the rule of law is now. It cannot simply become another election-cycle talking point.

Aspiring authoritarians never ask for permission; they see what they can get away with. The only way to ensure the integrity of the 2026 midterms is to demonstrate, now, that the ideals of the American Constitution are still worth fighting for. Otherwise, Trump's personal delusion, that America is a country over which he reigns supreme, becomes our reality.

Garry Kasparov is the host of season two of the Autocracy in America podcast.