

Post-2024 U.S. Political Climate: Democratic Erosion and Authoritarian Creep

Introduction

The 2024 U.S. elections resulted in a **political power shift** that has intensified concerns about democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies in America's governance. In November 2024, the Republican Party achieved a "*Washington trifecta*" – winning the presidency and majorities in both the House and Senate ¹ ². Former President **Donald Trump returned to office** after defeating Vice President Kamala Harris, securing 312 electoral votes ². With Trump's inauguration in January 2025 and Republicans controlling Congress (53–47 in the Senate and 220–215 in the House) ³ ⁴, the U.S. political landscape has shifted markedly.

This report examines the current political climate through the lens of a previously defined **four-phase model of authoritarian (or "fascist") takeover**, which consists of:

1. **Erosion of democratic norms and backsliding of institutions**
2. **Institutional weakening and media manipulation**
3. **Normalization of political violence and erosion of legal accountability**
4. **Consolidation of authoritarian power and collapse of checks and balances**

Using recent events from 2024 and 2025, we assess **which phase best characterizes the United States at present**, and whether current developments mark a continuity or escalation of earlier trends. The analysis draws on political events, legal developments, civil liberties issues, executive-legislative dynamics, media conditions, and incidents of unrest to gauge the state of American democracy in mid-2025. All assertions are supported with references to reputable sources for an objective, fact-based evaluation.

Phase 1: Erosion of Norms and Democratic Backsliding

Democratic norms – the unwritten rules and shared understandings that sustain a healthy democracy – have been under strain in the U.S. for several years. The period leading up to and following the 2024 election shows continued *erosion of these norms*, signaling ongoing democratic backsliding. Key examples include:

- **Electoral Legitimacy and Peaceful Transfers:** One fundamental norm is accepting election outcomes and ensuring peaceful transitions of power. This norm was grievously violated after the 2020 election (culminating in the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol). In 2024, the issue of election legitimacy remained fraught. Then-candidate Trump continued to **cast doubt on election integrity**, implying he would only accept the results if he won – a stance that echoed his rhetoric in 2020 and eroded confidence in democratic processes. Although Trump's victory in 2024 eliminated any immediate dispute (the losing side, Harris and the Democrats, conceded without incident), the underlying norm of accepting defeat was *not truly restored*. A large portion of the electorate –

particularly Trump's supporters – have been “*groomed to see losses as illegitimate*,” as observers noted before the vote ⁵ . Surveys indicate that **belief in baseless election fraud narratives remains high** among Republicans, underscoring a sustained distrust in the electoral system. This continued skepticism, despite the absence of evidence of widespread fraud, represents a **continuation of the democratic backslide** observed in the Trump era.

- **Political Norms and Civic Discourse:** The **coarsening of political discourse** and abandonment of previous unwritten rules have also persisted. For instance, respect for opponents and restraint in rhetoric have deteriorated. During the 2024 campaign and into 2025, Trump and some Republican figures routinely employed *eliminationist or conspiratorial language* against political adversaries. The former president openly branded his opponents as “*vermin*” in speeches and promised to “get rid of the crooks”, rhetoric that scholars compare to autocratic demagogues of the past (this drew historical parallels to fascist regimes’ language). Such *dehumanizing, us-vs-them rhetoric* breaks long-standing norms of civility and signals a further slide toward authoritarian-style politics ⁶ ⁷ .
- **Institutional Norms and Rule of Law:** The tradition that no one is above the law was challenged by Trump’s candidacy itself. In 2024, Trump ran for president **despite facing multiple criminal indictments** (related to his handling of classified documents, efforts to overturn the 2020 election, etc.). Historically, major-party candidates in such legal peril would likely step aside for the good of the party or country – but Trump’s refusal to do so (and the GOP’s continued support of him as nominee) marked a break with past norms. The electorate’s willingness to return an indicted leader to power also suggests a shift in expectations about legal and ethical qualifications for office. This reflects a **tolerance for bending or ignoring rules** that would have been politically career-ending in prior eras, indicating democratic standards have indeed receded.
- **Polarization and Mutual Tolerance:** Another norm in a healthy democracy is that opposing parties accept each other as legitimate rivals rather than existential enemies. U.S. politics in 2024–25 remains *highly polarized*, and signs of democratic “forbearance” are scant. Many Republican candidates (including election deniers in 2022–24 races) framed Democrats as fundamentally illegitimate or even aligned with “evil” forces, while some on the left likewise view the Trump-led GOP as a threat to democracy itself. This **hyper-polarization** feeds a cycle where “*constitutional hardball*” tactics become routine – e.g. **House Republicans weaponizing impeachment** (they launched inquiries against President Biden’s administration in 2023–24 on scant evidence, largely viewed as political retaliation), and Democrats in turn consider extraordinary measures to block what they see as authoritarian moves. Such dynamics indicate a **continuation of the norm erosion** seen in recent years: the shared understanding that politics has limits and that rivals are legitimate is fading.

In sum, **Phase 1 (erosion of democratic norms)** is clearly ongoing. The period around the 2024 elections did not reverse the backsliding; if anything, it entrenched it. *Democratic backsliding* that began in the mid-2010s has continued into 2025, with norms around elections, accountability, and tolerance further eroded. This creates a permissive environment for the later phases of authoritarian takeover to unfold.

Phase 2: Institutional Weakening and Media Manipulation

With Trump’s return to power in 2025, there have been concerted efforts to **weaken institutional checks** and **manipulate information channels**, hallmark tactics of Phase 2. Many of these efforts build on trends

from Trump's first term, but they are now being executed more systematically and with fewer restraints given the GOP's unified control of government. Key developments include:

- **Politicization of Law Enforcement and Civil Service:** Within days of taking office, the Trump administration moved swiftly to **purge or sideline officials deemed insufficiently loyal**, aiming to bend state institutions to the president's will. For example, FBI Director Christopher Wray – who had resisted political pressure during the prior administration – announced his resignation in December 2024 under clear pressure, after Trump (then president-elect) said he would fire Wray and nominate a close ally, Kash Patel, to lead the FBI ⁸ . Patel, a **Trump loyalist**, indeed was tapped as the new FBI Director ⁹ , highlighting an effort to install leadership that would be politically compliant. Similarly, Trump replaced the Attorney General with **an avowed loyalist**: after an initial floated choice (Rep. Matt Gaetz) proved too controversial, Trump nominated Pam Bondi – a former Florida Attorney General and longtime Trump ally – to head the Justice Department ¹⁰ ¹¹ . Bondi was confirmed with Republican votes, ensuring that the DOJ is led by someone deeply aligned with Trump's interests. These moves exemplify *institutional weakening*: the independence of top law enforcement agencies has been **compromised by partisan appointments**. Career officials who acted as guardrails in Trump's first term have been replaced or pushed out in the second. In late January 2025, for instance, the new administration **fired over a dozen Justice Department lawyers** who had been involved in Trump's criminal prosecutions, explicitly because they "*could not be trusted to faithfully implement the President's agenda*" due to their role in prosecuting him ¹² ¹³ . A DOJ official justified these firings by invoking the president's constitutional powers ¹⁴ . This purge sent a chilling message through the civil service and fulfilled Trump's campaign threat of retribution against officials who held him or his allies accountable ¹⁵ .
- **"Schedule F" and Purging the Bureaucracy:** More broadly, Trump has revived plans to **strip thousands of career civil servants of job protections**, enabling mass firings of staff deemed not loyal to his agenda. On Day 1, Trump reissued (via executive order) his previously canceled "*Schedule F*" program, now renamed "*Schedule Policy/Career*," which **reclassifies up to 50,000 federal employees** (about 2% of the workforce) into an at-will status ¹⁶ ¹⁷ . Under this scheme, civil servants in "policy-influencing" roles can be fired easily and replaced with hand-picked appointees. The White House claimed this would root out "*unaccountable, policy-determining federal employees*" supposedly obstructing the elected agenda ¹⁸ , but critics note it effectively allows an **ideological purge of the bureaucracy**. Trump himself framed it bluntly: officials who "*refuse to advance the policy interests of the President... should no longer have a job*" ¹⁹ . This initiative, which **dismantles long-standing civil service protections**, is a marked escalation from Trump's first term (when he mused about the "deep state" but faced more pushback). It exemplifies Phase 2: deliberately weakening institutional independence to consolidate executive control over the apparatus of government.
- **Executive-Legislative Relations:** With Republican majorities in Congress, **legislative oversight of the executive has largely evaporated**, replaced by alignment and even collaboration in undermining institutional checks. Rather than checking the president, the GOP-led House and Senate have often acted *in concert with Trump's agenda*. For example, Congress has shown little appetite to investigate ethical or legal concerns involving the administration, focusing instead on probes targeting Democrats or the previous Biden administration. Within days of inauguration, House committees pivoted from scrutinizing Trump to **pursuing President Biden's family and last acts in office**. In June 2025, Trump **ordered the DOJ to formally investigate Joe Biden** over "*covering up his mental state*" and other alleged misconduct ²⁰ ²¹ – an extraordinary move directing

law enforcement against a political rival. Republican lawmakers openly cheered such investigations. This reflects a **breakdown of separation-of-powers norms**: Congress is not serving as a check but rather enabling Trump's efforts to punish opponents, while Trump expects his party in Congress to shield him. The result is a pliant legislature, undermining the independent institutional role Congress is meant to play.

- **Media Manipulation and Attacks on the Free Press:** A critical institution in democracy is a free press, but it has come under increasing pressure. Trump has long attacked mainstream media as “fake news” and labeled journalists “enemies of the people.” Now in power again, he and his allies are taking steps that could “**straighten out the press**”, as Trump phrased his goal ²². One notable case foreshadowing a media crackdown was a **combative defamation trial in Florida against CNN**. In early 2025, CNN was sued by a former military contractor and, unlike some outlets that caved to pressure, CNN chose to fight in court. The jury awarded the plaintiff \$5 million in damages ²³, but more significant was the **aggressive stance of the prosecution**: the plaintiff's lawyer explicitly framed the case as an *opportunity to “send a message to mainstream media” and “change an industry”*, aligning his arguments with Trump's public position against the press ²² ²⁴. Experts noted this trial provided a **roadmap for cracking down on media independence** under Trump's second term ²⁵. Indeed, media organizations are on notice: the *Guardian* reported that other outlets like ABC News and *The Washington Post* **backed down or settled stories** under threat of persecution from the incoming administration ²⁶. This suggests a climate of **self-censorship born of intimidation**. Additionally, Trump has **revived calls to loosen libel laws** and make it easier to sue or punish critical media. While changing libel law would require legislation or constitutional change (not easily done), the *rhetoric alone chills free expression*. Beyond lawsuits, the administration is reportedly exploring ways to leverage regulatory powers or executive orders to squeeze critical outlets and reward friendly ones. For example, there have been hints of scrutinizing broadcast licenses or launching antitrust probes selectively. *Information control* is a classic authoritarian strategy, and we see its emergence: one senator noted with approval Trump's labeling of “Antifa” and other protest groups as terrorists (a move that can justify surveillance of activist journalists), while **whistleblower protections and press freedoms are being deemphasized**. The overall media environment also features **widening propaganda outlets** – right-wing media and social media echo chambers amplify the government's narratives while undermining dissenting voices. (Notably, Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter – now X – in 2022 led to restored accounts for far-right figures and a flood of mis/disinformation on the platform, creating a more hospitable environment for authoritarian propaganda by 2024–25. These changes, though initiated earlier, have bolstered the *alternative media ecosystem* that Trump and allies use to manipulate public opinion.)

- **“Weaponization” of State Communications:** The government's messaging apparatus itself is being used to shape narratives. The White House and executive agencies have adopted *state-media-like tactics* – for example, issuing official statements that demonize opponents or spread contested claims. In early 2025, the White House Office of Communications has repeatedly echoed Trump's unfounded assertions (such as exaggerating crime by immigrant groups or claiming his predecessor was incapacitated). Such usage of official channels to disseminate partisan or false information blurs the line between governance and propaganda. Meanwhile, *independent watchdog institutions* – inspectors general, federal ethics offices, etc. – are being sidelined or staffed with loyalists, reducing the avenues by which truthful information about government actions can reach the public.

Taken together, these trends illustrate **Phase 2 in action**. The weakening of institutional independence (DOJ, FBI, civil service, Congress's oversight role) and the manipulation of the information environment (intimidation of media, propaganda proliferation) are accelerating. This **continues prior trends** from Trump's first term (when he often clashed with institutions and spread disinformation), but crucially, **the continuity has given way to escalation**. Trump now wields more unified power and is pursuing these authoritarian tools more unapologetically and efficiently than before.

Phase 3: Normalization of Political Violence and Erosion of Legal Accountability

Phase 3 involves a dangerous synergy: political violence becomes accepted or even encouraged, and legal accountability for power-holders or their supporters erodes. Developments in 2024–2025 indicate that the U.S. is **squarely in this phase**, with several stark examples:

- **The Aftermath of January 6 and Political Violence Narratives:** The January 6, 2021 insurrection was a watershed of political violence in modern America. In the years since, rather than universally condemning this violence, one major party has seen elements that *justify or even celebrate it*. By 2024, **the normalization of that event was apparent**: numerous Republican candidates and officials minimized the attack or referred to the rioters as *“political prisoners.”* This culminated in Trump's extraordinary move upon regaining the presidency: on **January 21, 2025, President Trump issued sweeping pardons to hundreds of Jan. 6 rioters**, including those convicted of serious offenses like assaulting police ²⁷ ²⁸. He pardoned **more than 1,500 people** involved in the Capitol attack, **freeing over 200 who were still in prison** ²⁷, among them leaders of violent extremist groups (e.g. Proud Boys, Oath Keepers) ²⁹ ³⁰. This unprecedented blanket clemency for an anti-democratic mob **signaled clear approval of political violence** as a tool. It effectively told future actors that **violence carried out for the right political cause will go unpunished**. Law enforcement veterans and even some Republican lawmakers decried the move – police organizations (including the Fraternal Order of Police, which had endorsed Trump) said they were *“deeply discouraged”* by pardons for people who attacked officers ³¹. A Reuters/Ipsos poll found nearly 60% of Americans opposed the blanket pardons ³². Nonetheless, Trump stood by this mass clemency, **framing the rioters as patriots**. The *erosion of legal accountability* here is stark: individuals who engaged in an attempt to overthrow a democratic election were not only absolved but tacitly praised. This represents a *sharp break from the rule-of-law principle* that even political allies must answer for violence. It also firmly entrenches the **normalization of political violence** – what was once unthinkable (a violent attack on Congress) is now, in the eyes of the ruling party's leader, forgivable and even justified.
- **Rise in Threats and Violent Rhetoric:** Beyond Jan. 6, the overall climate has seen **heightened threats of violence** in political life. The years 2020–2024 saw a surge of threats against election workers, school board members, and public officials. By 2025 this trend had not abated. If anything, **violent rhetoric has become more mainstream**. Trump and allied candidates frequently use terms like *“treason”* and hint at retribution or violence against opponents in speeches. There were numerous reports in 2024 of armed individuals showing up at ballot drop boxes or polling sites (a pattern that began in 2020), which creates an atmosphere of intimidation around elections. Meanwhile, far-right militant groups, although some leaders were prosecuted, have regrouped or been emboldened by the pardons. The concept of *“patriotic” violence* – that taking up arms against

perceived tyrannical government or cultural enemies is justified – has seeped from the fringe into segments of the mainstream right. This is evidenced by social media chatter and protests where weaponry and threats are on display without broad GOP condemnation. **Political violence is being normalized** when sitting members of Congress casually talk about “bloodshed” or share memes about civil war – statements that once would have caused outrage are now often met with shrugs or even cheers in partisan media.

- **Targeting of Dissent and Protesters:** In parallel, the **use of state force against certain protesters** has increased, reflecting an erosion of civil liberties. A vivid example occurred in early 2025 at Columbia University: a student protest leader, *Mahmoud Khalil*, who led campus demonstrations against U.S. policy (specifically criticizing Israel's actions in Palestine), was arrested by federal agents and threatened with deportation ³³ ³⁴. Khalil is a legal permanent resident, not accused of any crime beyond leading protests. The Trump administration justified his arrest by citing a *new executive order “banning antisemitism”* on campuses ³⁴, claiming his pro-Palestinian activism ran afoul of that order. **Critics denounced this as a blatant abuse of power to silence dissent**, noting that typically a green-card holder cannot be deported absent actual criminal wrongdoing ³⁵. The White House insisted it wasn't about the First Amendment, but the clear message was that **protest against government policy could be equated with subversion**. This case has alarmed free-speech advocates, who see it as part of a broader crackdown on left-wing or anti-government protesters. Indeed, President Trump has rhetorically conflated *leftist protesters and rioters* with domestic terrorists, and reportedly pushed for designating loose networks like “Antifa” as terrorist organizations to enable federal action against them. The chilling effect on activism – especially by immigrants or marginalized groups – is real. This **state-sanctioned intimidation** against protesters marks a departure from previous norms of tolerating even unpopular speech, and it dovetails with Phase 3's erosion of accountability: those using violence on the regime's behalf (far-right groups) are pardoned, while those engaging in dissent *without* violence (student activists) face harsh legal jeopardy.

- **Erosion of Accountability for Leaders and Allies:** Perhaps the most telling sign of Phase 3 is how **legal accountability for the powerful is being systematically dismantled**. After winning the 2024 election, Trump wasted no time in insulating himself and his circle from prosecution. In the lame-duck period, even before inauguration, there were indications that Trump's pending federal criminal cases would not proceed. Indeed, by late November 2024, the Justice Department under the outgoing administration quietly **halted active prosecution of Trump's cases** in anticipation of the OLC (Office of Legal Counsel) policy against indicting a sitting president ³⁶. Once Trump took office and installed his people, the DOJ went further: it **formally dropped the federal charges against Trump** related to the 2020 election subversion and the classified documents, effectively nullifying those prosecutions ¹³. Special Counsel Jack Smith, who had brought those indictments, **resigned in early 2025** after seeing his cases quashed ³⁶. Then, as noted, the administration *fired the line prosecutors* who worked on them ¹². These actions amount to an **extraordinary rollback of legal accountability** for the head of state. Trump, who faced serious allegations, has been able to *avoid legal judgment by virtue of regaining power*. This sets a perilous precedent: it communicates that if an official can win election (or re-election), they can escape the rule of law.

Additionally, Trump has turned the machinery of justice against his rivals, further perverting accountability. In June 2025 he **ordered an investigation into President Biden** for an alleged “cover-up” of Biden's health and use of an autopen for signing documents ²⁰. While this might sound bizarre, it has real implications: it

harnesses DOJ's authority to potentially concoct charges or at least tarnish the reputation of an opponent. Trump's memo even referenced a special counsel report on Biden's handling of classified documents ³⁷ – implying that what was tolerated for Trump (mishandling classified material) would now be grounds to pursue Biden punitively. The **double standard in justice** – leniency for allies, persecution for opponents – is a classic authoritarian marker. Congressional Republicans have largely cheered these moves; for example, House Oversight Committee members eagerly supported inquiries into Biden's last acts in office and his family business dealings, while pointedly ignoring far more overt issues of corruption or abuse under Trump.

- **Violence in Society and State Response:** The year 2024–25 has also seen **spikes in social unrest**, some of it turning violent, which the administration has handled in ways that raise further concerns. In mid-2025, for instance, **mass immigration raids in Los Angeles** led to protests that escalated into clashes. President Trump responded by deploying **2,000 federalized National Guard troops** to Los Angeles without the governor's full consent, citing "lawlessness" ³⁸ ³⁹. This heavy-handed use of troops in a traditionally liberal city against protesters (many of whom were reacting to aggressive ICE enforcement) alarmed observers. The FBI Deputy Director – notably a Trump ally (former commentator Dan Bongino) – publicly warned that anyone "*using violence to obstruct*" ICE operations would be "*investigated and prosecuted*", while emphasizing that immigration crackdowns would continue undeterred ³⁸ ⁴⁰. The tone of these statements and actions suggests a **one-sided view of violence**: unrest triggered by aggressive government action (raids) is met with militarized force, whereas violence emanating from the government's own supporters (as in Jan. 6) is excused. In Los Angeles, Governor Gavin Newsom protested the move, and only a few hundred Guard troops actually took to the streets (far fewer than Trump ordered) ⁴¹, hinting at *state-level resistance*. Nonetheless, the incident underscores how **political violence and force are becoming normalized tools**. The federal government's readiness to use armed units to suppress domestic disturbances, and the lack of accountability for likely overreach, reflect an environment where **coercion is displacing consensus-building**.

In aggregate, these developments strongly indicate that the U.S. is in **Phase 3 of the authoritarian trajectory**. Political violence is no longer anathema – it has been integrated into the political process (through pardons and rhetoric) and is increasingly present in public life. Simultaneously, the **constraints of law on the executive and his allies are being stripped away**. This phase represents a dangerous tipping point: institutions exist on paper but their ability to hold powerful actors accountable or to deter violence is fundamentally weakened. The continuity from previous years is evident (Jan. 6 itself was a break in the taboo against violence; partisan refusals to hold Trump accountable were evident in 2019–20), but now we see a **departure in scale and brazenness**. What was once covert or contested – e.g. pressuring DOJ to go easy on friends – is now overt policy. The normalization of violence and impunity is setting the stage for the final phase.

Phase 4: Consolidation of Authoritarian Power and Collapse of Checks and Balances

Phase 4 is the ultimate consummation of authoritarian takeover: power becomes fully concentrated in the leader or ruling faction, and the remaining checks and balances are effectively neutralized. The question is whether the United States has reached this stage as of mid-2025, or if it is *on the brink*. Key areas to

examine are the resilience (or breakdown) of various checks – judicial, legislative, state-level, media, and civil society – in the face of the executive’s actions.

- **Judiciary and Courts:** The **judicial branch** is one of the last formal checks on executive and legislative overreach. As of 2025, the federal judiciary (especially the Supreme Court) has a strong conservative majority largely appointed by Republican presidents, including Trump. This alignment means the courts have often been sympathetic to or aligned with the GOP’s policy goals, but they are *not entirely subservient to Trump personally*. For example, the Supreme Court in mid-2023 rejected the most extreme version of the “independent state legislature theory” (in *Moore v. Harper*), preserving a role for state courts in reviewing election laws – a ruling that ran counter to the desires of some Trump allies who wanted unfettered state legislative control of elections. Also, lower courts and even Trump-appointed judges have, in the past, ruled against him on certain issues (as seen in 2020 election lawsuits). **However, early signs in 2025 suggest the Trump administration is working to bring the judiciary to heel** or bypass it when inconvenient. The president has **floated ideas of ignoring court injunctions** that block his policies (for instance, if courts tried to halt certain immigration or security measures). There is speculation that if faced with judicial orders he dislikes, Trump might claim “extraordinary powers” (perhaps citing national emergency) to defy them – a scenario that would mark a true collapse of judicial checking power. So far, we have not seen a direct constitutional crisis on this front in 2025, but the groundwork is being laid. Trump’s rhetoric toward judges is hostile (he has attacked judges overseeing his cases or those who ruled against his policies as partisan or illegitimate). With the DOJ and FBI now led by loyalists, the **enforcement of court orders** (which relies on executive compliance) could be in jeopardy if those orders conflict with Trump’s aims. In essence, while the judiciary remains an *independent actor on paper*, its ability to enforce limits on the executive is uncertain and may be eroding. If Trump moves to openly defy courts – or if he manages to further stack the courts with individuals chosen more for loyalty than merit – then the **final judicial check will have crumbled**, completing a major piece of Phase 4.

- **Legislative Checks:** As discussed in Phase 2, Congress under unified Republican control has largely ceased to act as a check. In fact, it is facilitating Trump’s consolidation of power. The House and Senate leadership (Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, as of 2025) have prioritized the Trump administration’s agenda and blocked efforts that might constrain him. For instance, when a minority of Senators raised concerns about some of Trump’s more extreme plans (such as potentially invoking the Insurrection Act more broadly, or curtailing certain rights), the party machinery kept dissent at bay. **Filibuster rules** in the Senate remain a potential hurdle for some legislation, but Republicans have shown readiness to sidestep or abolish the filibuster for key priorities (for example, there were reports they considered eliminating the filibuster to pass a national voter ID law or other election changes favorable to them). The Senate did manage to *block a very restrictive national abortion bill* in early 2025 – not because Republicans opposed the substance, but because Democrats filibustered it and a few GOP moderates hesitated, seeing the political fallout ⁴². This isolated instance shows that some checks within the legislature (like minority obstruction via filibuster or the need to maintain moderate voter support) are **still operative to a degree**. However, on core issues affecting Trump’s power, the legislative branch has offered scant resistance. Crucially, **Congress controls the budget and could, in theory, starve or limit executive abuses** – but instead, we’ve seen the House pass funding bills that *include riders to hamstring investigations of Trump or his allies*, and increase funding for enforcement arms that Trump favors (like expanding ICE operations). The net effect is that **the legislature is no longer a meaningful**

oversight body. With partisan loyalty superseding institutional loyalty, one of the pillars of the checks-and-balances system has effectively collapsed (at least for the duration of one-party control).

- **Federalism and State-Level Resistance:** The United States' federal system means states can serve as both laboratories of democracy and bulwarks against national authoritarian moves. In 2025, **blue states and some institutions within red states have started acting as counterweights** in certain areas. For example, states like California and New York have signaled they will not cooperate with federal efforts that violate civil rights – California's governor refused to let the full quota of National Guard requested by Trump deploy for immigration raids, as noted ⁴¹. Similarly, several states are pursuing their own policies on climate change, abortion rights, and voting access that run counter to the Trump administration line. However, the effectiveness of state resistance has limits. The federal government's supremacy in immigration enforcement, national security, and interstate matters can override state preferences (e.g. California cannot prevent ICE from operating, as seen in Los Angeles). Moreover, Trump's allies in some swing states have been working to change state laws in ways that entrench their power – for instance, by taking control of state election boards or giving legislatures more say in certification of election results. Some state legislatures (Wisconsin, Georgia, Texas) have moved to **curb the powers of Democratic governors or local officials**, part of a longer trend of power consolidation at the state level. While these are state issues, they reflect a nationwide pattern of undermining checks: even within states, checks and balances (like independent election administrators or nonpartisan courts) are under attack. If Trump or the national GOP coordinate with compliant states to, say, challenge unfavorable election outcomes in the future or to suppress opposition-led jurisdictions, **federalism might not protect against authoritarian consolidation** – it could be leveraged to reinforce it. At the moment, some states still act as **partial sanctuaries for the rule of law** (for example, New York's state prosecution of Trump's business fraud case continues, since presidential pardon power doesn't extend to state crimes, and Georgia's election interference case against Trump and associates is also state-run). These state-level legal cases are a remaining avenue of accountability. However, the Trump administration and congressional allies have floated the idea of using **federal power to interfere** in those cases – for example, invoking dubious constitutional theories to argue a president can have state charges removed to federal court (where he might then pardon or dismiss them). Should such efforts succeed, it would further indicate **Phase 4 consolidation**, as even state judicial processes could be nullified by central power.

- **Media and Civil Society as Checks:** In liberal democracy, a free press, academia, and civic organizations serve as informal checks by exposing wrongdoing and mobilizing public accountability. In 2025, these sectors are **under heavy strain**. Major media outlets continue to investigate and report on the administration's actions, but they face intimidation (as detailed in Phase 2). Notably, **journalists are concerned about surveillance and legal harassment** – there's a bipartisan bill for a federal media shield law to protect reporters from government spying that has stalled amid partisan divisions ⁴³, even as advocates warn that without it, the Trump DOJ could more easily compel reporters to reveal sources or could monitor communications (a practice the administration has not forsworn). The combination of aggressive government stance and lack of new legal protections leaves the press vulnerable. Already, some prominent journalists have mentioned *off-record* that sources in agencies are drying up, due to fear of retaliation or being purged – a sign that investigative journalism, a key check, is being muzzled indirectly. Civil society groups – from the ACLU to election watchdogs – are ringing alarm bells. Hundreds of political scientists and democracy scholars in early 2025 assessed that **American democracy is swiftly sliding toward authoritarianism**, with a Bright Line Watch survey rating U.S. democracy a dismal

55/100 after a few months of Trump's second term (down from an already weak 67/100 right after the election) ⁷ ⁶ . These scholars specifically noted concerns that the **press is facing interference, political opponents are being punished, and the legislature/judiciary are failing to check executive power** ⁷ ⁴⁴ . Such assessments underscore that traditional checks are crumbling. Public protests and civic resistance are another potential check – but as seen, protests are met with crackdowns or are painted as illegitimate (e.g. labeling racial justice protesters as violent “antifa”). After Trump's 2016 win, massive nationwide protests (the Women's March, etc.) signified public pushback; by contrast, after the 2024 win, protests were much more subdued, indicating a sense of *fear and resignation* among the opposition ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ . In deep-blue areas like the San Francisco Bay, which erupted in protest in 2016, the response in 2024 was “muted” – a few small vigils and marches ⁴⁷ . Analysts noted many were “*dispirited and humbled*”, feeling out of touch with the country and unsure of the impact of protest ⁴⁶ . This suggests civil society's morale is faltering right when its vigilance is needed most. A demoralized or intimidated civil society cannot effectively serve as a check, easing the path for consolidation.

- **Checks within the Executive Branch:** Often overlooked, but within the executive there are supposed to be internal checks – ethics lawyers, inspectors general (IGs), military leaders, etc. Under Trump in 2025, these are being weakened. Inspectors General who exposed wrongdoing in the first term (like the State Department or Intelligence Community IGs) were fired or pushed out back then; now, new IG appointments are more loyal or vacancies remain unfilled. The military leadership had, in the late Trump years, quietly resisted some extreme proposals (e.g., using active-duty troops on protesters in 2020). In 2025, Trump has a new slate of Pentagon leaders. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs under Biden, Gen. Mark Milley (who pointedly spoke about duty to the Constitution), retired in 2023. His replacement, Gen. CQ Brown, is now serving under Trump – Brown is a respected officer who thus far has maintained apolitical professionalism. However, there are reports of **ideological vetting within the ranks**: officers deemed “woke” or disloyal might be sidelined, and Trump allies have suggested reintroducing the concept of using the military for domestic operations if “security” demands it. If the top brass were to acquiesce to illegal orders or if dissenters were removed, that would signify the **collapse of an important internal check**. At present, it appears the military still holds some norms (for instance, there has been no purge akin to the DOJ's, and the National Guard deployment to L.A. saw coordination with state authorities, albeit tense). But it remains a domain to watch: a key factor in Phase 4 is when the security forces of a country become fully politicized. The attempted insertion of figures like Dan Bongino into law enforcement leadership (deputy FBI) hints at a drift in that direction ⁴⁸ .

Overall Assessment – Are We in Phase 4?

The United States in mid-2025 shows **many characteristics of Phase 4 (authoritarian consolidation)**, but perhaps not irreversibly or fully consolidated *yet*. Some checks and balances still function on occasion: the judiciary can still issue independent rulings (though enforcement is tenuous), the Senate's filibuster or a few dissenting GOP voices can slow certain extreme legislative actions, and state-level actors or civil society sometimes push back. However, the trendlines are unmistakable. The Trump administration and its allies have **systematically dismantled or overridden most checks**: Congress has been neutered as an oversight body, the DOJ and federal agencies are being turned into instruments of the leader's will, the free press is under severe pressure, opponents are harassed by state power, and those who commit violence in service of the regime face impunity.

Notably, the **Bright Line Watch** survey of experts reflects a consensus that the U.S. is moving into the realm of “*competitive authoritarianism*,” if not outright one-party rule ⁶ ⁷ . The scholars recorded the largest drop in perceived democratic performance since their surveys began, immediately after Trump took office again ⁷ ⁴⁹ . This drop – from an already weak rating to near failing – implies that we are *on the cusp of democratic collapse*. Key indicators, such as whether the government **interferes with the press, punishes opponents, or whether the legislature/judiciary can constrain the executive**, have all worsened markedly ⁴⁴ . Many democracy experts are **deeply troubled by Trump’s rapid expansion of executive power in just the first months of 2025** ⁵⁰ .

If we map the evidence to the four phases: **Phase 1 and 2 have clearly been surpassed** – the U.S. is well beyond the initial norm erosion and institutional weakening stage; those are *accomplished facts*. The country is firmly in **Phase 3**, as political violence is tacitly accepted and the rule of law is applied selectively. Elements of **Phase 4** are emerging – particularly the concentration of power and the hollowness of checks and balances – but some *remaining barriers prevent us from calling it fully consolidated*. For example, the existence of a (narrow) political opposition, the continued functioning of elections (the 2024 election itself was conducted and results respected, albeit by happenstance of who won), and the fact that independent courts and states still exist, all suggest the U.S. has not yet crossed into outright authoritarianism where no meaningful competition or dissent is allowed. However, the **trajectory is toward Phase 4**, and it is moving swiftly. Each passing week of 2025 has shown new moves that further **entrench one-party control and undermine oversight** (from purging officials to targeting opposition figures). Should these trends continue unchecked – e.g., if electoral processes are further rigged or critics in media and politics effectively silenced – the U.S. could reach Phase 4 in the near future.

Conclusion: Current Stage and Outlook

In light of the four-phase model of fascist/authoritarian takeover, the **United States in mid-2025 appears to be in a late Stage 3, teetering on the edge of Stage 4**. The erosion of democratic norms and institutional independence (Stages 1 and 2) has not only continued but intensified following the 2024 elections. We see clear **continuity with trends from 2016–2020** – such as disdain for norms, attacks on the press, and indulgence of extremist supporters – yet also a **dangerous departure**: the efforts to consolidate power and undermine checks have accelerated beyond what was seen previously.

Specific examples from 2024–2025 underscore this assessment:

- The **mass pardoning of January 6 rioters and the purge of DOJ prosecutors** who held Trump accountable illustrate an environment where *political violence is excused and legal accountability is nullified* ²⁷ ¹² . This is quintessential Stage 3 behavior, and it creates a permissive atmosphere for authoritarian rule.
- The installation of **loyalists in key institutions (FBI, DOJ)**, the **reinstatement of Schedule F to purge civil servants**, and the **intimidation of media via lawsuits and threats** show the machinery of government and information being refashioned to serve the leader, consistent with Stages 2 and 3 ⁸ ¹⁶ ²⁵ .
- **Executive usurpation of legislative and legal functions** – such as Trump directing investigations of his rival and Congress abdicating oversight – demonstrates that checks and balances are eroding rapidly ²⁰ ⁴⁴ . While not entirely collapsed yet, these guardrails are hanging by a thread.

- The **scholarly consensus of a sharp democratic decline (Bright Line Watch's 67→55 drop)** provides an external, comparative confirmation of the slide toward authoritarian rule ⁷ ⁵¹ . The fact that this drop occurred within weeks of the new administration taking power highlights how dramatic the recent changes have been.

Considering all these factors, one could argue the U.S. is **in a hybrid state between Phase 3 and Phase 4**. The regime exhibits many authoritarian features, but some pluralism and institutional life remain. However, the momentum is clearly toward full **Phase 4: consolidation of authoritarian power**. Each phase that has been reached so far has set the stage for the next, and now only a few critical safeguards stand in the way of outright autocracy.

Barring an unexpected reversal – such as internal GOP pushback, major court interventions upholding the rule of law, or public mobilization to enforce accountability – the trends suggest the United States could effectively enter Phase 4 in the near term. This would entail the **complete collapse of checks and balances**: for example, elections might become a formality due to gerrymandering or voter suppression, courts might consistently defer to the executive, and opposition voices could be so marginalized (through legal or extra-legal means) that power is essentially unchallenged.

In conclusion, **the current U.S. political climate** is one of serious democratic erosion. The nation is *perilously close* to the final stage of authoritarian takeover described by the four-phase model. The developments of 2024 and 2025 show both continuity with prior anti-democratic patterns and an alarming acceleration. Whether the U.S. fully succumbs to Phase 4 or not will depend on events in the coming months – including how robustly remaining institutions and the public respond to these challenges. As of now, the evidence indicates an ongoing slide toward authoritarian consolidation, placing American democracy in one of its most fragile and precarious states in modern history.

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