

How Authoritarian Populists Consolidate Power and Implications for a Second Trump Term

By Don Sutherland

Democracy is fragile. When confidence in institutions is lost and the will to defend them evaporates, democracy is lost. When that happens, printed words in constitutions, statutes, and regulations and the protections that depend on those words become meaningless.

Once a nation's constitutional framework and its supporting institutions erode sufficiently, they can collapse at lightning speed. The title of Alexei Yurchak's book on the collapse of the Soviet Union, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, captures the rapidity and magnitude of change that follows once an inflection point is crossed.

Authoritarian populism, which depends heavily on grievances, public anxiety, division, and disinformation, rather than effective policy, cannot sustain for long periods of time. Thus, such leaders take measures or pursue courses aimed at corroding democratic institutions until they reach the point of collapse. Hungary, under Viktor Orbán provides a case study on how modern-day authoritarian populists carry out their destructive work to consolidate power.

Orbán pursued among the following strategies:

- His government changed electoral laws to weaken his opposition's ability to contest and win elections
- His government exerted significant influence over the news media, transforming it into a pro-Fidesz (his Party) propaganda machine that conveyed his Party's narrative while suppressing alternative viewpoints
- He constructed a "socio-economic dependency system" through his budgets and a system of patronage
- He undermined the system of checks and balances such as the Constitutional Court and National Electoral Board by appointing loyalists to those institutions until those institutions became extensions of his will

During his first term in office, throughout his 2024 campaign, and following his electoral victory, Donald Trump has taken steps along the path laid out by Orbán.

- Trump attacked the news media as the "enemy of the people," and his political opponents as the "enemy within." He described the United States as a failing nation in the midst of crisis. The implicit goal was to position himself as a kind of strong "national savior" on whose favor Americans depended.
- Trump fostered an alliance with billionaires such as Elon Musk and Bill Ackman. These ties made Trump's campaign the beneficiary of campaign funding and transformed Musk's X (formerly Twitter) into a powerful pro-Trump media platform.
- Trump connected state funding, including disaster relief, to their conduct in relation to his Administration. Loyalty-based allocation of funding could make state and local political

leaders and their constituencies increasingly dependent on loyalty to Trump, his allies, and their policies.

- Trump suggested that he would appoint loyalists to a wide range of positions (as he had already done through his appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court with big dividends). He also attacked professional civil servants and independent agencies such as the Federal Reserve and Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell. All of these actions are the building blocks of a patronage-based system.

Back on July 27, 2024 at a Turning Point Action event held at West Palm Beach, Trump told his audience, "... get out and vote, just this time. You won't have to do it anymore. Four more years, you know what, it will be fixed, it will be fine, you won't have to vote anymore..." Even if Trump didn't literally mean that Americans won't have to vote, he could consolidate power to the extent that the 2028 election would not be competitive just as Viktor Orbán achieved in Hungary.