

Guest Essay

How Does a Stymied Autocrat Deal With Defeat?

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By [Thomas B. Edsall](#)

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The window of opportunity that allowed President Trump to overwhelm his adversaries with an onslaught of executive orders dismantling core American institutions is closing.

Public opinion has [turned against](#) him, the economy is [faltering](#), the Supreme Court has [ordered him](#) to stand down, his tariffs have backfired and such conservative mainstays as [National Review](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#) are questioning his judgment.

How does a stymied autocrat deal with defeat? As the opposition gains strength, frustrating the nation's commander in chief, how will Trump respond?

It is unthinkable to imagine him graciously acknowledging defeat, changing direction and moving on.

Will he claim victory in defeat? Will he try to provoke his adversaries into violence in order to invoke the Insurrection Act?

Trump's unpredictability makes it impossible to answer these questions with any certainty, but as his actions in the first three months of his second term demonstrate, Trump's choices veer to the extreme.

In a jointly written email, Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, political scientists at Dartmouth and Harvard who wrote the 2024 book "[Ungoverning](#): The New Attack on the Administrative State and the Politics of Chaos," contend:

Today Trump is less restrained in the face of anything that thwarts his will. He has already begun to encounter threats from diminished popularity, strengthened political opposition, and legal and constitutional limitations. A less constrained Trump may be a more violent Trump.

Ungoverning unleashes rogue violence, vigilantism, militia. More, the coercive power of the state becomes a personal tool — from the investigatory power of the I.R.S. and the Justice Department to the colossal power of the military.

The targets of intimidation, threat, and violence expand. It starts with those on the margins who do not elicit popular sympathy but popular scorn: those who reside in the country illegally; those whose identities mark them off as vulnerable; trans people.

The logic of this violence is expanding. It will take aim at intellectuals, journalists, professors. The lawyers who protect the opposition. The donors who fund political opponents. Party operatives and then candidates themselves. Trump talks wistfully of sweeping up U.S. citizens and sending them to a foreign gulag outside the reach of U.S. law. The step from where we are to a much more violent politics is a short one.

A striking feature of politics in 2025 is how quickly the "[vibe shift](#)" that seemingly ushered in a new conservative era after the 2024 election has diminished or even disappeared.

On Jan. 20, the day Trump was inaugurated for a second time, he had an approval rating of 52 percent, with 43 percent disapproving, according to [The Times](#). By April 28, the numbers flipped to 44 percent who approved and 53 percent who disapproved.

In the most recent [New York Times/Siena College survey](#) conducted April 21-24, 66 percent of voters said the word "chaotic" described Trump's second term well, and 59 percent agreed that

“scary” was a good description. Majorities of voters disapproved of Trump’s handling of seven major issues, including immigration, the economy, trade and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Economic trends have been similarly adverse. On April 24, the Economist published “[How Is America’s Economy Faring Under Donald Trump?](#)” In contrast with Trump’s first term, the report found, “Mr. Trump’s second term is proving far rockier.”

Investors, according to The Economist’s analysis,

Fear that Mr. Trump’s tariffs, whatever their eventual form, will stoke inflation and depress economic growth. Company bosses, faced with extraordinary economic uncertainty, are delaying investments and issuing warnings about future earnings.

Consumers are downcast too. Expectations about the economy’s short-term health are at a 12-year low. Until recently, such pessimism was mainly found in Democratic-leaning parts of the country; now the gloom is evident among Republicans too.

At the same time, there is evidence of growing discontent with Trump on the right. Not only are [The Wall Street Journal](#) and [National Review](#) breaking from Trump on [tariffs](#), [Ukraine](#), the [prosecution](#) of Trump’s critics and his [deportation](#) policies, but so too are such influential voices as Ben Shapiro and Rod Dreher.

Shapiro has emerged as an [outspoken supporter](#) of Ukraine and a sharp critic of Trump’s pro-Russia policies. When Trump used an Easter message to attack everyone from “radical left lunatics” to “weak and ineffective judges” to “Sleepy Joe Biden,” [Dreher tweeted](#): “Beyond disgraceful — and on the holiest day of the Christian calendar, instrumentalizing the Resurrection to rant about his enemies. No class.”

As Trump’s armor begins to crack, you have to wonder: Who is more dangerous — a triumphant Trump or a wounded Trump?

I asked [Tali Mendelberg](#), a political scientist at Princeton, a series of questions about how Trump might react to an increasingly adverse political climate. She replied by email:

It’s futile to predict specifically what Trump would do. Unpredictability is one of his characteristics. He uses it to cow subordinates and wring concessions from adversaries. The fact that these questions even come to mind is one way he exercises power over people.

That said, a consistent pattern of past actions helps predict future behavior. Trump has gotten away with violating rules all his adult life. He did not incur lasting damage from his attempted insurrection on Jan. 6; despite what his own party leaders called impeachable offenses, he won a second term (and then pardoned even his violent followers, with minimal fallout). His statements suggest he believes he overcame persecution and disrespect and is once again a “winner.”

He is now aggressively pushing the limits of the law in nearly every conceivable way. It is difficult to see why he would slink into humility or go quietly into defeat. He has never done so before. He fights with every means at his disposal. If he should feel that he is losing power and respect, there is no reason to expect he will self-restrain.

Trump embodies the leadership qualities of a specific type of politician, according to Michael Bang Petersen, a political scientist at Aarhus University in Denmark, whose [work](#) I have often [cited](#). Petersen wrote in an email:

Research indicates that, at a very general level, there are two types of leaders. Leaders who win prestige in exchange for providing community benefits and leaders who operate via dominance and, hence, use fear and intimidation to force others to recognize their status.

It is often difficult to assess people at a distance but Donald Trump has every single hallmark of a dominance-oriented leader. He seems aggressive, self-centered, norm-violating and strategically uses fear to force people to defer. Psychological research has shown that people who are drawn to dominance as a status-strategy often have antisocial personality dispositions including being low in empathy and high in narcissism.

Petersen wrote that research he and his colleagues have conducted focuses

on a particular destructive aspect of the psychology of dominance, what we call a need for chaos. We have consistently found that when dominance-oriented individuals face threats to their status, they react with fierce aggression. Psychologists have long known about so-called narcissistic rage, but we have found that when the feeling of threat becomes strong enough in such individuals, this rage can turn into a destructive drive when the person essentially just wants to watch the world burn.

There is a risk that strong resistance would trigger a psychological desire to escalate the conflict much further. In a well-functioning democracy, such desires in a president would be balanced by strong institutional checks and balances but the current risk is that Trump's personality can shape government policy and reactions much more directly exactly because he has intimidated substantial parts of those checks and balances into submission and that the advisers in the inner circle may be afraid of speaking against him.

[Sean Westwood](#), a political scientist at Dartmouth, made the case in an email that instead of lashing out when faced with strong opposition to his agenda, Trump is more likely to back down:

"Trump is a coward who has convinced the world he is brave," Westwood wrote, adding that

Trump has carefully cultivated a personal myth of strength, yet his career is marked by a consistent pattern of loss and acquiescence. He has filed for bankruptcy six times and has lost lawsuits across all levels of government. What remains underappreciated is his tendency to capitulate when forced.

Although he routinely lies and cheats, he ultimately complies when compliance becomes unavoidable. Even as he publicly refused to concede the 2020 presidential election, his staff was quietly packing his belongings at the White House.

Of those I contacted, Westwood stood alone in his belief that Trump will retreat in the face of firm opposition. Everyone else suggested that Trump becomes more dangerous when threatened.

“My sense is that Trump will react to resistance from the courts and other institutions as he typically does — by lashing out at his perceived enemies using his social media bully pulpit,” Julie Wronski, a political scientist at the University of Mississippi, replied by email to my queries.

While Trump may not “try to intentionally provoke violence,” Wronski continued,

Research shows that when party leaders employ violent rhetoric, they increase support for political violence among their party members.

That is to say that, whether Trump wants to incite violence or not, if he rhetorically attacks political opponents and paints them as existential threats to the nation, this language can have unintended violent consequences.

In support of her analysis, Wronski cited [a paper](#) published in the journal Political Behavior on April 16, “The Effects of Partisan Elites’ Violent Rhetoric on Support for Political Violence,” by Taegyeon Kim, a professor of political science at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology.

Kim wrote that he conducted a survey of “2,312 U.S. partisans through [Lucid](#) between May 16 and June 1, 2022 — a sample matching the demographic profile of the general population.”

His key findings:

Partisan elites’ threatening rhetoric increases support for political violence when it comes from co-party elites while there is no such effect when the same rhetoric comes from opposing party elites

Boding ill for American democracy, there is no evidence of counteractive behavior in response to threatening rhetoric. Further, the inflaming effect of co-party elites’ threatening rhetoric is stronger among partisans who are more closely identified with their own party and less normatively concerned about political violence.

Kim found that when political elites frame “the opposing party as a threat to their own party’s values or status,” they “can be particularly influential by evoking fear. This is concerning in the contemporary political climate, where the opposing party is often perceived as an iniquitous other, and political losses are perceived as existential threats.”

In other words, Kim continued, “partisan elites, intentionally or unintentionally, can fearmonger among their followers in political discussions to justify the use of political violence.”

I asked [John Jost](#), a professor of psychology and politics at N.Y.U., how dangerous Trump is likely to become if he senses defeat and rejection, and how much damage is he likely to inflict?

Jost’s emailed reply was succinct:

He is clearly the most impulsive and unpredictable U.S. president of our lifetimes, so I think it is impossible to say. But based on the first 100 days of this presidency, I would say extremely dangerous to any and all democratic institutions and proponents.

Trump, Jost continued,

perfectly exemplifies all nine characteristics of the authoritarian personality syndrome:

(a) aggression against those who deviate from established norms, (b) submission to idealized moral authorities, (c) uncritical acceptance of conventional values, (d) mental rigidity and a proclivity to engage in stereotypical thinking, (e) a preoccupation with toughness and power, (f) exaggerated sexual concerns, (g) a reluctance to engage in introspection, (h) a tendency to project undesirable traits onto others, and (i) destructiveness and cynicism about human nature.

Steven Pinker, a psychologist at Harvard who has been at the forefront in the university’s confrontation with the Trump administration, pointed out that

So far Trump has reacted with vengeance, threatening further research cuts as well as rescinding Harvard’s tax-free status, in response to Harvard’s lawsuit, even after his administration admitted that the list of demands had been sent in error. This is indeed governance by revenge rather than justice.

Bullies and street toughs, Pinker continued,

think well of themselves not in proportion to their accomplishments but out of a congenital sense of entitlement. When reality intrudes, as it inevitably will, they treat the bad news as a personal affront, and its bearer, who is endangering their fragile reputation, as a malicious slanderer.

“And the trio of symptoms at narcissism’s core — grandiosity, need for admiration and lack of empathy — fits political tyrants to a T. It is most obvious in their vainglorious monuments, hagiographic iconography, and obsequious mass rallies.

One of the most threatening characteristics of such leaders, Pinker wrote, is that “their lack of empathy imposes no brake on the punishment they mete out to real or imagined opponents.”

There is “a big difference between classic tyrants and Trump,” according to Pinker:

It is that his thirst for dominance and revenge often loses out to his mercurial nature and short attention span. We saw this in the border wall, tariffs, and other stop-and-start policies.

He delights in chaos as much as in revenge. This means he could lose interest in one of his vendettas and move on to the next one. Also, like street bullies, he thrives on bluff and bluster, and often has a glass jaw when the target is overwhelming. We saw this in the fact that he did peacefully vacate the White House in 2021 despite claiming that the election had been stolen.

There is still a larger question. If, in the face of adversity, Trump and his allies attempt to overturn democracy, what are their chances? I asked [Herbert Kitschelt](#), a professor of international relations at Duke and the 2025 recipient of the prestigious Johan Skytte Prize in political science, that question, and he provided a nuanced reply by email: “No scientific, evidence-based investigation can currently provide a factually grounded prognosis” on “whether and how Trump and the Christian Evangelical-nationalist-Southern wing of the Republican Party might break the democratic constitution of the United States,” he wrote.

Instead, Kitschelt argued, it is possible to “outline the forces that may impinge on whether this process will take place or not.”

Kitschelt then specified the four factors working in favor of the establishment of “an authoritarian coalition in the United States.”

- 1) “U.S. technological innovativeness and productivity gains — more so than in other advanced capitalist countries — have generated anxiety among many occupational groups.”
- 2) “The U.S. has a weak welfare state — in terms of pensions, health care, unemployment insurance, aid to families with children, public education — when compared to just about any other advanced capitalist country.”
- 3) “America is the most inegalitarian advanced Western country in terms of income and wealth. That induces rich people to promote politicians who distract the economically worse-off from questions of economic distribution and focus their attention on issues of political governance, culture war, racial and ethnic hierarchies and nationalist claims to global supremacy.”
- 4) “Unlike any other Western democracy, America has a deeply anti-democratic, intolerant, illiberal religious strand.”

Kitschelt went on to describe conditions in the United States that “are adverse to the victory of an authoritarian coalition” and are, in contrast, favorable to democracy:

- 1) “America’s civil society: If it awakens from its current shock and slumber, signs of which are already emerging, it is likely that it will become a powerful force to uphold democracy.”
- 2) “Most importantly: American capitalism, large segments of the U.S. business class, whether in finance, IT and AI, U.S. manufacturers in global production chains (vehicles, aerospace, pharma, etc.) and U.S. culture industries are averse to a MAGA & Tea Party authoritarian coalition. Populism undercuts property rights and the rule of law, rendering it impossible to make rational, profit-generating, long-term business investments.”

A severe economic crisis, which Kitschelt believes is probable given current trends, would sharply undermine Republican prospects in the 2026 Congressional elections, which might prompt Trump and his allies to “realize that they cannot win a free and fair election, and actually might face a defeat in the midterms severe enough to precipitate the impeachment of both president and vice president.”

The question then becomes, in Kitschelt’s view,

Will evangelical-nationalist clero-fascism — with other MAGA and Tea Party currents in tow — be capable of converting America into an electoral autocracy faster than U.S. civil society and large parts of the business sector will be able to mobilize a defense of American democracy and to stiffen the spine of the U.S. judiciary to preserve American institutions?

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