



## THE SULTANIZATION OF US POLITICS

Wolfgang Merkel



# About the Author

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## WOLFGANG MERKEL

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# Introduction

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Whenever something new, unbelievable, even revolutionary happens before our very eyes, the terminology specialists in academia and the media have a field day. They are motivated not only by vain inventiveness, but also by an attempt to understand and explain better the content and meaning of the unbelievable events unfolding before us. We are talking about Donald Trump – how could it be otherwise in these times? The 47th president of the United States of America began with a small group of loyalists, a Republican Party in Congress largely subservient to him, and the support of right-wing media to tear down the mental, cultural, and institutional foundations of US democracy. Historian Timothy Snyder (2024) simply calls the regime ‘fascist’, while his former Yale colleague, Marci Shore, speaks of a ‘descent into fascism’ (Lopez and Wang 2025). The Economist (2024) classified the US as a ‘flawed democracy’. Political Scientists Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt resort to the already established term ‘competitive authoritarianism’ (Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt 2025) and cosmopolitan intellectual Ivan Krastev (2025) describes the emerging Trump regime as a ‘revolutionary government in the form of an imperial court’. The list goes on: tech oligarchy, plutocracy, toxic feudalism, one-man government, and the ‘rule of unqualified loyalists’ are all worth mentioning.

What are the arguments for describing Trump's USA as a plutocracy or fascism? Don't we rather see the bizarre features of a form of rule that the German sociologist Max Weber described as patrimonial, or more precisely, sultanistic one hundred years ago?

## Plutocracy

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US democracy in the 20th and 21st centuries has been more heavily influenced by private capital and donations than most Western democracies. This is partly due to the particular market affinity of the American economy and society. After 1945, there was hardly any relevant public funding of political parties and election campaigns in the US, unlike in Western Europe. This gave private funding from wealthy donors and big business an influence that is incompatible with the democratic principle of equality. As early as 2010, the landmark ruling in *Citizen United vs Federal Election Commission* allowed massive private corporate donations in election campaigns. The Supreme Court ruled that limiting corporate donations was not compatible with the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution (Wikipedia 2025a). This was a key decision for the further corporate and private ‘capitalization’ of election campaigns.

Etymologically, plutocracy means the rule of wealth. In practice, it implies at least indirect influence on political decisions depending on the size of donations. Wealthy individuals and financially powerful companies influence political decisions in line with their interests, for example, in tax, industrial, or trade policy. The political principle of equality in democracy becomes a dead letter.<sup>[1]</sup>

It seemed at first that what had once happened somewhat indirectly before Trump was now being demonstrated directly before everyone's eyes in his second presidency. The big tech billionaires, from Jeff Bezos (Amazon) to Mark Zuckerberg (Meta, Facebook) to Elon Musk (X, Tesla, SpaceX), were conspicuously among the guests of honour at the inauguration ceremony. This was a deliberate demonstration of present and future power. Market power was being directly translated into political power.

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[1] ‘Equality’ as a democratic principle foremost means legal equality. But legal equality is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democratic equality. In democratic regimes where private and corporate donors spend millions for specific political candidates, they buy direct political influence.

This seemed to become even clearer with Elon Musk, who as head of the newly-created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) was temporarily given direct government power to dissolve entire government departments and lay off thousands of government employees. A private entrepreneur with no legitimate political mandate had direct access to government data and political decisions.

The authoritarian–libertarian tech billionaire Peter Thiel successfully financed J.D. Vance's campaign for a Senate seat in Ohio in 2022 with \$10 million (Wikipedia 2025b). At the beginning of 2025, Vance rose to become vice president of the United States of America. According to the prime German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (2024), Elon Musk alone donated \$250 million to Donald Trump's election campaign. Consequently, the 2025 report by the academic *Electoral Integrity Project* (2025) cites the financing of the 2024 election campaign as one of the prominent causes of a further deterioration of *electoral integrity* in the United States of America.

So, it seemed at first that oligarchic capitalism had created its own superstructure. However, the male alliance between Musk and Trump broke down after only a few months of Donald Trump's second presidency, not because of constitutional concerns, but because of the bursting egos of two monomaniacs. In the end, political power prevailed in the hands of the president.

Trump secured a central position in the plutocratic power structure within his first 100 days in office. The oligopolistic order in the economy makes it easy for him to switch capitalist oligarchs. The tax authorities, the FBI, and parts of a partisan judiciary are Trump's omnipresent threats, keeping even his most powerful supporters in check. The tax authorities act as a permanent sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of supporters and opponents alike. They intimidate and thus ensure loyalty to the president. Tax authorities are a particularly popular and effective tool for autocrats such as Putin and Erdogan, right up to the presidency of the oldest democracy in modern times (Hanson and Kopstein 2024, 65).

Trump is more than just a *primus inter pares*. He rules with the help of his loyal followers and uses state instruments, which he increasingly abuses, for his own personal power. In this respect, the plutocratic traits of Trump's politics cannot be explained by a vulgar Marxist base-superstructure theorem. Under Trump, the personified state superstructure dominates the capitalist base and uses it for his own purposes, including personal enrichment. Trump has not created a new plutocratic regime, but he has reinforced and vulgarized existing plutocratic tendencies and turned them into a family affair. Trump favours, threatens, and keeps court, like a sultan (Weber 1922[1985]).

## Fascism

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In addition to characterizing Trump's form of rule as plutocracy, accusations of fascism are increasingly and inevitably being made. With all due respect to American historians Timothy Snyder and Marci Shore, both of whom taught at Yale University and have now left the US, it is problematic to follow their reasoning and call Trump a fascist or even claim that the US democracy is sliding into fascism. Of course, there are signs of authoritarianism, and the slogan 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) openly displays nationalism and chauvinism; the storming of the Capitol shows the Trumpists' willingness to accept violence for their own aims. Whether Trump subsequently attempted to create a "cult of January 6th martyrs," as Snyder (2024) claims, referencing the Nazi cult of Hitler's first coup d'état in 1923, is more doubtful. Trump's mobilization of a mob has little to do with the militarized SA and later SS units of German National Socialism.

Placing Trump as a person and his system in the same category of rule as Mussolini's fascism and Hitler's murderous National Socialism is an exaggeration, and unintentionally relativizes the horrendous crimes of these true fascists. To be sure, there are overlaps. If we refer to the 'fascist minimum' outlined by German historian Ernst Nolte, affinities become apparent, but so do categorical differences.

Nolte's slightly expanded minimum is: *anti-Marxism, nationalism, anti-liberalism, violence, the Führer principle, a party army, propaganda, and an aspiration to totalitarianism* (Nolte 1962). Trump is undoubtedly anti-Marxist. He is full of hatred and resentment toward everything he considers socialist, from nationalization of the economy to universal health insurance. The campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again' expresses a certain form of nationalist chauvinism. However, despite everyday racism in the US, it does not primarily express a sense of ethnic superiority or white supremacy among most Americans, but rather an imperial sense of being 'chosen people', which has religious–historical roots. This characterization might be useful for describing Trump's MAGA followers, but it applies less to him personally. But until now, the MAGA ideas have been historically bound to commitments to freedom and democracy. Trump has shed these ties at breathtaking speed. Nevertheless, it would be going too far to even compare Trump's grotesque territorial ambitions toward Canada, Greenland, and Panama with the National Socialists' delusions of 'living space in the East'. Trump himself seems to be less driven by MAGA ideology or values than by self-aggrandizement. This in turn is very consistent with patrimonial orientations and Trump's self-understanding of the sultan who governs according to his own discretion and changing whims, neither bound by ideology nor by institutions.

Even *anti-liberalism* is not a typical label for Trump's politics. Trump is certainly no classical liberal, neither of Friedrich August von Hayek nor, least of all, of Ralf Dahrendorf. His tariff and industrial policies are more reminiscent of French mercantilism. The upstart from Queens is miles away from Dahrendorf's (1981) liberal idea of "equal opportunities in life." Only Trump's aversion to the welfare and tax state can just about be labelled the vulgarized remnants of economic neo-liberalism.

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*Violence* as a means of domestic and foreign policy is no stranger to Trump. The deployment of the National Guard to Los Angeles June 2025 is proof of this. The violent hunts for and arrests of illegal immigrants by officers of ICE (United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement) would also be unthinkable in Western Europe, even under the right-wing authoritarian governments of Eastern Europe such as Poland (PiS: 2015–2023) and Hungary (Fidesz: since 2010 ff). However, when it comes to military intervention abroad, Trump's record from 2016 to 2020 and of his second presidency so far appear less violence-oriented than those of his predecessors, from Bill Clinton to G.W. Bush to Barack Obama. However, there is no guarantee that Trump, an ideological opportunist, will be fundamentally sceptical of foreign military interventions.

There is considerable agreement on '*propaganda*' and mass manipulation. Of course, even in the presently 'defective' US democracy, Trump cannot set up a Reich Propaganda Ministry modelled on Josef Goebbels. But Donald Trump is a master of short, suggestive repetitions, untruths, alternative facts, and calculated taboo-breaking. His style of speech is tailor-made for social media. He even has his own platform, Truth Social. With *Fox News*, he has the most widely watched TV channel behind him and his politics. His cultivated hostility toward the *New York Times* has long been part of Trump's media propaganda portfolio.

Trump's style of governing has demonstrated authoritarian traits, in particular, at the beginning of his second presidency. But his authoritarian ambitions are still being held back by some democratic institutions such as the judiciary and the federal government structure. Although there are certain echoes of Ernst Nolte's (1962) 'fascist minimum', they do not reveal the totalitarian aspirations of fascism and its murderous will to destroy. This should not be relativized, despite our rejection of Trump's pretensions. Although Trump's USA bears some resemblance to plutocracy and fascism, it is more useful to view it as a form of patrimonial or 'sultanistic' rule.

This is a form of rule that characterizes Trump's style of government better than fascism. Once again, the sociologist Max Weber helps us to recognize it.

# Sultanization and Sultanism

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Even if Trump's style of governance and the content of his policies have some plutocratic and, with reservations, fascist traits, neither of these explanations captures the particularities of his political regime. We see another form of rule emerging, which Max Weber called 'patrimonial rule' in his theory of rule around 100 years ago. According to Max Weber, "[p]atrimonial rule is every form of rule that is traditionally oriented, but whose exercise is characterized by a fully personal sultanistic rule with a form of administration that is despotic and unrestricted by tradition. The distinction is quite fluid." Max Weber continues: "Sometimes the sultanistic form of patrimonialism appears to be entirely bound by tradition, but it actually never really is. The form is, however, not objectively rationalized, for only the spheres of despotism and of grace are developed to extremes. This is what distinguishes it from any form of rational rule" (Weber [1922] 1985, 134). Max Weber adds: "With the development of the ruler's purely personal (and military) administrative staff, all traditional rule tends towards patrimonialism and power is maximized towards sultanism" (ibid., 133).

Doesn't Trump's presidency also follow the code of threat and reward? Isn't Trump's administration also "primarily in the realm of free, tradition-unbound arbitrariness"? Is it not also "distinct from any form of rational rule"? Is it not also true, as the great sociologist wrote, that the ruler is not a "superior" but a "personal lord," and that his administrative staff consists primarily not of "civil servants" but of personal "servants" (ibid., 130)?

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But can what Weber described 100 years ago as an already antiquated form of political rule now be considered suitable for the 21st century? Especially when we are not talking about the Arab Gulf states or African tribal societies, but about the oldest democracy, the most powerful state, the most modern economy, and the most advanced research system? Can what Weber defined as traditional authoritarian rule also emerge and persist in a modern democratic society? Before answering these questions too hastily with "no", it is worth consulting Juan Linz, one of the leading regime researchers of the late 20th century and a self-confessed follower of Max Weber. Linz and his co-author Chehabi emphasized, in line with their indirect mentor, that it was unlikely that sultanistic regimes could emerge in economically developed societies (Chehabi and Linz 1998, 26). If Linz were alive today, a good 25 years later, and witnessing the events in the United States of America, he might have to revise his statement.

According to Chehabi and Linz, sultanistic regimes are organized around leaders rather than legal-rational structures. Institutions do not play a role in guiding action. Important government positions are not filled according to meritocratic principles, but are hand-picked based on loyalty criteria. The chosen few often include family members, friends, and business partners. Loyalty to the ruler is not established through a coherent ideology, religion, or charisma, but through the dual principle of 'fear and reward'. It is the ruler personally who decides on the appropriate mix. He rules at his discretion, unbound by ideology and values. Administrative and legal norms are hollowed out; the ruler decides. The boundaries between the state and the private sphere become blurred. The ruler's companies conclude business contracts with the state. Patronage, nepotism, and corruption become informal norms. They replace formal institutions, first in the ruling apparatus and then in society (Chehabi and Linz 1998, 7 ff.). Max Weber explicitly assigned this type of patrimonial rule to traditional societies; Linz specifically mentions the Duvalier regime in Haiti, the Shah regime in Persia, Marcos in the Philippines, and Somoza in Nicaragua (ibid., 5). Does this fit Trump?

Many elements of this ideal type of sultanistic regime describe the governing style of the 47th president of the United States with astonishing precision. Of course, not one-to-one. Ideal types never do. There is always a difference between reality and the ideal type. This is especially true when such an ideal type was defined 100 years ago and further differentiated as neo-sultanism a good 25 years ago.



# Trump as Sultan

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The president of the United States of America is not Duvalier, Marcos, or Somoza. Even under Trump, the world power USA is of course not Haiti, the Philippines, or the dictatorship of Nicaragua from 1934 to 1979. Trump is not a dictator. However, there are similarities in his demeanour and style of government with dictators of this ilk or his authoritarian contemporary, Recep Ayyp Erdogan. The crucial difference is that Trump must take into account major institutional restrictions imposed by a democratic system, even if he repeatedly stretches, violates, and sometimes redefines them. To illustrate my thesis that the 47th President of the United States of America is consciously or unconsciously promoting the sultanization of the US political system,[2] the following three central constituents of (neo-)sultanism according to Weber and Linz will be briefly addressed in what follows : loyalty versus meritocracy, personalism instead of institutionalism, and the private sphere and the state.

*Loyalty versus meritocracy.* Loyalty triumphs over meritocratic criteria in the selection of officers and politicians for political positions. Trump has replaced the political administration and bureaucracy on a grand scale for personal and clientelistic reasons. According to the Brookings Institution, a third of top officials left their posts in Donald Trump's first year as president (2017) alone. That was more than twice as many as Ronald Reagan, who in the last five decades comes second to Trump for replacement of senior leaders. Marco Rubio just recently announced that he will dismiss 1300 staffers from their jobs in the state department under Trump's plan. With these mass dismissals, the Trump administration follows two goals: to get rid of employees from the former administration and replace them, at least partially, with its own followers.

The decisive selection criterion for huge numbers of new employees or politicians for top positions is loyalty, not expertise, competence, experience, or a successful professional career. Even the neoconservative security advisor John Bolton (2018-2019) had to leave his office when he dared to disagree with Trump on important diplomatic and security issues. From this first presidency, Trump concluded that he should fill the most important positions exclusively with his devoted followers from the outset so that he could rule unhindered from the start. A few bizarre examples illustrate how little Trump cares about professionalism and how loyalty and subservience clearly triumph over meritocracy.

Pete Hegseth, a former *Fox News* journalist who had already supported Trump's first presidential bid and had no administrative or political experience, was appointed Secretary of Defense. Robert Kennedy Jr., an anti-vaxxer during the COVID-19 crisis, proponent of questionable medical treatments, and considered a quack by most doctors and medical scientists, became Secretary of Health and Human Services under Trump 2.0. He was rewarded for withdrawing his presidential candidacy in favour of Donald Trump during the election campaign. Tulsi Gabbard, a former Democratic senator who converted to supporting Trump, was appointed United States Director of National Intelligence without any intelligence experience whatsoever. She had previously supported Bernie Sanders in his early presidential campaign (2020), served as a Democratic member of the House of Representatives (2013-2021), left the Democratic Party in 2022, and was rewarded for her political odyssey in 2025, when she rose to become the head of national intelligence in the Trump 2.0 cabinet. Another example is Kristi Noem. She was appointed US Secretary of Homeland Security. She had served as the former governor of South Dakota, but had no national experience with border security, migration, or counterterrorism, all highly relevant areas of expertise for the ministerial post. Instead, she had been a loyal Trump supporter for some time. Scott Bessent (Secretary of the Treasury in the Trump 2.0 cabinet) and Elon Musk (DOGE) 'bought' their political offices and influence through generous donations to Trump's election campaigns. These appointments, which are only a few examples, show how strong unconditional loyalty to Trump's political appointment guidelines became. Trump also demonstrated that he is the one who wields power and non-power in US politics. Trump's nomination style is reminiscent not only of the arbitrariness of a sultan, but also of the Roman emperor Caligula (12 to 41 AD), who announced that he wanted to appoint his favourite horse, Incitatus, as a senator in order to humiliate the Roman Senate.

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[2] I do not think that Trump reads Weber, but without knowing Weber's ideal type of sultanism he follows a political script which calls to mind the German sociologist.

Other prominent examples from Trump's first presidency show how quickly one can fall out of favour with the sultan and thus lose office and dignity among Trump's followers: John Kelly, White House Chief of Staff, had to leave office in December 2018, just 16 months after taking up the post. James Comey was fired as FBI Director just as the FBI's investigation into Trump's associates in the so-called Russia probe was intensifying. Kirstjen Nielsen resigned after coming into conflict with the president over border security and migration issues as Secretary of Homeland Security. Trump fired Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) chief Erika McEntarfer for providing poor labour market data for May and June 2025. This is classic sultanist behaviour in which the messenger is 'killed' and the causes of the bad news are not eliminated. The firing of the BLS chief was accompanied by intense criticism from both the Democratic camp (i.a. Larry Summers; Olivier Blanchard) and the conservative camp, such as ex-economists from the Heritage Foundation. The sultan in the White House ruled all the way into civil society and the sphere of sport. In July 2025, for example, he demanded that the football team from Washington, which had changed its name from Red Skin to Washington Commanders to counter accusations of racism, change its name back to Red Skin if it did not want to risk losing government funding for the planned stadium construction. These examples are just a few prominent examples of how even the slightest dissent has been punished by the supreme leader of the US government.

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*Personalism trumps institutionalism.* It is the sultan who overshadows the institutions. Trump's style of government is an example of this. He demonstratively rules by decrees,[3] which he ceremoniously signs in football stadiums or in the White House in front of rolling cameras and his entourage. Trump does not wait for Congress to decide unless he is required to do so. It is a narcissistic symbolism of his presidential power. The president decides, or better yet, Donald Trump decides and shows this to Congress, the American people, and the rest of the world. Congress is marginalized, even though the president has a majority there, at least until the midterm elections at the end of 2026.

State guests are received in the Oval Office, criticized, discriminated against, rebuked, lectured, or insulted and all under the gaze of the global public who follow the spectacle with fascination or disgust. Occasionally, the president condescends to give Western European heads of government and state such as Keir Starmer, Emmanuel Macron, or Friedrich Merz a patronizing assessment. This is always presented as a personal favour, which Trump also makes clear depends on consent and good behaviour and can be quickly withdrawn in the event of dissent. And as with a sultan, the country and the world play along.

The picture repeats itself at multilateral conferences of NATO or G7 meetings. Here, too, Trump appears as much more than just the *primus inter pares*. For him, there is no such thing as *inter pares*. It is the appearance of the sultan, and the others must subordinate themselves in habitus and content. But even the international heads of state and government degrade themselves to the status of courtiers in their gestures, communication, and political substance. In anticipatory obedience, the formats of international conferences are changed. The world sultan should not be bored for too long, with overly complex issues, potential topics of conflict, and without gestures of subservience. NATO Secretary General Marc Rutte crossed every line of shame when he called Donald Trump a 'daddy' who, like a father, successfully calls the warring parties Israel and Iran to order and peace. The new courtly form of such meetings, both nationally and internationally, characterizes the president's public appearances. The president becomes the sultan, and Western heads of government represent the international court.

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[3] Presidential decrees/executive orders are valid in the US until they are revoked by the president or declared invalid by a court of last instance.



There is another characteristic of sultanistic rule: the boundaries between state action and private business interests become blurred. And here, Trump's business practices actually resemble those of Marcos and Somoza more than those of heads of government in constitutional democracies. He and his entire family, from his sons to his daughter, from his son-in-law Jared Kushner to his father Charles, a real estate developer and convicted felon, are all constantly striving to increase the family's wealth. The presidential office, guarantees, and advantages of the President of the United States of America help them to do so. In arguably no other democratic constitutional state would such personal enrichment be politically possible or even exempt from punishment. And not even in the United States itself. Personal enrichment under Trump 2.0 is entirely out in the open. It is much worse, even, than Trump 1.0. It seems to be without any constraints.

At the beginning of his first presidency, Trump International Hotel (Washington, D.C.) leased the Old Post Office in Washington to accommodate state guests, lobbyists, and businesspeople (BBC 2017). At the same time, the Trump Organization pursued Trump Tower projects in Moscow, Istanbul, Belgrade, and other cities. Trump's financial and monetary policies favoured cryptocurrencies, from which Trump's family business in turn profited. The corporate empire concluded deals in particular with Saudi companies (Washington Post 2025). Trump allowed himself to be presented with a luxury aircraft by the Emir of Qatar, which was to be converted into Air Force One. In the meantime, sites corruption watchdogs[4] have sprung up on the internet, scrupulously documenting all of Trump's small and large acts of self-enrichment carried out under the shield of his presidency.

Of course, sultanistic forms of rule also exist in the 21st century, but mainly in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and sporadically in Latin America. What is truly astonishing, however, is that this type of pre-modern, traditional form of governance has been able to establish itself at such tremendous speed in Trump's style of governing in the most economically advanced and, for over 200 years,[5] seemingly most stable democracy. Why is this so? Following the conceptual line of Max Weber and later Juan Linz, the question of the regime, the form of political rule, also arises: Why can a sultanistic form of government be established not only in autocratic regimes such as the monarchies in the Gulf or the dictatorships in Central Asia?[6] Why not only in *competitive authoritarian* regimes such as the Philippines, why not only in defective democracies such as India, where the checks and balances are weak or absent? The question is why can it also spread in the US, *the* former role model democracy of the democratic West. Are the checks and balances of institutions and civil society weaker than has long been written in textbooks?

## The attack on the state

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According to Hanson and Kopstein (2024), the real 'attack on the state' at present is not directed against democracy alone, but goes deeper, namely against the modern state itself and its non-partisan administration. Nothing else lies behind the fight against the deep state proclaimed by Trump and his right-wing libertarian allies among the tech oligarchs, especially those from Silicon Valley.[7] Trump has been using the bogeyman of the deep state since 2018. This efficient, professional and non-partisan bureaucracy state, as Hanson and Kopstein rightly point out, is the guarantor of the citizen-oriented services that define the modern state: public health, impartial administration, independent courts, freedom of research, science, and education. Successfully combating these modern state functions creates space for Trump's own clientelism and benefits their cronies.

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[4] See for example, Open Secrets <https://www.opensecrets.org/trump/trump-properties>.

[5] 200 years because, according to Huntington's convention, the US was the first country to elect a democracy in the modern sense in 1828, when over 59% of adult men were given the right to vote for the first time (Huntington 1991: 16).

[6] See also Hanson and Kopstein (2024: 9, 65ff.), who describe Putin's Russia in particular as a model of patrimonial rule. They argue that a wave of neo-patrimonialism spread from Russia to Hungary and Poland and has now reached the US.

[7] The term does not originate from Silicon Valley, but from the military-administrative-secret service complex of the later Kemalist state in Turkey. Erdogan initially fought against it and then copied it in his thirst for power.

This is the neo-patrimonialism of the 21st century: retraditionalized in personal political relationships, partially denationalized through administrative cuts, marginalized in its tax sovereignty, deregulated in the market, and unhindered in the enrichment of the sultan, his family and his loyal followers. Such a peculiar re- and de-traditionalized patrimonialism can obviously also take root in modern polarized democracies. The longer Trump's style of government patrimonializes the modern democratic state, and the more unhindered it is, the more it will damage first the democratic discourse, then parts of the impartial institutions and common goods, and finally the democratic culture of the country. Hanson and Koppstein (2024) refer to this process as patrimonialization, although the Weberian term sultanism, the most personalized form of patrimonialism, more accurately describes the processes in US politics. Certainly, Trump does not have absolute power. But it is he, as the modern sultan, who pulls the strings. Clearly, a 21st-century neo-sultan does not need absolutist power to radically change the political situation in a country. However, the longer sultanization persists, the more it colours the political and social structure and culture of a ruling system

## Checks and balances

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Trump's sultanic rule also dispenses with the traditional doctrine that presidential democracies may not be as inclusive as parliamentary systems, but that they have more effective checks and balances.[8] If it was ever true at all, it is no longer the case when the president successfully dominates his party with 'fear and reward', representatives and senators are selected in the primaries based on their loyalty to Trump, and are financially supported by his business friends. The president knows he has the majority in both houses of Congress behind him, the Democratic opposition is acting helplessly and without a plan, the majority of the Supreme Court appears to rule based on loyalty rather than impartial law, and the rich tech oligarchs support the president financially. Checks and balances are doomed to fail when, in such an unfavourable constellation, the president shows no sign of democratic virtue or self-restraint. The dominance of one person over the institutions that check power in a liberal democracy is perhaps the most disturbing realization of Trump's presidency. Although, we cannot know for sure yet whether he will profoundly damage the democratic institutions, the first half year of Trump 2.0. highlights the particular fragility of democracies in the 21st century, even the American democracy where we would not have expected it twenty years ago.

How much damage can the sultanic president do to the mental and institutional infrastructure of American democracy? This depends above all on how long he can continue to rule in the current constellation. Four potential barriers could prevent him from driving US democracy even further toward authoritarianism in the near future. First, it is the voters who could deprive Trump of his majority in the midterm elections, at least in the House of Representatives. This would force Trump to choose between moderating his policies or ruling even more by executive order. The former would require a return to constitutional loyalty, of which he is not believed to be capable, from today's perspective. The latter would likely mean further decline for democracy. However, such an autocratic style of government could also test the limits of loyalty in the eyes of the judges he has appointed, some of his Republican colleagues in Congress, and parts of the Republican base. If Trump's Republicans will lose the midterm elections in 2026, there is the risk that the president will find ways to rig the elections. Although, a victory in the Senate or House of Representatives alone would not be enough to effectively rein in the sultan in the White House, it might slow him down in sultanizing US democracy.

The second barrier could arise from the federal system. Significant encroachment by Trump on the federal powers of individual states could lead to some governors joining forces. Trump's confrontation with California Governor Gavin Newsom over sending the National Guard to violently suppress protests in California in June 2025 could be a first sign of this. Significant restrictions on federal state powers would bring Trump close to a constitutional coup. He will probably avoid doing so in order not to jeopardize his power.

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[8] There has been a decades-long controversy on this issue. See, among others: Nohlen 1992; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Lijphart 1999; Weyland 2024.

The third effective barrier could come from the judiciary. This is least likely to happen with the Supreme Court, which is dominated by judges close to Trump. Moreover, it ruled in June 2024 in the case of *Trump v. United States* that US presidents enjoy immunity for all official acts (Lütjen 2025, 9). This is a disastrous carte blanche that broadens Trump's scope of action even beyond the law. The federal courts, which are spread across districts and are also involved in checking federal decision-making, may also play a role. Their rulings will not be entirely without influence. But it is precisely here that Trump's contempt of the judiciary is evident. In some cases, the federal executive branch does not even follow the court rulings or files lengthy appeals against them. Ultimately, the most important decisions will end up before the Supreme Court as the court of last resort. It would be a not entirely impossible, but rather an unlikely, turn of events if the highest court was then to remember its requirement of impartiality in a polarized dispute. The courts will not be ineffective in saving democracy in a power dispute with Trump's executive branch, but they will not play the role of the overwhelming force that has been attributed to them from Tocqueville to today's textbooks, in the event of a power struggle.

The fourth check on power does not come from the democratic system of checks and balances itself, but from the economy. If Trump's unpredictable economic policy causes turmoil on the stock market, he will jeopardize the retirement savings of millions of people. If his trade policy drives the US economy into a period of weak growth and rising inflation, one dimensional economic citizens could once again transform into political citizens (citoyens) and withdraw their support and legitimation from Trump and his Republicans. The economic price would be high. It would affect not only American citizens, but also the citizens of many countries who never voted for Trump.

## Conclusion

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It is astonishing how a partially pre-modern form of governance such as (neo-)sultanism can eat away at the democratic system of the most powerful, modern, and economically advanced country in the world, the US. Applying Max Weber's and, in particular, Juan Linz's concept of rule to the governing style of Trump's second presidency reveals striking overlaps between theory and reality. Despite the rule of law, despite old and proven checks and balances, despite a civil society believed to be vibrant, an unscrupulous politician like Trump finds enough political space and sufficient support in Congress, the Supreme Court, society and individual tech billionaires to plant authoritarian forms of governance in the centre of democracy. The US democratic system is being hollowed out from the top down. We are observing how a democratic system is being undermined from above while at the same time receiving positive feedback from below. Democracies of the 21st century often die slowly, without the public at large realizing that they are on the slippery slope to authoritarian rule. Of course, democracy does not transition to a fully-fledged autocratic system after just six months of sultanistic rule. Moreover, not all checks on political power have been destroyed. But they have been damaged. In the 21st century, the US is no longer a stable, liberal democracy based on the rule of law. This is clearly demonstrated by the renowned democracy indices of *V-Dem*, *Freedom House*, and *The Economist*. In my view, the American political system is in a state of regime that can best be described as a 'flawed' or 'defective democracy' (Merkel 2004).

Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) impressively described how democracies die in the 21st century. It is rarely through a military coup or even a revolution. They die slowly and quietly, not with a loud bang. Former liberal democracies are transforming and taking on hybrid traits in some areas, such as Orban's Hungary, Poland under the Law and Justice party, and Bolsonaro's Brazil. Something similar is happening to Trump's USA. Over the next three and a half years, it will depend on how much damage Trump's sultanistic style of government can cause in the time remaining until the end of his term. It will also depend on whether Trumpism can survive without Trump and whether the MAGA movement survives as a social base. Successors such as Rubio and J.D. Vance are already lurking in the wings.



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