TALK IT OUT: MEDIA, MILITARY, AND CIVIC DIALOGUE AS FIREWALLS AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

Rafal Pruchniak*

Abstract: The article discusses U.S. authoritarian populistic drift, its costs and backstops with the most critical one's military obligation to refuse illegal orders even if approved by courts, and public dialog moderated by the media, even if the media and the public are fragmented. The article takes us through historical examples, touches on economic results and compares U.S. populist authoritarianism with China's technocratic authoritarianism.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Populism; Technocracy; Illegal Orders; Civic Dialog; Media

* New York University, US.

Table of Contents

Introduction 47

I. The Military's Constitutional Duty 47

A. The Oath and the "Lawful Orders Only" Rule 47

B. Judicial Complicity and the Limits of Supreme Court Authority 48

C. Statutory Constraints: Posse Comitatus and the Insurrection Act 49

D. Comparative and Historical Lessons 50

E. The Prospective Duty of JAGs and Scholars 50

II. Political & Institutional Costs of Authoritarian Drift 51

A. The Erosion of the Rule of Law 51

B. The Weakening of Legislatures 51

C. Policy Volatility and Governance Fragility 52

D. Delegitimization of Democracy Abroad 53

E. The Institutional Vicious Cycle 53

F. Transition to Part III 53

III. Social and Human Costs of Authoritarian Drift 54

A. Suppression of Dissent and the Chilling of Free Expression 54

B. Brain Drain and the Flight of Talent 54

C. Inequality, Exclusion, and Patronage 55

D. Weakening of Civil Society and Social Capital 55

E. Public Health Risks and the Suppression of Bad News 56

F. Psychological Toll: Fear, Silence, and Self-Censorship 56

G. Transition to Part IV 56

IV. Economic Costs of Authoritarian Drift 57

A. Authoritarianism and Economic Performance 57

B. Policy Volatility and the Costs of Uncertainty 57

C. The Cost of Crony Capitalism 58

D. Authoritarianism and Disinvestment in Public Goods 58

E. Inequality, Rent-Seeking, and the Decline of General Welfare 59

F. Global Credibility and the Cost of Lost Trust 59

G. Transition to Part V 59

V. Media, Political Discourse, and Authoritarian Drift 60

A. The Media's Constitutional Role 60

B. Media as a Vector of Polarization 61

C. Economic Incentives and the Decline of Democratic Media 61

D. Media as a Bulwark: Proposals for Reform 61

E. Media, Optimism, and Economic Sentiment 62

F. The Role of Scholars and Independent Institutions 63

G. Transition to Part VI 63

VI. Talk It Out: Media-Prompted Civic Dialogue 63

A. Theoretical Rationale 63

B. Intervention Design 64

C. Research Agenda and Testable Hypotheses 65

D. Guardrails and Risks 65

E. Comparative Lessons 66

F. Synthesis 66

G. Transition to Part VII 66

VII. Synthesis and Conclusion 67

A. A Layered Firewall Against Authoritarian Drift 67

B. Risks of Fragmented or Partial Defense 67

C. Implications for Scholarship and Practice 68

D. The Normative Stakes 68

E. Quiet Conversations as Democratic Salvation 69

F. Conclusion 69

Note On China – U.S. Governance Systems, A Critical Comparison 70

INTRODUCTION

Democracy in the United States faces mounting threats from what scholars describe as authoritarian populism. Former President Donald J. Trump has repeatedly fused populist rhetoric with authoritarian impulses, combining charismatic personal appeal, media spectacle, and attacks on institutional checks. The consequences have been grave: intensifying polarization, delegitimization of courts and legislatures, and the normalization of conspiratorial falsehoods.[1]

The United States is not alone. Around the globe, populist leaders—from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil—have used electoral legitimacy as a gateway to dismantling democratic institutions.[2] But the American case is uniquely perilous, given the global role of the United States in sustaining liberal democracy abroad. If American institutions falter, the ripple effects extend far beyond its borders.

This Article advances a dual claim. First, resilience against authoritarian drift depends upon institutional firewalls: constitutional fidelity by the military, strong legislatures and courts, and statutory guardrails against abuse. Second, it also requires civic-cultural strategies: a revival of interpersonal political dialogue facilitated by media institutions that encourage citizens to "talk it out" with friends and family.

Thus, the project is both legal and sociological. Part I examines the military's constitutional duty to refuse manifestly unlawful orders, even in the face of judicial complicity. Parts II–IV analyze the political, institutional, social, and economic costs of authoritarian drift, demonstrating why legal resistance is essential. Part V considers the role of the press and media ecosystems in both accelerating and potentially countering authoritarianism. Part VI introduces the concept of media-prompted civic dialogue, a scalable intervention that could strengthen democracy at the grassroots by filtering extremism and fostering trust. Part VII synthesizes these insights, arguing that the defense of American democracy requires layered firewalls: military, institutional, media, and civic.

The stakes are existential. Authoritarian populism thrives on division, mistrust, and disengagement. Its antidote lies not only in elite institutions but also in citizens' willingness to converse across divides. The survival of democracy may hinge as much on kitchen-table conversations as on Supreme Court rulings or congressional statutes.

I. THE MILITARY'S CONSTITUTIONAL DUTY

A. The Oath and the "Lawful Orders Only" Rule

Every officer in the United States military swears an oath not to a monarch, not to a party, and not to a president, but to the Constitution itself:

---

[1] Nancy Bermeo, *On Democratic Backsliding*, 27 J. DEMOCRACY 5, 5–19 (2016).
[2] STEVEN LEVITSKY & DANIEL ZIBLATT, HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE 45–72 (2018).

"I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same…."[3]

This oath, mandated by Article VI of the Constitution, represented a radical departure from older traditions of personal loyalty. Under monarchies and authoritarian regimes, armed forces historically swore allegiance to the sovereign.[4] The Framers deliberately rejected this, placing the Constitution above any officeholder.

The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) concretizes this principle. Article 92 punishes the failure to obey "lawful orders."[5] Its silence on "unlawful orders" is deliberate: orders lacking lawfulness are void, and obedience to them may itself constitute a crime. Similarly, Article 90 criminalizes willful disobedience of a superior commissioned officer's "lawful command," again presupposing that unlawful commands fall outside military obligation.[6]

This is neither obscure nor theoretical. It is drilled into cadets at West Point and Annapolis, appears in military training manuals, and is taught at the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) School.[7] Military law thus embodies the maxim articulated at Nuremberg: "The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility…provided a moral choice was in fact possible."[8]

The tragic case of Lieutenant William Calley, convicted for his role in the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, underscores this principle. Calley argued that he was simply following orders to eliminate "the enemy." The court martial rejected the defense, ruling that orders to slaughter civilians are manifestly unlawful and cannot shield obedience.[9]

B. Judicial Complicity and the Limits of Supreme Court Authority

The harder case arises when unlawful orders are judicially blessed. Suppose a president orders active-duty troops into American cities to suppress peaceful demonstrations, and the Supreme Court upholds the order's constitutionality. Do officers then have a duty to obey?

Here we collide with the doctrine of judicial supremacy. In *Cooper v. Aaron* (1958), the Court famously declared that "the federal judiciary is supreme in the exposition of the law of the Constitution."[10] That dictum has been treated as axiomatic. Yet Cooper arose in defense of constitutional rights—ordering Arkansas officials to

---

[3] U.S. CONST. art. VI, cl. 3.
[4] SAMUEL HUNTINGTON, THE SOLDIER AND THE STATE 84–112 (1957).
[5] 10 U.S.C. § 892.
[6] 10 U.S.C. § 890.
[7] Richard H. Kohn, *How Democracies Control the Military*, 8 J. DEMOCRACY 140, 140–53 (1997).
[8] 1 TRIAL OF THE MAJOR WAR CRIMINALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL 223 (1947).
[9] *United States v. Calley*, 46 C.M.R. 1131 (C.M.A. 1973).
[10] *Cooper v. Aaron*, 358 U.S. 1, 18 (1958).

comply with Brown v. Board of Education—not in legitimizing authoritarian abuse. It presupposed good faith.

Judicial authority is not unlimited. As Alexander Bickel argued in The Least Dangerous Branch, judicial review rests on public acceptance of its legitimacy.[11] A Court captured by partisanship and used to rubber-stamp authoritarian decrees risks forfeiting that legitimacy. Abraham Lincoln foresaw this danger in his First Inaugural Address:

"If the policy of the government upon vital questions affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court… the people will have ceased to be their own rulers."[12]

Lincoln's warning is profound: judicial error—especially willful error—cannot transmute illegality into lawfulness. Officers who cling to their oath must remember that fidelity is to the Constitution itself, not to judicial usurpation.

History confirms this. In Korematsu v. United States (1944), the Court upheld Japanese-American internment.[13] That decision is now universally condemned as a stain on American jurisprudence, and the Court itself formally disavowed it in Trump v. Hawaii (2018).[14] The analogy is chilling: if the Court could uphold internment, it could uphold domestic troop deployments against protestors. Obedience to such rulings entrenches authoritarianism. Officers may therefore face a stark but necessary duty: to refuse compliance even when the judiciary has failed.

C. Statutory Constraints: Posse Comitatus and the Insurrection Act

Beyond constitutional principle, statutory law sharply cabins presidential power to use troops domestically. The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 provides:

"Whoever, except in cases and under circumstances expressly authorized by the Constitution or Act of Congress, willfully uses any part of the Army or the Air Force… shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both."[15]

The Act reflected post-Reconstruction distrust of federal troop deployment in civil affairs. Its animating principle was that the military must not become an instrument of domestic political control.

The Insurrection Act creates narrow exceptions. President Eisenhower invoked it in 1957 to enforce desegregation orders in Little Rock, protecting Black students from mob violence.[16] The Act was also used in genuine emergencies—civil war, natural disasters where local order collapsed. Never has it been intended to suppress lawful

---

[11] ALEXANDER BICKEL, THE LEAST DANGEROUS BRANCH 240–55 (1962).
[12] Abraham Lincoln, President of the U.S., First Inaugural Address (Mar. 4, 1861).
[13] *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).
[14] *Trump v. Hawaii*, 138 S. Ct. 2392, 2423 (2018) ("Korematsu was gravely wrong the day it was decided.").
[15] Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, 18 U.S.C. § 1385.
[16] MARY L. DUDZIAK, COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS: RACE AND THE IMAGE OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY 124–30 (2000).

dissent. As Professor Stephen Vladeck has argued, a president who cites the Act to send troops against peaceful protestors inverts its very purpose.[17]

Thus, even if the Court were to bless such use, statutory context reveals its illegitimacy. Officers would remain bound to resist.

D. Comparative and Historical Lessons

Authoritarian regimes consistently rely on military obedience as their final safeguard. History offers sobering parallels:

In Germany in 1933, Hitler's consolidation depended on the Reichswehr's willingness to acquiesce in repression.[18]

In Chile in 1973, Pinochet's coup succeeded only because the military obeyed orders against its civilian government.[19]

In Turkey in 2016, portions of the military attempted to resist President Erdoğan's authoritarian drift, though unsuccessfully.[20]

The U.S. military is not immune. During Trump's presidency, generals like James Mattis and Mark Milley faced acute dilemmas. Milley later admitted regret for participating in the Lafayette Square photo op, acknowledging it blurred the line between military professionalism and domestic politics.[21]

These examples show that obedience or refusal at moments of crisis determines whether democracy survives. Officers cannot abdicate responsibility to judiciary or executive. The oath is not ritual; it is the final firewall against collapse.

E. The Prospective Duty of JAGs and Scholars

Given these stakes, legal scholars and Judge Advocates General must preemptively clarify doctrine. The JAG Corps should issue guidance emphasizing that unlawful orders, even judicially ratified, must be refused where they violate constitutional rights and statutory limits. Law reviews, bar associations, and military education institutions must likewise build a body of scholarship preparing officers for this dilemma. Waiting until the crisis arrives may be too late.[22]

Transitional Note: Yet even if officers resist, authoritarian drift carries immense institutional, social, and economic costs. Understanding these costs underscores why refusal is not only lawful but essential.

---

[17] STEPHEN I. VLADECK, THE SHADOW DOCKET 201–07 (2023).
[18] IAN KERSHAW, HITLER: 1889–1936 HUBRIS 452–61 (1998).
[19] PETER KORNBLUH, THE PINOCHET FILE 83–112 (2003).
[20] GONUL TOL, ERDOGAN'S WAR 210–25 (2022).
[21] Helene Cooper, *Milley Apologizes for Role in Trump Photo Op*, N.Y. TIMES (June 11, 2020), (quoting Mark Milley, Remarks at National Defense University).
[22] Geoffrey S. Corn, *Unlawful Orders and the Obligation to Disobey*, 165 MIL. L. REV. 123, 123–65 (2000).

II. POLITICAL & INSTITUTIONAL COSTS OF AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

Authoritarianism rarely announces itself with tanks in the streets. More often, it arrives gradually, through the quiet erosion of political institutions. Courts bend, legislatures abdicate, executives exploit emergency powers, and checks and balances are hollowed out. In the United States, this process is often masked by constitutional forms that remain in place even as their substance is emptied.[23]

This Part explores five major institutional costs of authoritarian drift: (A) the erosion of the rule of law, (B) the weakening of legislatures, (C) policy volatility and governance fragility, (D) the delegitimization of democracy abroad, and (E) the creation of institutional vicious cycles. Together, these costs reveal that authoritarian populism not only threatens civil liberties but corrodes the very machinery of governance.

A. The Erosion of the Rule of Law

Authoritarianism first manifests in the corrosion of judicial independence. Courts become pliant, legislatures submissive, and oversight bodies hollow. A strongman rarely abolishes institutions outright; he bends them until their form survives but their function is destroyed.[24]

The Founders anticipated this risk. James Madison warned in Federalist No. 48 that "a mere demarcation on parchment of the constitutional limits of the several departments is not a sufficient guard against those encroachments which lead to a tyrannical concentration of all the powers of government in the same hands."[25]

Hungary offers a cautionary example. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán systematically packed the Constitutional Court, lowering retirement ages to force out judges and replacing them with loyalists.[26] Judicial robes remained; judicial independence vanished.

The United States is not immune. During his presidency, Trump repeatedly demanded "loyalty" from the Department of Justice and derided judges who ruled against him as "so-called judges."[27] If courts bend to intimidation, they cease to function as checks on executive power. The consequences are not only constitutional but economic: investors and businesses require predictable legal frameworks. Where courts are captured, capital flees.[28]

B. The Weakening of Legislatures

---

[23] Aziz Huq & Tom Ginsburg, *How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy*, 65 UCLA L. REV. 78, 84–90 (2018) (explaining how constitutions can be hollowed out while formal structures remain).
[24] Kim Lane Scheppele, *Autocratic Legalism*, 85 U. CHI. L. REV. 545, 545–84 (2018).
[25] THE FEDERALIST NO. 48 (James Madison).
[26] András Bozóki & Dániel Hegedűs, *An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime: Hungary in the European Union*, 25 DEMOCRATIZATION 1173, 1173–89 (2018).
[27] Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), TWITTER (Feb. 4, 2017), (remarks attacking Judge James Robart).
[28] DOUGLASS NORTH, INSTITUTIONS, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE 80–92 (1990).

A second political cost is the atrophy of legislatures. Authoritarian leaders typically convert parliaments into instruments of ratification rather than deliberation. Hannah Arendt observed that in authoritarian regimes, legislatures survive as "the most important and the most respected institutions," but only because they serve propaganda rather than debate.[29]

In the United States, Congress has increasingly shown symptoms of dysfunction. Presidents rely on executive orders and emergency powers to bypass legislative deliberation. Trump's declaration of a "national emergency" in 2019 to reallocate military funds for a border wall—despite Congress's refusal to appropriate such funds—illustrates this trend.[30]

History warns of the dangers. In the Roman Republic, the Senate ceded extraordinary powers to consuls during crises, normalizing emergency rule until dictatorship became permanent.[31] Similarly, the Weimar Republic relied on Article 48's emergency provisions with increasing frequency, hollowing parliamentary power and preparing the ground for Hitler's rise.[32]

If legislatures abdicate, the balance of separated powers collapses. Authoritarian executives then wield not only their formal prerogatives but also the inertia of legislative weakness.

C. Policy Volatility and Governance Fragility

Authoritarian drift produces extreme policy volatility. In democracies, policy change requires negotiation, coalition-building, and compromise—processes that create predictability and stability. By contrast, authoritarian leaders can reverse policies overnight to serve immediate political interests.

For businesses and citizens, this unpredictability is crippling. Investors require stable tax codes, contract enforcement, and property rights. Without them, long-term planning collapses. Economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson argue that "inclusive institutions" are prerequisites for sustained growth, while authoritarian "extractive institutions" generate volatility and stagnation.[33]

Venezuela offers a stark case. Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro alternated between socialist expropriation and ad hoc concessions to favored industries, creating massive uncertainty. Foreign investment evaporated, and the country's oil wealth was squandered.[34]

The United States saw a preview during Trump's trade wars. Tariff announcements were made by tweet; allies one day became adversaries the next. Markets fluctuated wildly in response, as companies struggled to predict supply chains

---

[29] HANNAH ARENDT, THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM 310 (1951).
[30] CONG. RSCH. SERV., R46379, PRESIDENTIAL DECLARATIONS OF NATIONAL EMERGENCY: STATUTORY AND CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES (2020).
[31] MARY BEARD, SPQR: A HISTORY OF ANCIENT ROME 342–50 (2015).
[32] PETER FRITZSCHE, GERMANS INTO NAZIS 211–25 (1998).
[33] DARON ACEMOGLU & JAMES A. ROBINSON, WHY NATIONS FAIL 74–103 (2012).
[34] Francisco Rodríguez, *An Empty Revolution: The Unfulfilled Promises of Hugo Chávez*, 87 FOREIGN AFFS. 49, 49–63 (2008).

or costs. The Peterson Institute for International Economics estimated that American consumers paid nearly the entire cost of tariffs, roughly $57 billion annually.[35] Such volatility discourages innovation and undermines growth.

D. Delegitimization of Democracy Abroad

A further institutional cost is the erosion of democratic credibility abroad. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way demonstrate that when powerful states model democratic backsliding, smaller states often follow suit.[36]

During the Cold War, America's credibility as leader of the "free world" depended on practicing democracy at home. Martin Luther King Jr. made this point explicit: segregation and racial violence undermined U.S. claims to moral leadership.[37]

Today, authoritarian actors such as China exploit U.S. failings to delegitimize democracy. Chinese state media highlights police violence and election disputes to argue that democracy is unstable and hypocritical.[38] If the United States itself deploys troops domestically against protestors, the consequences would be catastrophic for America's global reputation. Allies would lose faith; autocrats would gain license.

E. The Institutional Vicious Cycle

Perhaps most dangerous is the feedback loop authoritarianism creates. Once institutions bend, their weakness becomes self-reinforcing. Each abdication justifies the next.

The Weimar Republic illustrates this dynamic. Emergency decrees, once exceptional, became routine. By the early 1930s, the Reichstag had effectively ceded governance to presidential decree, paving the way for Hitler.[39]

The United States faces a similar risk. If the military obeys unlawful domestic orders, if courts ratify them, and if Congress acquiesces, authoritarian governance could entrench itself as "normal." Once normalized, reversal becomes nearly impossible. Rebuilding institutional strength after collapse is far harder than preserving it in advance.

F. Transition to Part III

The political and institutional costs described here—erosion of rule of law, legislative weakness, volatility, delegitimization, and vicious cycles—are not abstract. They translate into lived consequences: repression of dissent, inequality, brain drain,

---

[35] Mary Amiti, Stephen J. Redding & David Weinstein, *The Impact of the 2018 Trade War on U.S. Consumers* (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Rsch., Working Paper No. 25672, 2019).

[36] STEVEN LEVITSKY & LUCAN WAY, COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIANISM: HYBRID REGIMES AFTER THE COLD WAR (2010).

[37] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963), *in* WHY WE CAN'T WAIT (1964).

[38] David Bandurski, *China's Propaganda Machine Takes Aim at American Unrest*, CHINA MEDIA PROJECT (June 2, 2020).

[39] DETLEV PEUKERT, THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC: THE CRISIS OF CLASSICAL MODERNITY 163–70 (1992).

and economic decline. Part III turns to these social and human costs, showing how authoritarianism corrodes daily life as well as political structures.

III. SOCIAL AND HUMAN COSTS OF AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

Authoritarianism is not confined to the chambers of legislatures or courts. It filters down into the lived experience of citizens, reshaping social life, limiting freedom, and imposing human suffering. While Part II examined institutional consequences, this Part focuses on how authoritarian populism corrodes the social fabric: silencing dissent, driving out talent, exacerbating inequality, weakening civil society, endangering public health, and imposing lasting psychological costs.

A. Suppression of Dissent and the Chilling of Free Expression

At its core, authoritarianism thrives on silencing opposition. The First Amendment embodies the American conviction that speech is both an individual liberty and a structural safeguard of democracy. Justice Brandeis famously wrote in Whitney v. California (1927) that "the fitting remedy for evil counsels is good ones," not suppression.[40] Yet authoritarian regimes invert this principle, treating dissent not as a necessary component of democracy but as treason.

Classic authoritarian states employed blunt tools: the Soviet Union criminalized "anti-Soviet agitation,"[41] and Nazi Germany institutionalized censorship under Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry. Modern authoritarians adopt subtler mechanisms: licensing requirements for journalists, "fake news" laws targeting critics, or economic pressures that starve independent outlets.[42]

The United States has seen echoes of these tactics. During his presidency, Trump repeatedly called the press the "enemy of the people."[43] This rhetoric is not mere bluster: when leaders delegitimize journalism, citizens internalize fear of speaking out, leading to self-censorship and retreat from public discourse. The "marketplace of ideas" collapses into propaganda and silence.

B. Brain Drain and the Flight of Talent

Repression produces not only silence but also emigration. Skilled individuals, facing limited opportunity and political intimidation, often choose exit over voice.[44] Political economists have long noted that "brain drain" undermines economic growth and deprives societies of the very citizens most capable of reform.

Historical cases are instructive. East Germany hemorrhaged intellectuals and professionals to the West before the Berlin Wall sealed borders.[45] Contemporary

---

[40] *Whitney v. California*, 274 U.S. 357, 375 (1927) (Brandeis, J., concurring).
[41] 4 GEORGE ORWELL, THE COLLECTED ESSAYS, JOURNALISM AND LETTERS OF GEORGE ORWELL 194–200 (Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus eds., 1968) (noting Soviet censorship categories).
[42] ERIC HEINZE, THE CONCEPT OF INJUSTICE 212–18 (2013).
[43] Donald J. Trump, President of the U.S., Remarks in Phoenix, Arizona (Aug. 22, 2017) ("These are really dishonest people. They're the enemy of the people.").
[44] ALBERT HIRSCHMAN, EXIT, VOICE, AND LOYALTY 30–43 (1970).
[45] HOPE M. HARRISON, DRIVING THE SOVIETS UP THE WALL: SOVIET-EAST GERMAN RELATIONS, 1953–1961, at 211–20 (2003).

Russia has seen waves of emigration following repression of dissent and academic freedom.[46]

The United States risks similar dynamics. Surveys show that younger Americans, particularly those with advanced degrees, are increasingly open to working abroad.[47] If authoritarian drift accelerates—manifesting in surveillance, politicized universities, or restrictions on speech—the country could face a generational loss of innovators. Academic freedom, long a magnet for global talent, would wither.

C. Inequality, Exclusion, and Patronage

Authoritarian regimes rarely distribute repression evenly. Instead, they reward loyalty and punish dissent. The result is a stratified society where economic privilege is tied to political allegiance.

Russia epitomizes this logic. Under Vladimir Putin, oligarchs thrive only so long as they remain politically loyal; those who cross the Kremlin, like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, face imprisonment or expropriation.[48] In Turkey, President Erdoğan has steered lucrative state contracts toward loyal construction magnates, entrenching inequality.[49]

In the United States, the risk is subtler but real. When federal funds are threatened to be withheld from disfavored states or cities, or when regulatory waivers are granted selectively to allies, the seeds of authoritarian patronage are sown.[50] Over time, such practices erode equal citizenship and transform economic opportunity into political patronage.

D. Weakening of Civil Society and Social Capital

Democracy depends on more than institutions; it requires a vibrant civil society of unions, associations, and nongovernmental organizations. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that Americans' "art of association" was the seedbed of their democratic spirit.[51]

Authoritarian leaders understand this and systematically attack civil society. Russia has branded NGOs as "foreign agents."[52] Hungary has imposed onerous registration requirements on independent associations.[53] Civil society is suffocated not by outright bans but by bureaucratic strangulation.

---

[46] Michele Berdy, *Russia's Brain Drain: The Exodus of the Educated*, MOSCOW TIMES (Oct. 5, 2022).
[47] *Record High in U.S. Say They Would Move Abroad if They Could*, GALLUP (Jan. 20, 2021).
[48] ANDERS ÅSLUND, RUSSIA'S CRONY CAPITALISM: THE PATH FROM MARKET ECONOMY TO KLEPTOCRACY 112–16 (2019).
[49] Cihan Tuğal, *Turkey in the Middle East*, 57 NEW LEFT REV. 5, 5–34 (2009).
[50] David Super, *The Rise and Fall of the Implied Budget Power*, 84 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 167, 167–214 (2009).
[51] 2 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA 104–05 (1835).
[52] *Russia: Government vs. Rights Groups*, HUM. RTS. WATCH (Apr. 24, 2017).
[53] Kim Lane Scheppele, *Understanding Hungary's Constitutional Revolution, in* CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS IN THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTIONAL AREA 111, 111–38 (Armin von Bogdandy & Pál Sonnevend eds., 2015).

The weakening of civil society translates into declining trust and diminished democratic capacity. Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone documented the costs of declining association in the United States even without authoritarian repression.[54] Where authoritarian governments actively target associations, the decay is accelerated: citizens are atomized, fearful, and unable to organize for accountability.

E. Public Health Risks and the Suppression of Bad News

Authoritarianism also carries deadly public health costs. Leaders who equate transparency with weakness often suppress bad news. But delay can be fatal.

The Soviet handling of Chernobyl in 1986 remains emblematic. Officials concealed the explosion for days, exposing thousands unnecessarily to radiation.[55] China's initial suppression of COVID-19 information in 2019 likewise delayed global response, costing countless lives.[56]

Even in democracies showing authoritarian drift, similar dynamics appear. During the Trump administration, pandemic data was politicized and health officials pressured to downplay scientific findings.[57] When truth becomes subordinate to propaganda, the consequences are measured in lives lost.

F. Psychological Toll: Fear, Silence, and Self-Censorship

Beyond material harms lies the psychological toll of authoritarian drift. Citizens internalize fear, avoid political speech, and retreat from civic engagement. Václav Havel described life under communism as "living within a lie," where individuals perform loyalty outwardly while inwardly silencing themselves.[58]

Fear produces obedience not only to laws but to signals: citizens refrain from attending protests, signing petitions, or teaching controversial books. Over time, habits of self-censorship become ingrained, leaving democracy without citizens capable of democratic participation.

G. Transition to Part IV

The social and human costs—suppressed dissent, emigration of talent, rising inequality, civil society decay, public health failures, and psychological trauma—bleed directly into economic life. Brain drain undermines productivity, inequality distorts markets, and volatility deters investment. The next Part turns to the economic costs of authoritarian drift, demonstrating that repression has not only moral and political consequences but quantifiable financial ones.

---

[54] ROBERT PUTNAM, BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY 64–110 (2000).
[55] SERHII PLOKHY, CHERNOBYL: HISTORY OF A TRAGEDY 213–28 (2018).
[56] Yanzhong Huang, *The COVID-19 Pandemic and China's Global Health Leadership* (Council on Foreign Rels., Working Paper, Apr. 2020).
[57] Dan Diamond, *Trump Officials Interfered with CDC Reports on COVID-19*, POLITICO (Sept. 11, 2020).
[58] VÁCLAV HAVEL, THE POWER OF THE POWERLESS 36–45 (1985).

IV. ECONOMIC COSTS OF AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

While the political and social harms of authoritarianism are grave, the economic costs are equally destructive. Authoritarian leaders often tout their ability to "get things done" without the friction of legislatures or courts. Yet beneath the façade of decisiveness lies an economy plagued by volatility, cronyism, disinvestment, and long-term stagnation.

This Part examines how authoritarian drift imposes quantifiable economic losses. It proceeds in six steps: (A) the structural performance of extractive institutions, (B) policy volatility and investor uncertainty, (C) crony capitalism and rent-seeking, (D) disinvestment in public goods, (E) inequality and declining general welfare, and (F) the global credibility costs borne by authoritarian states.

A. Authoritarianism and Economic Performance

Economic historians have shown that political institutions shape prosperity. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson distinguish between "inclusive institutions," which protect property rights and foster innovation, and "extractive institutions," which concentrate wealth and power in elites.[59] Authoritarian regimes almost invariably generate extractive institutions.

While some authoritarian governments may deliver short bursts of growth, these gains rarely endure. Without independent courts, a free press, or checks on arbitrary power, investors cannot count on consistent contract enforcement or policy stability. As Douglass North argued, credible commitment to rules is the foundation of economic growth; authoritarian regimes are incapable of sustaining such commitment.[60]

The result is a paradox: authoritarian states may mobilize resources quickly for prestige projects—massive infrastructure, showcase industries—but in the long run, they undermine the predictability that markets require.

B. Policy Volatility and the Costs of Uncertainty

Markets prize stability. Authoritarian leaders, however, tend to govern by whim, generating volatility that undermines planning horizons.

The United States saw this dynamic in Trump's trade wars. Tariffs were often announced by tweet, with little consultation of Congress or allies.[61] Farmers lost access to export markets; manufacturers faced sudden input cost spikes. Economists Amiti, Redding, and Weinstein found that U.S. consumers bore nearly the entire cost, paying an additional $57 billion annually.[62]

---

[59] DARON ACEMOGLU & JAMES A. ROBINSON, WHY NATIONS FAIL: THE ORIGINS OF POWER, PROSPERITY, AND POVERTY 74–103 (2012).
[60] DOUGLASS NORTH, INSTITUTIONS, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE 80–92 (1990).
[61] Chad P. Bown, *The 2018 Trade War and the End of WTO Dispute Settlement as We Knew It* (Peterson Inst. for Int'l Econ., Working Paper No. 20-10, 2020).
[62] Amiti et al., *supra* note 35.

This pattern is not unique. In Argentina, sudden currency controls and arbitrary taxation destabilized markets, producing recurring crises.[63] In Venezuela, the Chávez and Maduro governments alternated between nationalizations and concessions, wiping out private investment.[64] The lesson is clear: when authoritarian leaders govern unpredictably, economies falter.

C. The Cost of Crony Capitalism

Authoritarianism breeds crony capitalism. When market access depends on political loyalty, efficiency collapses.

Russia under Vladimir Putin exemplifies this dynamic. State contracts and energy concessions are distributed to loyal oligarchs.[65] Rather than competing on productivity, firms compete for proximity to power. Economists have estimated that corruption functions as an implicit "tax," raising costs and deterring entrepreneurship.[66]

The United States is not immune to similar temptations. When leaders threaten to withhold federal funds from "blue states," or when regulatory relief is promised only to loyal industries, markets begin to operate on patronage rather than law.[67] Over time, the perception of politicized markets erodes trust, discourages foreign investment, and damages competitiveness.

D. Authoritarianism and Disinvestment in Public Goods

Authoritarian leaders often neglect investments in public goods—education, science, infrastructure—that yield diffuse benefits. Because these benefits cannot be easily monopolized or used for patronage, authoritarian governments prefer short-term rewards.

The U.S. debate over cuts to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) during the Trump administration illustrates this risk. Slash billions in research funding likely will cripple biomedical innovation.[68] Studies by United for Medical Research found that every $1 in NIH funding generates more than $2 in local economic activity.[69] A University of Chicago study projected that deep cuts could result in trillions of lost GDP over decades, as medical innovations drive productivity.[70]

International parallels abound. In Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, science and higher education budgets were gutted, prompting a mass exodus of researchers.[71] In Hungary, university takeovers by loyalist foundations undermined academic

---

[63] Guillermo Perry & Luis Servén, *The Anatomy of a Multiple Currency Crisis: Argentina 2001–02* (World Bank, Pol'y Rsch. Working Paper No. 3519, 2005).
[64] Rodríguez, *supra* note 34, at 49–63.
[65] ÅSLUND, *supra* note 48, at 112–16.
[66] SUSAN ROSE-ACKERMAN, CORRUPTION AND GOVERNMENT: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND REFORM 147–61 (1999).
[67] Super, *supra* note 50, at 167–214.
[68] Sarah Zhang, *Trump Wants to Slash NIH's Budget. Here's What That Means*, ATLANTIC (Mar. 16, 2017).
[69] UNITED FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH, NIH'S ROLE IN SUSTAINING THE U.S. ECONOMY (2017).
[70] Pierre Azoulay et al., *Public R&D Investments and Private-Sector Patenting: Evidence from NIH Funding Rules*, 86 REV. ECON. STUD. 117, 117–52 (2019).
[71] Richard Lapper, *Bolsonaro's War on Universities*, FIN. TIMES (May 2, 2019).

independence.[72] The long-term cost is fewer patents, less innovation, and slower productivity growth.

E. Inequality, Rent-Seeking, and the Decline of General Welfare

Authoritarian systems exacerbate inequality. Without independent institutions to safeguard the general welfare, elites extract disproportionate gains. Economists Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman estimate that in the United States, the top 0.1 percent controls as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent.[73]

Authoritarian policies accelerate this concentration. Loyalists receive contracts, subsidies, and regulatory waivers, while adversaries face exclusion. The result is rent-seeking: profits derived from privileged access rather than innovation.[74]

As Keynes observed, concentrated wealth depresses aggregate demand, creating stagnation.[75] Democracies can correct inequality through progressive taxation and redistribution. Authoritarian regimes, by contrast, entrench elite privilege, undermining social trust and economic stability.

F. Global Credibility and the Cost of Lost Trust

Finally, authoritarian drift carries costs in global markets. Investors and allies view respect for the rule of law as a prerequisite for engagement. When democracies backslide, credit ratings fall and borrowing costs rise.

The United States has long benefited from the "exorbitant privilege" of the dollar as global reserve currency.[76] This privilege rests on institutional trust. Should American institutions falter—if elections are undermined, if courts cease to function independently—that trust could fray. Even a modest rise in borrowing costs would increase debt service on trillions of dollars, costing hundreds of billions annually.[77]

Comparative history confirms the danger. Post-Soviet states struggled for decades to attract foreign investment due to weak legal systems.[78] By contrast, Chile's return to democracy after Pinochet was marked by heavy reinvestment in rule-of-law institutions, which helped fuel growth.[79]

G. Transition to Part V

---

[72] Scheppele, *supra* note 53, at 111–38.
[73] EMMANUEL SAEZ & GABRIEL ZUCMAN, THE TRIUMPH OF INJUSTICE: HOW THE RICH DODGE TAXES AND HOW TO MAKE THEM PAY 22–35 (2019).
[74] MANCUR OLSON, THE RISE AND DECLINE OF NATIONS 50–70 (1982).
[75] JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES, THE GENERAL THEORY OF EMPLOYMENT, INTEREST AND MONEY 85–92 (1936).
[76] BARRY EICHENGREEN, EXORBITANT PRIVILEGE: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DOLLAR AND THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MONETARY SYSTEM 22–29 (2011).
[77] CONG. BUDGET OFF., THE LONG-TERM BUDGET OUTLOOK (2020).
[78] ANDERS ÅSLUND, HOW CAPITALISM WAS BUILT: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, RUSSIA, AND CENTRAL ASIA 145–66 (2013).
[79] PATRICIO MELLER, THE CHILEAN ECONOMY: POLICY LESSONS AND CHALLENGES (1992).

The economic costs of authoritarian drift demonstrate that repression is not only a moral and political wrong but also an economic self-destruction. Volatility, cronyism, inequality, and lost credibility all weaken prosperity. Yet economics also intersects with information. Markets require transparency, just as citizens require truth. The next Part turns to the media ecosystem—examining how authoritarian leaders capture it, how polarization is fueled by economic incentives, and how reforms and innovations like "Talk It Out" could restore democracy's informational foundation.

V. MEDIA, POLITICAL DISCOURSE, AND AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

If institutions are democracy's skeleton, information is its bloodstream. Citizens cannot hold leaders accountable without accurate knowledge of government action, economic conditions, and civic choices. The Framers recognized this when they enshrined freedom of the press in the First Amendment.[80] Yet authoritarian leaders have always understood that controlling information is a precondition for controlling the state.

This Part analyzes the role of media in authoritarian drift, showing how (A) the press has historically functioned as democracy's constitutional safeguard, (B) polarization and digital platforms have fractured public discourse, (C) economic incentives have weakened journalism, (D) reforms could restore media as a bulwark, (E) media framing shapes civic optimism and economic sentiment, and (F) scholars and legal institutions must prepare for authoritarian capture of information systems.

A. The Media's Constitutional Role

James Madison described press freedom as "the only effectual guardian of every other right."[81] The press was not merely another liberty but a structural safeguard against tyranny. By exposing corruption and holding leaders accountable, it provides the informational foundation for self-rule.

Authoritarian leaders invariably attack this safeguard first. Adolf Hitler centralized radio under the Propaganda Ministry; Benito Mussolini used state-controlled newspapers to stoke nationalist fervor; Joseph Stalin's censors turned the Soviet press into a mouthpiece.[82] Each case illustrates that authoritarian consolidation begins with silencing independent media.

In the United States, formal constitutional safeguards remain strong, but recent decades have exposed vulnerabilities. Political leaders—most prominently Donald Trump—have repeatedly labeled the press "fake news" and "the enemy of the people."[83] Such rhetoric delegitimizes independent journalism and primes citizens to distrust all information not emanating from the leader himself.

---

[80] LEONARD W. LEVY, EMERGENCE OF A FREE PRESS 198–215 (1985).

[81] James Madison, *Report on the Virginia Resolutions* (1799), *reprinted in* THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON 345 (William R. Rachal ed., 1973).

[82] RICHARD J. EVANS, THE THIRD REICH IN POWER 122–40 (2005); ALEXANDER STILLE, BENEVOLENCE AND BETRAYAL: FIVE ITALIAN JEWISH FAMILIES UNDER FASCISM 34–42 (1991); SHEILA FITZPATRICK, THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION 88–90 (1994).

[83] Trump, *supra* note 43.

B. Media as a Vector of Polarization

The media not only informs but also frames political reality. In the digital era, partisan outlets and algorithmic curation exacerbate polarization. Research shows that consumption of ideologically consistent media reinforces partisan identities and increases hostility toward opponents.[84]

Social media platforms amplify this effect. Algorithms prioritize content that drives engagement—often outrage, fear, or sensationalism.[85] The result is a fractured public sphere where citizens inhabit parallel realities. For authoritarian populists, this environment is fertile: it allows leaders to delegitimize opponents, spread conspiracies, and mobilize support without accountability.

The U.S. experience following the 2020 election illustrates this dynamic. Partisan networks amplified unfounded claims of fraud, while platforms spread disinformation at scale.[86] Polarization hardened; bipartisan cooperation collapsed. Citizens, frustrated by gridlock and mistrust, became more receptive to strongman solutions.

C. Economic Incentives and the Decline of Democratic Media

Media dysfunction is not only political but also economic. Traditional journalism, especially local news, relied on advertising revenue that has been captured by digital platforms such as Google and Meta.[87] As ad revenues collapsed, newspapers shuttered or were absorbed into conglomerates, leaving "news deserts" across vast regions of the country.

The consequences are measurable. Studies show that communities without local newspapers experience lower voter turnout, higher corruption, and greater polarization.[88] National outlets cannot fill the gap; local reporting is essential for accountability in schools, municipalities, and state governments.

In response, many surviving outlets have shifted toward sensationalism, clickbait, or partisan programming to retain audience loyalty.[89] Authoritarian regimes exploit this vulnerability by subsidizing loyalist media and bankrupting critics. If unchecked, democracies risk drifting into the same model: media as a patronage network rather than an independent check.

D. Media as a Bulwark: Proposals for Reform

---

[84] MARKUS PRIOR, POST-BROADCAST DEMOCRACY: HOW MEDIA CHOICE INCREASES INEQUALITY IN POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND POLARIZES ELECTIONS 130–45 (2007).
[85] SIVA VAIDHYANATHAN, ANTISOCIAL MEDIA: HOW FACEBOOK DISCONNECTS US AND UNDERMINES DEMOCRACY 91–110 (2018).
[86] YOCHAI BENKLER, ROBERT FARIS & HAL ROBERTS, NETWORK PROPAGANDA: MANIPULATION, DISINFORMATION, AND RADICALIZATION IN AMERICAN POLITICS 239–312 (2018).
[87] VICTOR PICKARD, DEMOCRACY WITHOUT JOURNALISM? 54–73 (2020).
[88] Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee & Dermot Murphy, *Financing Dies in Darkness? The Impact of Newspaper Closures on Public Finance*, 135 J. FIN. ECON. 445, 445–67 (2020).
[89] Matthew Gentzkow & Jesse M. Shapiro, *Competition and Truth in the Market for News*, 22 J. ECON. PERSPS. 133, 133–54 (2008).

To resist authoritarian drift, the media must be reconstituted as a bulwark of democracy. Several reforms are possible:

Revitalization of Local Journalism. Public investment—through tax credits, nonprofit funding, or state subsidies insulated from political interference—could restore local news infrastructure.[90]

Transparency in Algorithmic Curation. Platforms that now function as de facto public squares should be subject to transparency requirements. Independent audits of algorithms could ensure that amplification does not privilege sensationalism at the expense of truth.[91]

Standards for Political Advertising. While First Amendment constraints are real, narrowly tailored disclosure requirements for online political ads could reduce disinformation, similar to rules governing commercial advertising.[92]

Incentives for Constructive Programming. Governments could provide tax incentives or public-service credits for outlets that produce bipartisan, solutions-oriented programming. Just as entertainment can be steered toward educational goals, so too can political media.[93]

These reforms would not eliminate partisan media but would rebalance incentives toward accuracy and civic responsibility.

E. Media, Optimism, and Economic Sentiment

Media not only informs but also shapes civic and economic psychology. Behavioral economics confirms that consumer confidence is heavily influenced by news framing.[94] During recessions, pessimistic reporting deepens downturns; during recoveries, constructive reporting accelerates growth.

Authoritarian populists exploit this by amplifying despair. By painting democracy as hopelessly corrupt, they persuade citizens that only authoritarian consolidation can restore order. Conversely, media that highlights bipartisan reforms, constructive compromises, and long-term solutions fosters optimism that strengthens democratic resilience.[95]

Thus, the orientation of the press has macroeconomic implications. Journalism is not simply a neutral mirror of events; it is itself a driver of civic mood and economic outcomes.

---

[90] PENELOPE MUSE ABERNATHY, NEWS DESERTS AND GHOST NEWSPAPERS: WILL LOCAL NEWS SURVIVE? 88–102 (2020).
[91] Daphne *Keller, Who Do You Sue? State and Platform Hybrid Power over Online Speech* 44–49 (Hoover Inst., Working Paper No. 1902, 2019).
[92] SPENCER OVERTON, STEALING DEMOCRACY: THE NEW POLITICS OF VOTER SUPPRESSION 162–67 (2006) (analogy to commercial ad regulations).
[93] MONROE E. PRICE & STEFAAN G. VERHULST, SELF-REGULATION AND THE INTERNET 97–103 (2005).
[94] ROBERT J. SHILLER, NARRATIVE ECONOMICS: HOW STORIES GO VIRAL AND DRIVE MAJOR ECONOMIC EVENTS 41–56 (2019).
[95] PIPPA NORRIS & RONALD INGLEHART, CULTURAL BACKLASH: TRUMP, BREXIT, AND AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM 301–10 (2019).

F. The Role of Scholars and Independent Institutions

Finally, scholars and professional institutions must anticipate authoritarian capture of media. Law schools should prepare students for litigation against government efforts to weaponize libel law or licensing regimes against critical outlets.[96] Journalism schools should experiment with models of nonprofit or cooperative ownership that insulate reporting from market failures.

The legal profession also has a role. Just as Judge Advocates General must prepare for unlawful orders in the military context, media lawyers must prepare for authoritarian efforts to curtail press freedom. Preemptive scholarship can shape doctrine before a crisis emerges.[97]

G. Transition to Part VI

The analysis so far shows that authoritarianism corrodes not only institutions, society, and the economy, but also the information ecosystem on which democracy depends. Yet reforming institutions and media alone is not enough. To be resilient, democracy requires cultural practices that foster trust across partisan lines. The next Part therefore turns to a novel proposal: media-prompted interpersonal dialogue, or "Talk It Out," as a civic-level intervention capable of filtering extremism and rebuilding democratic norms.

VI. TALK IT OUT: MEDIA-PROMPTED CIVIC DIALOGUE

The preceding Parts have shown that authoritarian drift corrodes institutions, society, the economy, and the press. But legal and institutional reforms alone cannot suffice. Even if the military resists unlawful orders, legislatures reclaim their power, and media reforms succeed, democracy cannot thrive unless citizens themselves are willing to engage across lines of difference. Polarization has rendered politics increasingly tribal, with partisans less likely to converse meaningfully with those who disagree.[98]

This Part proposes a novel intervention: media-prompted interpersonal dialogue, or what this Article terms "Talk It Out." The idea is simple but potentially powerful: if mainstream media outlets consistently encouraged viewers to discuss political issues with family and friends—using guided prompts, factual anchors, and conversational norms—the result could be reduced extremity, improved factual alignment, and greater civic participation. Unlike censorship or top-down regulation, this approach leverages the media's reach while relying on voluntary, interpersonal exchange.

A. Theoretical Rationale

---

[96] Clay Calvert, *Weaponizing Libel Law: The Curious Case of Donald Trump's Presidential Threats Against the Press*, 16 First Amend. L. Rev. 349, 349–76 (2017).

[97] Geoffrey R. Stone, *The First Amendment in the Trump Era*, 85 U. CHI. L. REV. ONLINE 335, 335–50 (2018).

[98] LILLIANA MASON, UNCIVIL AGREEMENT: HOW POLITICS BECAME OUR IDENTITY 55–72 (2018).

Several strands of communication and political theory support the plausibility of this intervention.

1. The Two-Step Flow of Communication. Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz demonstrated that media rarely changes minds directly; instead, it influences interpersonal conversations through "opinion leaders."[99] Messages filter through trusted personal networks. A deliberate strategy to prompt these conversations harnesses a channel already more persuasive than distant elites.

2. Deliberative Democracy. Jürgen Habermas argued that legitimate law arises from deliberation under conditions of reciprocity and reason-giving.[100] While large-scale deliberative assemblies are resource-intensive, everyday micro-dialogues can approximate the same benefit: they require participants to articulate reasons, consider trade-offs, and listen.

3. Cross-Cutting Exposure. Diana Mutz's work shows that exposure to differing views moderates policy preferences, though it sometimes reduces participation.[101] More recent studies, however, suggest that when conversations are framed constructively, moderation can occur without demobilization.[102]

4. Motivated Reasoning and Identity Threat. Psychological research confirms that factual corrections often fail when they threaten partisan identity.[103] Yet conversations with trusted interlocutors—family, close friends—may reduce perceived threat, making factual updating more possible.[104]

Taken together, these literatures suggest that carefully designed interpersonal conversations could act as a "civic vaccine" against authoritarian populism.

B. Intervention Design

A national dialogue initiative could be embedded within media programming at minimal cost. Outlets—television, streaming, podcasts, digital platforms—would include recurring prompts inviting viewers to talk politics with someone they trust.

Each prompt would include three components:

Three Open-Ended Questions. Designed to elicit reasoning rather than slogans (e.g., "What trade-offs would you accept in tariffs?").

---

[99] PAUL LAZARSFELD & ELIHU KATZ, PERSONAL INFLUENCE: THE PART PLAYED BY PEOPLE IN THE FLOW OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS 32–47 (1955).
[100] JÜRGEN HABERMAS, BETWEEN FACTS AND NORMS: CONTRIBUTIONS TO A DISCOURSE THEORY OF LAW AND DEMOCRACY 107–34 (1996).
[101] DIANA C. MUTZ, HEARING THE OTHER SIDE: DELIBERATIVE VERSUS PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY 62–83 (2006).
[102] Matthew Levendusky, *Americans, Not Partisans: Can Priming American National Identity Reduce Affective Polarization?*, 80 J. POL. 59, 59–70 (2018).
[103] Dan M. Kahan, *Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection*, 8 JUDGMENT & DECISION MAKING 407, 407–24 (2013).
[104] Brendan Nyhan & Jason Reifler, *When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions*, 32 POL. BEHAV. 303, 303–30 (2010).

Two Neutral Fact Anchors. Shared factual points that both sides can acknowledge (e.g., "Tariffs raise consumer prices").

One Perspective-Taking Exercise. A question that encourages empathy (e.g., "How would this policy affect people unlike us?").

For example, after a segment on healthcare, the broadcast might close with:

"This week, take ten minutes to talk with a friend or family member. Ask: (1) What do you think is the biggest challenge in U.S. healthcare? (2) Would you prioritize cost, access, or innovation? (3) What trade-offs would you accept? Fact: The U.S. spends about 18% of GDP on healthcare. Exercise: Imagine you're a small-business owner—how would rising premiums affect you?"

Such low-friction prompts would normalize dialogue as a habitual civic act. Anchors, media personalities should make their discussion with friends and family trendy i.e. "I talk with my family about politics all the time" statements by popular persons could start a snowball effect for national self-filtering dialog. Thus, it is critical news outlets, cooperate with film and entertainment industries, as well as educational institutions. It is also fundamental to conduct more frequent and precise surveys. All this in the name of thriving society.

C. Research Agenda and Testable Hypotheses

A robust research program could evaluate this intervention through field experiments and quasi-experiments.

Hypotheses:

H1: Participants will report less policy extremity after repeated guided conversations.

H2: Participants will demonstrate improved factual accuracy on contested questions.

H3: Participants will exhibit reduced affective polarization toward out-partisans.

H4: Participants will report higher civic efficacy and likelihood of voting.

H5: Effects will be strongest in heterogeneous networks, but positive even in homogeneous ones when norms are emphasized.

Testing could occur through randomized controlled trials (e.g., different media markets receiving prompts at different times) or partnerships with streaming platforms. Surveys, behavioral measures (turnout, volunteering), and discourse analysis could measure outcomes.

D. Guardrails and Risks

Any intervention must anticipate potential pitfalls.

1. Backfire Effects. Poorly framed conversations could entrench views. Guardrail: prompts should emphasize listening, reciprocity, and empathy.

2. Participation Drop. Mutz's research warns that cross-cutting exposure can reduce political participation.[105] Guardrail: affirm civic efficacy (e.g., "Your voice matters in shaping solutions").

3. Privacy and Ethics. Conversations must remain voluntary and unrecorded. The design should respect autonomy, with opt-in participation.

4. Elite Capture. If partisan outlets design prompts to entrench their own positions, the effort could backfire. Guardrail: develop nonpartisan conversation kits curated by independent bodies (universities, nonprofits).

E. Comparative Lessons

Comparative evidence supports the potential of media-driven dialogue.

In Rwanda, Betsy Paluck's field experiment showed that radio dramas designed to model deliberation reduced prejudice and conflict.[106] Citizens did not simply adopt elite messages but used them as scripts for their own conversations.

Similarly, James Fishkin's "deliberative polling" demonstrates that when citizens engage in structured conversation, preferences shift toward moderation and factual accuracy.[107] While deliberative polls are resource-intensive, media-prompted micro-dialogues could scale this effect nationally at minimal cost.

F. Synthesis

The "Talk It Out" proposal is not a panacea. But it offers a scalable, content-neutral, constitutionally unproblematic method for strengthening democracy at the grassroots. Unlike regulation of speech—which raises First Amendment concerns—this approach empowers citizens themselves to deliberate.

If successful, such dialogue could counteract authoritarian populism's reliance on division and mistrust. Authoritarian leaders thrive on citizens talking past each other; democracy thrives on citizens talking to each other.

G. Transition to Part VII

Having analyzed the institutional, social, economic, and informational dimensions of authoritarian drift, and having proposed media-prompted dialogue as a civic countermeasure, the final Part synthesizes these insights. It argues that a layered defense—military, institutional, media, and civic—is necessary for democratic survival.

---

[105] MUTZ, *supra* note 101, at 102–18.

[106] Elizabeth Levy Paluck, *Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda*, 96 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 574, 574–87 (2009).

[107] JAMES S. FISHKIN, WHEN THE PEOPLE SPEAK: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION 45–67 (2009).

VII. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

A. A Layered Firewall Against Authoritarian Drift

The preceding Parts have traced the multifaceted dangers of authoritarian populism and the corresponding defenses necessary to preserve constitutional democracy. The central claim of this Article is that resilience requires a layered firewall, composed of institutions, law, media, and civic practice.

Military Fidelity to the Constitution. As Part I established, the military oath to the Constitution is the final backstop against authoritarian usurpation. Unlawful orders—even if judicially ratified—must be resisted. The Posse Comitatus Act, the Insurrection Act, and comparative lessons all reinforce this duty.[108]

Strong Political Institutions. As Part II showed, legislatures, courts, and oversight bodies must not cede authority. Their abdication creates vicious cycles that normalize authoritarianism. Preserving their independence is not optional; it is existential.[109]

Social and Economic Health. Part III demonstrated that authoritarianism imposes human costs: silenced dissent, emigration of talent, entrenched inequality, hollowed civil society, and public health failures. Part IV extended this to economics: policy volatility, crony capitalism, disinvestment in science, inequality, and global credibility losses. Democracy's survival is inseparable from prosperity and social well-being.[110]

A Resilient Information Ecosystem. Part V argued that a democracy without trusted media is democracy in name only. Polarization, algorithmic amplification, and collapsing local journalism have created vulnerabilities authoritarian leaders exploit. Reforms—algorithmic transparency, subsidies for local journalism, and disclosure in political ads—are essential to rebuild informational resilience.[111]

Civic Dialogue as Cultural Infrastructure. Finally, Part VI advanced a novel civic intervention: Talk It Out. By embedding prompts for interpersonal conversation in media programming, citizens can develop habits of reason-giving, listening, and factual alignment. Dialogue across partisan lines, however modest, inoculates against the mistrust and disengagement on which authoritarian populism thrives.[112]

Together, these layers form a comprehensive defense. No single firewall is sufficient. But woven together—military fidelity, institutional strength, social and economic resilience, media reform, and civic dialogue—they create redundancy and depth.

B. Risks of Fragmented or Partial Defense

---

[108] *See supra* I (detailing military oath and unlawful orders).
[109] *See supra* II (analyzing legislative abdication and judicial capture).
[110] *See supra* III–IV (documenting human, social, and economic costs).
[111] *See supra* V (proposing media reforms to rebuild informational resilience).
[112] *See supra* VI (developing "Talk It Out" intervention).

If defenses are partial, authoritarianism can exploit the gaps. Consider three scenarios:

Institutional Resistance Without Civic Trust. Suppose courts, legislatures, and the military resist unlawful orders, but citizens remain polarized, alienated, and disengaged. Authoritarian populists will continue to mobilize mistrust, undermining institutions through political pressure.[113]

Civic Dialogue Without Institutional Integrity. Conversely, even if citizens engage constructively, authoritarian capture of courts or legislatures can nullify their efforts. Dialogue is powerless if elections are rigged or judicial review hollowed out.

Media Reform Without Citizen Uptake. Finally, reforms to journalism and platforms may succeed in creating more accurate content. But if citizens lack habits of engagement, they will not process or use the information effectively.[114]

These scenarios highlight the interdependence of law and culture. Institutions without citizens become brittle; citizens without institutions become vulnerable. Only their combination offers resilience.

C. Implications for Scholarship and Practice

This Article carries implications across three fields—law, political science, and media studies.

For law, it challenges judicial supremacy by reaffirming that fidelity lies with the Constitution itself, not with captured courts. It underscores the importance of statutes like Posse Comitatus as practical bulwarks, and it calls on JAGs and legal scholars to preemptively articulate doctrines of resistance.[115]

For political science, it confirms that authoritarian drift is gradual, often legalistic, and institutionally corrosive. It links institutional decline with social and economic harms, showing how backsliding spirals into entrenchment.[116]

For media studies, it reframes the "marketplace of ideas" from mass exposure to interpersonal dialogue. Rather than assuming that greater media supply ensures democratic outcomes, it emphasizes that conversation—structured, repeated, and trusted—is the real engine of moderation.[117]

D. The Normative Stakes

The normative stakes could not be higher. Authoritarian populism thrives on division, despair, and disengagement. It persuades citizens that democracy is corrupt,

---

[113] Milan W. Svolik, *Polarization versus Democracy*, 30 J. DEMOCRACY 20, 20–32 (2019).
[114] CASS R. SUNSTEIN, #REPUBLIC: DIVIDED DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA 77–103 (2017).
[115] Corn, *supra* note 22, at 123–65.
[116] Bermeo, *supra* note 1, at 5–19.
[117] LAZARSFELD & KATZ, *supra* note 99, at 45–61.

that elites are conspiratorial, and that only strongman rule can deliver. Once entrenched, such regimes are extraordinarily difficult to reverse.[118]

The antidote is multi-layered: military officers refusing unlawful orders, legislatures reclaiming their role, courts enforcing rights, media restoring truth, and citizens rebuilding trust. None of these alone is sufficient. But together, they can preserve the democratic experiment.

The United States has faced such crises before. Lincoln warned that if Supreme Court rulings irrevocably fixed national policy, "the people will have ceased to be their own rulers."[119] During Watergate, the press exposed corruption while courts and Congress asserted their authority. After September 11, civil society pushed back against excesses in surveillance. Each episode illustrates resilience when institutions and citizens act in concert.

E. Quiet Conversations as Democratic Salvation

Perhaps the most counterintuitive insight is that democracy may depend not on louder elite discourse but on quieter conversations at the kitchen table. Authoritarian populism thrives when citizens no longer talk across divides. The "Talk It Out" initiative envisions media prompts that normalize cross-cutting dialogue: short, low-friction exchanges that build habits of listening and factual alignment.

If millions of Americans engaged weekly in such conversations, the effects could be profound: less extremity, more empathy, higher turnout, and greater resistance to demagoguery.[120] Like vaccination, dialogue may not prevent every infection of authoritarian rhetoric, but it can build herd immunity.

F. Conclusion

Democracy's survival in the United States is not preordained. It depends on layered defenses: institutions that uphold law, media that sustains truth, and citizens who talk to one another. The military oath, the resilience of legislatures and courts, the vitality of civil society, and the role of the press are all essential. Yet the final firewall may be cultural rather than institutional: the willingness of citizens to engage in good faith dialogue.

In the face of authoritarian populism, the path forward is not despair but deliberation—not retreat into tribalism but renewal of civic trust. To preserve democracy, America must be willing to talk it out.

---

[118] LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT, *supra* note 2, at 12–41.
[119] Lincoln, *supra* note 12.
[120] Paluck, *supra* note 106, at 574–87.

NOTE ON CHINA – U.S. GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS, A CRITICAL COMPARISON

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerating climate crisis have exposed both the strengths and the weaknesses of contemporary governance models. In the United States, populist dynamics have too often led to gridlock and policy inconsistency. In China, centralized industrial planning has delivered rapid scaling of infrastructure and clean energy but at the cost of transparency and political openness. Neither system offers a perfect model for twenty-first-century governance. Yet, as Rafal Pruchniak has argued in his constitutional reform proposals, there may be space to imagine a hybrid system that takes the best from both traditions: strong checks and balances rooted in democracy, coupled with efficient long-term policy execution.[121]

The U.S. Model: Democracy Under Stress

The U.S. Constitution was designed to slow decision-making to prevent tyranny. But in recent decades, this strength has become a liability. Populist forces—amplified by media polarization—have undermined Congress's ability to legislate effectively.[122] Budgetary standoffs, debt-ceiling crises, and erratic trade wars illustrate how partisan dysfunction at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue can paralyze responses to pressing national needs. [123] The pandemic exposed this vividly. While the United States eventually mobilized vast resources for vaccines and stimulus, the early response was slowed by political division. Conflicting messages from the White House, state governments, and Congress allowed the virus to spread more rapidly than necessary.[124] In contrast to centralized systems, where unified commands can enforce immediate lockdowns or resource shifts, the U.S. model required negotiation, persuasion, and often litigation before decisive measures could take effect.

The Chinese Model: Planning with Limits

China's centralized system, anchored in Five-Year Plans and state-directed industrial policy, produced both remarkable achievements and serious drawbacks. On the one hand, the country's rapid mobilization of manufacturing capacity allowed it to supply the world with personal protective equipment and later dominate clean energy production.[125] China now manufactures more than 80 percent of the world's solar panels and has invested heavily in electric-vehicle infrastructure.[126] This strategic coherence stands in sharp contrast to the United States, where clean-energy policy has been hostage to shifting partisan tides. Yet China's model faltered in a different way during the pandemic. Local officials delayed reporting the outbreak in Wuhan, fearing political repercussions. Those weeks of silence allowed the virus to spread globally.[127] Such a delay would have been far less likely in the United States, where a decentralized

---

[121] Rafal Pruchniak, Modern Constitutional Reform—Rebalancing the Three Branches of Government (2025) (unpublished manuscript) (on file with author).
[122] THOMAS E. MANN & NORMAN J. ORNSTEIN, IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN IT LOOKS (2016).
[123] Sarah Binder, *The Dysfunctional Congress*, 18 ANN. REV. POL. SCI. 85, 85–101 (2015).
[124] Ed Yong, *How the Pandemic Defeated America*, ATLANTIC (Aug. 2020).
[125] YASHENG HUANG, CAPITALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS (2008).
[126] INT'L ENERGY AGENCY, RENEWABLES 2023 (2023).
[127] Laurie Garrett, *China's Missteps in Responding to COVID-19*, FOREIGN AFFS. (Mar. 2020).

press, empowered state governments, and whistleblower protections create multiple channels for disclosure.[128]

Toward a Hybrid Constitutional Model

Pruchniak's proposal for constitutional reform envisions combining democratic legitimacy with governance efficiency. Under his model, the executive could initiate legislation, but all laws would undergo judicial review to ensure they are economically sound and socially just. Courts would act as moderators rather than passive arbiters, while voters would retain ultimate authority through electronic elections and referenda.[129] This system attempts to resolve the core trade-off visible in the U.S. and Chinese experiences. The United States has strong safeguards for liberty and transparency but struggles with policy efficiency. China has unmatched planning capacity but suffers from weak institutional checks. A hybrid framework would aim to capture the benefits of both: decisive policy implementation without sacrificing accountability or fairness.

Shared Lessons from COVID and Climate Policy

The pandemic and climate change both underscore the need for cooperation as well as competition between the world's two largest economies. During COVID-19, American innovation in mRNA vaccines paired with China's mass manufacturing capacity to expand global supply.[130] Both sides contributed to saving lives worldwide. Looking forward, the climate crisis requires the same dynamic: fair competition in technological innovation, but also structured cooperation in scaling solutions, from clean-energy grids to carbon capture. Neither unilateralism nor isolationism can succeed against global threats. Just as the pandemic demanded coordination, the climate emergency will require recognition that interdependence is a feature, not a flaw, of twenty-first-century governance.

Media, Education, and Bridging the Gap

For cooperation to be sustainable, it must rest not only on governmental bargains but also on cultural respect and mutual understanding. Here, media and educational institutions play a decisive role. In both the United States and China, national narratives often emphasize rivalry, military preparedness, and historical grievances.[131]

These perspectives reinforce pride but also make compromise more difficult. Left unchecked, they risk framing every policy disagreement as an existential contest. Media outlets could instead shift toward responsible framing—highlighting not only competition but also areas of necessary cooperation—while using viewer surveys and polling to track progress toward political reconciliation. Educational institutions should invest in cross-cultural literacy, teaching younger generations to appreciate both the

---

[128] MARGARET ROBERTS, CENSORED: DISTRACTION AND DIVERSION INSIDE CHINA'S GREAT FIREWALL (2018).
[129] Pruchniak, *supra* note 121.
[130] Katalin Karikó & Drew Weissman, *The mRNA Vaccine Revolution*, 386 NEW ENG. J. MED. 1493, 1493–95 (2022).
[131] ODD ARNE WESTAD, THE COLD WAR: A WORLD HISTORY (2017).

strengths and flaws of each system.[132] Exchange programs, joint research centers, and collaborative platforms for students could build the interpersonal trust that political rhetoric often undermines. Universities can also help media conduct and analyze these surveys, bridging social science and journalistic practice. Governments might extend grants to sociologists to identify and counter militarization trends in the media and steer funds toward dual-purpose science projects (as often done at DARPA) that highlight cooperative opportunity. Aligning media and academia in this way can help unwind war rhetoric with scientific expertise and precision, better prepare societies to mitigate health and climate risks, and—crucially—support the early-stage marketing and adoption of frontier innovations that traditional industrial policy can be too risk-averse (or too budget-constrained) to back.

The competitive cultures of both nations are deeply rooted and will not disappear. The United States takes pride in individual liberty, entrepreneurship, and checks on authority. China emphasizes collective strength, strategic planning, and respect for centralized coordination. Each sees the other through a lens of skepticism, sometimes bordering on hostility. Yet competition need not preclude respect. Just as athletes may push each other to excel while respecting the rules of the game, nations can cooperate on existential challenges while competing in other domains.

The Obvious Choice – and the Persistent Risk of War

The choice before the world's two superpowers is, on its face, obvious. Cooperation—especially on public health, climate change, and economic stability—would benefit not only the United States and China but humanity as a whole for decades to come. Yet wars continue, and regional conflicts intensify, precisely because Washington and Beijing too often treat one another as adversaries first and partners second.[133] Without a shared commitment to stopping wars—whether in Asia, the Middle East, or Europe—the promise of joint leadership for the global good remains unfulfilled. The central obstacle is political incompatibility. The United States faces an era of populism in which policy is often shaped by partisan spectacle rather than consensus-building.[134] China, by contrast, operates through technocratic governance, where planning and expertise guide strategy but public participation remains limited.[135] These diverging systems make it difficult to establish the trust necessary for sustained cooperation. Each nation doubts the other's capacity to commit reliably—China questions U.S. volatility, while America questions China's lack of openness. Without bridging this incompatibility, cooperation might remain fragile, and competition risks tipping into confrontation.

Authoritarianism and GDP Performance

Comparative political-economy research shows that authoritarian regimes frequently inflate their economic performance and, in the long run, achieve lower growth than democracies. Using satellite night-time light data, Luis R. Martínez estimates that authoritarian states overstate annual GDP growth by up to thirty-five

---

[132] JOSEPH NYE, SOFT POWER: THE MEANS TO SUCCESS IN WORLD POLITICS (2004).
[133] MICHAEL BECKLEY & HAL BRANDS, DANGER ZONE: THE COMING CONFLICT WITH CHINA (2022).
[134] NORRIS & INGLEHART, *supra* note 95.
[135] SEBASTIAN HEILMANN, RED SWAN: HOW UNORTHODOX POLICY-MAKING FACILITATED CHINA'S RISE (2017).

percent compared to democracies.[136] Other studies corroborate this finding, suggesting exaggerations between fifteen and thirty percent annually,[137] while more conservative estimates place overstatements at between half and one and a half percentage points per year.[138] Beyond inflated reporting, authoritarian rule also produces genuine long-term growth penalties: historical analysis of countries between 1920 and 2000 demonstrates that each additional decade under authoritarianism reduced average annual growth by about 0.37 percentage points.[139] In short, while authoritarian leaders often claim stellar performance, both measurement and reality reveal underperformance.

China as the Exception

China complicates this general picture. Since the late 1970s, it has overseen the largest poverty reduction in history, lifting more than 800 million people out of extreme poverty.[140] Between the early 1980s and the mid-2010s, Chinese GDP growth averaged between eight and ten percent annually, far outpacing democratic peers such as India or Brazil.[141] China's system of one-party rule facilitated long-term planning, enabling massive infrastructure projects, targeted subsidies for renewable energy and electric vehicles, and industrial strategies for 5G, high-speed rail, and artificial intelligence. In certain domains, Chinese firms have leapfrogged advanced democracies.[142] These achievements suggest that authoritarian systems can deliver extraordinary results under specific conditions, including market reforms, demographic scale, and deep integration with the global economy.

Innovation, Universities, and Patents

Recent evidence demonstrates that authoritarian rigidity has not prevented China from becoming an academic and innovation powerhouse. In the 2025 Academic Ranking of World Universities, Tsinghua and Peking Universities ranked among the top twenty-five institutions worldwide.[143] Tsinghua now ranks third globally in SCImago's research-impact metrics and sixth in the Nature Index for natural-science publications.[144] China surpassed the United States in overall scientific publications in 2016 and overtook it in Nature Index high-impact research by 2022.[145] Patent activity is equally striking: in 2021, Chinese entities filed 1.4 million patents, more than half of all global filings.[146] By 2023, China accounted for 47.2 percent of global patent

---

[136] Luis R. Martínez, *How Much Should We Trust the Dictator's GDP Estimates?* (Becker Friedman Inst., Working Paper No. 2021-78, 2021).
[137] WORLD BANK, USING NIGHT LIGHTS TO ESTIMATE SUBNATIONAL GDP IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (2018); Roland Kupers, *Satellites to Authoritarian Regimes: Your GDP Is Inflated*, MANHATTAN INST. (2021).
[138] Christian Bjørnskov & Martin Rode, *Regime Types and Economic Growth: Evidence from Night-time Light Data*, 59 INT'L STUD. Q. 223, 223–37 (2015).
[139] Daniel Treisman, *The Causes of Corruption: A Cross-National Study*, 76 J. PUB. ECON. 399, 399–457 (2000); *Democracy Is Good for the Economy. Can Business Defend It?,* BROOKINGS INST. (2022).
[140] WORLD BANK, CHINA OVERVIEW: DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION (2020).
[141] BARRY NAUGHTON, THE CHINESE ECONOMY: ADAPTATION AND GROWTH (2007).
[142] Mariana Mazzucato & Caetano Penna, *The Rise of Mission-Oriented State Investment Banks* (UNCTAD, Working Paper, 2015).
[143] *Academic Ranking of World Universities 2025*, SHANGHAIRANKING CONSULTANCY (2025).
[144] *SCImago Institutions Rankings 2025*, SCIMAGO; *Nature Index 2025*, NATURE.
[145] *Nature Index 2022 Annual Tables*, NATURE.
[146] *China Is the Largest Contributor to Global Patent Applications*, OUR WORLD IN DATA (2023).

applications, up from 32 percent a decade earlier.[147] In artificial intelligence, Chinese researchers filed over 38,000 patents between 2014 and 2023, compared with just 6,200 by U.S. counterparts.[148] In applied technology, China has become a dominant force in the electric-vehicle sector, fueled by more than $230 billion in subsidies since 2009; companies like BYD have even surpassed Tesla in global sales.[149] By mid-2025, China led in 57 of 64 frontier technologies, including semiconductors, solar panels, and drones.[150]

U.S. – China Diplomatic Frictions

Despite economic and academic achievements, cooperation between the United States and China remains severely constrained. The United States' 2022 National Security Strategy identifies China as the "only competitor with both the intent and capability to reshape the international order."[151] Beijing, on paper, emphasizes "non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not targeting third parties."[152] However, most recently China strengthened economic ties with Russia and North Korea amid brutal war in Ukraine and anticipating a conflict with Taiwan or at the very least preparing for such a possibility. From Washington's perspective, China's ongoing support for Russia's defense industry during the war in Ukraine—particularly via dual-use exports of machine tools and semiconductors—poisons trust and risks secondary sanctions.[153] Beijing's coercive economic actions against Lithuania in response to the opening of a Taiwan office triggered a WTO complaint by the European Union.[154] South China Sea militarization and increasingly aggressive diplomatic rhetoric push regional states toward deeper U.S. security partnerships, while the opacity created by China's 2023 counter-espionage law chilled foreign direct investment and produced negative FDI inflows for the first time since the 1990s.[155]

From Beijing's perspective, the United States has imposed punitive tariffs such as the 100 percent duty on Chinese electric vehicles and new solar and semiconductor tariffs, which it interprets as protectionism disguised as national security.[156] The administration's outbound-investment restrictions on Chinese AI, semiconductors, and quantum technologies are likewise perceived as efforts to slow China's modernization.[157] The proliferation of U.S. sanctions regimes—including secondary sanctions on banks and third-country entities—reinforces Beijing's narrative that

---

147 WORLD INTELL. PROP. ORG., WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY INDICATORS 2024 (2024).
148 *China Files Vastly More AI Patents than US*, FIN. TIMES (May 2024).
149 *The Shift East: How China's EV Boom Powers Its Tech Rise*, TIME (June 2025).
150 *China Takes the Lead in the Global AI Tech Race—Can the US Charge Ahead?*, MONEYWEEK (July 2025).
151 THE WHITE HOUSE, NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (2022).
152 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Global Security Initiative Concept Paper* (2023).
153 European Commission, EU Sanctions Against Russia: Enforcement Reports (2023); U.S. Dep't of State, Press Briefing, PRC Support to Russia's Defense Industrial Base (2024).
154 Request for Consultations by the European Union, *China—Measures Concerning Trade in Goods and Services to or from Lithuania*, WTO Doc. WT/DS610/1 (Jan. 27, 2022).
155 U.S. DEP'T OF DEF., ANNUAL REPORT ON MILITARY AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS INVOLVING THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (2023).
156 OFF. OF THE U.S. TRADE REP., TARIFF ACTIONS ON CHINESE ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND BATTERIES (2024).
157 Exec. Order on Addressing United States Investments in Certain National Security Technologies and Products in Countries of Concern (Aug. 9, 2023).

Washington is weaponizing the financial system without restraint.[158] The Taiwan issue remains the hardest obstacle: for Beijing, unification is non-negotiable; for Washington, the Taiwan Relations Act requires arms sales and defense preparedness.[159]

The economic costs to China of these policies are measurable. Tariff losses in the EU and U.S. EV markets have already constrained Chinese firms, with the EU imposing duties of up to 45 percent on €9.7 billion of imports in 2023.[160] Export controls have slowed China's semiconductor ambitions, while negative net FDI inflows in 2023 underscored the chilling effect of geopolitical tensions.[161] The IMF estimates that geoeconomic fragmentation could reduce global GDP by up to seven percent, with China more exposed than most due to its central position in supply chains.[162] The tail-risk of a Taiwan conflict looms largest: Bloomberg Economics estimates a $10 trillion global GDP hit, with costs falling disproportionately on China as the hub of global manufacturing.[163]

Competition and Trade Barriers

The contrast between open competition and trade barriers further clarifies the stakes. Economic theory demonstrates that openness reallocates resources toward productive firms, increases consumer choice, and strengthens innovation.[164] Empirical studies of tariff reductions in Indonesia and Chile show significant productivity gains from cheaper, higher-quality inputs.[165] In the United States, increased import variety raised welfare by an estimated 2.6 percent of GDP between 1972 and 2001.[166] Exposure to import competition has spurred patenting and IT adoption in Europe, consistent with "escape-competition" effects.[167] At the same time, openness creates distributional challenges: the "China shock" generated localized job losses in U.S. manufacturing regions, highlighting the need for robust adjustment policies.[168] But protectionism fares worse. IMF analysis shows tariff hikes reduce output and productivity while raising unemployment,[169] and studies of U.S.–China tariffs in 2018–2019 confirm that costs were largely passed on to domestic consumers, yielding

---

158 DANIEL DREZNER, THE USES AND ABUSES OF WEAPONIZED INTERDEPENDENCE (2022).
159 Taiwan Relations Act, Pub. L. No. 96-8, 93 Stat. 14 (1979).
160 European Commission, Anti-Subsidy Investigation on Battery Electric Vehicles from China (2024).
161 State Administration of Foreign Exchange, Balance of Payments Report (Q4 2023).
162 INT'L MONETARY FUND, WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK: GEOECONOMIC FRAGMENTATION (2023).
163 *The $10 Trillion Cost of a Taiwan Conflict*, BLOOMBERG ECON. (Oct. 2023); RHODIUM GRP., THE ECONOMIC COST OF A TAIWAN CRISIS (2022).
164 Marc J. Melitz, *The Impact of Trade on Intra-Industry Reallocations and Aggregate Industry Productivity*, 71 ECONOMETRICA 1695, 1695–1725 (2003).
165 Mary Amiti & Jozef Konings, *Trade Liberalization, Intermediate Inputs, and Productivity: Evidence from Indonesia*, 97 AM. ECON. REV. 1611, 1611–38 (2007); Nina Pavcnik, *Trade Liberalization, Exit, and Productivity Improvements: Evidence from Chilean Plants*, 69 REV. ECON. STUD. 245, 245–76 (2002).
166 Christian Broda & David E. Weinstein, *Globalization and the Gains from Variety*, 121 Q.J. ECON. 541, 541–85 (2006).
167 Nicholas Bloom, Mirko Draca & John Van Reenen, *Trade-Induced Technical Change? The Impact of Chinese Imports on Innovation, IT, and Productivity*, 83 REV. ECON. STUD. 87, 87–117 (2016).
168 David Autor, David Dorn & Gordon Hanson, *The China Syndrome: Local Labor Market Effects of Import Competition in the United States*, 103 AM. ECON. REV. 2121, 2121–68 (2013).
169 Davide Furceri, Swarnali A. Hannan, Jonathan D. Ostry & Andrew K. Rose, *Macroeconomic Consequences of Tariffs* (Int'l Monetary Fund, Working Paper No. 19/9, 2019).

net welfare losses.[170] Concentrated market power also blunts innovation: when one country or a handful of firms dominate, markups rise and incentives to innovate diminish.[171]

Universities, Media Symbiosis, Communication – and Cross-Border Detente Potential

For universities facing federal funding cuts, adaptation requires new institutional models. Micro-venture-capital funds at universities can provide small, flexible pools of risk capital that bridge funding gaps for early-stage ventures, as demonstrated by initiatives like Stanford's StartX and MIT's E14 Fund. [172]] Partnerships between academia and specialized media outlets can create a symbiotic relationship, translating academic findings for public audiences while diversifying revenue for both sides; The Conversation has pioneered such partnerships with considerable success. [173] Proactive communication channels allow universities to counter misinformation and mobilize public opinion around the economic and social returns of research, a necessity underscored by proposals to slash NIH budgets by nearly twenty percent.[174]

Crucially, this academia–media symbiosis can—and should—be designed cross-border. Mobilizing foreign alumni networks to anchor micro-VC funds, open foreign markets, and connect research to international media partnerships can diversify capital and audiences while building reputational resilience. Oxford's cross-border innovation funds show such arrangements are feasible.[175] Extending these partnerships across borders could yield an additional benefit: creating channels of communication that not only protect universities from domestic austerity but also promote mutual understanding between the United States and China. Shared platforms where academics and journalists collaborate across borders can normalize the notion of "competitive partnership," redirect attention to joint gains in health, climate, and technology, and—over time—pave the way for détente alongside greater, healthier competition. The primary goal remains mitigation of research and education cuts; the secondary dividend is geopolitical: a thicker, civilian infrastructure of knowledge exchange that reduces misperception and supports selective cooperation even amid structural rivalry.

The evidence demonstrates that authoritarianism generally produces inflated statistics and slower long-term growth, yet China remains a striking exception, with extraordinary achievements in poverty reduction, technological leadership, and academic prominence. China's rise has coincided with worsening diplomatic frictions that limit opportunities for cooperation with the United States, but the logic of open competition over protectionism remains robust. At the institutional level, universities can adapt to federal retrenchment by building micro-VCs, partnering with media, and

---

[170] Mary Amiti, Stephen J. Redding & David E. Weinstein, *The Impact of the 2018 Tariffs on Prices and Welfare*, 33 J. ECON. PERSPS. 187, 187–210 (2019).
[171] Philippe Aghion, Nick Bloom, Richard Blundell, Rachel Griffith & Peter Howitt, *Competition and Innovation: An Inverted-U Relationship*, 120 Q.J. ECON. 701, 701–28 (2005).
[172] Fiona Murray, Scott Stern & Georgina Campbell, *The MIT Innovation Initiative and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem* (MIT Working Paper, 2019); *StartX Impact Report* (Stanford Univ., 2021).
[173] Andrew Jasinski, T*he Conversation: A Case Study in Academic–Media Partnerships*, 25 J. HIGHER EDUC. OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT 35, 35–49 (2021).
[174] CONG. RSCH. SERV., FEDERAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FUNDING: FY2018 (2017).
[175] OXFORD UNIVERSITY INNOVATION, OXFORD SCIENCES INNOVATION ANNUAL REPORT 2021 (2021).

mobilizing alumni globally. If extended across borders, these strategies can sustain research, improve public understanding, and serve as instruments of soft diplomacy—nudging U.S.–China relations toward managed competition and targeted cooperation, even as constitutional innovation seeks to balance liberty with effectiveness at home.

Industrial Overcapacity, Strategic Underinvestment

China's aggressive industrial policy has produced extraordinary scale in clean-energy manufacturing, but also severe imbalances. In 2024, Chinese firms manufactured roughly 588 GW of solar panels, far exceeding global demand of about 451 GW, leaving utilization rates near 54 percent and billions in industry losses.[176] This glut forced Beijing to intervene, pressing companies to shutter under-used production lines.[177] On one level, the resulting low global panel prices represent an historic opportunity for accelerated decarbonization. But from another angle, the United States and European Union failed to take advantage of these gluts, instead reinforcing tariffs and narrowing market access.[178]

By contrast, the U.S. response has been hesitant and fractured. The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) initially promised to transform domestic clean-energy deployment by guaranteeing long-term tax incentives.[179] Yet by mid-2025, legislative rollbacks under the *One Big Beautiful Bill* (OBBB) and executive freezes had sharply curtailed its effectiveness.[180] More than $14 billion in projects were canceled or delayed in 2025 alone, undermining domestic clean-energy build-out.[181] Meanwhile, Washington raised Section 301 tariffs on Chinese EVs, batteries, and solar cells, creating the paradox of high tariffs with weakening domestic subsidies.[182] Instead of capturing the gains from cheap Chinese solar output, U.S. policy heightened costs while slowing deployment.

Europe followed a similar path. Confronted with overcapacity, the European Commission imposed duties as high as 45 percent on Chinese EV imports in 2024.[183] In parallel, the EU has moved to accelerate its own *Net-Zero Industry Act* funding schemes.[184] While this can be justified as a defense of strategic autonomy, the combined U.S.–EU stance risks missing the global climate dividend from low-cost Chinese production.

Geopolitics looms large in these choices. China's tacit economic support for Russia since its invasion of Ukraine has hardened European and U.S. policy elites

---

[176] *China Steps in to Tame Animal Spirits as Solar Sector Racks Up Billions in Losses*, FIN. TIMES (Sept. 2025).
[177] *Id.*
[178] *Fact Sheet: Section 301 Tariff Increases on EVs, Batteries, and Solar Cells*, WHITE HOUSE (May 14, 2024).
[179] RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE, PROJECTED IMPACTS OF REPEALING THE SECTION 45Y AND 48E TECHNOLOGY-NEUTRAL CLEAN ELECTRICITY TAX CREDITS (2025).
[180] *The "One Big Beautiful Bill" Act—Navigating the New Energy Landscape*, SIDLEY AUSTIN LLP (July 2025).
[181] *$14 Billion in Clean Energy Projects Have Been Canceled in the US This Year, Analysis Says*, ASSOC. PRESS (Mar. 2025).
[182] Fact Sheet, *supra* note 178.
[183] *EU Slaps Tariffs on Chinese EVs*, REUTERS (Oct. 29, 2024).
[184] European Commission, Net-Zero Industry Act Briefing (2024).

against cooperative clean-energy integration.[185] Beijing's provision of dual-use goods, expanded trade flows, and rhetorical cover for Moscow's war effort has tied the climate question to security concerns in Europe.[186] Likewise, China's refusal to engage in meaningful political dialogue over Taiwan has deepened U.S. distrust, ensuring that Chinese industrial overcapacity is perceived less as a decarbonization opportunity than as a strategic threat.[187]

Had Beijing emphasized political recognition of Taiwan or distanced itself economically from Russia's war, transatlantic policymakers might have approached the solar glut differently. Cheap Chinese panels could have been framed as a stabilizing global public good rather than as a coercive lever of strategic dependency. Instead, distrust has fused climate, trade, and security into a reactive tariff-heavy posture. The result is an ironic misalignment: China bleeds cash from over-investment, while the U.S. and EU forgo cheap supply in the name of industrial defense—delaying climate goals on all sides.

In short, industrial policy and geopolitics have collided. China's economic decisions created cost advantages but also strategic suspicion. The U.S. and EU, preoccupied with energy security, Taiwan, and Russia, now risk combining underinvestment with over-protectionism—a policy mix that is neither economically efficient nor climatically sustainable.

(Student Editor for this Article: Wenjia Zhang)

---

185 *China and Russia's Economic Ties After Ukraine* (BROOKINGS INST., Policy Brief, 2024).
186 *China's Support for Russia's War Economy*, EUR. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELS. (Mar. 2025).
187 *The Taiwan Question and U.S.–China Relations*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELS. (2024).