

# Biden's "Democracy Summit" Prioritized US Hegemony Over Democratic Ideals



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For stark evidence that we live in a world where political hypocrisy reigns supreme, one need look no further than Biden's recent [Democracy Summit](#).

The United States — which was rated for the fifth consecutive year as a “[flawed democracy](#)” by a “leader in business intelligence” — sought to project itself at last week's summit as a leader in the fight to preserve global democracy, despite its long and dark history of overthrowing democratically elected governments and installing military dictatorships, and in spite of its ongoing support for any regime, however autocratic, that supports the interests and the objectives of the U.S. empire.

As if this wasn't hypocritical or farcical enough, many of the countries invited to take part in the summit are governed by leaders with little concern for democratic norms, such as India's Narendra Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. These are authoritarian-led nations, but they enjoy robust economic and political relations with the United States.

China and Russia were not invited. Neither was Turkey because of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's extensive military deals with Russia.

The summit brought together leaders from government and the private sector, all of whom seem to have accepted the fact that democracy is under strain in today's world, but there was no acknowledgement of the factors responsible for the weakening of democratic governance and the resurgence of authoritarianism. What one heard were pledges to strengthen democratic accountability, expand economic opportunities and protect human rights. In other words, the same blah, blah, blah, delivered by leaders at COP26.

In sum, the Summit for Democracy was not about defending democracy; rather, it was a geopolitical gambit to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives. As such, the question as to why democracy is undergoing [an alarming decline across the world](#) was simply left hanging in the air.

What really accounts for the spread of authoritarianism over the last few decades? And how does it differ from the forms of political authoritarianism that were prevalent during the Cold War era?

Today's authoritarianism (often called "authoritarian populism") is a complex phenomenon, with unique economic, cultural, political and social dimensions. Thus, while the ideological location of "authoritarian populism" is to be found on the far right of the political spectrum, there are important differences with regard to policymaking between regimes such as Victor Orbán's in Hungary and Donald Trump's during his four-year reign.

Different political contexts also play a key role in the resurgence of authoritarianism. Thus, while the rise of the new radical right in Europe is directly linked to the decline of the left on the continent, in Latin America, by contrast, the radical right has grown in a period of sharp electoral gains by the left.

Nonetheless, what bonds authoritarian leaders in today's world is their affinity for forms of political behavior that result in repressive measures, undermine all forms of collective decision-making — and indeed of the democratic process itself — and lead to the formation of autocratic regimes. In addition, all of the above leaders employ a rhetoric that can be loosely defined as xenophobic, if not outright racist, while seeking at the same time to gain popular support by using an ideology of extreme nationalism and emphasizing "law and order" as the basis for their political legitimacy.

Yet, we also need to understand how today's authoritarian regimes are different from those in the past. They are run by leaders who enjoy considerable support among the citizens of their respective countries. The new generation of authoritarian leaders rose to power not through *coups d'état* but by elections and with vows to transform the existing socio-political order. They offered quick and easy solutions to social and economic problems, and managed to build a strong level of support among working class and nonurban populations, while at the

same time enhancing the links of the state with the dominant capitalist classes in the domestic economy.

Take, for instance, the case of Orbán in Hungary, who was not invited to Biden's Democracy Summit, as his policies make him a pariah within the European Union.

On the economic front, Orbán developed a set of unorthodox but populist programs that came to be known as "[Orbánomics](#)." Briefly, "Orbánomics" combine policies of increased wages, low interest rates, high value-added taxes, initially high taxes in sectors of the economy controlled by foreign capital with the aim to drive foreign players away so the industries would pass into the hands of the domestic capitalist class (corporate tax in Hungary is now among the lowest in all of Europe, but value-added taxes remain the highest in the world), and an extensive workfare program for unemployed Hungarians. It's an economic program that can easily appeal to the average citizens, especially when compared to what they had experienced in the early years of the transition to post-communism where the ideology of the free market ran amok.

Of course, the developments on the political front [do not go unnoticed either by average Hungarians](#). Orbán has been remaking the Hungarian state in his own image since he took charge of the country in 2010. He filled the judiciary with members of his own party, rewrote the constitution, installed party apparatchiks into key agencies and institutions, introduced a school curriculum built around national identity and Christian cultural values, launched a war on the media and actually placed hundreds of independent media outlets into the hands of his cronies, and created an immense security apparatus at the border in order to keep away immigrants and refugees. Pro-Orbán newspapers and magazines are in the habit of even publishing the names of people considered to be enemies of the Hungarian state.

Hungary is clearly not a democracy, yet Orbán's authoritarian politics has more supporters than one cares to acknowledge. For many citizens, Orbán's regime is the protector of Hungary's national interests and identity from the globalizing impacts of a ruthless capitalist economic system. Different political forces inside Hungary have forged an alliance to challenge him ahead of next year's elections, but it would not be a shock if Orbán continues in office after April 2022. As part of his strategy to entice voters to stay loyal to his party, he has launched [a massive public spending campaign](#) which includes, among other things, a huge tax rebate

for families and an extra month's worth of pensions. He is also trying to create national hysteria by accusing the EU and the U.S. of [planning election interference](#).

Viktor Orbán is a textbook case of how "authoritarian populism" works in today's world where the economics of global neoliberalism have left nation-states at the mercy of powerful market forces, eroded social institutions and deprived people of their national patrimony.

Orbán's regime is not neoliberal per se. In actuality, Orbán's politics constitute a reaction to neoliberal intensifications via the creation of a post-neoliberal regime which, "[merges authoritarianism, racist and patriarchal nationalism, clientelism, and partial neoliberalization](#)," according to author and professor Dorit Geva. His regime is a far right alternative to global neoliberalism.

No doubt, this is what Trump tried to emulate from the moment he emerged on the political scene, but obviously without any interest in adopting the full package of Orbán's "economic nationalism."

Indeed, the spread of "authoritarian populism" is intimately connected to the intensifications of the neoliberal project in almost every case study that one wishes to examine, no matter the geographical location. In Central and Eastern Europe, where either illiberal programs or outright authoritarian rule extend from Hungary and Poland to Serbia, Bulgaria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, drastic neoliberal measures were introduced with complete disregard for the national patrimony and community well-being. Austerity, privatization, deregulation, the degrading of labor, the marketization of social relations, and the transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top, all of which constitute the economic and political aims of the neoliberal project, created massive inequalities and pushed a large portion of the population at the margins of society. These developments, combined with a growing feeling of alienation in their own country due to the dominance of foreign economic influence, made many an easy target for right-wing populists, especially in light of the decline of the parties of the traditional left. As far as immigration goes, as documented by researchers Anthony Edo and Yvonne Giesing, there is "[no mechanical link between the rise of immigration and that of extreme right-wing parties](#)." The key driver behind the rise of authoritarian populism is neoliberalism and its economic, social and cultural consequences.

Indeed, we see a similar trend in most countries of the European Union today, including France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Authoritarian or illiberal parties are gaining ground virtually everywhere in the Western world as the destructive consequences of neoliberalism become ever more pronounced and the left continues to lose ground.

Interestingly enough, in Latin America, on the other hand, the resurgence of the extreme right takes place in a period when [average voters are electing and reelecting leftist governments](#). The aim there on the part of extreme right-wing parties is clear and straightforward: defend neoliberal capitalism by preventing socialists and radical leftist parties from making further inroads and turning the tide against change.

In both cases, however, it is the intensification of the contradictions of the global neoliberal project that is propelling the shift toward illiberal democracy and authoritarian populism. Neoliberalism is deeply inimical to democracy. It is actually drawn toward authoritarian politics because, as [Noam Chomsky notes](#), it undermines democratic governance at the national and international level through the “transferring [of] policy-making to private tyrannies that are completely unaccountable to the public.”

The implementation of the neoliberal project is thus anything but a politically neutral process. It requires the full utilization of both the repressive and the ideological apparatuses of the state in order to secure, maintain and reproduce its hegemony in class divided societies. The use of state repression and propaganda have been absolutely critical to the success of global neoliberalism. As such, authoritarianism is just a symptom of neoliberalism — a fact that neither Biden nor any of the invitees to his Democracy Summit dared to acknowledge.

What the future has in store for democracy is of course impossible to predict, although authoritarianism is likely to stay with us for as long as neoliberalism remains alive. It is of some consolation, however, that “authoritarian populism” no longer has a global leader. The defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 U.S. presidential election was a major, if only temporary, blow to global authoritarianism. This is because Trump not only practiced authoritarian politics himself, but warmly embraced scores of authoritarian leaders during his four years in office, thereby granting immense political legitimacy to the growing trend toward illiberal democracy. This was indeed a most interesting and rather

unique development in the annals of U.S. politics in that, unlike most of his predecessors in the White House, who always sided with dictators and authoritarian rulers willing to cater to U.S. interests, Trump displayed support and admiration for authoritarian leaders (Putin and Erdoğan, in particular) who could be considered anything but allies of the United States.

Yet, it is quite conceivable that Trump may return to the White House if he decides to run in 2024. The Democrats appear incapable or unwilling to safeguard what is left of democracy in the U.S. Their failure so far to pass a voting rights bill is quite discouraging, while [the wave of mobilization at grassroots levels among Republicans](#) seeking offices to supervise elections is a bad omen of things to come. The Democratic Party's failure to advance an economic and social agenda that curtails the worst excesses of capitalism may create grounds for the further advancement of authoritarianism.

The weakening of democracy and the spread of authoritarian politics in many parts of the world is intrinsically linked to the contradictions of the global neoliberal project. For the progressive forces, therefore, restoring democracy entails putting an end to the neoliberal nightmare that has plagued the world for the past 40 years. Without undoing neoliberalism, and all other things being equal, the slide further and further toward authoritarianism is a distinct possibility.

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*Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).