



**Society at the Crossroads: Politics, Technology and  
Media in the 21st Century**

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Edited By  
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## Letter from the Editor

Sara Bedigian

December 9, 2025

Dear Readers,

As editor-in-chief of the University of Connecticut's Undergraduate Political Review, I share with you the release of our 21st edition.

This edition features articles written entirely by undergraduate students, all of which underwent a rigorous, student peer-reviewed drafting process. While some of our past publications have centered around specific themes, we left this edition open-ended, allowing writers to choose topics they were most passionate about. The writing includes topics ranging from religious and social movements, technological innovation, and media consumption, to political violence, conflict, and American and international politics. With themes focused on present day issues, we tied our 21st edition of the Undergraduate Political Review to the 21st century; *Society at the Crossroads: Politics, Technology and Media in the 21st Century*.

Each semester, we select a talented group of undergraduate students to write for our edition. The selection process was competitive this semester, with over 30 applications. With the 13 writers who wrote in this edition, 10 of them were new to UPR. Each writer is paired with an associate editor, who are experienced UPR writers, to lead them through the process, editing and revising their drafts throughout the semester. Through our organization, we look to provide writers with an opportunity to publish a thorough and scholarly piece they are proud of, and for editors to gain experience in leadership and mentoring.

I want to thank our editors and writers for their hard work, as well as Dr. Oksan Bayulgen and the UConn Political Science Department for their ongoing support.

Lastly, I encourage any UConn student interested in writing for us to reach out. We welcome new writers every semester. For more information, email us at [uconnpoliticalreview@gmail.com](mailto:uconnpoliticalreview@gmail.com)

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy this edition.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sara Bedigian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

Sara Bedigian, Editor-in-Chief

# **Clouds Becoming Cages: How Tech Companies Quietly Monopolized Cloud Infrastructure**

*Reese Berigan*

## **Introduction**

As global internet dependence increases, especially for freedom of speech, ethical concerns have arisen regarding who controls and maintains the internet. Surprisingly, most internet users are blissfully unaware that the majority of the internet's stores of information and websites are hosted by just a handful of companies that own and operate massive arrays of servers. Companies, such as Microsoft's Azure, Amazon's Amazon Web Services (AWS), and Google's Google Cloud, hold large quantities in the cloud infrastructure, to the point where if they fail, a vast majority of the internet would go down with them. These three companies have revolutionized the cloud computing space and digital access to information, but their monopolistic ownership of the server-hosting infrastructure poses a serious threat to digital freedom, internet reliability, and unregulated speech protections.

In order for a website to operate, it must have a server host, a connection to an internet service provider (ISP), a connection to your browser on your computer, and back again. The content you search for is stored on the server host. Think of it much like a post office. If the post office is out of commission, then you cannot get your mail or packages, i.e., your messages, your entertainment, or other content on the web.

Here lies the problem: what if your post office decides what to send you and what not to send you? What if they opened your mail, knowing it was wrong? Or perhaps prevented you from using another option to send your packages? This is the dilemma with web hosting monopolies today and its relation to freedom of speech, privacy of information, surveillance on the population, and true digital freedom.

## **A Specialization in Server Hosting**

Server-hosting requires a specialized labor force, a considerable up-front cost for specially-designed hardware, and a constant cash flow to maintain and upkeep that hardware. Companies decades deep in the technology sector realized this early on and began to spend vast fortunes to build their own servers to rent. First, it was Amazon Web Services (AWS) in 2006, then Google Cloud in 2008, and Microsoft Azure in 2010, followed by a wave of others. For a monthly fee determined by what you'd like to host, these companies and others will care for the hosting process for you hands-free. This is often cheaper than a company creating its own servers and hiring specialized labor to maintain them, especially if it is a small business.

The web hosting industry has reached unprecedented scale, with the global cloud infrastructure market (GCIM) valued at \$723 billion USD in 2025<sup>1</sup>, constituting the majority of the internet's physical data infrastructure. In 2024, AWS led the market with \$107 billion in revenue<sup>2</sup>, followed by Azure with \$105 billion<sup>3</sup>, and Google Cloud with \$12.3 billion<sup>4</sup>, with smaller vendors making up the rest. These revenues reflect only GCIM revenues and exclude total company revenues. AWS exerts the greatest influence over the market despite second place in revenue. In 2018, smaller vendors and self-hosted servers represented just over 50% of the GCIM. By Q4 2024, their share had declined to 36% while AWS, Microsoft, and Google collectively expanded their control to 53% of the market. In 2024, AWS held 33%, Microsoft held 20%, and Google held 10% of the market.<sup>5</sup> This underscores AWS's dominant discretion on over a third of the internet in addition to Google and Microsoft's respective market shares. With a dominant grip over the market, the big three and their private business control what is visible on the internet.

### **Picturing a Monopoly at Work**

Your average user doesn't use the entire internet, only visiting a handful of sites a day, relating to online banking, online shopping, entertainment, and more. The majority of these sites are housed on the 53% of the market controlled by AWS, Azure, and Cloud. According to their own reports, AWS currently has over 1 million active businesses using their services<sup>6</sup>, Microsoft reports just over 250,000<sup>7</sup>, and Google reports over 800,000 businesses.<sup>8</sup> In Figure 1, there are recognizable corporations that rely on the web hosting infrastructure. Many of which rely on not just one, but multiple services, depending on which part of the company is involved in a specific sector or part of the world. For example, Verizon uses AWS in the United States but will use

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<sup>1</sup> Gartner. "Public cloud services end-user spending worldwide from 2017 to 2025 (in billion U.S. dollars)." Chart. November 19, 2024. Statista. Accessed November 09, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Amazon. "Annual revenue of Amazon Web Services (AWS) from 2013 to 2024 (in million U.S. dollars)." Chart. April 4, 2025. Statista. Accessed November 09, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Microsoft. "Intelligent cloud segment's quarterly revenue for Microsoft Corporation from fiscal year 2015 to 2025 (in billion U.S. dollars)." Chart. March 31, 2025. Statista. Accessed November 09, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Alphabet. "Global Google Cloud Platform revenues from 2017 to 2024 (in million U.S. dollars)." Chart. February 5, 2025. Statista. Accessed November 09, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Canalys, und Statista. "Cloud infrastructure services vendor market share worldwide from fourth quarter 2017 to fourth quarter 2024." Chart. February 20, 2025. Statista. Accessed November 09, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> "Companies Using Amazon Web Services (AWS)." GeeksforGeeks, July 23, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Yarkoni, Charlotte. "Drive Growth with the Most Partner-Focused Business Platform." Microsoft Azure Blog, June 25, 2025. <https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/blog/drive-growth-with-the-most-partnerfocused-business-platform/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Customers | Google Cloud." Google. Accessed November 9, 2025. [https://cloud.google.com/customers?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://cloud.google.com/customers?utm_source=chatgpt.com).



Google Cloud in other parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, your average person will rely on one of the three companies without ever realizing it. As ex-Amazon developer Steve Yegge puts it, “Amazon Web Services is simultaneously the most ubiquitous and unknown entity in the digital world.”<sup>10</sup> Many people do not know or care to know that the majority of what they look at online is hosted by one of three companies.

Figure 1<sup>11</sup>

Service	Companies
Amazon Web Services	Airbnb, Amazon, American Express, AT&T, Barclays, BMW, Capital One, Cerner, Coca-Cola, Coinbase, Comcast, Coursera, DHL, Discovery, Disney, Dropbox, Duolingo, eBay, Electronic Arts, Epic Games, FedEx, General Electric, General Motors, Georgia Tech, Goldman Sachs, HBO, Instacart, Johnson & Johnson, JP Morgan Chase, King Games, L'Oréal, Maersk, Medtronic, Meta, NASA, NASDAQ, Nestlé, Netflix, Novartis, Pfizer, Pinterest, Procter & Gamble, Reddit, Redfin, Riot Games, Shopify, Siemens, Slack, Snapchat, Sony Pictures, Spotify, Sprint, Stripe, Take-Two Interactive, Target, The U.S. Army, T-Mobile, Trello, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Justice, Udacity, UK Home Office, Unilever, Universal Music Group, University of Notre Dame, UPS, Verizon, Visa, Vodafone, Volkswagen, Warner Bros, Zalando, Zoom
Microsoft Azure	Adobe, Boeing, Coca-Cola, eBay, General Electric, Johnson & Johnson, Procter & Gamble (P&G), Verizon, Volkswagen Group, Walmart
Google Cloud	BBVA, BMW, Capgemini, Coca-Cola, Discover Financial, Estée Lauder Companies, Fox Communications, GE Appliances, HCA Healthcare, IHG Hotels & Resorts, L'Oréal Groupe, Lowe's, Mars Wrigley, Mattel, Meta Platforms, Nuro, PayPal, Samsung Electronics, Signal Iduna, Spotify, Target, Uber, Verizon

Governments will also use cloud infrastructure companies as a way to expand their own operations more cost-effectively, preserving budgets for other projects. The US government uses AWS, for example, in many of its bureaucratic functions.<sup>12</sup> AWS calls this AWS Cloud for Government, or AWS GovCloud. To be a contractor of the US government, AWS has developed specific software for GovCloud to conform and comply with US government requirements.<sup>13</sup> Part of how AWS specifically is involved in so many sectors, like healthcare, is because they pre-comply to quickly gain access to contracts.<sup>14</sup> Some might be familiar, such as HIPAA BAA, CSF, and the Department of Defense's CC SRG, or Cloud Computing Security Guide. The idea

<sup>9</sup> “Companies Using Amazon Web Services (AWS).” GeeksforGeeks, July 23, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Armintor, Marshall N. “Amazon Web Services, the Lacanian Unconscious, and Digital Life.” *CLCWeb : Comparative Literature and Culture* 24, no. 4 (2022). doi:10.7771/1481-4374.4273.

<sup>11</sup> “Companies Using Amazon Web Services (AWS).” GeeksforGeeks, July 23, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> “Cloud for Federal Government | AWS.” Amazon Web Services . Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://aws.amazon.com/federal/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Compliance - AWS Govcloud (US).” Amazon Web Services. Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://docs.aws.amazon.com/govcloud-us/latest/UserGuide/govcloud-compliance.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “AWS Services in Scope by Compliance Program.” Amazon Web Services. Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://aws.amazon.com/compliance/services-in-scope/>.

is to combine public-sector infrastructure and government guidelines to create the groundwork for increased government efficiency inexpensively.

With increasing internet traffic, or the flow of data on the internet, legal scholars have noticed the exponential growth of the cloud infrastructure industry. With it comes the first tangible amounts of government intervention. In 2023, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), along with 17 state attorneys general, announced that they would be suing Amazon for illegal monopolistic practices.<sup>15</sup> While this case focuses more on the main company of Amazon, not AWS, the parallels of the case could be brought forth upon AWS as well. In 2024, AWS faced scrutiny as it asked for an antitrust case to be dropped, citing that the takeover of another company's contract providing hosting services was merely a correctly negotiated deal rather than a purposeful intervention.<sup>16</sup> In October of this year, AI users sued Microsoft in an antitrust suit, alleging that the deal it made with OpenAI was made in part to help artificially raise prices for ChatGPT subscriptions while hurting product quality.<sup>17</sup> Companies and governments alike are recognizing monopolies like these in place, and as they investigate further, more action to reduce their grip on the market could follow, as seen with the steps already taken.

### **The Cost of Overreliance and Monopolistic Market Control**

An emerging issue with tech giants' servers hosting the majority of the internet is censorship. Specifically in the U.S., the First Amendment's free speech clause applies only to public agencies, which usually are schools, law enforcement, and others. When it comes to private businesses, however, they can impose their biases on stakeholders since they do not have to abide by the same free speech regulations as public companies. In this case, AWS, Azure, and Cloud all reserve the right to publish whatever they please on their servers. For example, in 2021, AWS executives took down the alternative social media platform Parler for promoting speech that they didn't approve of. Following the January 6 insurrection, AWS announced that they would stop hosting the platform after it found "98 posts that encouraged violence" that did not "follow its rules."<sup>18</sup> The decision followed Google and Apple's removal of the app. As a result, Parler was completely deplatformed and unable to operate as it once had, despite its millions of users. More recently, in May 2025, Microsoft came under fire as its own employees

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<sup>15</sup> DAD, Tom Koch (Acting, and Stephanie T. Nguyen. "FTC Sues Amazon for Illegally Maintaining Monopoly Power." Federal Trade Commission, December 5, 2023. <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/09/ftc-sues-amazon-illegally-maintaining-monopoly-power>.

<sup>16</sup> Scarcella, Mike. "Amazon Asks Court to Dismiss Antitrust Lawsuit Over Web Traffic Sharing ." Reuters, April 9, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/transactional/amazon-asks-court-dismiss-antitrust-lawsuit-over-web-traffic-sharing-2024-04-09/>.

<sup>17</sup> Scarcella, Mike. "AI Users Sue Microsoft in Antitrust Class Action Over OpenAI Deal ." Reuters, October 13, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/government/ai-users-sue-microsoft-antitrust-class-action-over-openai-deal-2025-10-13/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Parler: Amazon to Remove Site from Web Hosting Service." BBC News, January 10, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-55608081>.

reported that emails would not send if they had the words “Gaza,” “Palestine,” or “genocide.”<sup>19</sup> The employees had noticed that emails with "Israel" written in them were sent immediately and on time. Advocacy group No Azure for Apartheid suggested that the emails were manually reviewed. Such censorship has propelled Professor Klaus Solberg Solien of Halmstad University to state, “we are moving [into] an Orwellian world of surveillance more or less voluntarily, often applauding it.”<sup>20</sup> Actions like these are indeed small but set a precedent for how far cloud infrastructure companies can flex the boundaries of dominance, authority, and autonomy. Under the guise of providing and protecting the people on the digital plane, AWS, Azure, and Cloud dictate where, when, and why things are shown to people. Unfortunately, because of their monopolistic hold over an essential market, there is indeed a sufficient way to circumvent actual government authority to enforce a set of ideals that benefit one group over another.

### **Unreliability of Monopolistic Market Control**

Recent events have also questioned both the ethics and reliability of hosting much of the internet between just three actors. Reliability issues raise questions over how secure these massive hosting platforms are and how well they can manage increased internet traffic. In June 2025, Google Cloud suffered an outage that affected millions of users in e-commerce and AI usage. In October 2025, AWS went down for a number of hours, affecting everything from social media platforms like Reddit and Snapchat to airline websites and online banking.<sup>21</sup> Over the last 12 years, there has been a detailed history of AWS malfunctioning alone, ranging from regional to global impacts on the financial, manufacturing, telecommunications, and e-commerce industries and more.<sup>22</sup> Every time a cloud service goes offline, millions of companies, websites, and automated technologies go down along with it.

Overreliance on one cloud system, especially in the case of AWS, exacerbates concerns regarding technological sovereignty and security risks. This is especially true since AWS, Azure, and Google maintain extensive contracts with the U.S. government. AWS arguably has the most involvement, with the CIA, IRS, and other top agencies using its technologies to aid their operations.<sup>23</sup> Emily West, associate professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst, suggests that they have become “de facto” powers, holding influence over politics without office, as the promise of jobs, income for the government in the form of taxes, and huge amounts of lobbying

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<sup>19</sup> Field, Hayden. “Microsoft Employees Say Emails with ‘Gaza,’ ‘Palestine,’ or ‘Genocide’ Won’t Send.” CNBC, May 22, 2025. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/05/22/microsoft-emails-gaza-palestine.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Solberg Söilen, Klaus. “The Internet Is Leading the World towards Forms of Totalitarianism: How to Fix the Problem.” *Journal of Intelligence Studies in Business* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–5. doi:10.37380/jisib.v1i1.690.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitracova, Olesya, Charlotte Reck, and Ana Nicolaci da Costa. “Huge Global Outage Impacts Amazon, Fortnite and Snapchat.” CNN, October 21, 2025.

<https://www.cnn.com/business/live-news/amazon-tech-outage-10-20-25-intl>.

<sup>22</sup> “AWS Premium Support - Cloud Services.” Amazon Web Services. Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://aws.amazon.com/premiumsupport/>.

<sup>23</sup> “Cloud for U.S. Intelligence Community.” Amazon Web Services. Accessed November 9, 2025. <https://aws.amazon.com/federal/us-intelligence-community/>.

in Washington DC have pushed lawmakers in support of new cloud infrastructure projects from the big three.<sup>24</sup> To many in government, their infrastructure has become critical to everyday American life. Most legal pushbacks without an alternative to the big three would leave room for unintended retaliation, such as closing down operations in major urban centers, leaving many jobless and a gap in tax income. These technologies are also not foolproof, as the companies would like to claim. Humans are susceptible to error and malice, and systems that interact with both will produce consequences accordingly. There are concerns that while the cloud infrastructure as a whole retains top-notch security, when a breach happens, a substantial amount of sensitive information will be stolen. For example, in 2021 a Russian hacker group stole 38 million records belonging to Ford Motors, the New York MTA, American Airlines, and more that included employee files, COVID-19 health information, and personal information hosted on Microsoft's Azure.<sup>25</sup> Having one castle for critical information will not only place a target on it, but also cause it to crumble.

### **A Myriad of Solutions**

The outlook of this ever-growing industry and its entanglement in government and everyday life is bleak. However, there are steps to reducing overreliance on the big three. First, government intervention is needed to break up the monopolies.<sup>26</sup> Having three companies control more than half of any market is grounds for big stick policies. Government intervention, especially internationally, is going to be the best and most straightforward way to organize and execute a breakup. Regulations on companies and how they store data and treat users would prove extraordinary in the long run. Second, internet users need to begin saving data. Saving data in the form of information, software, and entertainment on personal hard drives is a way to reduce the need for third parties for ease of access, especially if the information wanted is later censored or becomes unavailable.<sup>27</sup> Third, creating or using local servers to host information. Rely on smaller businesses that specialize in server hosting or go about creating your own. While easier said than done, creating specialized infrastructure for specific needs without intermingling with other businesses that might be high targets or have high traffic volumes would provide a streamlined, unregulated structure to rely on. Fourth, ingrain the importance of offline information and resources. Books, papers, libraries, and specialized organizations are key

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<sup>24</sup> West, Emily. *Buy Now : How Amazon Branded Convenience and Normalized Monopoly*. 1st ed. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022. doi:10.7551/mitpress/12464.001.0001.

<sup>25</sup> "Microsoft Warns Thousands of Cloud Customers of Exposed Databases, Email Shows." CNBC, August 26, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/08/26/microsoft-warns-thousands-of-cloud-customers-of-exposed-databases-email-shows.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Solberg Söilen, Klaus. "The Internet Is Leading the World towards Forms of Totalitarianism: How to Fix the Problem." *Journal of Intelligence Studies in Business* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–5. doi:10.37380/jisib.v1i1.690.

<sup>27</sup> Solberg Söilen, Klaus. "The Internet Is Leading the World towards Forms of Totalitarianism: How to Fix the Problem." *Journal of Intelligence Studies in Business* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–5. doi:10.37380/jisib.v1i1.690.

backups and barriers to lost knowledge in the age of information.<sup>28</sup> Their utilization would make it difficult to infringe on free speech.

The idea of these collective solutions is to reduce reliance on any one service or company. Having backups and personal control over how one can access and share information is vital to keeping information free and unrestrained. If the monopolistic control that these companies have on the internet today continues to be normalized, then achieving a free internet for and by the people will be harder in the not-so-distant future.

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<sup>28</sup> Solberg Söilen, Klaus. "The Internet Is Leading the World towards Forms of Totalitarianism: How to Fix the Problem." *Journal of Intelligence Studies in Business* 11, no. 1 (2021): 4–5. doi:10.37380/jisib.v1i1.690.

## Unmasking the New Apostolic Reformation

Michael Byrne

### Introduction

On September 25, 2025, the White House released a Presidential Memorandum titled “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence.” In this memorandum, the President disavows political violence and targets “organized campaigns of targeted intimidation, radicalization, threats, and violence designed to silence opposing speech, limit political activity, change or direct policy outcomes, and prevent the functioning of a democratic society.”<sup>29</sup> The memorandum points to common threads in this violent conduct; including “anti-Christianity” and “hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, and morality.”<sup>30</sup> This release comes in the aftermath of the assassination of Charlie Kirk, a conservative activist and founder of Turning Point USA, whose foundation the White House openly endorsed during the current presidency of Donald Trump.<sup>31</sup> As the U.S. nears its 250th anniversary, various parties are emerging to seize control of a deeply polarized nation, and one organization stands out as particularly influential within the current presidential administration. The New Apostolic Reformation is a fringe Christian nationalist movement whose theology and political strategy have quickly merged with far-right ideologies, promoting a new vision for the country.<sup>32</sup> The NAR is the primary engine of the far-right to infuse this Christian movement into the federal government—a movement that seeks not merely spiritual revival, but total dominion over society, where Christians must control all spheres of society to bring about God’s kingdom on Earth.

Now, is the U.S. government openly supporting “Christian values” a new thing? Not at all, as the U.S. has a long history of religious influence, dating back to its colonial days. However, what is new is the federal government seemingly targeting citizens who do not follow these “traditional American views” of religion. Quite loaded language, indeed, so what has changed? Clearly, the influence of religious beliefs, specifically Christian beliefs, has grown exponentially in recent times. To fully understand the existential danger posed by this religious force, it is necessary to examine the history of Christian nationalism in America, determine how

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<sup>29</sup> “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence,” The White House, September 26, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence>.

<sup>30</sup> “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence,” The White House, September 26, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence>.

<sup>31</sup> Licon, Adriana Gomez, and Bill Barrow. 2025. “How Charlie Kirk Shaped a Generation of Young People into a Conservative Force.” AP News, September 11, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/charlie-kirk-turning-point-trump-cf2a68e4303c5628299ffe383d09c1e9>.

<sup>32</sup> McCrummen, Stephanie. 2025. “The Army of God Comes Out of the Shadows.” The Atlantic, January 9, 2025. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/new-apostolic-reformation-christian-movement-trump/681092/>.

this ideology emerged, and identify how all citizens, churchgoers or not, can stop this dangerous presence from consolidating even more power in the political sphere.

## Background

The dominance of Christianity in the U.S. was neither accidental nor purely spiritual; rather, it was very meticulously constructed through centuries of colonization, indoctrination, and imperialism. From the Protestant colonization of North America, English Puritans who settled in modern-day New England in the early 17th century framed their migration as a divine mission—John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon aboard the *Arbella* envisioned the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a “city upon a hill,” a beacon of godly society to inspire the world.<sup>33</sup> This concept of divine exceptionalism, which blended theology with civic purpose, can be seen today as ground zero for American and Christian nationalism. Meanwhile, European colonizers used the concept of religion to rationalize the displacement and genocide of Native tribes all across the continent. Missionary activity accompanied colonization, positioning Christianity as a civilizing force, whilst seizing native land and erasing their culture.<sup>34</sup> This Puritan covenantal worldview, that God had chosen these European colonists for this sacred task, laid the groundwork for a nation rooted in hierarchy and moral destiny. Although the U.S. Constitution deliberately avoided establishing a national religion, Christianity dominated the republic’s moral vocabulary during its early years. In George Washington’s Farewell Address, he argued that morality and religion were essential to the survival of the republic, believing the government should encourage them and shun those who did not follow them.<sup>35</sup>

The fusion of nationalism and Christianity intensified throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The Second Great Awakening (1795-1840) triggered widespread evangelical revivalism, particularly in frontier regions, and stimulated reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, and the women’s rights movement. Preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney popularized the idea that personal salvation required social devotion.<sup>36</sup> Churches became central institutions, particularly in rural and newly settled areas, for social cohesion and moral guidance in regions lacking civic infrastructure. Later, the Social Gospel

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<sup>33</sup> Wilkie, Carter. 2019. “How Modern Leaders Got John Winthrop’s ‘City on a Hill’ Wrong,” *CommonWealth Beacon*, January 17, 2019,

<https://commonwealthbeacon.org/book-review/how-modern-leaders-got-john-winthrops-city-on-a-hill-wrong/>.

<sup>34</sup> Pember, Mary Annette. 2025. “How Christian Missionaries Sought to Erase Native American Culture and Identity,” *Literary Hub*, April 22, 2025,

<https://lithub.com/how-christian-missionaries-sought-to-erase-native-american-culture-and-identity/>.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, Mark David. 2017. “‘Let Us with Caution Indulge the Supposition That Morality Can Be Maintained without Religion.’” *Law & Liberty*, May 3, 2017.

<https://lawliberty.org/let-us-with-caution-indulge-the-supposition-that-morality-can-be-maintained-without-religion/>.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Nichols, “How Charles Finney’s Religious Revival Overwhelmed Rochester,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, August 17, 2025,

<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/2025/08/17/second-great-awakening-how-charles-finney-led-1830-religious-revival/80018992007/>.

Movement (1870s-1920s) argued that Christianity demanded engagement with social issues, including poverty and labor exploitation, as well as urban reform, which had a significant influence on Progressive Era policies.<sup>37</sup> Evangelicalism also grew from attracting new frontiers of land to attracting new frontiers of media, utilizing newspapers and the radio to broadcast a shared moral and cultural identity across diverse regions. By the 1920s, Protestantism had become associated with the rise of campaigns against perceived moral threats, including alcohol, gambling, and secularism. After World War II, amid the Cold War's ideological struggle against atheistic communism, religion grew into a patriotic duty. In 1954, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and "In God We Trust" was adopted as the national motto two years later.<sup>38</sup> This moment institutionalized Christianity within American political symbolism and further blurred the boundaries between faith and state power.

### **The Decline of Traditional Protestantism and the Rise of the Religious Right**

The postwar religious revival of the 1950s, where church attendance peaked at over 69% by the end of the decade, coincided with suburbanization and the dominance of Protestant middle-class values.<sup>39</sup> By the middle of the 1960s, the worldwide counterculture movement challenged the moral authority and social dominance of traditional Protestantism. The Civil Rights Movement, primarily led by African-American Christian clergy, exposed the hypocrisy of a nation claiming Christian virtue while simultaneously practicing racial oppression for centuries, including the persistence of Jim Crow laws in Southern, very protestant states for nearly 100 years following the Reconstruction era. In the aftermath of events like the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Stonewall, this era marked a turning point: for many white evangelicals, social progress felt like an existential threat to their cultural hegemony. For a nation whose growing population seemed to desire evolution beyond traditional conservatism, an ever-increasing backlash against this counterculture emerged. This backlash crystallized into a political movement that evolved in the 1970s, when evangelical leaders began organizing to reassert Christian values in public life. President Richard Nixon's "Southern Strategy," which appealed to white Southerners alienated by civil rights reforms, laid the groundwork for this realignment by translating racial resentment into moral panic about permissiveness, secularism, and the breakdown of "traditional family values." Nixon, among many other politicians, tapped into the anger of racist Southern Democrats to flip their vote Republican. No longer was the

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<sup>37</sup> Laura Nichols, "How Charles Finney's Religious Revival Overwhelmed Rochester," *Democrat & Chronicle*, August 17, 2025,

<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/2025/08/17/second-great-awakening-how-charles-finney-led-1830-religious-revival/80018992007/>.

<sup>38</sup> Bulger, Matthew. 2015. "On the Hill: Having Your Cake and Eating It, Too." *The Humanist*. February 3, 2015. [https://thehumanist.com/voices/on\\_the\\_hill/on-the-hill-having-your-cake-and-eating-it-too](https://thehumanist.com/voices/on_the_hill/on-the-hill-having-your-cake-and-eating-it-too).

<sup>39</sup> Palmer, Stone. 2025. "Dwight Eisenhower's Spiritual Influence on America," *Biography Host*. August 7, 2025, <https://biographyhost.com/p/dwight-eisenhowers-spiritual-influence-on-america.html>.



focus on supporting good, religious morals; it became about maintaining a patriarchal, white supremacist society and playing political games to achieve just that.<sup>40</sup>

It was in this climate that the Moral Majority emerged. Founded in 1979 by Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell Sr., the organization sought to mobilize conservative Christians into a unified voting bloc. Falwell, alongside figures such as Pat Robertson and Paul Weyrich, linked opposition to abortion, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights to a broader vision of “Christian America.” Their political agenda found a powerful ally in President Ronald Reagan amid the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, and this alliance between the Republican Party and evangelical Christianity transformed moral grievances into a political identity that equated Christianity with patriotism and conservatism with divine order.<sup>1241</sup>

### **The Growth of the New Apostolic Reformation**

This coalition did not simply defend faith, but it redefined American democracy as a sacred project that was under siege by secularism and anti-traditionalist movements. As historian Randall Balmer, in his 2023 book *Saving Faith: How American Christianity Can Reclaim Its Prophetic Voice*, has documented, many of the Religious Right’s early mobilization efforts were driven not by abortion or LGBTQ+ rights, but by resistance to federal desegregation policies targeting all-white Christian academies such as Bob Jones University.<sup>42</sup> At this point in history, the genuine desire of this movement has become clear, and beneath the moral rhetoric of this religious foundation lies the desire to preserve racial and gender hierarchies in the U.S., amidst the disguise of religious liberty. These “moral panic politics” laid the ideological foundation for future Christian nationalist movements—most notably the New Apostolic Reformation. Metering from the Pentecostal-charismatic revival of the late 20th century, the NAR adopted the Religious Right’s central belief that Christian values should dominate the public sphere and took it a step further: to take over the U.S., to ensure that the nation’s white supremacist hierarchy remains intact forevermore.

The NAR is not a denomination; rather, it is a network of charismatic leaders, prophets, and apostles who claim divine authority to reshape the world. The theological foundation of this movement is dominionism, the belief that Christians must seize control of all societal institutions to establish God’s kingdom on Earth and to bring about the second coming of Jesus Christ. This ideology is most clearly articulated by C. Peter Wagner’s 2008 novel, “Dominion! How Kingdom Action Can Change the World.” Wagner’s novel explains dominionism, a theology that

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly, James Ross. “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.” *St. John One*. May 29, 2019. <https://stjohnnoneone.com/2019/05/29/the-real-origins-of-the-religious-right-politico-magazine/>.

<sup>41</sup> Hughes, Jesse. 2024. “The Moral Majority Playbook,” *American Reformer*. March 25, 2024. <https://americanreformer.org/2024/03/the-moral-majority-playbook/>.

<sup>42</sup> Cornwall, Robert D. 2023. “Review: Saving Faith.” *Word&Way*. September 5, 2023. <https://wordandway.org/2023/09/05/review-saving-faith/>.

blends Pentecostalism and evangelicalism with the Seven Mountain Mandate. The Seven Mountain Mandate calls for complete Christian control over seven spheres: government, media, education, business, arts, family, and religion. Wagner's novel also describes "workplace apostles" as leaders in this spiritual battle, and affirms that the accumulation of wealth by the church is necessary to achieve dominion.<sup>43</sup> The NAR's casual use of scripture and emphasis on "new revelation" distances the movement from traditional Christian orthodoxy, replacing it with a militant, authoritarian vision of governance. Leaders such as Bill Johnson, Cindy Jacobs, and Lou Engle serve as spiritual authorities, lending legitimacy to their political allies. NAR followers adopt an activist framework, viewing political participation as a sacred duty and opposition as demonic obstruction. This theology transforms political engagement into spiritual warfare. Their opponents are not merely wrong; they are demonic forces to be defeated by the Christians. A person does not conduct spiritual warfare through the usage of guns and knives, but through the manipulation of hearts and minds, looking for and clawing its way to preserve traditionalism at all costs.

### **Adapting Old Ways to a New Nation**

Since the 1990s, overall religious affiliation has declined. According to the Pew Research Center, nonreligious Americans rose from 16% in 2007 to 28% in 2024.<sup>44</sup> Facing demographic decline, many followers interpret this loss of cultural dominance as persecution. Modern Christian nationalism, therefore, has appeared not from religious growth but from reactive power politics: a bid by white conservative Christians to keep control in a diversifying nation. This conservative push may seem unrealistic, but if one were to look around, they would see that they have already achieved their goal. The NAR's political influence grew significantly in the aftermath of Donald Trump's 2016 election. This election, among other momentous events in the first quarter of the 21st century, opened a Pandora's Box of far-right movements reaching the mainstream, a box this nation has been unable to close fully, as the NAR's rise has proven. Politicians like Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, and U.S. Representatives Marjorie Taylor-Greene and Lauren Boebert have become conduits for NAR ideology. All advocate for policies that reflect the movement's goals, like abortion bans, opposition to same-sex marriage, and a merger of church and state.<sup>45</sup> The Reawaken America Tour, a national tour led by Michael Flynn that initially protested COVID-19 vaccinations and mask mandates, soon became emblematic of the fusion between Christian and political

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<sup>43</sup> Whitehead, Andrew L. 2025. "How Christian Nationalism Weakens Democracy and What Can Be Done about It." The Kettering Foundation. August 21, 2025.

<https://kettering.org/how-christian-nationalism-weakens-democracy-and-what-can-be-done-about-it/>.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, Gregory A. 2024. "Religious 'nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe," Pew Research Center. January 24, 2024.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

<sup>45</sup> Hixenbaugh, Mike. 2023. "Meet the Evangelical Activist Who's Had a 'profound Influence' on Speaker Mike Johnson." NBC News. October 26, 2023.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/evangelical-activist-influence-speaker-mike-johnson-rcna122313>.

ideologies.<sup>46</sup> NAR adherents have repurposed certain historical symbols, such as the Appeal to Heaven flag, which colonial protestors hoisted during the American Revolution. This flag, featuring a tree on a white background, was prominently displayed during the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and later flown by the aforementioned Mike Johnson and Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito. The flag, far removed from its root usage now, has evolved into a symbol of desire to lock down the U.S. into enforcing Christian nationalism in all facets.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing on historical artifacts and symbolism, the NAR's ideology has also evolved digitally, with the rise of social media as a critical part of this process. NAR leaders and allied conservative influencers use platforms like Instagram, Facebook, X, YouTube, and more to mobilize followers and normalize nationalist rhetoric. Far-right content creators like white supremacist Nick Fuentes are strong examples of this mobilization, growing follower bases of primarily young, disillusioned men to carry along calls for a change towards dominionistic policies. This digital ecosystem allows this nationalist movement to bypass traditional media scrutiny from television or structured news, creating a feedback loop of theological messaging and racialized narratives. Combine this modernized political-religious apparatus with the consolidation of major internet platforms by Trump-friendly mega-corporations like Meta and Oracle.<sup>48</sup> This merger is a recipe for driving this nationalist, religiously-minded movement right across the mainstream as it races toward the White House, poisoning the minds of young and old to believe in and subject themselves to these authoritarian ideas and policies.

Even though Joe Biden's presidency from 2021 to 2025 promised an optimistic future post-COVID and post-Trump, his work could do little to stop authoritarianism from seeping deep into American soil. With Donald Trump's re-election in 2024, this movement's goals have gained the support of many American voters, and this new administration is now codifying these policies at the federal level. Enter into the picture: Project 2025, a "Mandate for Leadership" developed by the conservative think-tank Heritage Foundation, seeking to transform the U.S. into an ultra-Christian authoritarian nation.<sup>49</sup> The policy plan calls for a government "imbued with biblical principles" and led by a president with sweeping executive powers, with all other levels of control merged under their wing. Among the plan's several goals are a legal reinforcement of a racialized interpretation of "traditional American values" toward white Americans, and the closure of the Department of Education to instill a more conservative agenda

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<sup>46</sup> Kaylor, Brian. 2023. "Michael Flynn's Soup for the Soulless." Word&Way. May 16, 2023.

<https://wordandway.org/2023/05/16/michael-flynn-soup-for-the-soulless/>.

<sup>47</sup> AP News. 2023. "Second Flag Carried by Jan. 6 Rioters Displayed Outside House Owned by Justice Alito, Report Says." Associated Press. May 22, 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/supreme-court-flag-stop-steal-alito-trump-1842c40b833637c981c59c3f39bc4669>.

<sup>48</sup> Paul, Ari. 2025. "As Ellison Buys Out TikTok, US Moves Toward One-Party Media," FAIR. September 19, 2025, <https://fair.org/home/as-ellison-buys-out-tiktok-us-moves-toward-one-party-media/>.

<sup>49</sup> Graves-Fitzsimmons, Guthrie. 2023. "Far Right's Project 2025 Makes Christian Faith the Government's Job." MSNBC. September 8, 2023.

<https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/project-2025-heritage-foundation-christian-nationalism-rcna103510>

in American schools.<sup>50</sup> To many citizens, this whole project seems like a dangerous demolition of their freedoms in a country that has notably moved less democratically in the last 20 years; however, for an administration that will quickly target those who criticize “traditional American views on family, religion, and morality,” it seems this blueprint is just what they desire to implement in real time. Judging from the Trump administration’s decisions, which have overwhelmingly aligned with the Project 2025 model, right down to the recent Presidential Memorandum, it appears that these nationalists are succeeding, for now.

## Conclusion

If the past decade has shown Americans anything, it's that ideas of 'moral' are now uncertain. With an administration deploying the national guard into major cities and using taxpayer money to fund a rogue police force targeting anyone they label as a “criminal,” regardless of citizenship, 2025 may be the year to embrace nationalism—and possibly the worst year to criticize the government. Is it too early to see efforts against this authoritarian trend as hopeless? Not at all. Even as we face this threat, hope remains. Hope that Americans, who dedicated blood, sweat, and tears to building this nation into a global power, can resist groups like NAR by understanding what religion truly aims to be. For a movement so focused on traditionalism and conservatism, it seems to have lost sight of religion’s core purpose: to help us understand our humanity, our place on Earth, and how to share empathy and love with all life through communication and understanding. Religion is not a weapon to mask bigotry; it is a tool to find moral clarity in our chaotic world. If we can reclaim a church for everyone, we remind ourselves that our ultimate duty is not to seek power, but to support each other, and cherish life together while we still can.

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<sup>50</sup> McManus, Allison, Robert Benson, and Dan Herman. 2024. “The Dangers of Project 2025: Global Lessons in Authoritarianism.” The Center for American Progress. October 9, 2024.  
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-dangers-of-project-2025-global-lessons-in-authoritarianism/>

# From Distinction to Devastation: Civilian Victimization and Structural Violence in the Israeli Palestinian Conflict

*Kai Febus*

## Introduction

Civilians have long shouldered the brutal costs of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, with captivity, torture, and famine, along with millions suffering from forced displacement, and thousands dead. Why do civilians become constant and consistent targets, despite international humanitarian norms? This victimization is not just the result of chaotic warfare or isolated military decisions but is rather a manifestation of structural violence, stemming from centuries of political objectives, skewed power structures, incessant warfare, and severe lack of international accountability. Civilian areas, although mentioned in the Principle of Distinction under International Humanitarian Law, are to be left alone and are deemed non-combatant spaces.<sup>51</sup> However, they become militarized combatant spaces, creating grey areas. By blurring the lines, it further increases issues in identifying between enemy combatants and non-combatants. The mutation between combat and non-combat areas explains broader trends in human rights violations, along with offering insight to the limitations of international laws in armed conflicts, with state policies often institutionalizing civilian suffering. The Theory of Structural Violence, produced by Johan Galtung, will be further explored, specifically its theorization that systemic inequality is embedded in political arrangements and produces recurring harmful actions towards civilians.<sup>52</sup>

## Roots of the Conflict

The modern origin of the Israel and Palestine conflict dates to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Zionism began rising in Europe with the establishment of the World Zionist Organization in 1897 by Theodor Herzl,<sup>53</sup> with Arab society following suit with Al-Fatat, also known as the ‘Young Arab Society’, which was founded in 1911.<sup>54</sup> Zionism had called for an establishment of a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people, specifically in the land of Palestine, which was under Ottoman rule at that time.<sup>55</sup> Jewish settlements occurred from 1882 to 1903, despite Ottoman restrictions on Jewish immigration. The settlers challenged Ottoman authority by promoting and demanding self-determination, despite residing in Ottoman-controlled territory.

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<sup>51</sup> “Rule 1: The Principle Distinction between Civilians and Combatants.” IHL, 2025. <https://ihl.databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule1>.

<sup>52</sup> Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” JSTOR, 1969. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/stable/422690>.

<sup>53</sup> “History.” 2022, תורדתסה תויניצה תימלועה, <https://www.wzo.org.il/page/extraordinary-congress/history/en>.

<sup>54</sup> Nagle, Liam. “Al-Fatat: An Arab Underground.” Web log. *Arab America* (blog), March 26, 2025. <https://www.arabamerica.com/al-fatat-an-arab-underground/>.

<sup>55</sup> “History.” 2022, תורדתסה תויניצה תימלועה, <https://www.wzo.org.il/page/extraordinary-congress/history/en>.

Between July 1915 and March 1916, Sharif Hussein bin Ali, the chosen leader that held great influence over the Arab tribes, and Sir Henry McMahon, the British commissioner in Egypt, exchanged letters in which Britain promised the Arabs support for their independence if they were to revolt against the Ottoman rule. The proposition for the Arab independent land was the Levant region, containing modern day Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria.<sup>56</sup> This chain of revolution from both the Zionists and Arabs eventually led to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Britain promised the Zionist organization a “national home for the Jewish in Palestine, conflicting with the previous promises of the Hussein-McMahon correspondence.”<sup>57</sup>

In 1947, the United Nations Partition Plan had initially proposed a two-state system, which meant the mandate of Palestine would be partitioned into a state for Palestinian Arabs and another for the Israelis.<sup>58</sup> This land was split, with 56% given to the Israelis and 43% given to the Palestinian Arabs. Jewish leaders accepted the plan, while Arab leaders rejected it, due to the perceived unfairness for such a disproportionate amount of land to be given to the minority Jewish population.<sup>59</sup> In 1948, the Nakba, Arabic for “The Catastrophe”, occurred due to Zionist militias and the Israeli army committing ethnic cleansing and expulsion against Palestinian Arabs. During the Nakba, there was mass displacement, with over 750,000 refugees, 20% of which were Palestinian, and would become “Israeli Arabs.”<sup>60</sup> The refugee crisis would draw the attention of the UN, which passed a resolution in 1948 calling for all nations involved to allow the displaced to return to their native lands.

Following the war, Israel signed separate armistice agreements with Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, which established temporary de facto borders, known as the “Green Lines.” The lines were not permanent but held until 1967. Coordinating with Britain and France, Israel invaded Egypt after Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. The Israeli, British, and French forces were forced to withdraw due to increased international pressure and after a UN peacekeeping force would remain stationed on the border of Egypt and Israel for over a decade.

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<sup>56</sup> The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence 14 July 1915 - 10 March 1916. Accessed October 26, 2025. <https://www1.udel.edu/History-old/figal/Hist104/assets/pdf/readings/13mcmahonhussein.pdf>. people”

<sup>57</sup> Balfour, Arthur James. “Balfour Declaration 1917.” The Avalon Project : Balfour Declaration November 2, 1917, 2008. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/balfour.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp).

<sup>58</sup> “The United Nations Partition Plan.” University of Michigan. Accessed October 28, 2025. [https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/cmenas-assets/cmenas-documents/unit-of-israel-palestine/Section1\\_UnitedNation sPartitionPlan.pdf](https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/cmenas-assets/cmenas-documents/unit-of-israel-palestine/Section1_UnitedNation sPartitionPlan.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> “The United Nations Partition Plan.” University of Michigan. Accessed October 28, 2025. [https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/cmenas-assets/cmenas-documents/unit-of-israel-palestine/Section1\\_UnitedNation sPartitionPlan.pdf](https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/cmenas-assets/cmenas-documents/unit-of-israel-palestine/Section1_UnitedNation sPartitionPlan.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> “Quick Facts: The Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe).” The Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU), April 5, 2023. <https://imeu.org/resources/resources/quick-facts-the-palestinian-nakba-catastrophe/142>.



## Modern Conflict Catalyst

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was established in Cairo, Egypt in 1964 to consolidate the Palestinian efforts for an armed struggle against Israel. The founding of the PLO formalized the Palestinian national movement, increasing tensions. In June 1967, the Six-Day War restricted movement and institutionalized economic dependency, along with entrenching systems of Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, and the Syrian Golan Heights. The refugee crisis continued, with a new wave of displaced peoples called the Naksa, placing over a million Palestinians under Israeli military control. The Israeli occupation sparked a rise in Palestinian nationalism, exacerbating the dynamics of the conflict.

## Current Issues

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other militia groups launched a surprise attack on Southern Israel, launching thousands of rockets, breaching the border, and attacking the Israeli military, along with civilian areas. Approximately 1,200 people were killed in the assault, with 250 people taken hostage.<sup>61</sup> The next day, Israel declared war, with the goal of dismantling Hamas. Israel imposed a total blockade on Gaza and cut off all resources and food to the region. The blockade did not only function as a military tactic, but a continuous system of deprivation regulating medical care, food access, and mobility, which slowly produced the normalization of civilian suffering that further exemplifies structural violence. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza began to escalate, with massive internal displacement, and civilians from northern Gaza fleeing to the south.<sup>62</sup> Although humanitarian aid trucks and other aid began to enter Gaza, Israel launched another attack on Gaza in late October.

Throughout 2024, Israel continued to launch large-scale attacks, with heavy casualties amongst Palestinians, along with severe infrastructure damage to critical facilities in Gaza. Hamas retaliated with rocket fire launched into Israel, as Lebanon's Hezbollah became involved in the conflict.<sup>63</sup> Israel placed northern Gaza under siege, restricting and completely cutting off aid and movement. The siege and blockade caused massive destructive damage to civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. Many civilians were and are trapped, with aid completely cut off.<sup>64</sup> International organizations, such as the United Nations, raised allegations

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<sup>61</sup> Revkin, Mara R. "The Israel-Hamas Conflict: International Law, Accountability, and Challenges in Modern Warfare." *Judicature*, June 12, 2025. <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/israel-hamas-conflict-international-law/>.

<sup>62</sup> "History of the Question of Palestine - Question of Palestine." United Nations, September 2025. <https://www.un.org/unispal/history/>.

<sup>63</sup> "What Is Hezbollah and Why Has It Been Fighting Israel in Lebanon?" BBC News, February 14, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67307858>.

<sup>64</sup> Ferris, Layla, and Emmet Lyons. "Israel and Hamas at War: A Timeline of Major Developments in the Year since Oct. 7, 2023." CBS News, October 24, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-hamas-war-timeline-major-events-since-october-7-2023/>.

of war crimes and genocide against Israel for the humanitarian crisis occurring in Gaza.<sup>65</sup> The crisis also stems from its dense urban environment, which forces combatants and civilians into the same space. This militarization of all zones transforms civilians into human shields, resulting in both sides using civilian presence to justify continued violence.

## Conclusion

The International Humanitarian Law (IHL) was built around state-based wars, not conflicts involving both state and non-state actors, which creates legal grey zones that are exploited by all sides. Actors take the Principle of Distinction and reframe it through national security narratives to justify civilian harm within conflicts.<sup>66</sup> The lack of accountability for conflicts that violate the IHL, in this case the Israeli-Palestine conflict, contributes to the recurring and predictable civilian victimization, rather than it being an exception. The inability of international states to enforce accountability when needed reflects the asymmetries in global power that allows states to dominate and operate with impunity, reinforcing the conditions that enable civilian harm and structural violence.

Galtung's theory of Structural Violence explains that violence is not just direct, with bombings and shootings, but built into institutions, with blockades, restrictions to aid movements, and even political exclusion, ensuring targeted chronic suffering, such as internal displacement, trauma, and malnutrition.<sup>67</sup> Since Palestine is not a sovereign state, with limited representation in international governance, there were structural inequalities that allowed a normalized environment of harm for Palestinian civilians which made them constantly exposed. The continued conflicts between Israel and Palestine highlights Galtung's theory that civilian vulnerability is not incidental, it is deeply rooted in political policies, rather than just solely military miscalculations.

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<sup>65</sup> Gritten, David. "Israel Has Committed Genocide in Gaza, UN Commission of Inquiry Says." BBC News, September 16, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8641wv0n4go>. creating a "total war zone."

<sup>66</sup> Revkin, Mara R. "The Israel-Hamas Conflict: International Law, Accountability, and Challenges in Modern Warfare." *Judicature*, June 12, 2025. <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/israel-hamas-conflict-international-law/>.

<sup>67</sup> Institute, Global Health. "The Political Instability and the Health and Wellbeing of the Palestinian Territories." Global Health Institute, December 3, 2019.

<https://globalhealth.georgetown.edu/posts/the-political-instability-and-the-health-and-wellbeing-of-the-palestinian-territories>.



## **U.S. Asylum Law: Exploring the Relationship Between Strict Standards and Middle Eastern and North African Refugees and Asylum Seekers Fleeing War**

*Layan Jahaf*

The U.S. current political stance on refugee and asylum law is particularly disproportionate to the continual increase of such individuals emerging from the Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) region. Throughout history, the U.S. has tended to have a complex yet powerful influence upon the MENA region as a whole. Exploring the direct relationship between the U.S.' strict asylum law standards and its impact on MENA refugees actively fleeing from war is crucial in understanding this topic. While asylum law itself is often seen as a universal set of rules that countries expect to be followed by those voluntarily agreeing to the relevant treaties and conventions, the U.S. may differ. Although the U.S. is expected to protect refugee rights under the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, strict U.S. asylum laws disproportionately restrict Middle Eastern and North African civilians from seeking safe refuge due to the negative narrative regarding MENA identities as a whole.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol in close relation fosters additional understanding of the political and legal landscape across the globe regarding both the attitudes and laws with respect to refugees and asylum seekers actively fleeing from war. Analyzing the effects of current and past U.S. politicians displays the influence political parties in power may use to either severely deter or encourage additional refugees and asylum seekers into the U.S. While the U.S. has historically served as a key figure in accepting refugees within its country, recent political pushback begs to reverse this standard maintained for several years.

During 1951, the Geneva Refugee Convention had taken place, serving as a key legal event that allowed documents forming the basis of many countries' stances on accepting refugees.<sup>68</sup> The term "refugee" was defined as an individual fearful of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, or membership of a certain social group or political opinion.<sup>69</sup> The second part of this definition refers to a person fearful of the protection of the country in which they are fleeing, does not have a nationality outside of their former residential country, or unwilling or unable to return to it. Much of the protection, safety, and well-being that is sought by refugees severely lacks in that of the country being fled.

The 1967 United Nations Refugee Protocol expanded upon the limited definition of a refugee provided during the 1951 Refugee Convention. Rather than only referring to displaced individuals in Europe, this included refugees from any part of the world at any time. This

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<sup>68</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2025). *The 1951 Refugee Convention*. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>

<sup>69</sup> Roy, Diana., Klobucista, Claire , and McBride, James. (2025). *How Does the U.S. Refugee System Work?* Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work-trump-biden-afghanistan>

Protocol increased the responsibilities of the U.S. towards refugees, yet allowed nations to continue to define and assess an individual's refugee status independently through their own governments. Both the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol in conjunction serve as ways for refugee rights to be better protected.

The 1951 Convention allows for an internationally recognized definition of a “refugee” to exist, in addition to summarizing the rights refugees are entitled to as well. However, this does exempt people belonging to certain categories, such as war criminals. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) guards these rights, helping governments translate said documents into national laws. Basic standards for the treatment of refugees include the right to housing, work, and education. This helps governments across the globe be able to ensure that refugees, no matter which area of the world an individual may be coming from, are being protected and are able to freely exercise these rights. One of the most core principles of the 1951 Convention is that refugees absolutely should not be returned to a country in the case of facing serious threats to their life or freedom.

President Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, eliminating the “national origins” quotas that significantly limited the ability of immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia to obtain U.S. immigration visas.<sup>70</sup> This new immigration law held 6% of each year's visas for individuals fleeing persecution in communist areas, the Middle East, or escaping the aftermath of a natural disaster. Following World War I, millions of people fled their native countries seeking a place of refuge. In response to this, governments across the globe set up international agreements providing travel documents for first recognized refugees. These numbers increased significantly after World War II, with millions of people being forcibly displaced requiring safe refuge. The international community created a set of laws aimed at protecting basic rights, culminating in the 1951 Convention.

The U.S. signed the United Nations Refugee Protocol on November 6, 1968. Meanwhile, the right to seek asylum within the U.S. was adopted by Congress and officially passed in the Refugee Act of 1980. While it held key provisions of the Geneva Refugee Convention, the U.S. did not sign the convention itself, passing its own set of laws instead. This included the international definition of a refugee, as well as the core idea of defining asylum seekers as those formally applying for legal protection in another country.<sup>71</sup> Many of these people come from regions of the world devastated by conflict, disaster, and weak rule of law. The Middle East being referred to as a “shatter belt” region is a key example of this, prone to significant instability with a long history of colonial influence. However, the extent to which this law is

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<sup>70</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. *United States Immigration and Refugee Law, 1921–1980*. Holocaust Encyclopedia.

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/united-states-immigration-and-refugee-law-1921-1980>

<sup>71</sup> International Rescue Committee. (2019). *Is It Legal to Cross the U.S. Border to Seek Asylum?*

<https://www.rescue.org/uk/article/it-legal-cross-us-border-seek-asylum>

fully carried out within the U.S. is highly debated, especially pertaining to MENA refugees and asylum seekers fleeing war.

The size of the U.S. Refugee Program has fluctuated throughout the years. The war in Syria and 2015 migration crisis in Europe led to an increased amount of scrutiny emerging from policymakers regarding the arrival of individuals from the Middle East. This began with the Obama administration by increasing the cap on refugees allowed into the U.S. In 2016, President Obama increased a previously approved rate of 80,000 refugees allowed into the U.S. to an additional 5,000. This was said to address the growing migration crisis worsened by Syria's conflict. Within this same year, 72% of refugees resettling to the U.S. were women and children.<sup>72</sup> During the fiscal year 2017, Obama proposed the U.S. set a ceiling of 110,000 refugee admission with more dire humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Iraq as well. There are four principal categories that individuals may access USRAP through. Priority Two includes groups of "special concern" to the U.S., including religious minorities from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syrians with ties to the U.S.

Until recently, the U.S. annually provided more refuge to individuals than all other nations combined. This signified the U.S. as a globe leader in resettling refugees fleeing violence or persecution in their home countries. However, the first Trump administration drastically reduced the number of refugees able to enter the U.S. During 2017 and 2020, the U.S. resettled 118,202 refugees.<sup>73</sup> This was the fewest in any four-year period since the U.S. refugee program was created, and the first time the U.S. settled less refugees than the rest of the world. Under the Biden administration, resettlement rates rebounded, peaking at 100,034 refugees in 2024 alone. President Trump reversed Obama's proposed numbers, capping the refugee admittance in fiscal year 2017 at 50,000. This was even further lowered in the fiscal year 2021 to a historically low cap of just 15,000.

By contributing to a ban on refugees from certain countries and sharply decreasing the overall refugee admissions, refugee policy and national security implications have been heavily discussed. With conflicts in areas such as Afghanistan continuing to displace millions, Trump's changing refugee resettlement efforts fail to keep up with the higher previous refugee statistics among previous administrations. The UN refugee agency reported nearly 32 million refugees worldwide during 2024, with more than half of this number coming from Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Sudan. Despite this, the number of admitted refugees into the U.S. has declined from more than 200,000 at the start of the program in 1980 to 100,000 in 2024.

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<sup>72</sup> Amnesty International. (2017). *The U.S. War on Muslim Refugees*.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2017/01/the-us-war-on-muslim-refugees/>

<sup>73</sup> American Immigration Council. (2025). *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy*.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/overview-us-refugee-law-and-policy/>

In May 2021, President Biden reversed this declining trend by revising Trump's annual admissions cap to a total of 62,500 for the remaining year. President Biden then doubled the ceiling for Fiscal Year of 2022, 2023, and 2024 to 125,000. Despite these dramatic actions, the reductions initially set by Trump were difficult to reverse. The U.S. took in less than 61,000 refugees in 2023, which was higher than previous years but significantly below the Biden administration's cap. Considering that the number of refugees worldwide continues to increase each year, several advocacy groups have argued that the U.S.' annual cap should proportionately reflect the number of refugees worldwide instead.

Asylum seekers must be in the U.S. or within a port of entry to officially apply for or request asylum. Although the current Trump administration claims individuals should come to the U.S. legally and follow the legal process, this has been a struggle for many. A number of individuals have been denied access to U.S. officials and stranded in regions such as northern Mexico. Under U.S. law, if a person within expedited removal claims a fear of return to their home country or hopes to apply for asylum, they will be referred to a credible fear interview. This is led by a trained asylum officer in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The individual must prove a "significant possibility" of being eligible for asylum and undergo a credibility assessment. In the case the officer makes a positive finding the individual will be referred to an immigration court and come before an immigration judge. Without this approval, the asylum seeker may be deported.

Instead of serving as a safe haven for refugees and asylum seekers across the globe, the U.S. has continued to issue policies continuing to block families from claiming asylum. This creates standards separate from America's precedent, violating both U.S. and international law. These new policies have led to making the gaining of asylum status more difficult for certain cases, separating families and forcibly returning asylum seekers that are waiting for their claims to be processed. This is not only harmful, but illegal. In accordance with federal law and international treaty obligations, the U.S. cannot force an individual to return to a country that they will be in jeopardy of either persecution or torture. In addition to these countries, the administration has made recent changes to the U.S. asylum rules that narrow the circumstances people may be granted asylum. This has led to a specifically harmful impact upon survivors of domestic violence, the LGBTQ+ community, and people fleeing severe gang violence.

President Trump has "declared war" upon refugees from Muslim-majority countries across the globe. In 2017, Trump issued an executive order on his first day in office, suspending USRAP indefinitely. Trump claimed the U.S. was "inundated with record levels of migration" under the Biden administration. This temporarily prohibited the entry of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. This included Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen - indefinitely barring all Syrian refugees. While admissions for Syrian refugees restarted in 2018, the order made visa restrictions stricter for these countries. This disproportionately targets

MENA refugees and asylum seekers because of U.S. foreign policy and media actively framing individuals from this region as a “threat.” There is no plausible data proving refugees, Muslim or otherwise, pose an additional risk to committing acts of terrorism than citizens. A refugee is an individual fleeing those committing acts of terrorism, not a terrorist himself.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program puts refugees under the most rigorous security screenings of any other person, immigrant or visitor, seeking to enter the U.S. Despite the Trump administration revising the order twice due to legal challenges, the Supreme Court allowed the third version to stand in April 2018. In May 2025, the Trump administration was quick to welcome nearly 60 white Afrikaners as refugees. This was the first group admitted since the executive order, claiming discrimination and violence in South Africa. This was heavily criticized by refugee advocates, expressing concern about the Afrikaners rapid arrival while the U.S. continues to prevent refugee programs from other countries.

It is vital that in order to account for the growing refugee crisis, the U.S. restores and increases its historical policies regarding refugee admissions. The Trump era of this issue has significantly reduced refugee admittances affecting millions of people, with being able to roll back Trump’s actions being difficult to recover from. Countries within the Middle East and North Africa have long faced a history of Western colonialism, expansionism, and imperialism for centuries. Considering the region continues to undergo threats towards government stability, civilian safety, and independent liberty, it is crucial that the U.S. take these initiatives to account for this. Increasing the refugee admissions cap, regardless of the political party in power, is necessary to restore the U.S. position as a global leader in supporting refugee rights and standards.

# Should Political Campaigns Face Stricter Limits on the Personal Data they Collect and Use to Microtarget Voters?

*Kyle Jinks*

## Introduction

Elections are an integral part of democracy across the world. They allow citizens to elect individuals to represent their personal values. Elections also act as an accountability mechanism for elected officials to stay true to their constituents' values. To be elected, campaigns are pitted against each other in order to gain their party's nomination, sway undecided voters, and promote their image for future elections in their careers. Campaigns can start a year or two before actual elections, while funding and support begin even earlier. The U.S. has enacted several policies targeting specific aspects of campaigns to prevent abuse. Some examples of federal acts include the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), Hatch Act, and creation of the Federal Election Commission (FEC).<sup>74</sup> All four of these acts regulate contributions, federal employees' participation, and lobbying in campaigns.<sup>75</sup> What none of these acts regulate is the personal data that they collect and use to target voters. Personal data collection by political campaigns should face stricter limits as it is an invasion of privacy and undermines democracy.

## Background

Over the past two decades, advances in data analytics and digital communication have transformed American political campaigns. Campaigns that were once dependent on television and radio messaging now rely heavily on personal data to target individual voters.<sup>76</sup> Utilizing personal information, political campaigns can create targeted ads to influence voters. These ads can provide messages that connect voters to candidates or political ideologies to a group of voters. This change in campaigning has blurred the line between strategy and data protection. U.S. campaign law has struggled to adapt to rapidly changing technology for the past two decades. FECA and the FEC regulations were designed in the 1970s to promote transparency in campaign finance.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the Privacy Act of 1974 limits how government agencies handle

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<sup>74</sup> Federal Election Commission. "Statutes." Accessed October 20, 2025. <https://www.fec.gov/data/legal/statutes/>

<sup>75</sup> Federal Election Commission. "Statutes." Accessed November 29, 2025. <https://www.fec.gov/data/legal/statutes/>

<sup>76</sup> Dilley, Nicholas J. 2022. "American Elections and Campaigns – 1945 to 1948: The Onset of Television and the Cold War." Reagan Library Education Blog, November 10, 2022. Accessed November 12, 2025. <https://reagan.blogs.archives.gov/2022/11/10/american-elections-and-campaigns-1945-to-1948-the-onset-of-television-and-the-cold-war/>

<sup>77</sup> U.S. House of Representatives. "52 U.S.C. § 301 — Voting and Elections: Subtitle III – Campaign Finance (Preliminary Edition)." Accessed October 20, 2025. <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?edition=prelim&path=%2Fprelim@title52%2Fsubtitle3%2Fchapter301&>

personal information but does not apply to political campaigns, which are self-regulated.<sup>78</sup> Neither includes concepts of protecting individual personal data in political campaigns. Microtargeting is targeted advertisements that use personal data to identify the interests of a specific group to influence their actions.<sup>79</sup> By utilizing electronic tools, like “cookies”, which are small files that track and remember a browser's data, interested third parties can track your browsing habits, likes, and views to build a profile that aligns with your interests.

## **How personal data is collected and used**

Voter targeting can be very subtle and blend into everyday life. One of the most common ways personal data is utilized is to create targeted advertisements. Thorin Klosowski, a security and privacy activist at Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), wrote “How Political Campaigns Use Your Data to Target You,” detailing the process of how the data is organized to target voters.<sup>80</sup> The first step is collecting personal voter data through purchasing a state’s voter data, their own political parties, or other websites that collect data. A bipartisan commission called the Election Assistance Commission released a report on the availability of voter data by state in 2020.<sup>81</sup> The price of statewide voter data ranges from \$0 to \$37,000, and each state can be categorized as open, mixed, or restricted data.<sup>82</sup> These classifications can protect the data for certain groups or prevent commercial use of data. 31 out of the 51 voting states and districts have open classifications, 16 are mixed restrictions, and 4 have restricted information.<sup>83</sup> The voter data provided by most states is not protected from exploitation and has very few barriers to access, with an average price of ~\$2429.<sup>84</sup> On average, political campaigns can receive 21 states’ voter data for less than \$100. States’ voter data is easily accessible to political campaigns with few restrictions in many states.

This data is then enhanced by combining data from a data broker. Data brokers collect information about someone’s shopping habits, hobbies, demographics, and more. These data points can be anything from whether you are an electrical vehicle buyer, believe in climate change, or believe in conspiracy theories. Combining both sets of data can create behavioral

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<sup>78</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Privacy and Civil Liberties. “Privacy Act of 1974.” Accessed October 20, 2025. <https://www.justice.gov/opcl/privacy-act-1974>

<sup>79</sup> Information Commissioner’s Office. “Microtargeting.” Accessed November 11, 2025. <https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/microtargeting/>

<sup>80</sup> Electronic Frontier Foundation. 2024. “How Political Campaigns Use Your Data to Target You.” April 16, 2024. Accessed October 20, 2025. <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2024/04/how-political-campaigns-use-your-data-target-you>

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. “Availability of Voter File Information.” Accessed October 20, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. “Availability of Voter File Information.” Accessed October 22, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. “Availability of Voter File Information.” Accessed October 20, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. “Availability of Voter File Information.” Accessed October 20, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)



profiles that are sorted into categories. These categories the profiles are placed in are then targeted by whether that group is receptive to ads, firm in their political decisions, and various other factors. Jon Keegan, an investigative data journalist, writes in “How Political Campaigns Use Your Phone’s Location to Target You” that some campaigns then use your IP address to target demographics they see fit to reach voters.<sup>85</sup> By utilizing behavioral profiles, they can target websites in certain areas that voters are likely to visit. Thus, political campaigns can influence a voter’s decision-making by creating ads targeting voters in certain demographics.

## Current

In recent years, there have been investigations into campaign mobile apps and websites that collect personal data and share it with third parties with limited or lacking disclosure. These investigations disregard political parties and make matters non-partisan to share accurate information.

During the 2020 election, the International Digital Accountability Council (IDAC) conducted a two-month investigation into the practices of election apps and websites regarding the collection and sharing of data to third parties.<sup>86</sup> The investigation was non-partisan and both President Trump and President-elect Biden were subjected to it, along with over a hundred other political campaigners. The report found that campaign apps and websites do not explicitly state in their privacy policies with which third parties the data collected will be shared with, nor do they disclose their use of ID bridging when targeting voters with ads. ID Bridging is when websites advertise to certain demographic groups by using third-party information. They utilize cookies, which every website collects and acts as a history of what you visit, to target ads towards website visitors.<sup>87</sup> There were also political campaigns that excessively shared data with third parties. Lindsey Graham’s campaign website shared user data with 64 third parties, which was double what Biden and Trump’s websites shared.<sup>88</sup>

The impact of these findings shows the dangers of sharing personal data of U.S. voters. Information is being shared without consent to third parties that use the data to manipulate and

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<sup>85</sup> Keegan, Jon. 2022. “How Political Campaigns Use Your Phone’s Location to Target You.” The Markup, November 8, 2022. Accessed October 20, 2025.

<https://themarkup.org/privacy/2022/11/08/how-political-campaigns-use-your-phones-location-to-target-you>

<sup>86</sup> International Digital Accountability Council. n.d. “Privacy Investigation Reveals Extensive Voter Data Collection & Data Sharing in 2020 Presidential Campaign Mobile Apps & Websites: Report Identifies Best Practices Moving Forward.” Digital Watchdog. Accessed November 10, 2025.

<https://digitalwatchdog.org/privacy-investigation-reveals-extensive-voter-data-collection/>

<sup>87</sup> Byrd, Andrew. 2024. “ID Bridging Explained: Benefits, Controversies, and the Battle for Transparency in Digital Advertising.” AdMonsters, June 13, 2024.

<https://www.admonsters.com/id-bridging-explained-benefits-controversies-and-the-battle-for-transparency-in-digital-advertising/>

<sup>88</sup> International Digital Accountability Council. n.d. “Privacy Investigation Reveals Extensive Voter Data Collection & Data Sharing in 2020 Presidential Campaign Mobile Apps & Websites: Report Identifies Best Practices Moving Forward.” Digital Watchdog. Accessed November 10, 2025.

<https://digitalwatchdog.org/privacy-investigation-reveals-extensive-voter-data-collection/>



create social fragmentation, showing different information to different people, between what messages people receive during political campaigns.<sup>89</sup>

### **Why this Matters to Voters**

Unless you actively understand that your personal data is being processed to target, you may not care much about protecting data you did not know was being used. Connecticut's voter data can be bought for an estimated \$300 with zero restrictions.<sup>90</sup> Connecticut's voter data is completely public for anyone's use. There are 31 states that have similar, lack of, restrictions on who can buy and what the data can be used for.<sup>91</sup>

Privacy is not something to take lightly. People can be taken advantage of or discarded when privacy, during political campaigning, is abused. Tailoring messages to manipulate, mislead, or exploit voters based on their personal vulnerabilities invades the ethics of personal data collection and use.

Democracy is also at stake when there are no restrictions on the collection and use of personal data. Fairness and equality are affected when campaigns target persuasive groups of voters. People who have a higher engagement with the internet are more likely to view these targeted ads. This disproportionately targets certain groups of voters over others. Ayman Farahat and Michael Bailey, a data scientist and a marketing researcher, respectively, wrote "How Effective is Target Advertising" and experimented to find that advertising to target a specific demographic increases the likelihood of click through rates, clicking an ad to the linked website.<sup>92</sup> Although the ads tracked were not political, categories can be considered political parties and brands considered political ideologies when reviewing the research. Different messages targeting different audiences create fragmented messaging. Fragmented messaging is when different groups receive different messages or information.<sup>93</sup> In voter targeting, different factors influence what message you might receive about a political candidate. As stated before, geolocation and other demographic factors heavily influence these messages from political

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<sup>89</sup> Dommett, Katharine. 2019. "Data-Driven Political Campaigns in Practice: Understanding and Regulating Diverse Data-Driven Campaigns." *Internet Policy Review* 8 (4). DOI: 10.14763/2019.4.1432. Accessed November 12, 2025. <https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/data-driven-political-campaigns-practice-understanding-and-regulating-diverse-data>

<sup>90</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. "Availability of Voter File Information." Accessed October 20, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Election Assistance Commission. "Availability of Voter File Information." Accessed October 20, 2025. [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available\\_Voter\\_File\\_Information.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/voters/Available_Voter_File_Information.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> Farahat, Ayman, and Michael C. Bailey. "How Effective Is Targeted Advertising?" In *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web (WWW '12)*, 111–120. New York, NY: ACM, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> Jonathan Bright, Explaining the Emergence of Political Fragmentation on Social Media: The Role of Ideology and Extremism, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 23, Issue 1, January 2018, Pages 17–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmx002>

campaigns. Two core values of democracy are equality and fair elections, and the exploitation of personal data can blur the lines of both.

Stricter restrictions ensure voter personal data is not shared without their consent, either publicly or to third parties. Restrictions could include who can access the data and what they can do with it. By restricting the usage of personal data, political campaigns cannot micro-target voters through advertisements. This creates fairer campaigns and prevents targeting certain demographics as a voter base.<sup>94</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Privacy in political campaigns is not a partisan issue and affects every citizen who participates in the democratic process. The use of microtargeting utilizing personal data represents a serious invasion of privacy and threatens the democratic values of elections. When voter data can be easily purchased from states and shared with third parties without clear consent, existing safeguards meant to protect that information are clearly insufficient. The ability of campaigns to collect and distribute personal data without meaningful oversight undermines public trust in elections and weakens the values of fairness and accountability. Stronger restrictions on the collection, sale, and use of voters' personal data are necessary to protect citizens' privacy and uphold democratic values.

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<sup>94</sup> Information Commissioner's Office. "Profiling in Political Campaigning." *Guidance for the Use of Personal Data in Political Campaigning*. Accessed December 2, 2025.  
<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/direct-marketing-and-privacy-and-electronic-communications/guidance-for-the-use-of-personal-data-in-political-campaigning-1/profiling-in-political-campaigning/>.

## **All That Glitters: America's Second Gilded Age**

*Marko Katra*

Starting on November 1, 2025, more than 40 million Americans saw a pause in SNAP benefits, or food stamps, as a result of the government shutdown. The Department of Agriculture initially announced that it could not use its contingency funds to help continue to run the program, even during the shutdown.<sup>95</sup> In 2024, SNAP funding totalled \$99.8 billion, or about \$8.3 billion per month.<sup>96</sup> Currently, the 10 richest people in America are together worth \$2.4 trillion, which is about enough to fund the SNAP program for the next 24 years.<sup>97</sup> In fact, the top 0.1% of the country controls 12.6% of the entire country's wealth, while the bottom 50% only controls 5.4%, the highest disparity between groups since the distribution of household wealth began being tracked in 1989.<sup>98</sup> In an age marred by income inequality and burgeoning new technologies, it is evident that the majority of Americans now find themselves increasingly at odds with a new class of the extremely wealthy. As this gap continues to widen, the U.S. currently finds itself on the edge of another era: a Second Gilded Age.

### **The First Gilded Age**

Historians generally recognize the first Gilded Age as spanning from the end of the American Civil War (1865) to the turn of the 20th century. The Civil War resulted in a large influx of cash into northern industry, spurring tremendous economic growth both during and after the war. Railroads, steel, oil, and manufacturing dominated this new landscape. Between 1865 and 1873 alone, U.S. industrial production increased by 75%, outpacing nearly every other country save the UK. However, most of this wealth did not find its way into the pockets of the average American. Instead, a very small yet powerful class of ultra-wealthy industrialists emerged, with famous names like J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie becoming tycoons within their respective industries.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Lebowitz, Megan, and Maggie Rhoads. "As Millions of Americans Prepare to Lose SNAP Benefits, Some States Are Moving to Bridge the Gap." NBCNews.com, October 29, 2025.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/millions-americans-prepare-lose-snap-benefits-states-are-moving-bridge-rcna239159>.

<sup>96</sup> Jones, Jordan. "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) - Key Statistics and Research." Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) - Key Statistics and Research | Economic Research Service, July 24, 2025.  
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/key-statistics-and-research>.

<sup>97</sup> "Forbes Real Time Billionaires List - the World's Richest People." Forbes. Accessed October 29, 2025.  
<https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#204e3f2d3d78>.

<sup>98</sup> "Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System." The Fed - Table: Distribution of Household Wealth in the U.S. since 1989. Accessed October 29, 2025.  
<https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/table/#quarter:143;series:Assets;demographic:networth;population:all;units:shares>.

<sup>99</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. "The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives." *Politico*, March 2, 2025.  
[https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/03/02/trump-musk-bezos-gilded-age-corporations-economy-00205454?ICID=ref\\_fark&utm\\_content=link&utm\\_medium=website&utm\\_source=fark](https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/03/02/trump-musk-bezos-gilded-age-corporations-economy-00205454?ICID=ref_fark&utm_content=link&utm_medium=website&utm_source=fark).

As economic historian Brad DeLong put it, this rise in industrialization led to “a wild ride of Schumpeterian creative destruction [that gave] rise to enormous wealth while destroying entire occupations, livelihoods, industries, sectors, and communities.”<sup>100</sup> The disruption fueled labor tensions, sometimes erupting in violent clashes between striking workers and the government, such as during the deadly Great Railroad Strike of 1877 or the 1894 Pullman Strike. Both involved the use of federal troops and lethal force in order to be put down.<sup>101</sup>

The era was also marked by political scandal and corruption. The Credit Mobilier Scandal implicated 30 members of Congress and a vice president in an elaborate securities fraud scheme, while political bosses like William Tweed of New York strong-armed elections via voter fraud and intimidation.<sup>102</sup> Another issue was large-scale spending influencing politics. During William McKinley’s 1896 bid for the presidency, wealthy elites and corporations poured massive sums of money into his campaign, resulting in him outspending his Democratic opponent 5:1, eventually winning him the White House. As a result, McKinley’s administration tended to favor pro-business interests, such as high tariffs and the gold standard.<sup>103</sup>

If we were to replace the names of these people and companies with the names of the elite of today, how much of the story would really end up changing?

## **Monopolies**

The First Gilded Age was a period characterized by the persistence of monopolies. From Standard Oil to U.S. Steel, entire industries were controlled by just one corporation, a phenomenon that appears to be repeating itself today.<sup>104</sup> Walmart controls 72% of all warehouse clubs and super centers in the U.S., and sells more than 50% of the groceries in nearly 40 metro areas.<sup>105</sup> As a result, millions of Americans have no choice but to shop at a handful, or sometimes just one store for everyday essential items. This can lead to price fixing and artificial scarcities, which negatively impact consumers who have no other choice but to purchase goods from that company.<sup>106</sup> In other words, monopolies can artificially inflate prices while forcing down the costs of production, increasing their profits to the detriment of both consumers and workers.

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<sup>100</sup> Rose, Gideon. “How Today Is Like the 1890s.” Council on Foreign Relations, July 16, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-today-1890s>.

<sup>101</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>102</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>103</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>104</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>105</sup> “Monopoly by the Numbers.” Open Markets Institute.

<https://www.openmarketsinstitute.org/learn/monopoly-by-the-numbers>.

<sup>106</sup> Hayes, Adam. “Understanding Monopoly: Its Types, Market Impact, and Regulatory Measures.” Investopedia, September 26, 2025.

<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/monopoly.asp#toc-exploring-different-types-of-monopolies>.

Continued relaxation and deregulation of policy surrounding mergers have allowed for entire industries to be consolidated into a handful of corporations. Since 1993, the number of large defense contractors has been consolidated from 107 to five, while in air travel, mergers have allowed for just four carriers (American, United, Delta, and Southwest) to control 80% of the market.<sup>107</sup> Monopolies like these can make it harder for new competitors to emerge onto the market, as they create higher barriers to entry due to the inability of newcomers to compete with the economies of scale, or the ability of a corporation to produce a good for the lowest price, that monopolies enjoy.<sup>108</sup>

A White House report found that monopolies can also lead to increased wealth inequality by reducing competition and lowering wages, via a power known as “monopsony,” or the ability of an employer to control and dictate wages.<sup>109</sup> This sheer concentration of power within the hands of such few businesses is something that has not been seen since the mega-corporations of the last Gilded Age.<sup>110</sup>

## **Income Inequality**

Since 1963, the gap in inequality between the wealthiest families and the median has almost doubled, with the richest now earning 71 times that of the median American family, compared to just 36 times back in 1963.<sup>111</sup> This gap has continued to grow as a result of a number of factors, including wage stagnation and rising costs of living. Between 1979 and 2013, wages for the top 1% increased 138%, while those for the bottom 90% only increased by 15%. Also disrupted was the historical relationship between worker productivity and hourly compensation. Between 1948 and 1973 worker productivity increased by 96.7%, which was generally reflected in an increase in hourly compensation by 91.3%. However, between 1973 and 2013, worker productivity increased by 74.4%, while worker compensation only increased by 9.2%. This reflects the trend of widening gaps in inequality between the average American and the top 1%.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Monopoly by the Numbers.” Open Markets Institute.

<sup>108</sup> Hayes, Adam. “Understanding Monopoly: Its Types, Market Impact, and Regulatory Measures.”

<sup>109</sup> Furman, Jason, and Peter Orszag. “Council of Economic Advisers Issue Brief October 2016 Labor Market

Monopsony.” Council Of Economic Advisers Issue BRIEF, October 2016.

[https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20161025\\_monopsony\\_labor\\_mrkt\\_cea.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/20161025_monopsony_labor_mrkt_cea.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>111</sup> Brown, Madeline, Signe-Mary McKernan, Thea Garon, Oriya Cohen, Catherine Harvey, C. Eugene Steuerle, and Ofronama Biu. “Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America.” Urban Institute, April 25, 2024.

<https://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts/>.

<sup>112</sup> Mishel, Lawrence, Elise Gould, and Josh Bivens. “Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts.” Economic Policy Institute, January 6, 2015. <https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>.

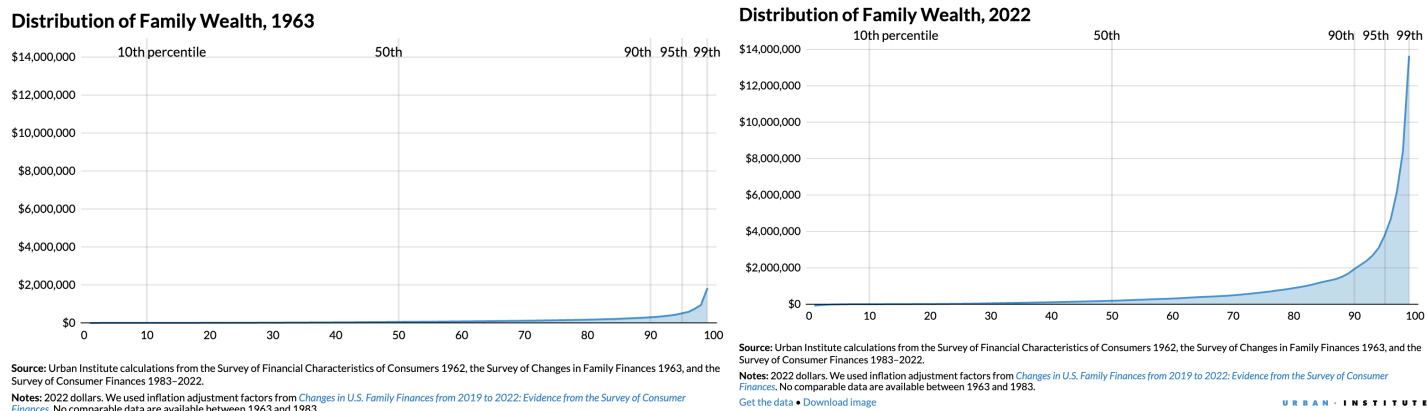


Fig. 1 Comparison of the Distribution of Family Wealth in the US between 1963 and 2022. Brown, Madeline, Signe-Mary McKernan, Thea Garon, Oriya Cohen, Catherine Harvey, C. Eugene Steuerle, and Ofronama Biu. “Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America.” Urban Institute, April 25, 2024

In 1965, the average CEO made just 20 times more than what the average worker made, however, as of 2024, that figure is now 281 times.<sup>113</sup> In 1913, the top 0.01% held 9% of the country’s wealth, whereas in 2019 that number was 10% (compared to a low of 2% in 1970). It is clear that this level of inequality and concentration of wealth rivals even that of the “robber barons” of the last Gilded Age.<sup>114</sup>

## Political Influence and Corruption

The Gilded Age was also defined by political corruption and influence from the nation’s wealthiest. Whether it was political campaign donations or fraud schemes, politics was seen as being sold to the highest bidder. It can be argued that similar trends are emerging today.<sup>115</sup> During the 2024 election, dark money groups like super PACs or shell corporations spent a whopping \$1.9 billion on campaigns, an incredible increase from just \$144 million in 2010.<sup>116</sup> In the New

<sup>113</sup> Gould, Elise, Josh Bivens, and Jori Kandra. “CEO Pay Increased in 2024 and Is Now 281 Times That of the Typical Worker: New EPI Landing Page Has All the Details.” Economic Policy Institute, September 25, 2025. <https://www.epi.org/blog/ceo-pay-increased-in-2024-and-is-now-281-times-that-of-the-typical-worker-new-epi-landing-page-has-all-the-details/>.

<sup>114</sup> Wolff-Mann, Ethan. “Super Rich’s Wealth Concentration Surpasses Gilded Age Levels.” Yahoo! Finance, July 7, 2021. [https://finance.yahoo.com/news/super-richs-wealth-concentration-surpasses-gilded-age-levels-210802327.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAKR\\_qO9-n3tV1VU-8nTIWqS7rr0e3VTqf-srRBfrK7NMHhndIrocWG\\_8ysXZzK\\_w25lXbg8yJVY\\_fIUZrQUTd9tT78ddRJtT10HLHo nv4antPnXsD-6uY8DM9CCaceg\\_eA2F74hxdFn0HcQGnl7ViGvA682oyCkcUs4rKG-OORwC](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/super-richs-wealth-concentration-surpasses-gilded-age-levels-210802327.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKR_qO9-n3tV1VU-8nTIWqS7rr0e3VTqf-srRBfrK7NMHhndIrocWG_8ysXZzK_w25lXbg8yJVY_fIUZrQUTd9tT78ddRJtT10HLHo nv4antPnXsD-6uY8DM9CCaceg_eA2F74hxdFn0HcQGnl7ViGvA682oyCkcUs4rKG-OORwC).

<sup>115</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>116</sup> Center, Brennan, and Ian Vandewalker. “Dark Money Hit a Record High of \$1.9 Billion in 2024 Federal Races.” Brennan Center for Justice, December 19, 2024.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/dark-money-hit-record-high-19-billion-2024-federal-races>

York City mayoral race, opponents to candidate Zohran Mamdani spent over \$22 million, including some \$8.3 million from former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg.<sup>117</sup> This intense spending against a political candidate very closely mirrors William McKinley’s presidential campaign of 1896, which was also bankrolled by elites who feared the repercussions of electing a populist candidate to office.<sup>118</sup> Although not illegal, the increase in campaign donations by corporations and elites shows a trend towards elections becoming increasingly influenced by large-scale spending.

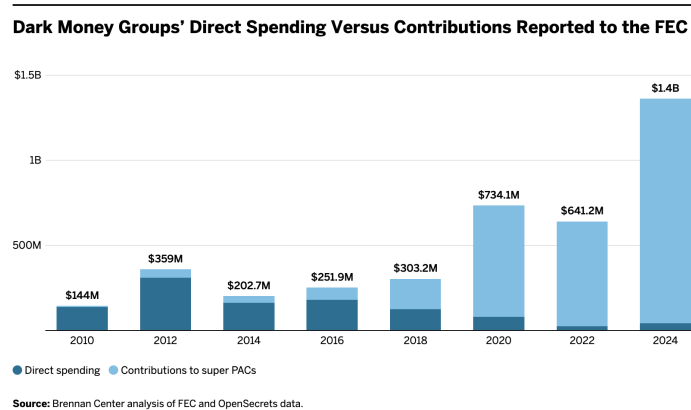


Fig. 2 Dark Money Groups’ Direct Spending Versus Contributions Reported to the FEC. Danetz, Lisa, and Eric Petry. “What Is Political Corruption and What Can We Do about It?” Brennan Center for Justice, August 11, 2025

The Trump administration has recently come under criticism for many perceived conflicts of interest, ranging from insider trading to quid pro quo donations. During his reelection bid, Donald Trump pressured oil executives to donate \$1 billion to his campaign, pledging to roll back Biden-era climate initiatives. He also put together the wealthiest cabinet in American history, appointing many of his billionaire donors to policy-making positions that govern their very own financial interests. The most notable of these donors was Elon Musk, who was appointed the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) after having spent some \$300 million on Trump’s 2024 campaign. Criticisms over conflicts of self-interest have also been publicized, with many criticizing Trump’s refusal to place his assets in a blind trust, something every president has done since the 1970s.<sup>119</sup>

Possibly the most egregious example came as a result of an FBI operation started under the Biden administration. In 2024, Trump Border “Czar” Tom Homan accepted a \$50,000 bribe

<sup>117</sup> Khan-Mullins, Kyle. “These Are the Billionaires Cutting Checks to Stop Zohran Mamdani.” *Forbes*, October 24, 2025.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kylemullins/2025/10/24/anyone-but-mamdani-these-billionaires-are-spending-big-to-stop-him-from-becoming-nycs-mayor/>.

<sup>118</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>119</sup> Danetz, Lisa, and Eric Petry. “What Is Political Corruption and What Can We Do about It?” Brennan Center for Justice, August 11, 2025.

<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/what-political-corruption-and-what-can-we-do-about-it>.

in an FBI sting operation, in which he promised immigration-related government contracts in exchange for money. Over the summer, FBI director Kash Patel closed the investigation, citing a “lack of evidence,” and the Justice Department largely shut down the department that prosecuted corruption cases. This, in combination with the dropping of corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams, prompted many career prosecutors to resign.<sup>120</sup>

## Moving Forward

The Gilded Age did not last forever. Political pressure starting in the 1890s eventually turned into the Progressive Movement, which brought with it vast reform via legislation and constitutional amendments.<sup>121</sup> It is still to be seen whether this Second Gilded Age will spawn a second Progressive Movement, although some foundations seem to be emerging. Zohran Mamdani, a progressive socialist, was elected New York City’s next mayor.<sup>122</sup> Senator Bernie Sanders, alongside New York Representative Alexis Ocasio-Cortez, wooed crowds of thousands on their “Fighting Oligarchy” tour, which seeks to promote progressive values and policies across the nation.<sup>123</sup> Lastly, over seven million Americans across the country took part in the “No Kings” protest on October 18, 2025, protesting against what they deemed the Trump Administration’s misuse of federal power and its attacks against healthcare, environmentalism, and immigration.<sup>124</sup>

All that glitters is certainly not gold, and in the case of the United States, the populace once again finds itself on the precipice of an era of unprecedented inequality. The choice, however, still remains, and Americans will have to choose whether or not they want a future that favors the few, or a future that chooses the many.

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<sup>120</sup> Lynch, Sarah. “Trump Aide Homan Accepted \$50,000 in Bribery Sting Operation, Sources Say | Reuters.” Reuters, September 22, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-aide-homan-accepted-50000-bribery-sting-operation-sources-say-2025-09-21/>.

<sup>121</sup> Zeitz, Joshua. “The Gilded Age Is Back — And That Should Worry Conservatives.”

<sup>122</sup> Treisman, Rachel, and Brian Mann. “Mamdani Wins New York City Mayoral Race, in a Historic Victory for Progressives.” NPR, November 5, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/11/04/nx-s1-5597788/election-results-zohran-mamdani-new-york-city-mayor>.

<sup>123</sup> Kinzel, Bob. “Bernie Sanders on What Comes after His ‘Fighting Oligarchy’ Tour.” Vermont Public, September 9, 2025. <https://www.vermontpublic.org/local-news/2025-09-09/bernie-sanders-what-comes-after-fighting-oligarchy>.

<sup>124</sup> “No Kings.” No Kings. <https://www.nokings.org/>.



## **Tuning the Narrative: The FCC and the Politics of Broadcast Media**

*Carson LaFemina*

### **Introduction**

On September 18, 2025, conservative activist Charlie Kirk was assassinated at the age of 31, an event which shocked the nation and consumed national attention for weeks. In the days following Charlie Kirk's death, there was much fodder from both Democrats and Republicans taking a variety of stances related to the murder. Some commentators discussed gun violence legislation, while others took the opportunity to denounce political violence. In addressing the assassination, comedian Jimmy Kimmel commented on his late-night television show: "We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it." The line quickly polarized audiences, with some applauding his candor and others condemning it as inflammatory. That same day, the head of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) suggested the agency could punish ABC over comments made by Kimmel related to Kirk's killing. Shortly after this comment, ABC's parent company announced that it was taking Kimmel's late-night show off the air indefinitely. This decision sparked widespread backlash, and while the show did return after a week of suspension, the event raises important questions about the role of federal agencies like the FCC in manipulating political discourse. This paper will discuss the history of the FCC and its overlap with the American executive branch, and how these interactions have shaped controversial censorship decisions throughout American history.<sup>125</sup>

### **The History of the FCC**

In order to appreciate the waves generated from the recent Jimmy Kimmel cancellation, it is important to explore the history of the FCC in shaping popular political thought. The FCC was created in 1934 to replace the outdated Federal Radio Commission, a U.S. government agency that regulated radio broadcasting content. As communications expanded and television became more prominent, the FCC's duties were expanded to include regulating all forms of communication in the United States. A large part of the FCC's power is providing licenses for certain channels, stations, groups, or entities to broadcast their media to the public. Because access to a broadcast license could determine whether a viewpoint reached millions of Americans or vanished entirely, the FCC quickly became a powerful force in shaping political narratives. In some cases, the FCC would utilize their power to award or revoke licenses from

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<sup>125</sup> Mitel Networks Corp. "The History of the Federal Communications Commission." Mitel, accessed November 5, 2025. <https://www.mitel.com/articles/history-federal-communications-commission-fcc>.

certain entities for overtly political reasons, sometimes from the direction of the President himself.

### **Executive Power and FCC Oversight**

It is unsurprising that the Chairman of the FCC appointed by the President plays a large role in the way the FCC moderates political thought. One executive's interpretation of what is acceptable on public media airwaves is bound to be different from the interpretations of others, potentially due to political bias. Richard E. Wiley, who served as chairman of the FCC from 1974 to 1977, has mentioned that finding the first example of undue executive branch influence over the FCC would take one back to the Roosevelt administration.<sup>126</sup> Reportedly, Roosevelt "was offended by the fact that he had been opposed by the vast majority of the newspapers in the United States and developed as his 'number-one priority,' which was a plan to retaliate by stripping newspaper owners of the ability to hold broadcasting licenses."<sup>127</sup> Wiley, a Republican appointed former chairman of the FCC, believed that the influence attributed to the executive branch over the FCC was overstated, and that it was instead Congress which had a significant control over FCC policies and decisions. However, there have been many examples of U.S. presidents taking direct or indirect action in manipulating political discourse through the FCC, particularly President Richard Nixon.

### **Nixon and the Limits of the Fairness Doctrine**

Nixon's entanglement with FCC matters has a lot to do with the policies that dictated the operation of the government agency in the past. A contentious issue regarding the FCC for several years was a policy known as the "fairness doctrine." Originally put in place in 1949 to address the power of the three largest broadcasters at the time (NBC, ABC and CBS), the Fairness Doctrine mandated that broadcast networks devote a certain amount of time to contrasting views on issues of public importance.<sup>128</sup> The purpose of the Fairness Doctrine was to ensure widely debated political issues were not decided by unfair coverage of one stance over the other. Although well-intentioned, the doctrine ultimately faltered in its implementation. The doctrine was upheld in *Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. Federal Communications Commission* (1969), but it was eventually repealed in 1987. The reason for its repeal has been attributed to the doctrine being used for wide-reaching censorship campaigns, including being utilized by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to mute conservative radio.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Federal Communications Commission. "Commissioners from 1934 to Present." Last modified June 5, 2013. Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.fcc.gov/commissioners-1934-present>.

<sup>127</sup> Wiley, Richard E. "Political Influence at the FCC." *Duke LJ* (1988): 280.

<sup>128</sup> "Fairness Doctrine | Ronald Reagan." Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/topic-guide/fairness-doctrine>.

<sup>129</sup> Cato at Liberty. "When Conservatives Forget the History of the Fairness Doctrine." Cato Institute, September 2, 2021. <https://www.cato.org/blog/when-conservatives-forget-history-fairness-doctrine>.

In addition, following critical coverage of the Vietnam War, Nixon's administration approached CBS and threatened them with Fairness Doctrine scrutiny if they did not cease their coverage of the U.S.' actions during the war. In response to this action, CBS executives were reportedly "accommodating, cordial, and almost apologetic," ultimately yielding to Nixon's demands.<sup>130</sup> This would not be the last battle Nixon and the FCC would have with the press, however.

## **The Watergate Scandal**

One of the most notable examples of the FCC being used as a weapon for political censorship came in 1972 in the midst of the Watergate investigation. Watergate was a series of interlocking political scandals from 1972 to 1974 that started with a burglary of Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters.<sup>131</sup> Over the following two years, accumulating evidence pointed to the White House's efforts both to conceal the burglary and to fund it, and even President Nixon himself became a subject of investigation. The most significant piece of evidence of Nixon's involvement in Watergate was the revelation of the "Nixon Tapes," which proved that Nixon had attempted to cover up the scandal, resulting in tremendous public outrage and leading to his resignation from the presidency on August 9, 1974.<sup>132</sup>

Around the time that the Nixon tapes were still fresh in the minds of Americans, the Nixon Administration learned of a Washington Post article that threatened to expose the President's involvement in the scandal. Among the many highly incriminating statements that surfaced from the Nixon tapes came one directly addressing this situation: "The main, main thing is The Post is going to have damnable, damnable problems out of this one. They have a television station ... And they're going to have to get it renewed."<sup>133</sup> Further evidence revealed the context of this quote, which was that President Nixon was planning to combat the Washington Post's revelation of the true nature of the Watergate scandal by seeking revocation of the company's television licenses by the FCC.<sup>134</sup> By doing this, the President hoped to squeeze the Washington Post financially in order to keep them silent about their knowledge of the scandal. Nixon did this at a time when television stations made up a majority of the revenue that the Post was drawing in, as well as doing it soon after the Post went public with their stocks. Although the Post stood its ground and moved forward with the Watergate story, it did so at considerable financial cost. Attorneys close to Nixon and then Attorney General John Mitchell eventually did challenge the Washington Post's Florida license renewals before the FCC, causing

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<sup>130</sup> Cato at Liberty. "When Conservatives Forget the History of the Fairness Doctrine." Cato Institute, September 2, 2021. <https://www.cato.org/blog/when-conservatives-forget-history-fairness-doctrine>.

<sup>131</sup> "Watergate Scandal | Summary, History, Timeline, Deep Throat, & Facts | Britannica." October 24, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Watergate-Scandal>.

<sup>132</sup> Watergate Scandal | Summary, History, Timeline, Deep Throat, & Facts | Britannica." October 24, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Watergate-Scandal>.

<sup>133</sup> Bazelon, David L. "FCC regulation of the Telecommunications Press." Duke LJ (1975): 213.

<sup>134</sup> Carl Bernstein. "Watergate's Last Chapter." Accessed November 3, 2025. <https://www.carlbernstein.com/watergates-last-chapter-vanity-fair-october-2005>.

the company's stock price to fall by more than 50% and costing the modern equivalent of \$6 million in legal fees.<sup>135</sup> This example highlighted the powerful role the president can play in moderating public political sentiment simply through their control over the FCC.

## **Conclusion**

The history of the Federal Communications Commission demonstrates how a regulatory body intended to manage communication infrastructure can also become a tool for political influence and censorship. From Roosevelt's attempts to punish dissenting newspapers to Nixon's use of the FCC to suppress critical coverage during Watergate, the FCC has often operated at the intersection of media, politics, and power. The recent suspension of Jimmy Kimmel's show illustrates that this dynamic is not a relic of the past, as federal oversight of media continues to shape political discourse, often in ways that provoke public debate and controversy. Understanding the FCC's historical role in regulating speech, enforcing or repealing policies like the Fairness Doctrine, and interacting with the executive branch provides crucial context for evaluating modern incidents of media suppression and political influence. Ultimately, these examples underscore the need for vigilance in protecting both the independence of media and the principles of free expression in a society where government agencies wield substantial influence over what reaches the public.

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<sup>135</sup> Knight First Amendment Institute. "A Cyberbully in the Oval Office." Accessed November 4, 2025. <http://knightcolumbia.org/content/a-cyberbully-in-the-oval-office>.

## Faith on the 50-Yard Line: The Impacts of *Kennedy v. Bremerton*

Caroline Lufitz

### Introduction

The overturn of *Roe v. Wade* drew average Americans' attention back to the Supreme Court. The results of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) raised concerns about the legitimacy of the Supreme Court among many Americans. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that Americans increasingly believe that the Supreme Court justices are not apolitical, with 86% of Americans stating the justices should keep their political views out of their judicial opinions.<sup>136</sup> However, the *Dobbs* case is not the only consequential case heard by the new conservative Trump-appointed court era. In fact, the case *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022) broke down the precedent of the separation of church and state in American public schools, a far more long-established principle than that in *Roe v. Wade*. The current Supreme Court has continued to overrule legal precedent, going against *stare decisis*, drastically altering the meaning of the freedoms for Americans, and pushing a political agenda.

### The First Amendment and Legal Precedent

The broadness of the religion clauses in the First Amendment has led to years of legal battles. The language: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,"<sup>137</sup> is known as the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. The Establishment Clause was used to argue against the legality of public schools' actions, including school prayer, as well as the government's interactions with private schools, most notably government and taxpayer funding for religious schools. The test for government action emerged from the case of *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). This *Lemon* test has three parts: whether a law has a legitimate secular purpose, does not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion, and does not result in excessive entanglement of government and religion.<sup>138</sup> It is important to note that the Supreme Court introduced various other tests, including the endorsement and coercion test, which asks if an activity could be interpreted as a school endorsement of religion or if students were coerced to participate in the activity.<sup>139</sup> Despite these other tests, the *Lemon* test had not been overturned and was still

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<sup>136</sup> Copeland, Joseph. "Favorable Views of Supreme Court Remain near Historic Low." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 3 Sept. 2025,

[www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/03/favorable-views-of-supreme-court-remain-near-historic-low/](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/09/03/favorable-views-of-supreme-court-remain-near-historic-low/).

<sup>137</sup> Overview of the religion clauses (establishment and free exercise clauses) | constitution annotated | congress.gov | library of Congress. Accessed November 6, 2025.

[https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-2-1/ALDE\\_00013267/](https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-2-1/ALDE_00013267/).

<sup>138</sup> *Lemon v. Kurtzman* | 403 U.S. 602 (1971) | justia U.S. Supreme Court Center. Accessed November 6, 2025.

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/403/602/>.

<sup>139</sup> Ruello, Jack. "Looking Forward After *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*." Louisiana Law Review, January 17, 2023. [https://lawreview.law.lsu.edu/archives/2960#\\_ftnref58](https://lawreview.law.lsu.edu/archives/2960#_ftnref58).

jurisprudence. The Kennedy case demonstrates the current court's legal analysis of how to interpret the Establishment Clause if it is met with a free exercise argument.

### **Summary of Kennedy v. Bremerton School District (2022)**

This case revolves around Joseph Kennedy, a football coach in Washington. After each game, he would pray on one knee on the 50-yard line. While this started as a private moment, students began to join him. He would also include motivational speeches to the players in his prayers. Besides the post-game prayer, he would also sometimes lead a prayer in the locker room either before or after games. The school district sent a letter to the coach that these displays may violate the Establishment Clause and asked the coach to keep prayers ‘inconspicuous.’<sup>140</sup> After initially cooperating with the order, Kennedy decided to go back to his ‘public’ displays of prayer, for which he was then suspended. Kennedy sued the school district, claiming that suppressing his prayer, his free exercise, and his freedom of speech rights were being violated. The judges in both the trial court and the court of appeals found that Kennedy’s freedom of speech claim was invalid because his speech was government speech and not private speech; therefore, it did not have freedom of speech protection. The suspension was valid because it was due to the constitutional and legal risks of Kennedy’s religious conduct. Kennedy then appealed to the Supreme Court.

### **The Supreme Court’s Ruling**

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Kennedy and honored his free exercise claim. This sets out a new standard that when the Establishment Clause comes into contention with a free exercise claim, the court is more likely to rule in favor of the individual’s free exercise. However, the surprising aspect is the court’s overruling of both the endorsement and Lemon tests. The court replaces these tests with the idea that the Establishment Clause should be analyzed in “reference to historical practices and understandings.”<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, the court states that the understanding of the clause must “reflect the understandings of the founding fathers.”<sup>142</sup> This is a very broad framework for interpretation compared to the prior tests and subsequently makes it easier to incorporate religion into schools. This test also leaves questions about strict constructionism and how to properly reflect the ideals of the Constitution’s framers.

### **Impact on Future Cases**

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<sup>140</sup> Epstein, Lee, Kevin T. McGuire, and Thomas G. Walker. Constitutional law for a changing America. rights, Liberties, and Justice. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, an Imprint of Sage, 2025.

<sup>141</sup> Epstein, Lee, Kevin T. McGuire, and Thomas G. Walker. Constitutional law for a changing America. rights, Liberties, and Justice. Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, an Imprint of Sage, 2025.

<sup>142</sup> “Kennedy v. Bremerton School District – a Sledgehammer to the Bedrock of Nonestablishment: ACS.” American Constitution Society, June 28, 2022.

<https://www.acslaw.org/expertforum/kennedy-v-bremerton-school-district-a-sledgehammer-to-the-bedrock-of-nonestablishment/>.

The emphasis on history, specifically history as seen by the authors of the Constitution, is deeply problematic. There is no way to know what the authors would think about current politics. Strict construction, the idea of looking at cases through their historical views, is an avenue for justices to inject conservative views into decisions. This justification has allowed the Supreme Court justices to blow up legal precedent. The historical framework presented in *Kennedy* is akin to the rationale used in *Dobbs*, which states that a right can only be conceived from the Constitution if it is “deeply rooted in [our] history and tradition.”<sup>143</sup> This begs the question of how decades of legal precedent, whether regarding the right to an abortion or the separation of church and state in schools, does not show that these rights are deeply rooted in history? There continues to be religion present across public schools, from elementary schools to universities. This emerging ideology has effects that go beyond freedom of religion cases. The Supreme Court denied hearing a case that would have overruled on religious grounds, which would have overturned the right to same-sex marriage.<sup>144</sup> However, the justices did so without comment, which may insinuate they have a critical outlook on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage. It is not far-fetched to think that a similar case, with people validating same sex discrimination due to religious reasons, could eventually make its way to the Supreme Court. The justices would have multiple options of rationale to overrule precedent once again, including arguing for the importance of free exercise rights like those in the *Kennedy* case. Overall, the outcome of *Kennedy v. Bremerton* reinforces conservative politics on the Supreme Court as the majority continues to use this historical outlook to repeatedly overrule precedent and put civil liberties in danger.

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<sup>143</sup> 19-1392 *dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* ( ... Accessed November 7, 2025. [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392\\_6j37.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf).

<sup>144</sup> Kapasi, Alyssa. “Supreme Court Declines to Revisit Gay Marriage Decision.” NPR, November 10, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/11/10/nx-s1-5604293/scotus-rejects-gay-marriage-appeal>.

## Trumpian Authoritarianism: Is There a Comparison?

Patrick Minnerly

### Introduction

Throughout history, authoritarian and antidemocratic governments from different countries across the globe have been compared to one another. In accordance with this constant comparison, Donald Trump's second presidency has faced much questioning over whether his administration's policies harken back<sup>145</sup> to the ideology of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as other authoritarian regimes, including a more recent example<sup>146</sup> in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Comparisons are also often made to present-day autocratic or autocratic-leaning governments, such as those in Hungary<sup>147</sup> and India. Given that such comparisons cover sensitive and difficult topics, it is worth exploring the connections between history and the present when it comes to autocratic developments and whether attempting to equate those two periods is helpful or detrimental to the discourse.

### American Authoritarianism

First, Trump's authoritarianism needs to be defined. There is already no shortage of work documenting the administration's antidemocratic policies. An October joint statement from hundreds of former U.S. national security officials assessed that the overlapping effects of Trump's actions were "placing the nation on a trajectory of competitive authoritarianism."<sup>148</sup> The essential idea of competitive authoritarianism boils down to a system where democratic institutions continue to exist nominally or in a weakened state, but the actual power lies almost completely with the head of state. Looking through the first nine months of Trump's second presidency, we can see that U.S. institutions are still somewhat functioning. Congress ostensibly has the sole power to make and pass laws, and the courts have been allowed to consider cases and deliver judgments. Yet Trump has worked consistently to erode the rule of law. He has chosen to ignore congressional funding in decision-making, such as when eight billion dollars in contracts to combat climate change were cut<sup>149</sup> in October by the Office of Management and Budget. With Congress' power of the purse diminished, Trump's deluge of executive orders and memorandums have concentrated an almost legislative function within the office of the presidency. In addition, extensive gerrymandering and political partisanship has caused a

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<sup>145</sup> Beauchamp, Zack. "A leading Holocaust historian just seriously compared the US to Nazi Germany". Vox, October 5, 2018

<sup>146</sup> Kilgore, Ed. "Trump Doesn't Just Like Putin – He's Like Putin". *Intelligencer*, February 26, 2025

<sup>147</sup> Shapiro, Jeremy & Vegh, Zsuzsanna. "The Orbanization of America: Hungary's lessons for Donald Trump". *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 9, 2024

<sup>148</sup> "Accelerating Authoritarian Dynamics". *The Steady State*, October 16, 2025

<sup>149</sup> Becket, Stefan & Quinn, Melissa. "Trump administration cancels \$8 billion for climate projects in latest shutdown cuts". *CBS News*, October 2, 2025



distinctive weakening<sup>150</sup> of Congress' lawmaking abilities. The current and 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, already nearing the halfway point of its term, has only enacted 36 pieces of legislation. By contrast, the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress enacted 274 pieces of legislation during its full term; the highwater mark of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was set by the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2000 with 604. The government shutdown of fall 2025 laid bare that Congress is increasingly unable to reach agreements on bills, and Trump's executive orders and unilateral actions have filled this space<sup>151</sup>, marking a significant overreach into duties controlled by the legislature.

On the judicial side, Trump has often openly defied the decisions of the courts and has used the "shadow docket" of the Supreme Court, which allows the nine justices to come to a decision with little explanation, to give credence to his agenda. Considering that the Supreme Court is split 6-3 in favor of conservatives, and three of those justices were appointed by President Trump, the nation's highest authority on constitutional matters is severely compromised. Since the Supreme Court has shifted heavily<sup>152</sup> to the right with these new appointees, its ideological bias has dramatically increased, which at the same time has decreased its legitimacy with a large portion of the populace. Combined with Trump's reticence to accept court decisions he deems unfavorable to the administration, judicial independence is not the bulwark it appears to be. Since both the legislative and judicial branches have been weakened at the expense of the executive branch – with the judiciary negatively affected by Trump's influence and the legislature losing its authority – the U.S. is on the way toward autocracy.

### **The Much-Discussed Comparison**

The most explosive – and most controversial – historical comparison to the second Trump presidency is the Nazi takeover of Germany. When the Nazis took power in 1933, led by the new chancellor Adolf Hitler, they swiftly dismantled the functionality of democratic institutions, including Germany's legislative body, the Reichstag. Within a year and a half, any semblance of the institutions which had governed the former Weimar republic were gone. Instead, Hitler reigned as Fuhrer – simultaneously chancellor, president, and commander of the army.

The Nazi ideology and method of rallying around a charismatic leader bears some striking similarities to Trumpism. For one, both movements carried out attempted coups, trying to overthrow the democratic process by weaponizing the help of their supporters.<sup>153</sup> They were

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<sup>150</sup> Hyde, Aryanna & Santana, Edwin. "Gerrymandering, Turnout and Lazy Legislators". *MIT Election Data and Science Lab*, September 9, 2025

<sup>151</sup> "The Trump Administration is Purposely Inflicting Unnecessary Pain During the Shutdown". *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, October 24, 2025.

<sup>152</sup> El-Bawab, Nadine. "Supreme Court's dramatic rightward turn may undermine its political distance". *ABC News*, September 6, 2022

<sup>153</sup> Gumpert, David. "The Uncanny Resemblance of the Beer Hall Putsch and the January 6 Insurrection". *The Nation*, January 3, 2022

then swept to power at least somewhat democratically – although the Nazi party achieved a plurality of seats in the Reichstag, Hitler still had to be appointed chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg. The Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 and the 2021 January 6 riots reflected the desire to seize power unlawfully and undemocratically, and this would go on to shape both governments. Additionally, the leaders of the two movements both express or expressed a hostility to minorities within the state’s borders – for Hitler, this was primarily the Jews, who he blamed for the country’s woes; for Trump, primarily Hispanic undocumented immigrants have been the scapegoat<sup>154</sup> for issues like crime plaguing the U.S.

Yet the comparison is far from perfect, and we should take attempts to conflate the Nazis with Trump with a grain of salt. The Germany Hitler took over had only been democratic for less than two decades and had previously been ruled by an autocratic Kaiser, thus paving the way for an extremely swift destruction of the country’s political system. Just two months after taking power, Hitler already had full control<sup>155</sup> of the legislative process. This is a timeline that the Trump administration has simply not been able to replicate, nor could it have done so. The U.S. system of checks and balances, in place for nearly 250 years, has prevented such a blatant takeover from occurring. Instead, Trump has been forced to chip away at democratic norms.

### **The Russian Example**

Perhaps a more instructive comparison can be found in Russia’s Cold War aftermath. When Vladimir Putin was elected democratically to the presidency in 1999, he soon began consolidating power and cementing himself<sup>156</sup> as a near-dictator. The pace of this centralization was relatively slow and often reliant on his promises to eradicate terrorists in the separatist region of Chechnya – a movement that Putin brutally crushed with the destruction of Chechnya’s capital, Grozny, in 2000. As with Putin’s early regime, Trump has often used security threats to gather more executive power – for example, Trump’s assertion that the U.S. is in armed conflict with narco-terrorists affiliated with drug cartels and gangs such as Tren de Aragua has enabled him to authorize military strikes without relying on a declaration of war from Congress. This bypassing of legislative authority echoes Putin’s own sidestepping of his government. In addition, both leaders explored or have explored ways to get around their nations’ limits on presidential terms. In Putin’s case, he has remade Russia’s constitution to essentially eliminate<sup>157</sup> restrictions on how long a president can serve, while in America ideas are still being kicked around by Trump and members of the Republican Party.

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<sup>154</sup> Hesson, Ted & Rosenberg, Mica. “Explainer: Trump says migrants are fueling violent crime. Here’s what the research shows”. *Reuters*, April 11, 2024

<sup>155</sup> Ryback, Timothy. “How Hitler Used Democracy to Take Power”. *TIME*, April 26, 2024

<sup>156</sup> Moulton, Cyrus. “‘It’s a remarkable feat.’ In power since 1999, how Vladimir Putin became a Russian leader rivaled only by Josef Stalin”. *Northeastern Global News*, March 21, 2024

<sup>157</sup> “The Evolution of Putinism: Constitutional Change: Constitutional Change and Regime Stability”. *The Wilson Center*, March 2, 2021

However, there are still issues with finding the parallels between Putin's Russia and Trump's America. Russia's government was highly unstable before Putin took over; only eight years had passed since the Soviet Union collapsed, and a vacuum of power emerged in Russia. The democratic experiment, as it was in Germany during the 1920s, was extremely nascent, meaning that Russia was used to the rule of one. In this context, Putin's rise can almost be seen as a return to the status quo – another strand in Russia's long string of autocratic rulers. Meanwhile, America has the opposite history working in its favor – Trump is fighting against two and a half centuries of democratic ideals and principles. For instance, the U.S. Constitution is not so easily amended as the Russian one, requiring three-fourths of the states to ratify<sup>158</sup> it. By contrast, Putin only needed a majority of voters. While Putin went with the tide, Trump is going against it.

### **Hungary: A Present-Day Parallel?**

Beyond the historical comparisons, Trump's government has been compared to other countries where democratic backsliding has occurred in the present day. One such country is Hungary, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who recently received praise from Trump and has served as leader of Hungary since 2010. In the years since taking power, Orban has systematically moved Hungary into the “competitive authoritarian” camp, dismantling the nation's legal system and rigging elections so his party, Fidesz, can maintain control.<sup>159</sup> One of the most crucial parallels is the leader's relationship with the media. In Hungary, Orban passed a law that politicized the main media regulator, the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, putting it directly in the hands of the government. His allies in business have also periodically bought out news outlets – recently, the pro-Orban company Indamedia purchased<sup>160</sup> Blikk, Hungary's most-read newspaper. Trump has carried out similar acts, installing the partisan Republican Brendan Carr as Federal Communications Commission chair and influencing business decisions by major U.S. media companies. One such example is the recent merger between the media giants Skydance and Paramount, which owns CBS. Skydance is owned<sup>161</sup> by pro-Trump billionaire David Ellison, and Carr, who had ultimate control over approving the merger, enthusiastically approved of it. Since then, reports have emerged that Ellison is also looking to buy Warner Bros., which has control over CNN. The potential expansion of this pro-Trump media echoes Orban's allies' business moves in Hungary, beginning the process of effective state control over the media.

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<sup>158</sup> “Article V: Amendment Process”. *National Constitution Center*, 2025

<sup>159</sup> “Orban: The Art of Eroding a Democracy”. *Civil Rights Defenders*, 2025

<sup>160</sup> Garamvolgyi, Flora. “Shock as Orban allies take ownership of Hungary's most-read newspaper”. *The Guardian*, Nov. 5, 2025

<sup>161</sup> Stelter, Brian. “David Ellison may have a ‘Trump card’ – literally – in Warner Bros. Discover pursuit”. *CNN*, October 23, 2025

Through the similarities in the macro level of deconstructing democratic institutions such as elections and the judiciary, as well as the details of media suppression and control, the example of Hungary rings as a far better parallel for Trump's authoritarian government. Thus, it is no surprise Trump has praised<sup>162</sup> Orban as a "great leader." The two governments mirror each other, with Trump following in the Hungarian prime minister's quest to make an "illiberal democracy," as Orban himself termed<sup>163</sup> it. However, the system that Orban has created – and Trump is trying to create in the U.S. – represents a tendency toward autocracy. In addition, Hungary's recent transition to authoritarianism underscores the power of its comparison to America; democracy may not be around forever, and it can disappear quickly when threatened enough.

## Conclusion

No attempt to compare the governments of different countries is perfect, and these flaws are amplified when looking back into history. Comparisons of Trump's second presidency to the Nazi regime or Putin's takeover of Russia are interesting, but they cannot provide an entirely accurate picture, as the situations those authoritarian changes occurred in were much different than America's current scenario. Instead of reaching into the past, examining present-day or recent examples of autocratic takeover is a more instructive process, especially when tailoring the scenarios to Trump's brand of competitive authoritarianism. Ultimately, these kinds of comparisons are helpful, since they allow us to put Trump in the context of the current world environment.

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<sup>162</sup> Hutzler, Alexandra. "Trump heaps praise on Hungary's Viktor Orban in White House meeting". *ABC News*, November 7, 2025

<sup>163</sup> Plattner F., Mark. "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right". *Journal of Democracy*, January 2019

## **When Work And Family Can't Coexist: How Labor Structures Fuel South Korea's 4B Movement**

*Branaugh Morton*

### **Background**

In the late 1950s, the average births for women in South Korea sat at six, and has declined to 0.73 as of 2023.<sup>164</sup> This figure is significantly below the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) standard for population sustenance, which will lead to substantial consequences on South Korea's economy and society before the end of the 21st century. Labor market conditions have primarily shaped these fertility trends with long hours of work, high job insecurity, and persisting gender inequalities. These circumstances have primarily impaired the ability of women to balance work and a family, affecting decisions made about marriage and childbearing. To counter the decline in fertility, Seoul has been implementing policy to counter the decline of fertility rates through providing tax and social insurance benefits, extending childcare services, and expanding support for pregnancy and childbirth. Despite these initiatives, institutional obstacles remain an obstacle to family planning. For example, while the employment rate of women sits at 61.7%, the employment gap between women and men is ranked the highest in the OECD since 2022.<sup>165</sup> In recent years, these accumulated pressures have led to the emergence of the "4B" movement, a rejection of dating, marriage, and motherhood as a response to worsening inequalities and economic conditions. South Korea's decreasing birth rate and the rise of this protest result less from personal choices and instead from structural labor inequalities that make marriage and childrearing more economically disadvantageous.

### **Labor Market Inequalities and Gendered Work Structures**

In 1987, South Korea began a shift toward neoliberal economic reform, marked by reduced state involvement and increased market competition, to respond to the changing international political economy. The Chaebols—large, family-controlled South Korean conglomerates—adopted multiple American and Japanese strategies by shifting “from growth to profit-orientedness” to adapt to globalization.<sup>166</sup> This produced a pro-business strategy after the 1997 crisis when the currency collapsed, resulting in bankruptcies and an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout.<sup>167</sup> Labor consequences of neoliberal reforms were also devastating,

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<sup>164</sup> Choi, Sunyong, Sunyu Ham, Yoonyoung Yang, and Jon Pareliussen. “Women's Employment and Fertility in Korea.” OECD Economics Department Working Papers, October 17, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1787/ac53879e-en>.

<sup>165</sup> Lee, Sam-Sik. “Causes of Low Fertility and Comprehensive Policy Responses.” *The Japanese Journal of Population* 7, no. 1 (March 2009).

[https://www.ipss.go.jp/webjad/webjournal.files/population/2009\\_4/Web%20Journal\\_03.pdf](https://www.ipss.go.jp/webjad/webjournal.files/population/2009_4/Web%20Journal_03.pdf).

<sup>166</sup> Kim, Kyung-Pil. “THE NEOLIBERAL STRATEGY OF SOUTH KOREAN CONGLOMERATES.” *World Review of Political Economy* 13, no. 1 (2022): 97–117. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48681600>.

<sup>167</sup> Yoo Sun, Kim. 2021. “The Non-Regular Work in South Korea.” Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/seoul/18415.pdf>.

resulting in mass layoffs and companies replacing employees with nonregular workers. This reconstruction ultimately negatively impacted working conditions that directly shape women's employment stability and reproductive choices. Across demographic lines, results show that precarious work, defined as non-standard or temporary employment,<sup>168</sup> is at the expense of South Korean women. While one in three men of the population in Korea are non-regular workers, women hold a visibly higher rate of one in two as of 2020.<sup>169</sup> These patterns indicate that precarious employment has become increasingly feminized, highlighting occupational segregation and inequality in the South Korean labor market.

In the country's labor force as Stansbury, Kirkegaard, and Dynan (2023) demonstrate, South Korea has one of the largest employment gaps despite having one of the most educated female workforces, with South Korean women's unemployment rate ranking 20% below men.<sup>170</sup> An analysis of South Korean labor survey data dating 2010 to 2019 shows these differences cannot fully be explained by variations in education, industry, or occupation, highlighting the main influence stems from societal and institutional norms. Approximately 60% of nonworking women cite child and eldercare as the primary reason they left or have not entered the workforce, or driving them into temporary positions that pay lower rates.<sup>171</sup> However, even for women without children, pay and job security gaps are still evident, suggesting discrimination is not confined to family dynamics but rather a result of the broader structure of the labor market. Gendered labor expectations and institutional structures continue to reinforce occupational segregation, limiting career opportunities for women and reinforcing generational economic inequalities.

## **Cultural and Social Pressures on Women**

Deeply embedded traditional norms in South Korea continue to pressure women to conform to prescribed roles despite younger generations increasingly pushing back. Survey results reveal significant divides between demographic groups, with younger and unmarried men showing lower support for policies that advance women's empowerment.<sup>172</sup> The "marriage

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<sup>168</sup> Yoo Sun, Kim. 2021. "The Non-Regular Work in South Korea." Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/seoul/18415.pdf>.

<sup>169</sup> Shin, Kwang-Yeong. 2012. "Economic Crisis, Neoliberal Reforms, and the Rise of Precarious Work in South Korea." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (3): 335–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764212466241>.

<sup>170</sup> Stansbury, Anna, Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, and Karen E Dynan. 2023. "Gender Gaps in South Korea's Labour Market: Children Explain Most of the Gender Employment Gap, but Little of the Gender Wage Gap." *Applied Economics Letters* 31 (17): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2023.2206103>

<sup>171</sup> Stansbury, Anna, Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, and Karen E Dynan. 2023. "Gender Gaps in South Korea's Labour Market: Children Explain Most of the Gender Employment Gap, but Little of the Gender Wage Gap." *Applied Economics Letters* 31 (17): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2023.2206103>

<sup>172</sup> Mo, Cecilia Hyunjung, and Soosun You. 2025. "The Fight over Gender Equality in South Korea." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 16, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/the-fight-over-gender-equality-in-south-korea?lang=en>.

market squeeze,” defined by Soosun You as a glut of men in the dating landscape, has led to unmarried men opposing reforms related to public institutions, corporate leadership, and protections against violence. This is not necessarily a result of economic status, but is instead due to men in their 20s holding more conservative gender views than men 60 and older while strongly feeling that they have become the newly marginalized group.<sup>173</sup> Mo and You additionally found that this age group inaccurately judges the extent of gender inequality in almost 75% of surveys, contributing to the misconception that equality has been successfully achieved. Men with a larger “status aspiration gap” – the distance between men’s perception of where they are versus where they believe they should be – were also ranked 14 percent more likely to show hostile and modern sexist attitudes.<sup>174</sup> The data links social and cultural pressures to neoliberal labor structures, contributing to findings that express that competition influences attitudes which places more biased expectations on women.

In South Korea’s labor market, the transition from the professional environment to forced domesticity after childbirth remains stark. In the raw gender employment gap alone, women aged 25-54 are 26 percentage points less likely to be employed than men of the same age group regardless of other factors such as occupation, education, etc.<sup>175</sup> The study additionally concluded that women’s “likelihood of working falls substantially with the arrival of their first child and increases again only very slowly in the five years following the birth.”<sup>176</sup> These patterns highlight the prominent cultural expectation that women are expected to either sacrifice a serious career or motherhood and cannot have both without considerable trade-offs. Because of the vulnerabilities on women’s labor market status that marriage or childbirth creates, it disproportionately causes lower wages as their employment tends to be irregular.<sup>177</sup> Unlike other nations where part-time work or flexibility in the workplace can minimize these effects, the rigid corporate culture in South Korea and long hours heavily reinforce the female disadvantage. As a result, women have limited opportunities to advance their career, and the expectation they will transition to less secure, less-paid work after marriage and childbirth remains deeply rooted.

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<sup>173</sup> Jung, Han Wool. 2023. “A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men’s Anti-Feminism and Male Victim Ideology.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (14). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1230577>.

<sup>174</sup> Mo, Cecilia Hyunjung, and Soosun You. 2025. “The Fight over Gender Equality in South Korea.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 16, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/04/the-fight-over-gender-equality-in-south-korea?lang=en>.

<sup>175</sup> Stansbury, Anna, Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, and Karen E Dynan. 2023. “Gender Gaps in South Korea’s Labour Market: Children Explain Most of the Gender Employment Gap, but Little of the Gender Wage Gap.” *Applied Economics Letters* 31 (17): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2023.2206103>.

<sup>176</sup> Mangelsdorf, Martha. 2023. “Understanding South Korea’s Gender Gaps in Employment and Wages | MIT Sloan.” [mitsloan.mit.edu](https://mitsloan.mit.edu/centers-initiatives/institute-work-and-employment-research/understanding-south-koreas-gender-gaps-employment-and-wages). September 19, 2023. <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/centers-initiatives/institute-work-and-employment-research/understanding-south-koreas-gender-gaps-employment-and-wages>.

<sup>177</sup> Lee, Sophia Seung-Yoon, and Yuhwi Kim. 2020. “Female Outsiders in South Korea’s Dual Labour Market: Challenges of Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value.” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 62 (4): 651–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185620931138>.

Hobong-je, a traditional workplace system in Korea that determines an employee's salary and rank based on seniority, predominates culture across corporations.<sup>178</sup> Since this arrangement benefits regular workers through increasing wages over time, workplace stability, and a more defined career progression path, their irregular counterparts do not receive the same framework and benefits throughout their tenure. Unequal wage-setting institutions reinforce the undervaluation of feminized work, creating pay disparities. Increasing transparency in wage systems and nonstandard employment is essential for addressing gendered pay gaps. However, due to much resistance and the absence of these reforms, women have begun to recognize that their labor will maintain its undervalued state, despite high effort and qualifications.

### **The Rise of the 4B Movement and its Political Meaning**

In response to gender inequality and state-driven familial expectations, the radical “4B” movement gained momentum in South Korea in the late 2010s. The four key principles include: no dating (biyeonae), no sex (bisekseu), no marriage (bihon), and no children (bichulsan).<sup>179</sup> Collectively, the cause rejects the traditional patriarchy while embracing the idea that women should strive for economic self-reliance and emotional autonomy.<sup>180</sup> The consequences of wage gaps and temporary labor conditions have led marriage and motherhood to be increasingly viewed as a professionally disadvantageous choice, particularly resonant with young women.<sup>181</sup> 4B supporters additionally challenge pronatalist policies pushed out by the South Korean government by refusing to allow women's value to be tied to reproduction through online activism, rejecting traditional expectations, and protesting.<sup>182</sup> Instead of deviating from traditional norms, the underlying cause of declining birth rates is fundamentally based in discrimination against hiring women due to women commonly being discouraged from entering the workforce.<sup>183</sup> The government's rhetoric encouraging women to have children to save the nation contradicts with their lived experiences where they are penalized for pregnancy and caregiving. This disconnect has reinforced the belief that reproduction is more valuable to the

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<sup>178</sup> Whitehouse, Gillian, and Meg Smith. 2020. “Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value, Wage-Setting and the Gender Pay Gap.” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 62 (4): 519–32.

<sup>179</sup> Lee, Jieun, and Euisol Jeong. 2021. “The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future With/in a Non Reproductive Future in Korea.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30 (5): 633–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097>.

<sup>180</sup> Lee, Jieun, and Euisol Jeong. 2021. “The 4B Movement: Envisioning a Feminist Future With/in a Non Reproductive Future in Korea.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 30 (5): 633–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097>.

<sup>181</sup> Rashid, Raphael. 2024. “As 4B Takes the World by Storm, South Korea Is Grappling with a Backlash against Feminism.” *The Guardian*. November 15, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/15/4b-south-korea-feminist-movement-donald-trump-election-backlash>.

<sup>182</sup> Rashid, Raphael. 2024. “As 4B Takes the World by Storm, South Korea Is Grappling with a Backlash against Feminism.” *The Guardian*. November 15, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/15/4b-south-korea-feminist-movement-donald-trump-election-backlash>.

<sup>183</sup> Zimmermann, Brianna. 2023. “South Korea's 4B Movement Lowers the Birth Rate in a Fight for Gender Equality.” *The International Affairs Review*. The International Affairs Review. August 8, 2023. <https://www.iar-gwu.org/blog/iar-web/south-koreas-4b>.



nation than the economic rights or career advancements.<sup>184</sup> However, activists have faced continuous backlash from society, with critics arguing that radical feminists are promoting hatred toward men by publicly rejecting heterosexual relationships.<sup>185</sup> Nearly a quarter of South Korean men in their 20s were categorized as “anti-femme” warriors, meaning they embody anti-feminism and victim ideologies, believing that society is more unfavorable to men.<sup>186</sup> Some assertions against the 4B movement include the belief that the pay gap is fair due to women’s lack of competence, or that sexism is no longer a present issue in current society and has now led to radical feminists making unjust demands.<sup>187</sup>

Hostility toward 4B activists represents how the direct challenge to gender and economic hierarchies in South Korean women’s shift to rejecting marriage and child-rearing sparks resentment and conservatism. As more women are choosing to not partake in a system that erodes their professional and personal autonomies, opposition to contradictory pronatalist campaigns and continuous labor discrimination have led to collective acts of defiance against inequality.

## **Conclusion and the Implications of the 4B Movement**

South Korean labor market inequalities have become a primary force in influencing women’s social political choices in the 21st century. As the wage gap widens, aiming to achieve financial independence has led South Korean women to realize that the structural factors working against their professional interests make managing traditional expectations of motherhood increasingly incompatible. These pressures not only alter individual life plans but also show the limits of a society that depends on women’s underpaid and unpaid labor while receiving few protections in return.

The 4B movement responds not as an isolated trend but as an intentional response to a labor system that fails to offer support or economic stability to women. Its emphasis on resisting patriarchal rules shows the use of autonomy as a political tool. Their goal of independence is seen as a threat to deeply rooted gender hierarchies, leading to groups expressing public criticism and anti-feminist sentiment. In the future, movements similar to 4B will likely grow, especially in other nations battling similar issues with both precarity in women’s employment and fertility decline. If reforms fail to improve conditions for women, comparable acts of resistance can be

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<sup>184</sup> Jeong, Jihye. 2015. “Boycotting Men? How the 4B Feminist Rebellion Is Taking on Patriarchy.” AFSEE. 2015. <https://afsee.atlanticfellows.lse.ac.uk/en-gb/blogs/how-the-4b-feminist-rebellion-is-taking-on-patriarchy>.

<sup>185</sup> Jung, Han Wool. 2023. “A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men’s Anti-Feminism and Male Victim Ideology.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (14). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1230577>.

<sup>186</sup> Jung, Han Wool. 2023. “A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men’s Anti-Feminism and Male Victim Ideology.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (14). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1230577>.

<sup>187</sup> Jung, Han Wool. 2023. “A New Variation of Modern Prejudice: Young Korean Men’s Anti-Feminism and Male Victim Ideology.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (14). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1230577>.

expected to intensify and spread. However, sustainable change may only become a possibility when economic security, autonomy, and equality for women become necessary prerequisites for a nation's stability instead of obstacles to it.

# More Than A Laughing Matter: The Influence of Cartoons on American Politics

Olivia Ray

## Introduction

From the earliest days of American politics to the meme-saturated feeds of the 21st century, political cartoons have served as a powerful form of visual and humorous commentary. Through seemingly comedic illustrations and caricatures, artists have been able to utilize symbolic visual elements to convey political and social messages on current events. The word *caricature* itself originates from the Italian words “carico” and “caricare,” which best translates “to load” or “to exaggerate.”<sup>188</sup> While they are entertaining in their exaggerated style and humorous appeal, they play an important role in implementing freedom of speech and of the press by exercising necessary political discourse.<sup>189</sup> For centuries, these cartoons have shaped how citizens understand political candidates, interpret scandals, and even assign blame or praise. They wield a quiet power as they guide audiences toward a particular narrative through wit. In American politics, the pen may not be mightier than the sword, but the cartoonist’s pen comes awfully close.

## Background

Editorial and political cartoons are derived from a family of satirical art that dates back to the beginning of humanity and ranges across a variety of cultures. For instance, the earliest political cartoon dates as far back as 1360 BC when an unnamed artist in Ancient Egypt mocked King Tutankhamen’s unpopular father-in-law, Ikhnaton.<sup>190</sup> While satirical art forms mocking those in power have existed for centuries, the invention of the printing press around the mid-1400s revolutionized the political cartoon, enabling newspapers and magazines to be more readily available to not just the elite, but ordinary people as well.<sup>191</sup> The rise of printing technology brought with it the widespread emergence of broadsheets — editorial productions that distilled current events, often relying on both caricatures and visual metaphors.<sup>192</sup> The use of these caricatures became more popularized as they were quickly perceived as easily understandable, widely accessible, and a highly entertaining form of political analysis. As

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<sup>188</sup> Zarifian, Mohsen, et al. “The Evolution of Cartoons throughout the History of Mass Communication.” *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 12 Dec. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.13187/ijmil.2022.2.629>.

<sup>189</sup> Knieper, Thomas. “Political Cartoon.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 20 Feb. 2018, [www.britannica.com/topic/political-cartoon](http://www.britannica.com/topic/political-cartoon).

<sup>190</sup> Hopkins, Melissa. “Brief History of the Editorial Cartoon · Epidemics, Economics, and Elections · RIT Archives Digital Exhibits.” *Archives-Exhibits.rit.edu*, [archives-exhibits.rit.edu/exhibits/show/editorial-cartoons/essays/history-cartoons](http://archives-exhibits.rit.edu/exhibits/show/editorial-cartoons/essays/history-cartoons).

<sup>191</sup> Danjoux, Ilan. “Reconsidering the Decline of the Editorial Cartoon.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2007, pp. 245–248. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20451938](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451938), <https://doi.org/10.2307/20451938>.

<sup>192</sup> Danjoux, Ilan. “Reconsidering the Decline of the Editorial Cartoon.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2007, pp. 245–248. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20451938](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451938), <https://doi.org/10.2307/20451938>.

technological innovations in printing advanced, it marked a transformation from broadsheets to the daily paper, ultimately giving birth to the modern political cartoon.

Human history is filled with caricatures and satire spanning across a variety of cultures, yet the political cartoon as it is understood today did not emerge until eighteenth-century Europe.<sup>193</sup> As the European merchant class expanded, more people challenged long-standing authorities and began reconsidering power beyond the kings and the church.<sup>194</sup> Simultaneously, the Enlightenment brought forth new principles regarding free speech, the function of the press, and religious freedom. As literacy rates increased and printing techniques advanced, it created ideal conditions for political cartoons to emerge, which began by targeting the major events of the eighteenth century.<sup>195</sup> It did not take long for political cartoons to reach the New World. By the end of the American Revolution, the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, which protected free speech and press through the First Amendment, further bolstering the creation of political cartoons. During this era, the cartoons published often commented on political issues on local and national levels, especially .<sup>196</sup>

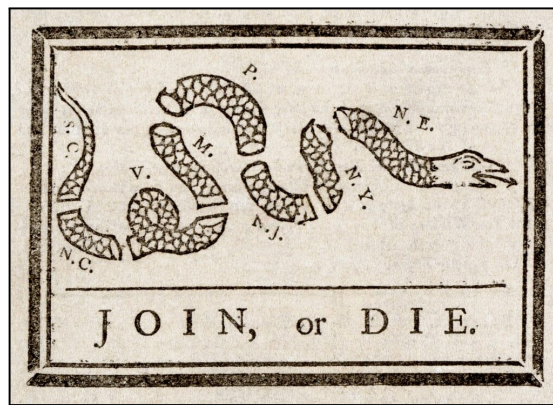


Figure 1: Franklin, Benjamin. *Join, or Die*, May 1754. *Pennsylvania Gazette*.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>194</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>195</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>196</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>197</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](https://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

One of the first major political cartoons to come to light in American history was *Join, or Die*, created by Benjamin Franklin in May 1754. The cartoon was first published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, urging Americans to unite against the threats posed by the French and their native allies during the Seven Years' War.<sup>198</sup> This message was demonstrated by the woodcut cartoon showing a snake cut into eighths, with each piece signifying an American colony or region.<sup>199</sup>

## The Father of the American Cartoon

By the mid-nineteenth century, political cartoons had firmly established themselves as a prominent and often intimidating force in American politics. No figure demonstrates their impact more powerfully than Thomas Nast, frequently referred to as the "Father of the American Cartoon".<sup>200</sup> Originally from Germany, Nast moved to New York when he was a young boy and showed a great talent for drawing at an early age.<sup>201</sup> After honing his unique illustration skills at the National Academy of Design, Nast was eventually hired by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1855. However, it was not until he moved on to publishing illustrations for *Harper's Weekly* that his work became both widely recognizable and provoked significant debate. Nast stood firmly against segregation, actively advocated for the abolition of slavery, and supported the rights of both Native and Chinese Americans.<sup>202</sup> Despite championing noble causes, Nast had biases of his own. In one cartoon, he notoriously used children-stalking crocodiles to depict Catholic bishops and regularly represented the Irish as apeline, mounting a sustained visual critique against both groups.<sup>203</sup>

With the platform Nast gained from publishing regularly in *Harper's Weekly*, he took it upon himself to express his opinions on the corruption that he believed to be unjust. Most notably, he created cartoons on crucial topics, such as the Tweed Ring. Former U.S. Representative and political "Boss" of a democratic party political machine, Tammany Hall, William M. Tweed was convicted of stealing between \$25 million and \$200 million from New

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<sup>198</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](http://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>199</sup> First Amendment Museum. "Political Cartoons, Part 1: 1720-1800." *First Amendment Museum*, [firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/](http://firstamendmentmuseum.org/exhibits/virtual-exhibits/art-politics-300-years-of-political-cartoons/political-cartoons-p-art-1-1720-1800/).

<sup>200</sup> Kiter, Tammy. "Thomas Nast: Father of the American Political Cartoon | New-York Historical Society." *www.nyhistory.org*, 4 Oct. 2017, [www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon](http://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon).

<sup>201</sup> Kiter, Tammy. "Thomas Nast: Father of the American Political Cartoon | New-York Historical Society." *www.nyhistory.org*, 4 Oct. 2017, [www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon](http://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon).

<sup>202</sup> Kiter, Tammy. "Thomas Nast: Father of the American Political Cartoon | New-York Historical Society." *www.nyhistory.org*, 4 Oct. 2017, [www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon](http://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon).

<sup>203</sup> Kiter, Tammy. "Thomas Nast: Father of the American Political Cartoon | New-York Historical Society." *www.nyhistory.org*, 4 Oct. 2017, [www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon](http://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon).

York City taxpayers.<sup>204</sup> Nast created over 140 political cartoons that targeted Boss Tweed. His angry depictions of Tweed’s greed and stubbornness were carried out so effectively that even illiterate New York residents were able to recognize his corrupt abuses. The cartoons even got to Tweed himself, who infamously complained, “ ‘Let’s stop those damned pictures. I don’t care so much what the papers write about me—my constituents can’t read, but damn it, they can see pictures.’ ”<sup>205</sup> His outrage highlighted the very influence that made political cartoons a formidable force in an age marked by limited literacy and early stages of mass media.

One of Nast’s most vivid and renowned cartoons was labeled as “Tammany Tiger Loose—What are you going to do about it?” The illustration is set in the Roman Colosseum, where Tweed is depicted as a gluttonous Roman emperor happily watching his corrupt “Tammany Tiger” brutally tearing apart Lady Liberty, the female embodiment of the American Republic.<sup>206</sup> In the smaller details, it can be observed that her “Republic” crown and sword lay shattered, the “law” ripped to shreds, the “ballot” bowl smashed to pieces, and Justice herself is lifeless on the ground with her scales and sword snapped beside her. The detailed imagery in Nast’s art reveals the intricate details employed within a political cartoon, demonstrating how they rely on carefully constructed symbolism. In the illustration, every object corresponds to a familiar civic ideal: law, voting, and justice, inherently transforming the cartoon into a visual argument about the stakes of political corruption.



Figure 2: Nast, Thomas. *Tammany Tiger Loose*, Nov. 1871. Harper’s Weekly.<sup>207</sup>

Additionally, Nast’s work creating political cartoons was responsible for introducing some of the most enduring symbols in American politics. For instance, his representation of the

<sup>204</sup> Kiter, Tammy. “Thomas Nast: Father of the American Political Cartoon | New-York Historical Society.”

[www.nyhistory.org](http://www.nyhistory.org), 4 Oct. 2017, [www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon](http://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/thomas-nast-father-of-the-american-political-cartoon)

<sup>205</sup> Roos, Dave. “The Political Cartoonist Who Helped Lead to “Boss” Tweed’s Downfall | HISTORY.” *HISTORY*, 31 May 2022, [www.history.com/articles/thomas-nast-boss-tweed-cartoons](http://www.history.com/articles/thomas-nast-boss-tweed-cartoons).

<sup>206</sup> Roos, Dave. “The Political Cartoonist Who Helped Lead to “Boss” Tweed’s Downfall | HISTORY.” *HISTORY*, 31 May 2022, [www.history.com/articles/thomas-nast-boss-tweed-cartoons](http://www.history.com/articles/thomas-nast-boss-tweed-cartoons).

<sup>207</sup> Nast, Thomas. “Tammany Tiger Loose - What Are You Going to Do about It?,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Nov. 1871, [www.masshist.org/database/5901](http://www.masshist.org/database/5901).

Democratic Party as a donkey and the Republican Party as an elephant, one that is still widely circulated today. Although once created as a mockery, comparing politics in America to one big messy circus of donkeys and elephants, today both political parties have enthusiastically embraced their mascots.<sup>208</sup> This is a true testament to the lasting power of his visual language and its ability to outlive the moment it initially sought to ridicule.

### From Print to Pixels

As the digital age made way, the political cartoon underwent a transformation just as revolutionary as the printing press. What once required a physical printing run, could now be created, shared, and reshared globally within a matter of minutes. With the rise of the internet and social media threads, satirical art has not diminished, but merely migrated from newsprint to screens, becoming even more potent than ever before.

In the 21st century, political cartoonists have resorted to more digital art, yet they continue to tackle key figures and defining moments, leveraging the speed and outreach digital platforms possess. Recent presidential campaigns, elections, and policy reform have proven to be rich sources for visual satire. In current news cycles, President Donald Trump has been a primary target for many cartoons, as artists have exaggerated his signature gestures, hairstyle, and rhetoric to encapsulate his divisive persona. In November, Zohran Mamdani was deemed the official winner, securing a title as the Mayor-elect of New York City.<sup>209</sup> Mamdani, a Democratic socialist and Muslim defeated former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and used his victory speech to provoke Trump.<sup>210</sup> This Democratic Party victory, along with wins in governor races in New Jersey and Virginia, inspired political cartoonists to make light of the recent setbacks faced by the Republican Party. For instance, cartoonist Drew Sheneman created an illustration for *The Star Ledger* depicting the election as a “train wreck” and Trump as the clueless engineer denying any blame for it.<sup>211</sup> The cartoon further shows the comedic reaction to political events is reflective of the deeper societal role political cartoons desire to fulfill. In the Sheneman illustration itself, he blends metaphors, satire, and caricature to allow the public to indulge in a

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<sup>208</sup> Arn, Artsy, Jackson. “Why Democrats Are Donkeys and Republicans Are Elephants.” *CNN*, 6 Nov. 2018, [www.cnn.com/style/article/why-democrats-are-donkeys-republicans-are-elephants-artsy](http://www.cnn.com/style/article/why-democrats-are-donkeys-republicans-are-elephants-artsy) .

<sup>209</sup> Morelli, Marie. “Editorial Cartoons for Nov. 9, 2025: GOP Election Losses, Mamdani Victory, Dick Cheney Dies.” *Syracuse*, 9 Nov. 2025, [www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html](http://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html) .

<sup>210</sup> Morelli, Marie. “Editorial Cartoons for Nov. 9, 2025: GOP Election Losses, Mamdani Victory, Dick Cheney Dies.” *Syracuse*, 9 Nov. 2025, [www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html](http://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html) .

<sup>211</sup> Morelli, Marie. “Editorial Cartoons for Nov. 9, 2025: GOP Election Losses, Mamdani Victory, Dick Cheney Dies.” *Syracuse*, 9 Nov. 2025, [www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html](http://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2025/11/editorial-cartoons-for-nov-9-2025-gop-election-losses-mamdani-victory-dick-cheney-dies.html) .



digestible image offering a message about the current political climate, which at times can be challenging to understand.



Figure 3: Sheneman, Drew. *Election Results Wreck*, Nov. 9th, 2025. The Star Ledger.

## Ethical Considerations

Although political cartoons thrive on exaggeration and their comedic appeal, these same qualities can sometimes push them beyond satire into ethically troubling territory. It is indeed the business of satire to attack the character and challenge the motives of public figures; however, cartoonists still have to be careful that they do not step into the bounds of defamation.<sup>212</sup> Similar to journalists, political cartoonists have their own professional associations, such as the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, which promotes the interests of cartoonists themselves.<sup>213</sup> While political cartoonists do not often face legal repercussions for their artistry, they aim to obey their social responsibility and align with the code of ethics which states to minimize harm, demonstrate cultural awareness, respect beliefs, be truthful and accountable, and have editors carefully approve appropriate cartoons.<sup>214</sup> Fundamentally, this ethical tightrope becomes even more pronounced in the present day, in a digital age where cartoons circulate instantly online, and their impact can be amplified far beyond the printed page.

## Conclusion

From the early Egyptian caricatures and carved woodcuts of the 18th century to the instantly shareable digital memes and sketches today, political cartoons have served as influential artistic tools to spark meaningful political discourse. They have introduced heroes and villains,

<sup>212</sup> Handsley, Elizabeth, and Robert Phiddian. "Flinders Academic Commons." *Flinders.edu.au*, 2025, [fac.flinders.edu.au/items/a2964734-41c6-4403-9910-dcfa914fd017](http://fac.flinders.edu.au/items/a2964734-41c6-4403-9910-dcfa914fd017). Accessed 18 Nov. 2025.

<sup>213</sup> Ashfaq, A., & Russomanno, J. (2018). "A punch straight for the heart": Disparaging political cartoons and ethical guidelines. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 33(2). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.

<sup>214</sup> Ashfaq, A., & Russomanno, J. (2018). "A punch straight for the heart": Disparaging political cartoons and ethical guidelines. *Southwestern Mass Communication Journal*, 33(2). Retrieved from <http://swecjmc.wp.txstate.edu>.



mocked hypocrisy, and at times, captured the heat of a political moment through the means of a single striking image. Through their satirical and humorous nature, political cartoons have allowed for complex political topics to be simplified for ordinary people. It is also important to realize that humor reaches a wider audience than “preaching to the choir does.”<sup>215</sup> In a way, these cartoons are often more effective than writing as they can condense information for ordinary people as well as function as references to pinpoint the political climates at different periods of time. Political cartoons serve as a reminder that democracy is not only argued in courtrooms or legislatures, but also sketched in margins and shared among people who desire to make sense of the world. At its core, they are directly empowered by our right to freedom of speech and expression. At the same time, this power comes with responsibility, as the line between exaggeration and offense must always be carefully considered. Ultimately, political cartoons demonstrate that even in humor and comedic art, lies a more meaningful purpose to challenge, inform, and engage citizens, showing that visual art can illuminate important truths that words alone simply cannot.

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<sup>215</sup> Bellmann, Pauline. “Outside the Line – What Political Cartoons and Satire Contribute to a Free World - TEDxVienna Magazine.” *TEDxVienna Magazine* -, 17 Aug. 2023, [magazine.tedxvienna.at/2023/08/17/outside-the-line-what-political-cartoons-and-satire-contribute-to-a-free-world/](https://magazine.tedxvienna.at/2023/08/17/outside-the-line-what-political-cartoons-and-satire-contribute-to-a-free-world/) .

## **What is the United States if not a Country of Immigrants?**

*Nicole Soares*

### **Overview**

The integrity of this country as every day we stray further from the values and principles embodied in our constitution. A living, breathing document, written by educated immigrants fleeing an oppressive monarch, now is not even remotely reflected by this current administration. Immigration has been essential in building America's identity, yet today's political climate has reframed it as an existential threat. Since 9/11 policy policymakers have justified restrictive immigration, completely ignoring its empirical benefits. How does a nation with a history so defined by these communities have now become a breeding ground of hate and has normalized xenophobia. Thus, what is the United States, if not a country of immigrants?

### **Background**

Pre 9/11, the Immigration and Naturalization Service oversaw two conflicting responsibilities, finding avenues granting immigration status while simultaneously enforcing immigration law.<sup>216</sup> The need for immigrant labor is imperative to the development of the United States, but simply opening borders leaves the nation in an extremely vulnerable position. This notion upheld many policies that, if brought up today, would seem radical. For example, we had the family-sponsored immigration, where adult children, spouses, and siblings of U.S. citizens could receive papers. This avenue went so far as to allow a yearly limit to how many distant relatives a citizen could legalize.<sup>217</sup> Recently, this policy has been tightened so that only U.S. citizens can legalize their parents, or their child (if the child is under 18), as well as their spouse. There also used to be employment-based immigration, where employers could sponsor workers and put them on a path to citizenship. As well as a diversity-visa lottery where every year, (1990-2001), 55,000 immigrant visas were granted through a lottery system to countries with historically low rates of migration.<sup>218</sup>

Former President Ronald Reagan stated, "Illegal immigrants in considerable numbers have become productive members of our society and are a basic part of our workforce. Those who have established equities in the United States should be recognized and accorded legal status."<sup>219</sup> Understanding the trauma exploited from the 9/11 attacks is essential to understanding how the views on immigration have drastically changed.

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<sup>216</sup> Whatcott, Elizabeth, and Mackler, Camille J.. "Immigration Policy Before and After 9/11: From the INS to DHS – Where Did We Go Wrong?" Reiss Center on Law and Security, 15 December 2021

<sup>217</sup> Whatcott, Elizabeth, and Camille J. Mackler. 2021. "Immigration Policy Before and After 9/11: From the INS to DHS – Where Did We Go Wrong?" Reiss Center on Law and Security

<sup>218</sup> American Immigration Council. How the United States Immigration System Works: A Fact Sheet. June 24, 2024

<sup>219</sup> Ronald Reagan. "Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy." July 30, 1981. Reagan Presidential Library. (reaganlibrary.gov)

## Economic Influence

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) dedicates an entire page to frequently asked questions regarding immigration. As of April 15, 2025, it was shown that despite immigrants making up 14.3% of the population, immigrants' total output was 18%, which is 2.1 trillion dollars towards our economy. They are the only group that outputs significantly more than they make up.<sup>220</sup> The EPI states that relative to their share of the population and in comparison to native-born individuals, they are more likely to start businesses that generate employment. These statistics reflect their economic effect in 2024. However, a study done in 2013 showed that immigrants made up 16% of the population, but 18% were business owners and 28% were main street business owners.<sup>221</sup> No other group contributes as much economic value as immigrants, who consistently produce more than they consume. Not only that, but their day-to-day expenses bring massive revenue as well. Whether that be through having credit cards, financed cars, renting or buying homes, every transaction these immigrants make has a tax. Over time, it adds up and develops to the \$2.1 trillion input into our economy.<sup>222</sup>

The EPI also shows statistics regarding the labor force, and represents how unfounded the claim that immigrants take jobs is. The following chart compares what our workforce would look like with and without immigrants. The population of individuals in the prime working age (25–54 years) who were in the workforce rose by 13.6 million from 1994 to 2024. Almost the entire increase was due to immigration, clearly showing that if immigrants were not present, the number of the prime-aged labor force in 2024 would be about equal to what it was in 1994. This comparison highlights how poor our job market would be without this population of workers.<sup>223</sup>

Most economists recognize the extreme economic benefits immigrants bring and agree that historically, any form of mass deportations causes major consequences that take years to repair. According to research from the University of Pennsylvania, mass deportation would slash wages for 63% of high-skill workers and generate an additional \$900 billion in costs over the first decade.<sup>224</sup> Despite the immigrant population overwhelmingly taking low-skilled jobs, their economic support is undeniable. High skilled workers rely on immigrant labor and without it they lose that complimentary labor which reduces productivity. Fewer workers slow economic growth thereby reducing wages for high-skill workers. It's estimated that every U.S. removal costs roughly \$10,900 per deportee. Scale that to roughly 1.2 million removals by the Trump administration, and the financial burden on taxpayers will lead us into unpredictable economic

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<sup>220</sup> Costa, Daniel. et al. Economic Policy Institute. Immigrants and the Economy. April 15, 2025. (epi.org)

<sup>221</sup> Kallick, David Dyssegaard. Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow. Fiscal Policy Institute / Americas Society-Council of the Americas, January 2015. (fiscalpolicy.org)

<sup>222</sup> Costa, Daniel. et al. Economic Policy Institute. Immigrants and the Economy. April 15, 2025. (epi.org)

<sup>223</sup> Costa, Daniel. et al. Economic Policy Institute. Immigrants and the Economy. April 15, 2025. (epi.org)

<sup>224</sup> Penn Wharton Budget Model. "The Effects of Immigration on the United States' Economy." January 27, 2016.

complications. To be precise, it becomes a total of \$13 billion in taxpayer spending.<sup>225</sup> No labor and increased costs to deport these workers is not something the American taxpayer can afford.

### **Current Consequences**

These consequences are already evident: the agricultural sector relies on exploitative labor conditions, making it dependent on the very immigrants we are deporting. According to Food and Water Watch, an organization responsible for ensuring sustainable and accessible food and water practices, 61% of immigrants are farmers.<sup>226</sup> Despite their labor being hard, underpaid, and facing many safety concerns, most workers state it's better than what they had in their home countries.<sup>227</sup> Food and Water Watch also states that under orders from the Trump administration, ICE agents have targeted processing plants and chased workers through fields, while also targeting locations where these workers live, causing major labor shortages.<sup>228</sup> ICE's fear campaign has created a massive problem: we do not have enough workers to grow our food, reap our food, package our meats, and operate our processing plants.<sup>229</sup>

This shortage of labor causes food prices to go up, and minimizes our food supply. Grocery prices are rising at the highest rate since 2022.<sup>230</sup> Labor shortage, as well as this administration's tariffs, imply that our way of life will only become more difficult and more expensive.<sup>231</sup> The agriculture industry is simply the first to be affected by these counterproductive policies. CNN reported that a cherry farmer in Oregon will lose over 30 acres of fruit (almost a quarter of a million dollars) after more than half his workers did not show up this season due to the immigration crackdowns.<sup>232</sup> CNN also highlights a couple dairy farmers in Wisconsin who are fearing the loss of their workers. They estimate that without their labor, to stay in business, the price of a gallon of milk would have to go up to over \$10. This leaves American farmers outcompeted by imported produce and necessities, and puts most of them at high risk of losing their profitable businesses.<sup>233</sup>

On a local scale, towns surrounding massive plants, farms, and other agricultural industries depend economically on immigrants. Before the massive influx in immigration which

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<sup>225</sup> Economic Policy Institute. "Trump's Deportation Agenda Will Destroy Millions of Jobs: Both Immigrants and U.S.-Born Workers Would Suffer Job Losses, Particularly in Construction and Child Care." By Ben Zipperer. July 10, 2025

<sup>226</sup> Food & Water Watch. "How Trump's Immigration Policies Harm Our Food System." October 3, 2025

<sup>227</sup> Food & Water Watch. "How Trump's Immigration Policies Harm Our Food System." October 3, 2025

<sup>228</sup> Food & Water Watch. "How Trump's Immigration Policies Harm Our Food System." October 3, 2025

<sup>229</sup> Food & Water Watch. "How Trump's Immigration Policies Harm Our Food System." October 3, 2025

<sup>230</sup> The Hill. "Grocery Prices Are Rising as Beef, Coffee Hit Record Highs." The Hill, September 23, 2025

<sup>231</sup> CBS Evening News. 2025. "U.S. Farmers React to Trump's Policies on Tariffs, Immigration And Foreign Aid Cuts." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvKcuOH7oAg>.

<sup>232</sup> CNN. 2025. "Meet the Farmworkers in Hiding as Crops Rot." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqqGfpC9zfl>.

<sup>233</sup> National Milk Producers Federation. "Losing Immigrant Workers on Dairy Farms Would Nearly Double Retail Milk Prices and Cost the Economy More Than \$32 Billion, New Report Finds." September 9, 2015.

began in the 1990's<sup>234</sup> population decline was leaving multiple rural American towns devastated and practically abandoned. Especially as the younger generations migrate to urban centers.<sup>235</sup> Many rural towns were revitalized as the immigrants spent their earnings at local groceries, gas stations, invested their taxes into the school systems, and many began serving as healthcare workers. As we scare these people who are integral to rural America and the agriculture industry away, larger corporations are finding more ways to profit and cut corners by lowering government oversight in these operations. Fewer federal inspections imply more worker injuries, food contamination, and environmental disasters.

ICE has not just threatened low-wage workers but also high-skilled laborers coming from other countries. Last September, a new Hyundai manufacturing plant, which took years of planning and billions of dollars in investments, was raided by ICE in Georgia. Over 400 South Korean workers, sent there to help develop the plant, were detained and deported back to South Korea. This raid put a massive diplomatic strain between the U.S. and South Korea, after South Korean President Lee Jae Myung stated, "Establishing a local factory in the United States will either come with severe disadvantages or become very difficult for our companies... They will wonder whether they should even do it."<sup>236</sup> Restricting visas to high skilled workers being sent to the U.S. to develop plants and other operations and hire Americans means that the companies looking to avoid Trump's high tariffs will be unable to move their businesses to the U.S. This administration has left our allies furious, the South Koreans expected to train Americans then go home. They were instead cuffed and sent to camps before being deported home. This plant would have been Georgia's largest economic development project.

What we can learn from this is that no one in this globalized world can survive on their own. We, as a country, rely on immigration, foreign allies, and aid. Economically, we can not survive on our own.

## **Social Influence**

The massive opposition to large-scale immigration comes from descendants of immigrants who have lived in rural America and were privileged to forget their roots.<sup>237</sup> With immigration comes change. A major change immigration tends to bring begins with the immersion of differing cultures. By bringing new languages, religions, and cultural practices over time, "American culture" has become intrinsically defined by this hybrid culture. Historically, American society has always developed from foreign populations. Such as the

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<sup>234</sup> Civil Eats. "A New American Dream: The Rise of Immigrants in Rural America." March 22, 2019.

<sup>235</sup> Civil Eats. "A New American Dream: The Rise of Immigrants in Rural America." March 22, 2019.

<sup>236</sup> PBS NewsHour. "South Korean Workers Who Were Detained in a Hyundai Factory Raid Are Now Headed Home. Here's What Else to Know." PBS NewsHour, September 11, 2025.

<sup>237</sup> Charles Hirschman and Items Admin. "The Impact of Immigration on American Society: Looking Backward to the Future." Items / Social Science Research Council, July 28, 2006.

development of Rock and Roll <sup>238</sup>, how fashion <sup>239</sup> has developed as well as our entire food Industry. <sup>240</sup> Immigrants and their descendants have contributed disproportionately to these fields, which define American culture, thereby pushing institutions toward more innovation. <sup>241</sup>

Through the hybrid cultural connections formed by being immersed in so many diverse influences, profound social networks are developed. Communities formed around immigrant populations, through churches or cultural organizations, generate a social capital that benefits society as a whole. These networks, in a sense, create a symbiotic relationship, helping newcomers navigate social and structural barriers and become bridges linking immigrant communities to broader civic life. <sup>242</sup>

The American education system has also transformed as it's been obligated to adapt. As immigrant and second-generation children become a growing portion of U.S. classrooms, educational environments are forced to develop new definitions of national identity and "Americanness" that reflect multicultural coexistence rather than solely assimilation. Studies show how imperative it is for child development to be immersed in new languages and cultures. Bilingualism has been shown to give children cognitive advancements as well as better social understanding. <sup>243</sup> These educational changes reshape social norms while encouraging cultural pluralism among youth, which time and time again have proven to be extremely beneficial. <sup>244</sup>

Long-term integration with immigrant communities tends to foster greater social cohesion. Over time, many immigrant groups and their descendants show increased language proficiency, improved socioeconomic status, and social mobility, becoming increasingly similar to native-born populations in measurable outcomes like income, education, and homeownership. <sup>245</sup> Overall, immigration reshapes the fabric of American society and American identity toward an identity that contains inclusion and diversity, which benefits all.

Civic engagement is often expanded and strengthened by communities that embrace

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<sup>238</sup> Myers, John E. "Influence of Immigrants on American Music." EBSCO Research Starters, 2024.

<sup>239</sup> American Immigration Council. "New York Fashion Week: Immigrants, Diversity, and Creativity." February 19, 2016.

<sup>240</sup> Foodprint. "Respecting Immigrants Is Respecting Our Food Culture." Foodprint, accessed December 3, 2025.

<sup>241</sup> Hirschman, Charles. "The Contributions of Immigrants to American Culture." *Population and Development Review* 39, no. 4 (2013): 641–70

<sup>242</sup> Tucker, Cristina M., and Anna Maria Santiago. "The Role of Acculturation in the Civic Engagement of Latino Immigrants." *Advances in Social Work* 14, no. 1 (September 4, 2013).

<sup>243</sup> Byers-Heinlein, Krista, and Catherine Lew-Williams. "Bilingualism in the Early Years: What the Science Says." *Learning Landscapes* 7, no. 1 (2013): 95–112.

<sup>244</sup> Lash, Cristina L. "Making Americans: Schooling, Diversity, and Assimilation in the Twenty-First Century." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2018): 99–117.

<sup>245</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015. doi:10.17226/21746.

immigrants. Religious congregations, community organizations, and other immigrant-led associations mobilize members of the community, pushing them towards civic engagement. Thus, providing platforms for political participation, social advocacy, and unity, strengthens the framework American society relies on.<sup>246</sup> Immigrants help reshape the institutional and social landscape of America, not solely as passive recipients but as active contributors to civic society.

In short, immigrants often influence American society, making the United States more diverse, dynamic, and interconnected.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

American identity is ingrained with foreign influence. It is impossible to demand dissolution when the entire essence of our nation has amalgamated with outsiders. In a time when the fear of those who are different is weaponized as a political tactic and exclusion has become synonymous with patriotism, the very foundation on which our nation was built trembles. From our nation's founding to the present day, influences from immigrants are guaranteed two things: society is constantly changing and evolving, and that these improvements are only furthered by the immersion of diversity. To answer my proposed question, the United States is a castle built on sand without immigrants.

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<sup>246</sup> Voyer, Andrea. "From Incorporation to Emplacement in the Cultural Sociology of Immigration." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 12 (2024): 557–73

# **The American Machine: How Lobbying and Regulation Has Driven the Automotive Market**

*Thomas Tzakas*

## **Introduction**

The car is a permanent facet of American culture. It dictates our movement, our freedoms, and ultimately our lives. Our environment has been irreversibly shaped by our American love for cars, for better or for worse. However, diversity of vehicles has been shaped by corporations and law since their very invention. The U.S. federal government has improperly regulated the automotive market to the point that it no longer serves the needs of the American people; the people have no choice, are less safe, and have less money consequently. U.S. regulation has three main areas of concern that constrict freedoms: tariffs/bans, safety, and the EPA.

## **The Chicken Tax**

Akin to the early year bout of tariffs levied by the Trump administration, the Chicken Tax was born as a form of economic countermeasure, a tariff in response to a tariff. Due to U.S. chicken overwhelming foreign markets in the early 60s, the European Economic Community imposed tariffs, which then evolved into minimum import prices that were set above what U.S. chicken was currently selling for. This devastated U.S. chicken export, and as a result, the retaliatory “Chicken Tax” was imposed in 1964, which was a 25% tariff on light trucks, potato starch, brandy, and dextrin. Soon after, all American tariffs were lifted except for the light trucks.<sup>247</sup> “Light trucks” are not the only vehicles subject to this tax, as due to vehicle classifications vans and most SUVs also fall subject.<sup>248</sup> Protectionist ideology, advanced by auto manufacturers and labor unions, maintained the chicken tax after seeing just how beneficial it was for American manufacturers, and it still holds today. This tax remains due to the political power that auto manufacturers wield; in the 2024 election cycle alone, over \$48 million was spent by manufacturers to secure votes that determine policy.<sup>249</sup>

The Chicken Tax is the one of the most anticompetitive, anti-consumer pieces of regulation lobbied for by auto manufacturers, lingering in our system like Chicken Pox in the nervous system. The U.S. suffers from a permanent shingles outbreak as a result. As a policy it is excused under the guise of “protecting American industry and workers.” The auto industry uses

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<sup>247</sup> Steven Cole Smith, “So, What Is the ‘Chicken Tax’ Anyway?” *Hagerty Media*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.hagerty.com/media/automotive-history/so-what-is-the-chicken-tax-anyway/>.

<sup>248</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Vehicle Fuel Economy and Greenhouse Gas Standards: Frequently Asked Questions*, CRS Report R45204 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, updated June 1, 2021), 13, accessed December 3, 2025, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/R/PDF/R45204/R45204.7.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R45204/R45204.7.pdf).

<sup>249</sup> OpenSecrets, *Auto Manufacturers Lobbying*, Center for Responsive Politics, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/lobbying?ind=T2100>.



this mantra for political purposes, and political purposes alone; carve-outs in protectionist law still exist. Under the U.S. Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), automotive vehicles and parts are mostly exempt from tariffs impacting the industry.<sup>250</sup> This has enabled born-and-bred American manufacturers to invest heavily in Mexican production at the expense of the American laborers they claim to value. Ironically enough, it is foreign manufacturers, namely the Japanese, keeping auto jobs in the U.S.<sup>251</sup>

To address any claims that the Chicken Tax has protected the American manufacturing worker, it has certainly contributed to the likes of Toyota, Subaru, and Honda bringing manufacturing to the States.<sup>252</sup> It hasn't, however, retained the workers of the very manufacturers that encouraged its continuance. Ultimately, the U.S. auto lobby has got its way with the Chicken Tax. They have increased profit margins by capitalizing on cheap Mexican labor, and the increase in price among foreign competition inevitably makes their own Mexican-made vehicles more appealing relative to the American-made foreign competitors'. Foreign manufacturers made jobs stateside because they couldn't make vehicles abroad, while American manufacturers departed for cheaper Mexican labor. Over the past 45 years, auto manufacturing jobs have decreased,<sup>253</sup> vehicle costs, however, have skyrocketed.<sup>254</sup>

## Vehicle Bans

The second means to address the issue of foreign vehicles harming corporate profits is to illegalize the competition. These outright bans have been pushed under pretenses of saving the environment and protecting American drivers. The Imported Vehicle Safety Compliance Act of 1988, amending the prior National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, imposes a ban on the importation of vehicles that do not meet "Federal standards," of which safety and emission standards are the most impactful. Notably, the law "Exempts non-conforming foreign motor vehicles that are 25 years old or older ("classic or antique") from the restrictions imposed by this Act."<sup>255</sup> When all this is combined with the Chicken Tax, the only vehicles viable to bring to the U.S. are those over 25 years old.<sup>256</sup> Consequently, the working and middle classes cannot afford the kind of vehicles that would serve them, those being affordable, reliable work vehicles.

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<sup>250</sup> United States International Trade Commission. *USMCA Automotive Rules of Origin: Economic Impact and Operation, 2025 Report*. Publication No. 5642. Washington, DC: USITC, July 2025.  
<https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/pub5642.pdf>.

<sup>251</sup> Smith, "So, What Is the 'Chicken Tax' Anyway?"

<sup>252</sup> Smith, "So, What Is the 'Chicken Tax' Anyway?"

<sup>253</sup> Katelynn Harris, "Forty Years of Falling Manufacturing Employment," *Beyond the Numbers* 9, no. 16 (November 20, 2020), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,  
<https://www.bls.gov/opub/btn/volume-9/forty-years-of-falling-manufacturing-employment.htm>.

<sup>254</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: New Vehicles in U.S. City Average (CUUR0000SETA01)," *FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, updated October 24, 2025,  
<https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CUUR0000SETA01>.

<sup>255</sup> H.R. 2628 — *Imported Vehicle Safety Compliance Act of 1988*, 100th Congress (1987–1988), *Congress.gov*. Accessed November 29, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/2628>.

<sup>256</sup>

## EPA

The Environmental Protection Agency, founded in the wake of Silent Spring, has the express purpose of protecting the environment of the U.S.<sup>257</sup> The EPA mandates a wide variety of basic equipment among consumer vehicles, and regulates fine particles (soot), and gas mileage as well.<sup>258</sup>

EPA structure groups vehicles into eight classes, of which only the first two are classified as light vehicles and are relevant for most Americans. These are weight classes, dictated by the weight of the vehicle, and maximum occupant and cargo weight.<sup>259</sup> As of 2023, 65.4% of new light duty vehicles are “trucks,” whereas 34.6% are “cars,” a number that has only gone up with time. SUVs, like the Chevrolet Suburban, and minivans, like the Toyota Sienna, are considered light trucks.<sup>260</sup> As vehicles get progressively larger, they are subject to decreasing emissions standards. A “compact car” such as the Honda Civic must meet far more stringent standards than an F150, driving up R&D costs and thus vehicle costs.<sup>261</sup> The system incentivizes manufacturers to simply make larger vehicles, pushing average vehicle weight up.<sup>262</sup> Updated and more demanding standards exacerbate these issues. The small car, which is arguably the least impactful on the environment, is being killed off by the standards meant to protect the environment.

Environmental lobbyists have often advanced legislation that ultimately undermines the very environments they seek to protect. The nature of EPA auto regulation is antithetical: in its drive to create cleaner vehicles, it incentivizes a primitive jump backwards towards the legal inefficient; in its drive to improve efficiency, it forces the American to sacrifice efficiency at the

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<sup>257</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “The Origins of EPA,” *EPA History*, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/history/origins-epa>.

<sup>258</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Smog, Soot, and Other Air Pollution from Transportation*, updated September 2023, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/transportation-air-pollution-and-climate-change/smog-soot-and-other-air-pollution-transportation#about>.

<sup>259</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Vehicle Weight Classifications for Emission Standards Reference Guide,” *Emission Standards Reference Guide*, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/emission-standards-reference-guide/vehicle-weight-classifications-emission-standards-reference>.

<sup>260</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, *Alternative Fuel Vehicle Availability*, Alternative Fuels Data Center, Data Set 10306, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://afdc.energy.gov/data/10306?page=2>.

<sup>261</sup> United States, *Emission Standards for New Motor Vehicles or New Motor Vehicle Engines*, 42 U.S.C. § 7521 (2013), in *United States Code: Title 42 – The Public Health and Welfare*, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2013-title42/html/USCODE-2013-title42-chap85-subchapII-partA-sec7521.htm>.

<sup>262</sup> California Transportation Commission, *Vehicle Weight Safety Study Academic Report: Draft Task 2 Deliverable*, Agreement Number CTC-C-25-008, December 20, 2024; updated June 25, 2025, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://ctc.ca.gov/-/media/ctc-media/documents/programs/ab-251-vehicle-weight-study/2025/ctc-vehicle-weight-report-20250624-draft-task-2-v2-accessibility-tested-al1y.pdf>.

cost of their wallet and the environment. This forced EPA upsizing negatively affects the health of Americans via increased contaminants in the air, but safety is jeopardized as well, compounding with misguided safety standards.

## Safety Regulation

In just five years from the birth of the automobile on the consumer market, the first motor vehicle collision occurred in Ohio, with the vehicle striking a tree root and veering into a hitching post.<sup>263</sup> This is symbolic of both the danger of cars and the impending end of horse-based transportation. Up until 1966, no federal regulation existed for automobiles, until the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 implemented federal safety standards such as seatbelts, lighting, and defect-warning.<sup>264</sup> The National Highway Safety Bureau (NHSB) was created as well, and soon after was supplanted by the creation of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in 1970, which persists today.<sup>265</sup> The NHTSA oversees federal safety standards, regulates standard equipment such as airbags, and oversees crash tests. The NHTSA was designed with a noble purpose and has made the American driver far safer than had it not existed.<sup>266</sup>

As safety standards have progressively increased, vehicle design and form had to change as well. This has resulted in the American vehicle getting progressively larger, though with minimal increases in cabin space.<sup>267</sup> A problem lies with the greater size and blockier shape of American vehicles, which, while increasing safety for occupants, has created a severe threat to pedestrians. As per the CDC, “Compared with passenger cars, SUVs and pickup trucks are more likely to strike pedestrians during certain maneuvers (e.g., turning), and pedestrians are 50%–100% more likely to be killed when they are in a crash involving a SUV or pickup truck.”<sup>268</sup> Safety regulation has neglected the pedestrian, and due in part to regulation protecting occupants, has put pedestrians in further danger.

The Kei-truck fails to meet the requirement of safety under the import ban. Most lack airbags entirely, and the crumple zone for such vehicles is the legs of the occupants due to their

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<sup>263</sup> Ohio History Connection, “The Supreme Creation of an Era: Ohio and the Early Auto Industry,” *Ohio Memory*, August 5, 2016, <https://ohiomemory.ohiohistory.org/archives/2866>.

<sup>264</sup> H.R. 2628 — *Imported Vehicle Safety Compliance Act of 1988*, 100th Congress (1987–1988), *Congress.gov*. Accessed November 29, 2025. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/2628>.

<sup>265</sup> “National Highway Traffic Safety Administration,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed November 29, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Highway-Traffic-Safety-Administration>.

<sup>266</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “How Vehicle Safety Has Improved Over the Decades,” NHTSA, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.nhtsa.gov/how-vehicle-safety-has-improved-over-decades>.

<sup>267</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Explore Automotive-Trends Data,” accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/automotive-trends/explore-automotive-trends-data#SummaryData>.

<sup>268</sup> Naumann, Rebecca B., Bethany A. West, Vaughn Barry, Sarah Matthews, and Robin Lee. “Pedestrian and Overall Road Traffic Crash Deaths — United States and 27 Other High-Income Countries, 2013–2022.” *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 74, no. 8 (March 13, 2025): 134–139. Accessed December 3, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/74/wr/mm7408a2.htm>.

overall shape and mid-engined design.<sup>269</sup> However, the NHTSA doesn't apply this health concern equally. Motorcycles account for 15% of all traffic deaths while composing only 3% of registered vehicles.<sup>270</sup> This is due in part to the lack of safety measures that are designed to protect the operator after a collision for motorcycle drivers. Kei trucks, by class, are capped at 63 horsepower and 660cc motors, resulting in a struggle to reach highway speeds.<sup>271</sup> Meanwhile, motorcycles exhibit no such flaws, being far lighter and more powerful. If the NHTSA was consistent in its judgement and the federal government proactive about road safety, motorcycles would be gone overnight, subject to the same obscurity of the Kei class. Yet the government respects the rights of those individuals who choose to operate motorcycles, while simultaneously affording no such choice regarding the Kei truck. Both pose minimal increased harm to those not in the vehicle compared to road cars, and arguably the motorcycle poses a greater risk due to the increased speed and energy involved, yet one is restricted, and one is commonplace.

## Conclusion

What are the overall impacts of these regulations for the average American? After all, the American public constitutes the entirety of those on the roads impacted by these decisions from Washington. The impacts are numerous and severe. The US has an extremely high death rate related to motor vehicles compared to the rest of the developed world,<sup>272</sup> even as an industry leader. The EPA enables greater levels of pollution and stops those who wish to drive more environmentally friendly vehicles, instead pushing them towards larger, more expensive alternatives. Many Americans, struggling financially amidst rising costs everywhere, cannot afford even compact vehicles anymore due to increased regulation driving up development costs and protectionist policy prioritizing corporations' wallets. The lobbying issue is ultimately what enables these harms to the public. American politicians are bought out by corporations and thus are no longer beholden to the American people. Prices have increased, pedestrian safety has decreased, and the environment has been devastated, with no change of direction in sight. The auto industry has robbed the American public of their lives and well-being: that is the impact of current regulation.

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<sup>269</sup> Stephen Miller, "Japan's Tiny Kei Trucks Find Fans in US Cities. DMVs Are Less Enthused," *Bloomberg*, December 1, 2025, accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-12-01/japan-s-tiny-kei-trucks-find-fans-in-us-cities-dmvs-are-less-enthused>.

<sup>270</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Traffic Safety Facts, 2023 Data: Motorcycles*, Report No. DOT HS 813 732, U.S. Department of Transportation, October 2024, <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813732>.

<sup>271</sup> Automobile Inspection and Registration Information Association, "Types of Automobiles," n.d., accessed December 3, 2025, <https://www.airia.or.jp/info/system/02.html>.

<sup>272</sup> Naumann et al., "Pedestrian and Overall Road Traffic Crash Deaths,".