

Opinion | The Rot Creeping Into Our Minds

David Brooks

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)

David Brooks

Oct. 23, 2025



A protester near an ICE building in Portland, Ore.Credit...Jenny Kane/Associated Press

In 2020, Democrats won a convincing election victory. They proceeded to do what all victorious parties do. They passed legislation in accord with their priorities, including raising health insurance subsidies to families making above 400 percent of the poverty line. They wrote the law so that the subsidies would expire in 2025.

In 2024, the Republicans won a convincing election victory. They proceeded to do what all victorious parties do. They passed legislation in accord with *their* priorities, including letting the Democrats' insurance subsidies expire as planned.

If the Democrats were a normal party that believed in democratic principles, they would have planned to go to the voters in the next elections and said: These Republican policies are terrible! You should vote for us!

But of course that's not what the Democrats decided to do. Instead, they shut down the government. Why did they do that? Because we don't live in a healthy democracy. We live in a country in which the norms, beliefs and practices that hold up a democracy are dying even in the minds of many of the people who profess to oppose Donald Trump.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan once wrote an essay called “Defining Deviancy Down.” His core point was that when the amount of deviant behavior rises, people begin to redefine deviant behavior as normal. This is a column about that.

In a functioning democracy, a politician’s first instinct is to go to the voters and let the voters decide. In a diseased democracy a politician’s first instinct is to amass power by any means necessary. In a healthy democracy politicians abide by a series of formal and informal restraints because those restraints are good for the nation as a whole. In a diseased democracy like ours, all the decent rules and arrangements are destroyed. Anything goes.

Trump is destroying democratic norms. Democrats have decided to follow him into the basement. When both parties cooperate to degrade public morality, then nobody even notices as it’s happening.

Government shutdowns became a thing during the Carter administration. The first few shutdowns during the Reagan administration lasted a day or two. Leaders in both parties did not want to face the wrath of voters who would be offended by this level of gridlock and incompetence. Now we’re in our 20th shutdown (depending on how you count them) and nobody cares. Neither political party is paying much of a price because the public has been rendered utterly cynical about government. Nothing is shocking anymore because there are no moral norms left standing.

Let me try to illustrate how deeply this cynicism has penetrated the American mind. When Democrats did decide to shut down the government, they could have done it to protest Trump’s historically unprecedented assault on democracy. But instead the Democrats decided to organize their messaging around the expiring health insurance subsidies. Why did they do that? Because they calculated that the American public doesn’t care about democracy’s degradation. It’s been going on so long voters are simply inured to it. So better to talk about Obamacare.

Image

The Democrats Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries at a news conference on the government shutdown.Credit...Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

And in fact there are good reasons to think that Americans simply don’t care about their democratic rights. For example, several states are redrawing congressional district maps to come as close as possible to eliminating competitive races. If you live in Texas or California, then you probably will not have to vote in November 2026. The district maps will have been redrawn in a way that makes House elections largely predetermined. By then you will probably have been effectively disenfranchised.

You might think that proud Texans and Californians would be outraged, or that the ruling parties in those states would be destroyed for doing this. Didn’t our ancestors at Valley Forge and on the beaches of Normandy die to preserve our democracy? But do you hear an outcry? No. It’s just crickets. People are used to the idea that the game is already rigged. So what is there left to get upset about so long as your party is ruthless enough to do the rigging?

I don’t think I appreciated how much a democracy depends upon regular people standing up to defend their rights and their powers against the elites who try to usurp them. These days people are happy to give up their rights and power if they can find some strongman or strongwoman willing to take it. This is a much larger part of human nature than I thought.

For example, when I first started covering Congress, in the 1990s, backbench members could pass legislation if they had a good idea and some entrepreneurial mojo. Back then, congressional committees and their chairmen were still powerful. Power was dispersed, in true democratic fashion.

But for at least 30 years members of Congress have been content to give away their power. First, they gave the power to leadership, so that today four people basically run the legislative branch. Then they gave power to executive branch agencies, letting more and more key decisions get made by the unelected

civil service.

Today if you are a Republican you have basically given away all your power to Trump. You are a duly elected representative of your constituents, yet you've turned yourself into a Trump bobblehead figure who gets to go on Fox News from time to time.

The blunt truth is that a lot of Americans don't find our founding ideals sacred, so they don't get upset when the Constitution is trampled, so long as it is their side doing the trampling.

Let me try to describe something that may seem trivial but which I believe is at the core of our rot. It is politicians' tendency to use the word "fight" in their campaign rhetoric. I noticed this trope when Hillary Clinton ran for president. She was continually promising to "fight" for middle-class Americans. It didn't bother me then. She was a woman running for an office that had been held entirely by men, so she had to prove she was tough.

But now the "fighting" rhetoric is ubiquitous. MAGA Republicans claim that the old Bush-era Republicans were squishes who didn't really know how to fight. Democrats are upset with their party leaders because they don't fight hard enough. Political analysts casually use phrases like "he brought a knife to a gunfight." I hear "fighting" references constantly in political discourse, and every time I do alarm bells go off.

This is no longer just a metaphor. It's a mind-set. We now have a lot of people in this country who do not believe that democracy is about trying to persuade people, it's about fighting, crushing and destroying people. I don't agree with the philosopher Michel Foucault on much, but he had a point when he observed that a lot of life is about trying to repress the little fascist in each one of us. When people start describing politics as a fight, they are unleashing their inner fascist. Fighting is for fascists.

Democracy is about persuasion. Our Constitution is a vast machine that is supposed to increase the amount of deliberation, conversation and persuasion in society. Our elections are supposed to be raw, rollicking persuasion contests.

Trump's idiotic rhetoric is not about persuasion. The Democrats' mind-numbingly repetitive talking points are not about persuasion. The people who want their leaders to "fight" harder just want them to shout their side's orthodoxies at higher and higher volume. They just want their leaders to ramp up the bellicosity of their rhetoric so that the extremists on their side feel good.

What defines extremists these days? It's not that they hold ideological extreme positions. It is that they treat politics as if it were war. They use the language, mental habits and practices of warfare. They are letting their inner Mussolini out for a romp.

Let me give you one quick example of how widely this corruption has pervaded our society. Universities were once about persuasion, truth-seeking and the life of the mind. But over the past half century an ideology has spread through them that holds that persuasion is naïve. Ideas are about power. Thus many professors decided their job was indoctrination, not truth-seeking. To impose power so that students think just like they do.

Jon A. Shields, Yuval Avnir and Stephanie Muravchik [recently published a study](#) in the magazine *Persuasion* looking at college syllabuses. As you'd expect, professors assign a lot of left-wing books like Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," about the criminal justice system and race, that align with the official orthodoxy of academia. But there are a lot of other books that dispute the historical claims of books like "The New Jim Crow." You might think that some professors would assign books on both sides of the issue so students would learn how to weigh evidence and be persuaded. But the researchers estimated that "less than 10 percent of professors assigning Alexander's book actually teach the controversy surrounding it."

Students are completely aware that they are not being educated; they are simply players in a cynical

indoctrination game. At Northwestern and the University of Michigan, 88 percent of students told researchers that they pretend to be more progressive than they are because they think it will help them succeed academically or socially. I saw exactly this kind of performative dishonesty while covering the Soviet Union years ago.

Yes, Trump is launching an assault on democracy. But what worries me more is what has happened over the last few decades to the rest of us. There has been a slow moral, emotional and intellectual degradation — the loss of the convictions, norms and habits of mind that undergird democracy. What worries me most is the rot creeping into your mind, and into my own.

A correction was made on

Oct. 24, 2025

:

An earlier version of this article misstated a detail about legislation in 2020 expanding health insurance subsidies. It allowed families with income above 400 percent of the poverty line to qualify, not income up to 400 percent of the poverty line.

David Brooks is an Opinion columnist for The Times, writing about political, social and cultural trends. [@nytdavidbrooks](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 20 of the New York edition with the headline: The Rot Creeping Into Our Minds. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)