

Answering Authoritarian Politics: An Open Letter to an American Citizen about the 2016 Presidential Election

In response to a Facebook post I made challenging his understanding of the 2016 US presidential election — and of freedom and democracy — a former Solidarity activist, and now a first-generation immigrant to America who is supporting Donald Trump, wrote the following:

I am all for freedom and democracy. This is why I will never vote for a Democrat! Clinton as a President was a disgrace, and so is Obama! He created racial divide and doubled the deficit! Every city run by Democrats for decades is in ruin. Democrat DeBlasio in NYC is a disaster! Democratic NYC Council honored soviet spy Ethel Rosenberg. Democrats stand for gun control and speech control! Yes, I am all for freedom and democracy, that is why I support the party that eliminated racial segregation, party of ML King and Malcolm X, the party of Reagan who destroyed communism!

He subsequently wrote, “If the media were doing their job, Hillary would have been in prison long time ago, Obama would not have been elected and Bill Clinton forced to resign.”

I quote these responses not because they are unusual but rather because they are all too representative of a distorted reality and ideological mindset that has become mainstream in America with the candidacy of Donald Trump for the US presidency. The media and internet outlets that promote his politics and campaign propagate these and other false claims, which are then ceaselessly repeated on social media.

Those of us committed to democracy must start to take the propagation of such distorted reality and ideology more seriously. They form the basis of Trump’s anti-democratic and authoritarian politics. Indeed, such propaganda should be taken as seriously as we took the false reality of communist propaganda when fighting communism. That propaganda has returned in Putin’s Russia and in other settings. And as the journalist Anne Applebaum points out, there is a striking similarity in the tactics of Russian state propaganda and that of Donald Trump’s candidacy. The aim of such propaganda is to undermine liberal democracy: the more false reality that is generated and the more distrust and confusion about facts that can be created, the less ability there is to discern the difference between fact and opinion, between democratic governance and dictatorship, indeed between good and evil.

Simplistic, false, and distorted assertions that reflect fixed ideological stances are now the norm in what passes for political commentary not just in social media but in much of American news and opinion media — including in serious political and intellectual journals. Within that framework, as my Facebook responder and numerous others make clear, the legitimacy of America’s democratic institutions and processes, its system of rule of law, and indeed the determination of voters in elections are all invalidated. Dissidents under communism insisted on reclaiming reality by openly rejecting propaganda lies and “living in truth.” I believe we must answer those propagating distorted and false reality in this election to reclaim our political reality, to re-affirm democracy, and to “explain, discuss, debate, and persuade.” In doing so in this Open Letter to an American Citizen, I hope I can contribute to a return to more democratic politics and discussion.

Eric Chenoweth

Dear American Citizen,

I cannot let your words go unanswered. You once were imprisoned for your role in the Solidarity trade union in its struggle against communism in Poland. You left your country to gain freedom. But you reveal in your several responses to me that you are now a willing agent of authoritarian politics. I spent many years devoted to helping your former countrymen gain freedom. I hope, then, you will read and reflect on what I write below.

I challenged you that American democracy — and democracy throughout the world — were being threatened by the candidacy of Donald Trump and that you should not be supporting his campaign. I argued that Trump has regularly promised to undermine the constitutional foundations of American democracy and its international obligations to democratic alliances. He has pledged mass deportations of millions of people; he gained support by proposing to bar entry into this country to all Muslims; he gained greater support by pledging to routinely use torture and order extra-judicial killings contrary to American and international law; and he has promised to undermine America's NATO treaty obligations while praising and proposing an alliance with NATO's chief adversary, Russian leader Vladimir Putin. These are just a few of his authoritarian pledges. I argue that any candidate for president making them should be decisively rejected.

You answer that "I am all for freedom and democracy. That is why I will never vote for a Democrat." But the reasons you provide are unrelated to *any* fundamental threats to democracy. Rather, they are assertions and repetitions of lines of propaganda put forward by the Trump campaign and by ideologically driven media outlets and personalities backing it. Your response is a reflection of the rise of propaganda as politics in the US. But it also reflects the failure of America's democratic institutions, including its political parties, media, and civil society, to help protect American democracy from an anti-democratic politician. We should rise to this task.

So let me first address the issue of political party identification (I will address your specific claims further below). Of course, not voting for a member of a political party with which you disagree is legitimate political behavior in a democracy. In normal democratic elections, citizens choose the candidates and parties they think will best represent their political views and interests. But it is dangerous when citizens identify political parties as fundamentally opposed to freedom and democracy or as the "enemy" simply because they disagree with them on *policy* issues. When this becomes the norm, as it has in much of the media, we lose the capacity to identify actual enemies of freedom and democracy and to adopt the necessary means to protect against those genuine threats. It is the case in this election when there is such a genuine threat.

In the United States, the Democratic and Republican Parties — the two major parties that contest in our elections — have remained within a broad democratic range and commit themselves to adhering to America's constitutional foundations that establish and protect basic rights and a democratic system of governance. These two major parties have adopted competing sets of democratic principles and taken positions in favor of larger or smaller government, greater and lesser regulation, more or less fiscal stimulus, and higher or lower taxes. They have staked positions supporting labor or business, greater or lesser advancement of civil rights and suffrage, and the promotion of more liberal or conservative moral and social values, and so on. Since World War II, they have taken positions on how best America should act as the most powerful free and democratic country in a world facing many threats to freedom and security. Sometimes,

there has been general consensus, overlaps, or compromises on policy between the parties; more recently, there has been greater disagreement and lack of compromise.

The foundations of freedom and democracy are *not* threatened when political parties adopt policies or take actions on the range of issues affecting the country's domestic political governance or its foreign affairs. Nor generally do the results of those policies or actions threaten those foundations. Doubling the budget deficit, racial division, the poor governance of cities, the passing of resolutions at a city council level, or even gun control (the Democratic platform does not propose "speech control") — the main issues stated by you as justifications for never voting for a Democrat — none of these threaten the foundations of freedom and democracy.

These foundations *are* threatened when one of the major parties nominates a candidate for the country's highest and most powerful office whose basic promise is to replicate as president the autocratic and domineering leadership of his business empire. They are further threatened when such an authoritarian candidate builds an anti-democratic political movement of support based on open appeals to prejudice and violence, on promises to repudiate the country's constitutional principles and values, on questioning the legitimacy of democratic institutions and elections, and on the daily violation of political civility and norms of political dialogue essential to any democracy (see my article "[The Authoritarian Temptation](#)"). Today, we face an abnormal situation: one of America's two major parties has nominated an explicitly authoritarian candidate for the presidency. That poses a present danger to American democracy.

In such an instance, the normal allegiance or non-allegiance to political parties should be reconsidered. As in historical situations where authoritarian political forces threatened to take power, the only question should be how to defeat such a threat to democracy as strongly as possible. In this country's two-party system, such repudiation is achieved by voting for the other major party candidate if he or she is a qualified and democratic alternative. While Hillary Clinton is considered flawed by many due to questions of her ethics, truthfulness, and professional lapses of judgment, she demonstrates competence for the office of the presidency, adherence to constitutional foundations and principles, and support for the post-war system of alliances with democratic nations. Her platform represents a continuity of the policies of one of America's major democratic parties. Contrary to claims of Trump and his supporters, she is not "disqualified" as "a criminal" who "belongs in jail." She has never been formally accused much less convicted in court of any criminal actions under America's system of rule of law.

Anti-communists once criticized anti-anti-communists for "moral equivalence": equating the actions and behavior of the Soviet state with those of less systematically repressive regimes or of the United States and other democratic countries. The main argument was that whatever the faults of such regimes or of democratic countries (and there were many) these could not be equated to the political evil of Soviet totalitarianism and the overall danger the Soviet Union posed to world freedom. In this election, all citizens' most basic interest should be to preserve American democracy. That is to say, citizens must protect the country and the world from a genuine political evil: an authoritarian candidate making pledges to undermine the democratic foundations, principles, and values of the United States. Citizens therefore should reject "moral equivalence" between the authoritarian and democratic candidates. This is not because the democratic candidate is ideal or is not flawed but rather because "moral equivalence" minimizes the fundamental danger to liberal democracy posed by an authoritarian threat.

We know from history the consequences when citizens do not mobilize themselves against anti-democratic threats and make the choice for democracy. Authoritarianism and totalitarianism win. Various historical examples — Russia, Germany, and Spain are a few — offer clear lessons of what one should choose when faced with anti-democratic and democratic options. In those (and other) cases, attacking and failing to support the democratic options resulted in the victory of the anti-democratic options and helped to bring about the worst human rights nightmares of the 20th century. The prospect of an authoritarian victory now exists in the world's most established and powerful democracy. As a result, America and the world face as grave a threat to freedom and security as any that previously existed. This threat places a profound obligation on American citizens to vote for and support the democratic option to an authoritarian candidate.

It is perhaps unfair of me to ask that a first-generation American like yourself respond responsibly to this country's authoritarian danger when so many members of older generations of Americans are supporting the authoritarian candidate; when a 162-year-old democratic party appeases and nominates such a candidate and is doing whatever it can to elect him; and when so many remain neutral or apathetic to the obligation to oppose this anti-democratic threat. It is perhaps more unfair when news and opinion media, much of it based on a rigid ideological bias, dispense information and opinion in tornado swirls without basis in fact or reality. Broadcast, internet, and print media emit a ceaseless propagation of Trump's authoritarian claims and false reality. Spokesmen for his campaign appear on all major media outlets; many "news commentators" back his campaign on ideologically biased news stations; even writers and editors in conservative opinion journals that opposed Trump's candidacy put forward various false representations of political reality. America is a "third-world country" where cities and the economy are "falling apart." African Americans live in "war zones." Obama's foreign policy has made America "weak." The rival Democratic candidate "belongs in jail," "betrays national security," and "sold her office" as Secretary of State. America's justice system has a "double standard" and FBI Director James Comey "violated his constitutional duties." Law and order are "collapsing." The Black Lives Matter movement and even President Obama have declared "war on cops." Certainly, it is hard for anyone to see reality through such a prism.

Still, citizens in a democracy must try to discern truth from distortion, reality from fiction, and historical facts from false claims and interpretations. So, in response to your particular claims:

Cities under the long-term administration of Democratic mayors and city councils are not all "in ruin." Most (like Austin, Boston, San Francisco and many others) are doing well by general economic, social, and cultural indicators. Mayor di Blasio of New York is not a "disaster." Whatever objections you have with his leadership, economic growth has increased and crime statistics have declined during di Blasio's administration. The City Council did not pass a resolution "honoring Soviet agent" Ethel Rosenberg. It passed a resolution foolishly praising her but its main purpose was to recognize what most serious (including anti-communist) historians agree was her wrongful prosecution and execution for treason committed by her husband and brother, who were Soviet agents.

President Obama did not "double the deficit." The budget deficit for FY 2015 was about two-thirds less than its high of \$1.4 trillion in FY 2009. Much of the large increase in the national debt during the Obama administration occurred due to the effects of the worst recession since the 1930s that began under President George W. Bush. No single person created America's "racial

divide.” That exists due to the fact that America still has not overcome its history of slavery, segregation, and racism. Relatedly, no single party ended segregation. Democratic President Lyndon Johnson pressed forward the great civil rights legislation of the 1960s that ended segregation with both Democratic and Republican support. However, with the nomination for president in 1964 of Barry Goldwater, a “states’ rights” advocate and one of six Republican senators who opposed the Civil Rights Act, the Republican Party began to reject its own history and record. It marginalized pro-civil rights members and welcomed segregationists and anti-civil rights legislators who left the Democratic Party. In the last fifty years, the party identifying itself with civil rights and equality is the Democratic Party and this is the major reason African Americans have voted overwhelmingly for Democrats. There is real debate over how best to overcome America’s continued racial inequality and injustices, but most African Americans find it offensive when Republicans claim theirs is “the party of ML King.” This is particularly so when their party has nominated a candidate in this year’s presidential election who led a white supremacist-generated and conspiracy theorist-fueled campaign to question the legitimacy of the country’s first African American president by falsely claiming he was not born in the US.

As noted earlier, the Democratic Party platform does not advocate “speech control.” In this campaign, only one candidate, Donald Trump, has openly threatened freedom of expression by calling on supporters to menace “the disgusting media” and by advocating libel laws to muzzle reporters. (The issue of “speech codes” is different and is being played out mostly on college campuses and within corporations.) And no matter how highly people may place “the right to bear arms” among their considerations for voting, the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights has *never* been paramount within America’s constitutional framework of liberties. Unlike other natural rights protected in the Constitution, it is a qualified right that originated from America’s unique history as a “frontier country” in which a citizen army fought for its independence. Only two other countries in the world today have such a right in their constitutions (Guatemala and Mexico, both with clear limitations). No international human rights convention includes “the right to bear arms” in its protection of rights. You may disagree with gun control or gun safety advocates on the proper constitutional interpretation of the Second Amendment, but they pose no fundamental threat to the foundations of American freedom or democracy or to human rights.

Finally, no party or president destroyed communism. The history is more complex. The overall policy that set the external conditions for communism’s collapse was containment, which was first adopted by Democratic President Harry Truman and was continued under both Democratic and Republican presidents. Many historians give President Reagan credit as having significantly contributed to the collapse of Soviet communism for his administration’s military build-up and adoption of harder-line policies toward the Soviet Union in the 1980s following the period of détente. But the Cold War was waged in bi-partisan coalition. I also argue that communism’s collapse had much to do with the struggle for freedom of your former countrymen and others living under communism. Regardless, ***the Republican Party is no longer the party of Reagan.*** It is, by its nomination and overwhelming support, the party of Trump, who is excising Reaganism from the Republican Party and rebuking its claim as the “party of freedom.” Only if Donald Trump is fully repudiated in this election can it be possible for the Republican Party to reclaim such a heritage.

On foreign policy, Trump has re-orientated the Republican Party away from Reagan’s anti-communist and pro-democracy policies, away from Bush’s “freedom agenda,” and indeed away

from America's 70-year commitment to the system of alliances of democratic nations. Trump would abdicate America's role as the leader of the free world in favor of an "America First" policy in which authoritarian dictators and countries are considered potential allies and American security commitments are based on monetary compensation, not on the sharing of democratic values. "America First" was the slogan and name of the isolationist and pacifist movement from the late 1930s led by the Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh. That movement helped delay America's mobilization against the cataclysmic threat posed by the Axis nations — at great cost for America and the world. Its historical impact should teach a permanent lesson: there is an enormous danger when foreign policy is based on "America First." It means by definition America's retreat from leadership in the defense of freedom and democracy in the world.

Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other founders of the American republic argued that the most fundamental defense of any democracy is an informed citizenry making rational choices for their elected representatives. Today, that tenet is being tested: will the general citizenry defend American democracy from the threat of a presidential candidate who has built an anti-democratic political movement of knowing and willing supporters based on an authoritarian platform?

So far, America's democratic institutions and its political class have failed that test. Most of the elected leadership and membership of the Republican Party appeased, nominated, and endorsed such a candidate for president. Some of the party's leaders have joined Trump in encouraging mob-like behavior in hysterical calls for imprisoning the main rival candidate. Highly educated and informed conservatives who opposed Trump on grounds that he was an authoritarian candidate nevertheless remain neutral and attack the democratic alternative as an unacceptable choice. Meanwhile, the free media, the institution most responsible for informing the electorate, has in its coverage acted to propagate and legitimize Trump's authoritarian politics. As a result, the threat of Trump's victory is quite real.

The journalist Anne Applebaum has pointed out that the propaganda fueling the Trump campaign and the false reality put forward by his political and media supporters — the type found in your assertions and claims — has similar characteristics to that found in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The domestic and foreign propaganda organs of the Russian Federation all put forward stories about the economic and social collapse of Western democratic countries, the decline of Western "civilizational" values, the rise of nationalist, ethnic, and racial tensions, and the disorder and lawlessness in the world caused by crime and terror. The aim of such Russian propaganda, like Soviet propaganda before it, is quite simple: to undermine liberal democracies.

It is now the responsibility of American citizens to recognize the basis of the Trump campaign and its propaganda, reject it, and affirm liberal democracy. The hopeful sign in this election is that most first generation Americans do so and appear to understand the foundations of American democracy and its requirements of citizenship. In polls, they oppose Trump and support Clinton, the democratic alternative, in large numbers. I hope that in reflecting on what I have written above, you join that majority and the repudiation of authoritarian politics in America, just as you rejected dictatorship in Poland.

Sincerely,
Eric Chenoweth