



Protests against mistreatment of Black people by police highlight that many U.S. citizens effectively live outside the provisions of the Constitution.

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POLICY FORUM

Racial authoritarianism in U.S. democracy

One segment of the population experiences different rules and differential citizenship.

By **Vesla M. Weaver¹** and **Gwen Prowse²**

Recently, casual and savage violence of police against peaceful protesters and images of police in military gear sweeping up residents into unmarked vans has led journalists to question whether U.S. democracy is in peril. Many observers described these recent actions as authoritarian. But racial authoritarianism has been central to citizenship and governance of race-class subjugated communities throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. It describes state oppression such that groups of residents live under extremely divergent experiences of government and laws. Yet when police engage in excessive surveillance, incursions on civil liberties, and arbitrary force as a matter of routine patrol, many scholars of American politics are reluctant to consider it a violation of democracy and instead deem them aberrations in an

otherwise functioning democracy. This mischaracterization is not limited only to intellectual discourse but also affects the public sphere. By obscuring evidence of racial authoritarianism, reforms will not land where needed. Procedural reform is useful when we are simply improving policing, not ridding democracy of authoritarian practices.

Racial authoritarian governance has deeply shaped our institutions, political arrangements, and state development, and virtually every racial justice movement over the past 100 years has tried to expose its operation, challenge it, and seek freedom from it (2). Coterminous with democracy in the United States, racially authoritarian patterns are reproduced and innovated after periods of democratic expansion in the United States. Since the 1960s, policing has been the primary administrative tool of racial authoritarianism: One segment of the population effectively lives under a different set of rules and, as a result, experiences differential power and citizenship.

Although many Black intellectuals and citizens have understood how authoritarian

power operates on citizens within a democracy, scholars of U.S. politics largely overlook state power to coerce, surveil, and enact violence often by police authorities and treat it as unimportant to theorizing our democracy. Starting from the assumption of a liberal tradition and examining deviations from a mostly pluralistic polity, they document evidence of democratic retreat only when political competition is curtailed and trust in governing institutions erodes, despite overwhelming evidence of racial authoritarianism. This view, stretching from the field's defining scholars to the present day, is housed within a polity that was increasingly turning to, and expanding, its coercive instruments of surveillance, predation, violent intimidation, and confinement, concentrated on race-class subjugated residents.

The result is a substantive and substantial narrowing: By failing to consider the possibility of widespread, coherent, and racially targeted authoritarian practices, the focus in academic debates becomes improving aspects of democratic quality and the distribution and delivery of democratic goods—more

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representation, more votes, more responsive policy—while rendering invisible the lack of autonomy and freedom, and the vulnerability to state violence and illegal takings, that characterizes the experience of U.S. democracy for those experiencing its more authoritarian aspects. We should augment our understanding, theories, and measurement to encompass or reconcile the presence of such authoritarian practices within U.S. democracy. In addition to measuring democratic performance through national indicators such as free and fair elections, we should also include local coercive practices concentrated on subgroups of the population.

A TRENCHANT REBUTTAL

Once we look beyond democracy's formal structures, institutions, and rules to the lived experiences of political authority, we see that they pose a sharp contrast, and a trenchant rebuttal, to the conventional understandings of liberal democracy. For example, drawing on the largest database of narrative accounts of policing in U.S. cities after the Baltimore uprising of 2015, we see that U.S. residents have a sophisticated understanding of the actual operation of democracy and are witnesses to its relationship to authoritarian practices (2). Stopped by police, subject to violation of privacy and displays of force, routine seizure of resources, and unable to freely assemble because of police occupation of their neighborhoods, they described being effectively outside the provisions of the main text of U.S. democracy—the Constitution:

“But every black and every Hispanic that gets stopped, especially here in LA, they asked to get out their car...okay. And it's a difference. When you're telling me, you're going to go and say, 'Oh you're just nitpicking, you're crying, you're complaining.' But we live this. You see? We live it” [(2), p. 1162].

“They're paid to protect and serve but they're not protecting us, they're not serving us, they're killing us and eliminating us” [(2), p. 1160].

Police have long proscribed the movement of Black communities and engaged in racial and social control. When historians interviewed several thousand Black Americans who had lived under Jim Crow (state and local laws that enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement in the U.S. South) in the 1930s and 1940s, police were understood to be guardians of white democracy (3). They described orientations similar to conversations about life decades later. For example, how police goaded Black people into displays of force: “They would come and mess with you in order for you to say something ... This gave them an excuse to hit you, you know” (3). State violence through police was witnessed, as well as the absence of accountabil-

ity when police executed Black people.

When we look to narrative accounts and the undemocratic practices they reveal, we may be better equipped to anticipate critical ruptures in political life. State practices of policing, surveillance, and impunity that are quotidian for racially subjugated people, when popularized, become worrying signs of an authoritarian turn.

HIDING IN PLAIN VIEW

Despite racial authoritarianism's glaring presence in experiential accounts of U.S. democracy, it has been hiding in plain view in the field of political science. In a field responsible for constructing metrics on democratic stability and political behavior, our failure to theorize racial authoritarianism has had consequences for how U.S. democracy is conceived by the public and policy-makers.

There are several reasons why racial authoritarianism in the United States has, for so long, gone unnamed by our field. One reason is because scholars tend to discount knowledge derived from a bottom-up approach (actual citizen experience), which may obscure our understanding of how government authority is actually experienced. Empirical research on democracy leans heavily on quantifiable indices (such as the Polity Index) and nationally representative survey samples. These measures are useful tools for comparative analysis and standardized snapshots for change over time, but they do not leave room for citizens to define democratic deficits on their own terms or through their own experiential accounts. When we use narrative accounts as the lens through which we view U.S. democracy, racial authoritarianism comes clearly into focus.

Relatedly, scholars tend to fixate on nationally representative institutions and political activities such as voting and operate from an overly narrow definition of authoritarian practices (executive power grabs, direct police collusion, and limited political competition). But the focus on executive overreach can be misleading in a political system as decentralized as the United States, where local governments have high levels of autonomy over police authority in particular. Without a focus on the local or subnational level, it is easy to overlook the ways in which U.S. federalism facilitates racial authoritarianism.

Third, for scholars who have written about modern policing practices, there is no shortage of analysis of their racially disparate outcomes (1). But students of political science have tended to examine the coercion, occupation, subjectivity, and extraction that constitute what we call racial authoritarianism in isolation from democracy. We tend to analyze racialized policing within a separate literature on incarceration and criminal jus-

tice; but why should we not also analyze it in the literature on democratic transitions, subnational or group-based authoritarianism, and political violence?

If the field of political science sequestered police repression from questions of democracy, historical Black thinkers did not. An understanding of racial authoritarianism—although completely absent in mainstream scholarship—animated historical Black theorizations that contested U.S. democracy's hard line boundary from authoritarian modes of governance. They saw police violence and power as a central instrument upholding the differentiated citizenship key to the operation of democracy in the United States. For example, in 1966 James Baldwin wrote, “I have witnessed and endured the brutality of the police many more times than once—but, of course, I cannot prove it. I cannot prove it because the Police Department investigates itself, quite as though it were answerable only to itself. But it cannot be allowed to be answerable only to itself. It must be made to answer to the community which pays it, and which it is legally sworn to protect, and if American Negroes are not a part of the American community, then all of the American professions are a fraud” (4).

This brings us to the final reason, which is that we have been working from foundations of a discipline that has segregated and isolated Black knowledge. For example, our field's most vaunted scholar of American democracy, Robert Dahl, theorized civic life through a case study in New Haven during a period of mass racial upheaval across northern U.S. cities (5). Yet, Dahl's account portrayed a democracy that subjugated Black citizens did not live and had never taken part in. Political science scholars have typically examined democratic deficits as a question of who is represented and how; they tend to focus on exclusion from political participation or social citizenship, or hindrances on the ability of citizens to have equal influence (6).

Scholarly treatises flowed from Dahl's conceptions but stood uneasily alongside a chorus of Black intellectuals, folk leaders, and activists that contested the clean distinction between democracy and authoritarian rule. Instead of describing pluralism, polyarchy, and liberalism, they called attention to undemocratic legacies, visible and unapologetically practiced on their streets.

That mainstream approaches have hardened into deep scholarly grooves has had consequences. Today, students learn about authoritarianism abroad. We are taught American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is singular for its old constitution, institutional arrangements such as federalism, lack of feudalism, and weaker

welfare state, not because we have a racial authoritarianism distinct from any other nation in the western world. When we do recognize authoritarian governance in the United States, it is a past relic, confined to the post-emancipation U.S. South where Black disenfranchisement, one-party rule, and explicit political violence reigned but was eventually overcome. And when scholars present evidence of democratic backsliding in contemporary U.S. politics, they ignore the expansion of racial repression, focusing instead on polarization, distrust in institutions, and extreme income inequality—all of which themselves derive from or are linked to racial authoritarianism.

PROMISING FRAMEWORKS

How can scholars study authoritarian modes of governance within democratic states? What can attending to racial authoritarianism teach us about the nature and evolution of U.S. democracy? Fortunately, there are promising theories on which we can build. A few scholars have pointed to the possibility that authoritarian practices coexist within formally democratic states and institutions. King and Smith have argued that U.S. democracy was formed through the contestation of liberal egalitarian ideologies and illiberal, ascriptive hierarchy (7). Miller describes “racialized state failure” in which U.S. federalism and racism interact to create conditions comparable with those of failed states (such as extreme levels of homicide, state violence, and imprisonment) (8). Hanchard reminds us that the most celebrated democracies, back to ancient Athens, had the longest histories of racial slavery, subjugation, imperialism, police terror, and highly unequal labor regimes (9). He argues against typical stances in our field that tend to ignore the coexistence of democracy and ethnoracial hierarchy and that the former’s institutional development was shaped by the latter: “The seemingly straightforward genealogy that reduces democracy to its formal and performative elements ignores how coercion, empire, and forced labor have been deeply intertwined in democratic experiments in the Greek city-states and in contemporary societies” [(10), p. 68].

The literature on the relatively recent democratization of the United States also offers an opening. Scholars of U.S. and comparative political development have long understood one-party rule in the South before the Second Reconstruction (1945–1968) as authoritarian. Mickey has analyzed these “authoritarian enclaves,” that “created and regulated racially separate—and significantly unfree—civic spheres” [(10), p. 5]. Gibson has described subnational authoritarianism in the United

States as compatible with, and enabled by, federal democratic institutions before the Second Reconstruction (11). However, scholars stop shy of theorizing the persistence or reemergence of authoritarian practices after the fall of territorial subnational authoritarianism in the 1960s.

Last, we can learn from scholars working outside the United States who have analyzed and provided theories to explain conditions that aid the endurance of coercive institutions in democracies, including the police, who further “stratify citizenship” along the dimensions of race, class, and geography by failing to protect citizens, serving instead the interests of the state and engaging in extra-legal force (12). In countries with histories of military rule, norms of police violence endure in the transition to democracy. During dictatorships, even the middle classes are subject to state and police repression, but this falls away under democratic reforms; ironically, the rise of democracy helps concentrate police violence on poor and raced

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groups. Citizens being “outlaws” in Bolivia—unprotected by police and law but also subject to its capricious regulation—draws parallel to Black communities in the United States experiencing “legal estrangement” (13, 14). How might scholars better connect racial authoritarianism across democracies?

Unlike Latin American cases, where authoritarian practices predated and then survived democratic openings, in the United States, authoritarian policing tended to develop after democratic expansions. State power to surveil and confine citizens increased in response to a wave of democratization in both the First (1863–1877) and Second Reconstruction. On the heels of the abolition of slavery, new forms of repression evolved, including the leasing of Black convict labor; after the voting, civil rights, and fair housing acts of the 1960s, racially targeted policing practices grew on nearly every indicator (1). Scholars should account for whether and why police power and Black mass imprisonment have tended to grow in relation to periods of formal democratization.

ANEMIC, DISTORTED, DIRE

The United States is now and has historically been characterized by high levels of state control of and violence toward ra-

cially subjugated groups alongside formal political freedom. Just as racial slavery defined U.S. democracy historically, racial authoritarianism continues to define the practices of our democracy. In the current political moment, recognition of the fraying of democratic institutions has collided with a movement for Black liberation from police atrocities. Scholars often do the work of making such a connection legible more broadly. But if scholars continue to keep the former separate from the latter by ignoring racial authoritarianism, we will continue to have an anemic and distorted conception of U.S. democracy, with potentially dire consequences for policy. It is perhaps unsurprising that the media has followed suit, presenting racialized policing as distinct from democratic backsliding, linked only by the executive’s rhetoric and actions.

Political scientists prepare and educate the next generation of civic leaders, teachers, policy-makers, pollsters, and change agents; by representing to them democracy in this way, we give them a half-truth, a flawed understanding of U.S. democracy, which may shrink policy agendas and political discourse more broadly. The analysis and description of democratic frameworks—and, for example, backsliding—influences the media and carries weight in policy circles (15). Thus, it is essential that political scientists continue to offer theories for understanding democracy with attention to its actual practice in heavily policed communities, so as not to squander an opportunity to improve it. ■

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