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An Analysis of Authoritarianism Concerning American and Chinese COVID-19 Response

The last six years have been a period of seismic change, both in the United States and internationally. The culmination of events contributing to this tumultuous period would be too great to list; the growing threat of climate change, rapid technological advancement, and the humanitarian disasters in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine are just a few such events. Of these, none have had the global reach and devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its emergence in late 2019, COVID-19 has killed over six million people worldwide, nearly one million in America alone ("WHO Coronavirus"). Throughout the pandemic, countries addressed the threat in various ways; some, like China, acted forcefully once the magnitude of the threat was made clear, while others, such as the United States, struggled with forming and enacting an effective strategy. In this crisis period, one that is only now seeming to diminish, governments grappled with protecting their citizens without overstepping their authority. The extent to which they succeeded is of great importance; there has been concern among academics and political analysts that authoritarianism has established a foothold internationally. There have been detailed examinations of this phenomena, but less in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consulting the academic literature and observing the pandemic responses of the United States and China, it is fair to say that both countries enacted authoritarian measures to combat the virus. However, there is much less consensus that the United States government's actions thus far in response to

COVID-19 indicate a turn towards authoritarianism. At the same time, there are worrying signs that China is already using its pandemic measures to increase its authoritarian influence within its borders.

Although authoritarian traits have existed among individuals throughout human history, authoritarianism as political philosophy only emerged in the 20th century. The autocratic dictators of the period, most notably Hitler and Stalin (Husain and Liebertz 12), became case studies for authoritarian traits by future academics. In the aftermath of World War II, the Frankfurt School deconstructed the authoritarian personality, defining three types of authoritarian: "the 'semi-erudite'. . .on the 'lunatic fringe,' the bureaucratic 'manipulator,' and the 'nihilistic' rebel, the most extreme of which are 'retrogressive sociopaths'" (Aho 4). Initial research regarding common behavioral traits across the authoritarian personality indicated a desire to wield power over the vulnerable, "[watching] them squirm," and "[inflicting]. . .exquisite pain" (Aho 9). This sense of power extended beyond personal behavior to governmental policy. Large infrastructure projects were seen as a way to project their power and solidify public support. A few of the most significant examples of expansive infrastructure were conceived and executed by autocrats, including "Hitler's autobahnen, Mussolini's autostrada, [and] Rober Moses' highways and parkways" (Wray 15). Examining the prelude to Nazi Germany, Bob Altemeyer of the Frankfurt School concluded that authoritarian personalities are formed environmentally at a young age, representing the culmination of behavioral training and socialization from adults (Aho 5). Learning these traits indicates the preexistence and proliferation of authoritarian attitudes and perspectives within societies that experience periods of autocratic fascism, as in Nazi Germany or Italy under Mussolini. The qualities of authoritarianism were continually reexamined by

scholars throughout the Cold War and the end of the century. Following a comparative definition of authoritarian governments from J. J. Linz, Alon classifies authoritarian governance as lacking political pluralism, "[obtaining] legitimacy through appeals to emotion," suppressing "anti-regime sentiment," and changing "broadly-defined powers" on a whim.

There has also been academic debate over the existence of partisan authoritarianism. Since its origin as a field of study, authoritarian philosophy has been primarily characterized as right-wing. Early efforts to develop a system for measuring left-wing authoritarianism were seen as somewhat pointless. One of the first to research this subject, Bob Altemeyer, dismissed the notion as "the Loch Ness monster of political psychology" (Aho 4). Despite this repudiation, more recent scholarship indicates that the concept of left-wing authoritarianism is valid (Manson 1). Left-wing authoritarianism is similar to its counterpart, aside from its mobilizing traits. Rather than uphold right-wing values the way 'traditional' authoritarianism does, it focuses on values including "anti-racism, anti-sexism, and wealth redistribution (Manson 2). Both types of authoritarianism include "high levels of dogmatism, affective polarization, and moral disengagement" (Manson 2). The differences between left-wing and right-wing authoritarianism rely less on differences in behavior and more on differences in target (Manson 1). Significantly, both groups favor amassing influence and gaining control over their political rivals. Though their goals are not aligned, either flavor of partisan authoritarianism can undermine democracy if allowed the opportunity.

Considering the prolific rate countries were transitioning towards democratic or semi-democratic rule in the late 20th century, over thirty in the twenty-five year period between 1974 and 1990 (Huntington 2), citizens of western democracies began to treat their form of

government as unassailable. For many, stable democracies can only fail under the most extreme and typically violent circumstances. This notion is addressed and refuted in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's analysis of democratic decay, *How Democracies Die*. Pinpointing the traits of democratic societies is essential to understanding the subtle factors that might destabilize them. There are four qualities of a healthy democracy: representative officials "chosen through. . .fair elections," freedom to "participate in the political system," the protection of human rights, and equal enforcement and application of the law (Alon et al. 2). Multiple scholars use variations of these traits to define democracy, giving greater weight to their credibility. For example, David Shambaugh, in his book *China's Future*, identified the core tenets of democracy as "multiple political parties, regular elections, a parliament and judiciary independent of the executive, … real rule of law, … active NGOs, a full market-driven and open economy, … and protection of many basic freedoms and human rights" (ch. 1). In his definition, Shambaugh hints at an important quality of democratic societies; they rely on institutional and economic synergy to maintain themselves. More than a set of political procedures, democracies exist within a complex web of systems and institutions.

Another element of democratic states is that they are fragile. Many proponents of democracy believe the opposite, but examining the countries that either failed to transition to democracy or fell into a failed or authoritarian state, it becomes clear that democratic societies maintain a tricky balance. This dynamic was investigated by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in *The Narrow Corridor*. Acemoglu and Robinson's thesis was that democratic countries occupy an unusual spot proportional to the power of their state relational to society. In this titular narrow corridor, the state becomes a "shackled leviathan," powerful enough to operate

effectively but constrained by society (Acemoglu and Robinson ch. 2). The critical insight presented by Acemoglu and Robinson is that society must exercise some level of control over the state, or else democracy breaks down as the shackled leviathan turns into a despotic one. This conclusion is supported by other scholarship regarding democratization. Rather than a binary state of democratic or non-democratic, societies exist in a more granular state depending on their governmental structure and "institutional attributes" (Hadenius and Teorell 2). Though democratic structures are reasonably uniform, autocratic regimes have several variations with differing governmental styles, including military, one-party, and limited multiparty (Hadenius and Teorell 7). Just as authoritarian states can transition towards democracy, though it is uncommon, with just 23% of authoritarian transitions between 1972 and 2003 resulting in democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 11), democratic countries can deteriorate toward autocracy.

When democracy is undermined and dismantled from within, it is typically due to an authoritarian leader attempting to consolidate power. Not all authoritarians act on associated behaviors upon taking office. While some aspiring politicians have blatantly authoritarian characteristics, others only become authoritarian over time, sometimes after many years. In either case, it is important to identify behavior patterns that can align with authoritarian leadership. Levitsky and Ziblatt list the "four indicators of authoritarian behavior" as rejecting "the democratic rules of the game," denying "the legitimacy of opponents," tolerating or encouraging violence, and indicating "a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents" (18-19). In addition to the qualities of authoritarians, *How Democracies Die* asserts that in order to maintain their power, authoritarian rulers within liberal democracies must either compromise or nullify democratic institutions. Using a soccer metaphor, Levitsky and Ziblatt characterize

these actions are capturing the referees, sidelining the opposition, and rewriting the rules of the game (47).

A historical example of this pattern is Viktor Orbán's leadership over Hungary. At the beginning of his political career, he "governed democratically" for a single four-year term as prime minister of Hungary from 1998 to 2002 (Levitsky and Ziblatt 17). However, when he reentered politics in 2010, Orbán began exhibiting authoritarian traits, reshaping Hungary's government in the process. After achieving victory in 2010, Orbán's conservative party Fidesz abused its two-thirds majority to adopt "new majoritarian electoral rules" favoring itself and "gerrymandered the country's electoral districts to maximize the number of seats it would win" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 52). Previously independent state institutions, such as the Prosecution Service, Ombudsman's office, and State Audit Office, were packed with Orbán loyalists (Levitsky and Ziblatt 47). The size of the Constitutional Court was increased from eight judges to fifteen, and the nomination rules were changed only to allow Fidesz to appoint new justices (Levitsky and Ziblatt 48). The separation of powers, a vital trait of functioning democracies, was compromised. These are only a few examples of the actions that dismantle the essential "guardrails of democracy," necessary structures for preventing the rise of authoritarianism within a democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 58). Hungary is an example of authoritarian stressors weakening democracy, though not eliminating it.

A second example of democratic backsliding can be seen in Russia. Though not particularly democratic compared to Hungary, even before Vladimir Putin became president, many of the reforms implemented after the fall of the Soviet Union have been removed or eroded under his leadership. While Orbán consolidated his power by placing loyalists within the

government, Putin took a different path, focusing on neutralizing any possible threats to his authority. Rather than capturing the referees, Putin sidelined the opposing team (Levitsky and Ziblatt 55). Very soon after gaining power, Putin met with Russia's wealthiest businessmen and informed them that their autonomy depended on staying out of politics, in other words, staying out of his way (Levitsky and Ziblatt 50). Boris Berezovsky, the owner of ORT TV, defied Putin's warning by covering him negatively. Soon afterward, Berezovsky was arrested, and his media assets were put "at Putin's disposal" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 50). Each time a prominent individual threatened Putin's political control, they were arrested under dubious charges. These measures have been effective in discouraging anyone from defying Putin. Under such a system, democracy cannot exist, reflecting Russia's classification as a highly authoritarian state (Levitsky and Ziblatt 101). Just as with Hungary, the ascension of an authoritarian to political power led to a decline in democratic institutions.

Democratic backsliding is not only a concern for countries that have struggled with instability, corruption, or weak institutions. Even strong democracies like the United States are vulnerable to authoritarian tendencies. A well-known example in 20th century America was McCarthyism, the practice of utilizing accusatory rhetoric to paint political opponents as unpatriotic communist sympathizers (Levitsky and Ziblatt 77). Popularized by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, this practice was employed by the Republican party to gain public support while casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Democrat party. Outside of the inaccuracy of many of the accusations, McCarthyism threatened the "norm of mutual toleration" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 77). Mutual toleration is the concept that political opposition is legitimate and that although one may disagree on matters of policy, that disagreement is not an existential threat to

society (Levitsky and Ziblatt 59). America has had an uneasy relationship with mutual toleration throughout its history, most recently during the presidency of Donald Trump.

Former President Donald Trump can be accurately considered an authoritarian in many ways. Categorized as a "serial norm breaker," Trump employed populist and nationalist rhetoric to attack many democratic institutions, former and current government officials, and political opponents (Levitsky and Ziblatt 80, 95). During his campaign in 2016, Trump denied the legitimacy of his political rival Hillary Clinton, "branding her a 'criminal' and declaring. . .she 'has to go to jail'" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 38). Starting in 2016 and extending throughout his term as president, Trump would disparage critical news coverage, dismissing it as "fake news" and, in 2017, declaring the media "the enemy of the American people" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 97). These actions are consistent with those of historical authoritarian figures, including Stalin and Mao (Levitsky and Ziblatt 97). Trump's presidency also oversaw an acceleration in America's detachment from global affairs. In four years, he led the United States to withdraw from several international treaties and organizations, including the UN Human Rights Council, the Paris Accord, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Huang 5).

An important distinction concerning Trump is that although he possesses the personality traits of an authoritarian, he did not frequently govern as one. This claim has less to do with his own actions compared to America's political and institutional checks and balances. When Trump tried to implement a travel ban targeting Islamic countries, the Ninth Circuit US Court of Appeals blocked it (Levitsky and Ziblatt 96). Despite his targeted attacks against journalists and news agencies, at the time *How Democracies Die* was published in 2018, "no journalists [were] arrested, and no media outlets[. . .]altered their coverage due to pressure from the government"

(98). Some "democratic guardrails," metaphorical barriers protecting the integrity of America's political institutions, were weakened or removed during Trump's presidency, but "he did not break through them" (Levitsky and Ziblatt 100). Unlike Hungary, which has been descending towards authoritarianism, and Russia, having lost many democratic institutions over the decades, American democracy could survive the greater part of Trump's presidency without significant regression.

Compared to the United States, China lacks the checks and balances of liberal government institutions. Though a vital contributor and facilitator of international trade, China is commonly regarded as an authoritarian state due to its single-party system and retaliation against political opponents. Shambaugh categorizes China as a "hard authoritarian" state, accusing Chinese president Xi Jinping of overseeing a "zero-sum approach to power and a highly insecure regime that lacks intrinsic confidence" (ch.4). Though this is a common characterization of China's leadership, some scholars push back against labeling the country authoritarian. Looking at the structure of local governments within China, there are "public hearings, participatory budgeting," and even "village elections" partially disconnected from central leadership (He 1). These experiments have been labeled "phantom democracy" (He 2), and they hint at potential grassroots movements working towards political reform. While these developments should be monitored in the future, there is little doubt that China operates as a one-party authoritarian state on a national level. Both Shambaugh and He agree that despite the presence of limited political reforms, "[a]ll. . .locally-made democratic experiments stop when they confront. . .taming the power of the CCP" (ch. 2; 3). Despite international pressure from the United States and Europe, China showed little indication that it would shift towards a less authoritarian, potentially even

democratic, style of governance. The late 2010s saw a rise in nationalism across China and consolidation of power at the highest levels of government.

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus was detected in Wuhan, China. At the time, very little attention was given to this outbreak internationally, particularly in western countries. After spreading throughout Wuhan, the Chinese government announced an impending lockdown of the city on January 23, 2020 (Alon et al. 1). Upon hearing the news, "an estimated five million Wuhan residents fled," marking the beginning of the virus' international transmission (Alon et al. 1). Nineteen days later, the World Health Organization would label the disease COVID-19 ("Naming the Coronavirus Disease"). On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic (Cucinotta and Vanelli 1). As the new pandemic rapidly spread across the world in spring 2020, countries scrambled to react. There is no end to the analysis and commentary regarding various governments' responses concerning COVID-19. Its impacts on social dynamics, the environment, and the economy are just a few areas of academic research. What has not been as closely analyzed is the effect of the pandemic on liberal governance.

The liberal international order, a structure in place since the end of World War II, is marked by an ideology that is founded on "liberal ideology, the principle of multilateralism, and a group of defenders with a shared commitment to preserve liberal. . .principles and institutions" (Huang 14). This liberal order "[is] under attack from all sides during the coronavirus pandemic," (Huang 2), specifically caused by "the entrenchment of authoritarianism, characterized by. . .autocratization and the consolidation of competing authoritarian. . .models," a rise of nationalism enabled by marginal politicians, and "the intensified competition among major powers" (Huang 1). With increasing attacks on democratic norms in America and the rise of

President Jinping's authoritarian China, the approaches the two countries took to address the pandemic, and their potential consequences, are hugely important for their future development.

A common theme across early responses to COVID-19 is mismanagement. China initially placed heavy restrictions on information regarding the new disease, downplaying the outbreak's severity. Even once the risk posed by COVID-19 was becoming better understood internationally, many in the United States, including the Trump administration, were either unconcerned, believing the virus would not spread widely across America or believed early decisive action would cause panic (Alon et al. 4). To a point, the latter concern was credible. Footage from China showing overwhelmed hospitals caused people to buy large stores of medical supplies, masks, and toilet paper (Kitchin 11). This increase in demand caused shortages, furthering the perception of scarcity and the desire to hoard these supplies. That example, though valid, is not enough to justify the actions, or lack thereof, and rhetoric used by the Trump administration. Due largely to inadequate federal leadership, the United States had over one million recorded cases of COVID-19, with more than 57,000 deaths from the virus, at the end of April 2020, far more than any country had reported to that point (Mayberry et al.). Mindful of the need to preserve civil liberties to the greatest extent possible, state and federal instruction mainly was limited to closing nonessential destinations, requesting that citizens limit their travel, and requiring mask-wearing and social distancing whenever possible (Alon et al. 4).

In stark contrast, once the outbreak in China grew beyond the government's control, authorities reoriented and enacted a series of aggressive lockdowns on major cities to combat the virus and, in part, to counter international criticism of their handling of the Wuhan outbreak. The state expanded its surveillance network to better track outbreaks, deploying new, more invasive

technologies (Liu 4). One of the most significant initiatives was creating and deploying the Health Code phone app. Usage of this app was mandatory for gatherings and, depending on various factors, anyone attempting to leave their communities (Liu 1). The application stored information concerning the user's identity and location history and algorithmically assigned one of three QR codes: green, yellow, or red. Green indicates the person is healthy and not subject to any restrictions.

On the other hand, red and yellow represented different levels of risk primarily based on location. The restrictions on movement under yellow and red conditions have varied since the beginning of the pandemic from region to region, limiting the usefulness of a three-tiered colored system (Liu 1). In large urban areas, 'red codes' mandated a two-week quarantine, while 'yellow code' only required a single week of isolation (Boeing et al. 8). If no one with a yellow or red status was detected in a certain perimeter, citizens living there would be given green status. The QR codes were checked along with body temperature "at the entrance of residential areas, public places, [and] public transportation" (Boeing et al. 8).

When other countries were experiencing large outbreaks by mid-March, the Chinese government claimed they had achieved 'zero-COVID' in Wuhan. This claim faced scrutiny among Chinese communities and internationally (Alon et al. 4). Despite likely not completely eliminating cases, China was able to reopen while many countries, including the United States, were still closing nonessential businesses and schools. This time marked the beginning of China's "virus exceptionalism," a period of effective but harsh measures meant to limit the viral reproduction rate, or R0, while maintaining economic growth (Boeing et al. 2). These cumulative efforts, "draconian lockdown of megacities, digital contract tracing systems, and mandatory

quarantine upon arrival for international travelers" (Boeing et al. 5)., was viewed by other countries as highly effective. Similar measures, including developing phone apps for contact tracing, were employed in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan (Alon et al. 6).

Examining recent academic literature concerning the effects of pandemics and emergency events in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic shows a mild connection to increased authoritarian sentiment. There was a concern, particularly early in the pandemic, that "authoritarian leaders. . .would seize even more power," and democracies would experience backsliding from politicians who "would take advantage of the crisis to usurp power and infringe upon human rights" (Manson 1). There was a valid reason to be concerned. Historically, emergency politics have been a staple of authoritarianism, providing opportunities to trample democratic institutions and due process (Bieber 5). When the pandemic hit, the world was in the midst of a "democratic recession" (Lupu and Zechmeister 1), and "exclusionary nationalism" was on the rise in Europe and the United States (Bieber 4). Over 30% of the world's population were living in autocratizing countries, and, for the first time in twenty years, a "majority of countries in the world [were] autocracies (92 in total)" (Huang 12). According to Huang, the pandemic reinforced "anti-democratic trends," with 48 countries on the edge of democratic backsliding and another 34 at moderate risk (12).

In democracies with healthy checks and balances, authoritarian figures would find it hard or impossible to pass autocratic measures. However, during times of emergency, otherwise unacceptable measures can be passed to help protect public health or national security. If civil liberties are not actively considered when creating pandemic policies, democracies risk transitioning towards "competitive authoritarian regimes" (Bieber 5). Initially justifying

emergency policies as "necessary responses to. . .urgent threats" to public health, autocrats will later attempt to use those measures as a tool to extend and sustain their power (Bieber 5). There is still a tautological argument for strong democracies that are not as susceptible to autocratic politicians; suppressive measures invariably involve coercion, even to contain a global pandemic (Dosi 5). The rise of authoritarianism was identified as a global trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Yeganeh 3). Though arguably premature, Bieber went as far as to declare that the pandemic enabled "an unprecedented restriction of civil liberties and freedoms across the world." More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is worthwhile to examine whether the United States acted in an authoritarian manner to combat the virus and, if so, to what extent.

In the beginning stages of the pandemic, the United States government was reluctant to act. Though not much was known about the virus at the time, the lack of cases within the country, along with erroneous information indicating the virus was not transmittable through human to human contact, led experts to passively monitor the situation rather than suggest decisive action (Alon et al. 4). Once the magnitude of the threat began to be more fully understood, the federal government requested citizens shelter in place and maintain six feet of space around other people when outside. At the same time, several state governments, including California and New York, restricted gatherings, required masks in most situations outside the home, and closed nonessential businesses, primarily entertainment and retail (Yeganeh 7). Partly due to America's federalist system, placing some powers and responsibilities with the federal government and delegating others to the states, and partly out of a belief that restrictive nationwide mandates were not fully necessary to contain the virus (Lupu and Zechmeister 4), the Trump administration took a mostly "hands-off approach" regarding federal pandemic policy. In

late 2020, several viable COVID-19 vaccines, notably Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, and J&J/Janssen, entered mass production and distribution (Kim et al. 1). To promote vaccination, the new Biden administration encouraged mandatory vaccination for businesses, universities, and federal workers (Yeganeh 8).

Comparing America's COVID-19 response with the conventional indicators of counter-democratic, nationalistic, and autocratic behaviors, it is fair to say that the reaction possessed authoritarian qualities. The rhetoric surrounding the virus, particularly from the Trump administration and the Conservative party, exploited "the politics of fear" by focusing on China as the source and cause of the pandemic. Using crude euphemisms like "Kung Flu" to stoke divisiveness and deflect responsibility (Bieber 6), Trump continued his pattern of authoritarian rhetoric through his handling of the pandemic and, ultimately, his presidency. Actions from state governments, business and school closures in particular, were criticized as overreaching and inconsistent. Lack of federal direction caused some states to impose fewer restrictions than others, and debates over which businesses could be considered essential led to decision-making that occasionally motivated economic interests rather than public health (Yeganeh 8). Concerns over due process and equal application of the law indicate authoritarian policies. However, the difficulty of confirming the validity of these concerns makes it difficult to cast them as such. More concretely, the intervention itself into business operations, in this case forcing them to close as a public health measure, is an anti-democratic action (Yeganeh 7).

While the actions of the United States government in response to COVID-19 possessed elements of authoritarianism, a common pattern of the vast majority of emergency actions throughout history, have these measures drawn America as a whole closer to authoritarianism?

Answering that question requires an analysis of the American government and institutions in the aftermath of the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a chorus of complaints, mostly from politically right-leaning individuals, that measures instituted by state and federal governments constitute a violation of civil liberties (Alon et al. 4). There is some truth to these claims; after all, restricted movement and business closures were edicts, not suggestions. There is a consensus that limiting freedom of movement through lockdowns is "somewhat authoritarian in nature" and can erode public trust (Alon et al. 2). However, great efforts were made to limit government overreach whenever possible. At the same time countries were deploying movement tracking systems to monitor infection spread patterns and contact trace, the United States did not create a similar system. When asked about this in April 2020, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services administrator at the time, Seema Verma, cited American freedoms and limited federal powers as barriers to pursuing that route (Cha 8). Businesses and schools were forcibly closed to limit the spread of COVID-19, but those measures have since been relaxed if not removed throughout the country. Authoritarian responses to disasters may resemble democratic ones, but the important distinction is that autocratic regimes will maintain emergency powers as long as possible rather than relinquish them.

More recent actions from the Biden administration merit their own examination. In a reversal of the previous administration, Biden has favored an expanded, proactive federal presence in combating COVID-19. This, on its own, does not indicate a turn towards authoritarian governance. Even if measures like digital health monitoring and contact tracing were implemented, they would not endanger democracy independently. Cases of successful virus containment using these technologies have been seen in Taiwan and South Korea, "two of Asia's

most vibrant democracies (Cha 8). President Biden's rhetoric has been more concerning. Attempting to motivate Americans to vaccinate themselves as expeditiously as possible, the president has directly challenged the unvaccinated by emphasizing their responsibility to their communities and the country. On September 9, 2021, Biden again implored the unvaccinated to do their part, saying, "[w]e've been patient, but our patience is wearing thin" ("Remarks"). There have been accusations from critics of the president that his statements were demagogic. The assertion that Biden's words were politically and socially divisive, if true, would still be no worse than the pattern of behavior exhibited by the former administration, thus drawing America closer to authoritarianism than it had been under Trump.

The final question regarding the potentially authoritarian nature of the American government's response to COVID-19 remains that of COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Federal vaccine mandates have been accused of being un-American, unconstitutional, and authoritarian. Examining various examples of COVID-19 vaccine mandates, only a small number point towards authoritarianism. Many private businesses have instituted vaccine requirements on their own; those decisions do not impact this discussion. There have been similar vaccine requirements for most public schools and universities, but overall these measures are aligned with similar vaccine requirements for Chickenpox, Tdap, and Polio ("Requirements for Immunizations").

Additionally, vaccine exceptions on medical or religious grounds are typically available. The federal government's directive to require COVID-19 vaccination for federal employees, the armed forces, and contractors is not overtly authoritarian. It is within the federal government's authority to require the COVID-19 vaccine for individuals ostensibly under their employment.

There are concerns that religious and medical exemptions are not being fairly granted,

particularly among the armed forces (Milvert). However, it would be difficult to judge these

cases, considering many of them are under investigation.

Finally, on November 4, 2021, the Biden administration announced the two largest and

most impactful vaccine mandates. The first was the introduction of a new Occupational Safety

and Health Administration (OSHA) standard requiring that all "employers with 100 or more

employees" require vaccination or a weekly negative test for their workers ("Fact Sheet"). The

second mandate, under the authority of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS),

required all "health care workers at facilities participating in Medicare and Medicaid are fully

vaccinated" ("Fact Sheet"). The same announcement estimated that approximately 101 million

Americans would be subject to these new regulations. The public response was immediate.

On the one hand, many considered this necessary as a health measure to motivate people to

vaccinate themselves. The emergence of new strains of the virus coupled with slowing

vaccination rates and mounting death tolls framed the situation in people's minds as a necessarily

strong step towards ending the pandemic (Kitchin 9). On the other hand, these mandates,

particularly the new OSHA standard, represented an antagonistic overreach of federal authority.

Temporary business closures, especially before introducing the COVID-19 vaccine, were much

easier to accept to combat the virus. That is a much more restricted action than expanding the

powers of the federal government to require businesses to implement these measures for the

foreseeable future.

While both sides may feel justified in their conclusions, the truth, as it is so often said,

seems to lie in the middle. Although these actions would be more expansive than previous

pandemic measures, they are not quite the overstep that many may initially believe them to be. OSHA has endured as a federal office dedicated to worker safety since its creation over fifty years ago (OSHA). New OSHA standards are created regularly, and limiting COVID-19 transmission in the workplace could arguably be considered within the interest and jurisdiction of the organization. Addressing the other side, it is worth considering that the central argument for the defenders of Biden's proposal seems to rest on the efficacy of these measures in combating the virus rather than addressing concerns of government overreach. By talking past concerns over civil liberties, it appears as though this group believes government action to eradicate COVID-19 supersedes any other concerns, including liberty. If actions were to be taken using that mentality, it would be extraordinarily damaging to the notion of checks and balances, a pillar of democratic governance.

Despite seeking to protect the greatest number of Americans during a deadly global pandemic, the proposed OSHA standard is authoritarian. In addition to the authoritarian slant inherent to crisis policies, they sought to expand federal power through executive action without indication that these powers would be retired in the future. That categorization is supported by definitions of authoritarianism across the academic spectrum. Even so, these measures did not measurably weaken American democracy, in large part because they were challenged in court. In January 2022, the Supreme Court blocked Biden's proposed OSHA standard. It is a strong sign that democracy is not backsliding towards authoritarianism when a political institution, such as the courts, can successfully strike down executive actions. The majority opinion argued that OSHA "was authorized to regulate workplace hazards[,] not public health threats" and that COVID-19 could not be properly classified as an occupational hazard (Jaffe 1). The minority

opinion emphasized that, as an organization dedicated to protecting the health and safety of workers, OSHA was given broad authority by Congress to "regulate health hazards as well as general hazards in the workplace" (Jaffe 1). Under this interpretation, this was not an executive mandate but rather the president asking OSHA to do its job. This difference in perspective provides insight into the strange nature of authoritarianism. Although there has been a great deal of academic work regarding authoritarian policy, structures, and character traits, the application of these characterizations is imperfect. As Joseph Manson puts it, "[s]uch judgments are colored by political ideology" (2).

Whereas the United States has made efforts to balance its response to the COVID-19 pandemic with concerns over government overreach and the preservation of civil liberties, the Chinese government has largely ignored those concerns. China's initial reaction, heavy lockdowns on Wuhan and other cities, paired with information restrictions during the initial outbreak, have been categorized as hallmarks of a repressive government (Yeganeh 7). Despite international praise of China's 'virus exceptionalism,' the government's actions throughout the pandemic deserve scrutiny, none more so than the Health Code app. Part of a larger "community-based digital contact tracing" initiative, the app acts as an evolution of China's "networked authoritarianism" (Boeing and Wang 10; MacKinnon 3). First coined in 2011, the term is meant to encapsulate China's technological innovations to authoritarianism. In networked authoritarianism, digital technologies provide state-controlled spaces for citizens to interact with each other and, to an extent, government bodies. Over the internet, ordinary people may feel freer to express themselves than under more traditional authoritarian systems (MacKinnon 3). This freedom is mostly illusory, as the government is still monitoring these channels. Many of

the traits of autocratic rule are mapped onto digital spaces in networked authoritarianism, including government control and oversight of private and commercial spaces and a lack of due process for suspected offenders (MacKinnon 6). A central advantage of networked authoritarianism is its ability to sideline political dissent. In addition to outright censorship, the Chinese authorities will allow certain activist groups to operate in online spaces engineered to render them as ineffective as possible while still appearing tolerant of altering political viewpoints (MacKinnon 5). In the 2000s, western observers believed networked authoritarianism would backfire, leading to China's partial or complete democratization. Although the internet is frequently thought to undermine authoritarian regimes and promote democratic values, China's system of networked authoritarianism may do the opposite, "bolstering [the CCP's] domestic power and legitimacy while the regime enacts no meaningful political or legal reforms" (MacKinnon 6).

China's system of networked authoritarianism is more than the social media platforms, blogs, and other web pages that form their walled-off internet. It also encompasses the country's extensive surveillance system. The history of this system goes back much further than digital cameras and networking, taking the form of a "network of civilian informants, secret police, and obligatory party loyalty" (Akbari 3). As technology advanced, the CCP invested heavily in sophisticated systems that form a subset of networked authoritarianism known as "authoritarian surveillance" (Akbari 1). This system, including the creation and use of Health Code, was employed fully in China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike other authoritarian states such as Iran, China possessed the "social, political, and economic capacity to implement mass surveillance at the time of crisis" (Akbari 5). Iran possesses surveillance capabilities but had not

deployed them to combat the virus a year into the pandemic (Akbari 1). This was caused, in part, by the lack of preexisting non-digital infrastructure (Liu 1). By early 2020, China had already spent years building a surveillance apparatus of "millions of facial recognition and automatic number plate recognition cameras" (Kitchin 10). More than technological proficiency, Akbari argues that state legitimacy is the determining factor that enabled China, an authoritarian state, to "implement extensive mass surveillance" alongside democracies like South Korea and Singapore (Liu 3). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government has been able to maintain legitimacy and public support through a combination of networked authoritarianism and virus exceptionalism.

Despite privacy concerns over the data collected through "smartphone app-based digital tracing," their use has been more readily accepted in Asian countries than in the United States (Cha 2). Asian countries that experienced the SARS outbreaks of 2002 and 2003 were motivated to overhaul their approach to future epidemics. This can be seen in populations more willing "to embrace technologies that provide a valuable public good despite the privacy incursions" (Cha 2). Providing safety and a sense of normalcy is highly valued, particularly during the uncertainty of a global pandemic. Additionally, in Asian democracies, these systems are not considered surveillance tools but rather "social tagging" systems to ensure social distancing and quarantine measures are followed so that everyone can return to their normal routine sooner (Cha 6). The lack of enthusiasm in America to develop mobile tracking apps as a pandemic measure was categorized by MIT professor Yasheng Huang as originating from "deeply entrenched Western liberal values. . .[including] the expectation of privacy, consent, and the sanctity of individual rights" (Cha 8). Regime type also impacts adoption. Weak democracies are not as concerned with

civil liberties and privacy norms, and authoritarian regimes are not held to the same legal accountability (Cha 8). While privacy concerns for these tracker apps are valid, implementations in countries like Taiwan demonstrate that protections can be built-in to greatly limit inappropriate data use (Cha 14).

Regardless of the privacy concerns of the Health Code app and the additional risk of the CCP utilizing the system for social control, it was well supported by the Chinese public. Talking to people with firsthand experience with Health Code and examining posts on the Chinese social media network Weibo, Dr. Chuncheng Liu and her team found general recognition of the privacy drawbacks of such a centralized system, rationalizing it with the justification that "no one has privacy [in China], at least now they can use the information for something good" (Liu 2). A public opinion survey in 2020 indicated Chinese citizens were fine with expanding surveillance, as they felt their government's pandemic response was superior to that of western countries. Skeptical of the west's pandemic response and defensive over criticism directed at the CCP, the Chinese public became more accepting of the government's actions, believing that "the West did not acknowledge the. . .sacrifices that China made facing [a]. . .deadly pandemic" (Liu 2). Perception of a double standard between the words and actions of western countries and the United States contributes to a rallying effect, fueling nationalistic support of the regime (Liu 4; Lupu and Zechmeister 3). Part of these negative associations is a product of Chinese propaganda and censorship. However, even many Chinese citizens critical of their government's actions are impressed by the low COVID-19 case and death numbers compared to Europe and the United States. The widespread participation of a system like Health Code is seen as necessary since,

without significant buy-in from the public, the entire system would be rendered ineffective (Liu 3).

Health Code can easily be considered authoritarian, despite its introduction as an emergency measure. The Chinese people view Health Code as useful and necessary to maximize public health during this crisis. Even as a tool to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, its restrictions on movement and potential as an authoritarian instrument. As Boeing and Wang emphasize, "the mere existence of an emergency does not in itself legitimize any intrusion on the autonomy or privacy of individuals or group" (4). If the Chinese government were to mandate the use of this app, or one similar to it, once the threat of the pandemic has faded, its impact as a part of the CCPs authoritarian surveillance would have wide-reaching consequences for the Chinese people. There have already been indications that this could be the case. In May 2020, a few weeks after Health Code was launched, the Hangzhou government suggested its continued use even after COVID-19 was no longer a threat. The backlash over privacy concerns from Chinese citizens was so great that the government reversed course, denying it was a serious plan (Liu 3-4). Once the app became mandatory for most travel, the difficulty of avoiding Chinese surveillance became so great that many people who had been evading the authorities for years turned themselves in (Liu 1). There has been a broad consensus that misuse of personal data by the state can erode civil liberties, but a system like Health Code could be abused to tighten the government's grip on the public (Yeganeh 7). Far beyond infringing their rights, if China's authoritarian surveillance is left unchecked, it has the potential to ensnare the country in a panopticon of 1.4 billion people.

Authoritarianism is seemingly present in the political systems of all modern countries. With the role and expectations of government expanding over the last several decades, nearly every act can be viewed as an expanse of state power. Shifting standards for political campaigns encourage raw attacks on political rivals that toe the line between effective rhetoric and disregard for decorum or democratic norms. In such an environment, it is especially important to identify authoritarian behaviors and policies, particularly through this global emergency we have all been navigating through. The actions of the United States and Chinese governments in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic have been authoritarian to varying degrees. Nearly all policies passed in response to emergencies will possess elements of authoritarianism. It is the role of citizens who wish to safeguard their democracies, hold their leaders accountable, or preserve their rights to remain vigilant in these situations. There are no major signs to indicate that government policy is causing American democracy to backslide towards authoritarianism. However, there are worrying signs that the Chinese government may capitalize on its pandemic response to solidify its control. As of May 2022, it seems the world may be transitioning to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. If that is the case, our shared responsibility is to hold on to our most precious ideals as we take the next step forward.

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