

# What makes Trump’s power grab different?

For many, the evidence is in: Donald Trump wants to be an autocrat. If you haven’t read an op-ed or heard a radio, TV or podcast commentator make that case, it’s probably because you’ve tried hard to avoid doing so. It would require virtually never watching cable news, including pro-Trump outlets, because there are few things Fox News and its imitators love more than running clips of MSNBC hosts and other “resistance” types, not to mention Democratic politicians, melting down over Trump’s “war on democracy,” “authoritarian power-grabs,” etc.

Move further to the right, and you’ll find populists who want Trump to be an autocrat. They use terms like “Red Caesarism,” or “neomonarchism,” while others pine for an American Pinochet or Francisco Franco or compare Trump to biblical figures like the Persian King Cyrus or ancient Israel’s King David. I can’t really blame anyone for taking these pathetic Bonapartists at their word.

In fairness, Trump recently said “I’m not a dictator.” Though he did add that as



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president he can do “whatever I want.” Still, I know it’s a lot to ask, but let’s put aside the question of whether Trump actually wants to be a dictator.

There’s a lesser charge that is much easier to prove. Trump very much wants people to talk about him like he’s a dictator. Whether it’s cosplaying, trolling or something more sinister, his posturing is a surefire way to guarantee that people will talk about him and his strength because his detractors and defenders alike cannot resist it.

For instance, consider Trump’s executive order “banning” flag-burning. Friendly media covered it as an authentic ban and so did hostile media. The Associated Press headline blared, “Trump moves to ban flag burning despite Supreme Court ruling that Constitution allows it.” Fans cheered sticking it to the hippies, foes fretted about yet

another violation of the Constitution by executive fiat.

But if you actually read the executive order, it’s not a ban. It’s almost entirely vaporous twaddle. It flatly says that the Justice Department should prosecute flag burning to “the maximum extent permitted by the Constitution” and state laws. It doesn’t criminalize flag burning because the president can’t do that.

The order has several possible purposes. Trump hopes friends and foes alike will believe he’s banned flag burning when he hasn’t. Strength! I suspect he also hopes this will goad protesters into burning the flag, giving him greater political pretext to use the National Guard to crush the longhairs.

Last week, a federal court — rightly — ruled that Trump exceeded his authority to levy some of his sweeping tariffs. In response, Trump claimed that, “If allowed to stand, this Decision would literally destroy the United States of America” and “our military would be instantly obliterated.”

Now this is obvious nonsense. But if Trump believed it,

there’s a very easy remedy at his disposal. He could simply ask the unprecedentedly pliant and obsequious Republican-controlled Congress to impose the tariffs he wants, thus saving the country from total destruction.

For the same reason the court vacated his tariffs — that power belongs to Congress — they would undoubtedly uphold them if Congress ratified them.

But Trump’s shown no interest in doing that. Why? Because then they wouldn’t be his tariffs anymore. Asking Congress for permission looks weak. It underscores the bedrock constitutional principle that American presidents aren’t autocrats, a principle he doesn’t want to seem beholden to.

Politically (and characterologically), this preference for the appearance of strength is perhaps Trump’s greatest weakness, because it prevents him from actually having a much longer-lasting impact. All of the executive orders — some good, some not — that his superfans think demonstrate his strength and dominance have a shelf life that ends with the next president. If he truly

wanted to lay the foundation for a new “golden age” he’d be pestering Speaker Mike Johnson to put them all on the law books. But that would come at the price of looking weak in his mind.

Trump’s power grabs are not as unprecedented as his amen corner or his chorus of Cassandras believe. FDR and Woodrow Wilson declared war on constitutional and democratic “norms” arguably as often as Trump did. Nixon was no piker either.

But what does make Trump different is his desire to brag about it. Traditionally presidents seek to assure the public they are careful stewards of their constitutional oath.

Even if I’m right, none of this settles the issue of where all of this is heading. One of the consequences of pretending to be something is that, after a while, you’ll come to believe it yourself. Worse, a lot of Americans might decide they desire the fiction to become fact.

Jonah Goldberg is a national columnist whose work is published regularly in the Grand Forks Herald. ©2025 Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

## What matters to voters?

MINOT

What voters should care about, and what they do care about, often aren’t the same thing.

This is a lesson Democrats have to learn if they hope to get back up off the mat.

Nationally, voters should care that Trump-era Republican dominance in Washington, D.C., has meant a full-on descent into Maoism, complete with state ownership of private businesses, a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution against “wokeness,” legal persecution for critics of the regime, and a cult of personality that has Dear Leader’s portrait glaring down at us from just about everywhere while Red Hats who commit acts of traitorous violence against the republic are treated as heroes.

It can’t happen here?

It can. It is. But when Democrats focus on Trump as a threat to democracy, they lose. Voters don’t care about that, mainly because, to this point, his antics have seemed, to them, a performance with little practical change in how they live their lives.

When Kamala Harris campaigned against Trump as a threat to democracy, she lost in the Electoral College and the popular vote. By contrast, when Iowa Democrat Catelin Drey won a special election for a seat in Iowa’s Senate, beating a Republican and breaking that party’s supermajority in the state, she wasn’t talking about threats to democracy. She was talking about grocery prices.

“The main frustration point that I am hearing is that we have an affordability crisis,” she said. “And folks are really feeling that in their pocket-books and in their spending decisions.”

Democrats nationally need to take heed. So, too, must Democrats here in North Dakota.

Our in-state liberal friends have made a lot of noise about the Ray Holmberg scandal, ethics problems, and town halls, but there’s not a lot of evidence that voters care all



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that much. At least not enough to change how they’re voting. Democrats have invested months of messaging into the idea that North Dakota’s federal delegation is ignoring the people by not holding in-person town hall events.

The impact? In a recent public opinion survey, Sens. John Hoeven and Kevin Cramer, along with Rep. Julie Fedorchak, scored strong majority support. Perhaps even more tellingly, if more anecdotal, when the Democratic-NPL held a “People’s Town Hall” event in Minot, intended to dunk on the Republicans for not hosting their own town halls, they ended up mostly talking to themselves.

Should North Dakota’s voters care that their delegation isn’t holding in-person town halls? Yes. Do they? Not really.

That’s reality, and our Democratic friends have to come to grips with it.

If Democrats want to be competitive again — and though I’m no liberal, I think it would make for a healthier state (and nation) if they were — they have to start talking about issues voters care about. Not issues their progressive, left-wing base cares about, but things the average, somewhat apathetic, not all that politically engaged voter prioritizes.

North Dakota Democrats have invested themselves in rhetoric that defines Republicans as evil and corrupt — Democratic-NPL chairman Adam Goldwyn accused Republicans of wanting to starve children in a March press release — in a state where most voters identify as Republicans.

How’s that working out for them?

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### AMERICAN OPINION

## Trump’s decision on renewables will help, not hurt, the industry

### LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

President Donald Trump’s “big, beautiful bill” nixed a host of green energy handouts created during the Biden administration. In response, advocates for renewables have adopted a Chicken Little posture. But eliminating the subsidies will benefit the industry.

Green tax handouts were “so generous that there wasn’t as much pressure to minimize costs,” Atin Jain, an analyst at BloombergNEF, told The Wall Street Journal. Without the government money, companies will be forced to become more efficient.

Indeed, taxpayer largess can also stifle creativity and innovation. Like a sugar high, the handouts feel good but create problems over time. Wind and solar producers have been the recipients of federal and state money for decades in an effort to “encourage” growth. At some point, they have to be weaned from the public treasury.

In addition, “the removal of

subsidies would bring more stability to an industry that has seen boom-and-bust cycles at the whims of Congress,” Jinjoo Lee wrote for the Journal. He added that, “Ending a complicated form of subsidy might simplify renewable investments going forward — perhaps even opening them to more investors.”

Critics of fossil fuels often argue that subsidies exist for all forms of energy development and that handouts to gas and oil producers exceed those bestowed upon renewables. That’s a green myth.

In reality, “the claim that fossil fuels are heavily subsidized simply doesn’t withstand scrutiny,” notes a Cato Institute report issued in June. “While a few narrow subsidies exist and should be eliminated, the real outlier in the tax code isn’t fossil fuel subsidies but the scale of preferential treatment granted to renewable energy technologies.”

In fact, the review found, “official government data show that renewables are subsidized 30 times more than

fossil fuels. Most of the subsidies are in the tax code, where 94 percent of the fiscal cost goes to green energy technologies. And even this breakdown is overstated. Most of what critics label as fossil fuel subsidies are standard tax treatments available to many industries.”

The idea that renewables alone can power the American economy is nonsense given the current technology, green pipe dreams notwithstanding. The development of alternative energy sources hasn’t displaced fossil fuels, it has only powered more energy use. And that trend will continue as power demand soars thanks to AI and other nascent technologies. That, Lee notes, presents opportunities for green energy producers.

Congress and Trump have done the green energy industry a favor by demanding that, after decades of taxpayer handouts, it learns to walk on its own.

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