

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness



Trump's latest display isn't just deranged. It's also an abuse of power.

By **Greg Sargent**

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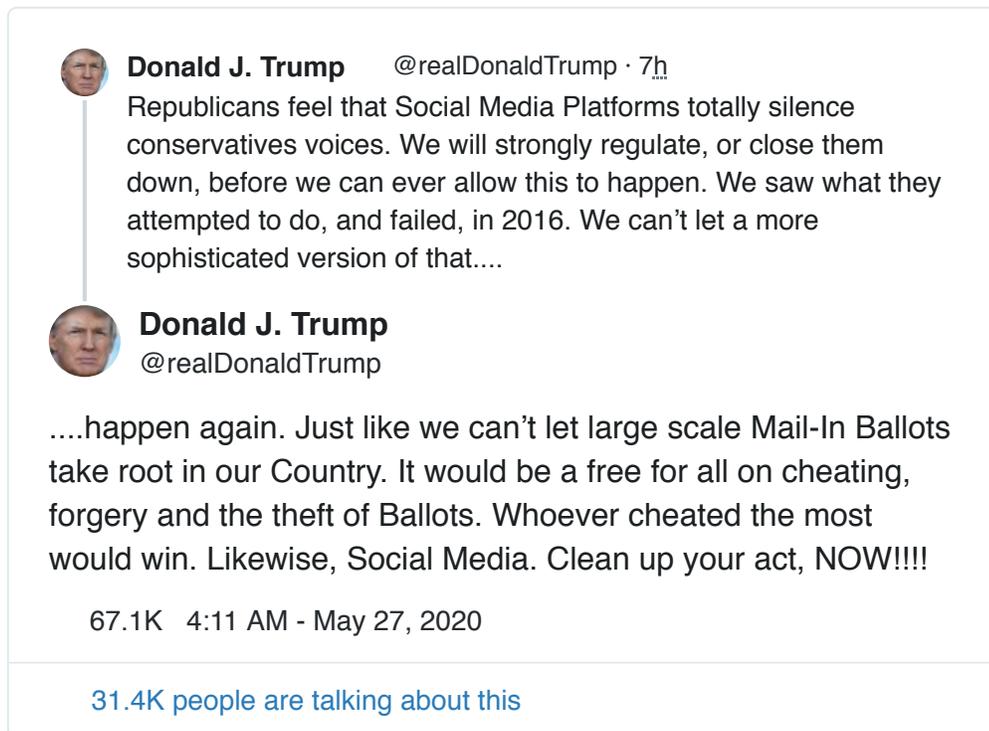
The news that Twitter has dared to attach the mildest of correctives to President Trump's latest false tweets — prompting threats of direct retribution from Trump — reopens the long-running debate over the true nature of the menace that Trump's autocratic instincts pose to democracy.

That debate pits those who see Trump as a clownish and ineffective autocrat wannabe against those who see a much more insidiously destructive form of corruption at work.

What's happening right now strongly supports the latter interpretation. While some will seek to cast Trump's war on Twitter as largely feckless, it actually constitutes a genuine abuse of power that is already showing corrosive signs of working as intended.

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Trump just unloaded in a fury at Twitter:



The object of Trump's rage is Twitter's decision to affix a fact check to Trump's lies about vote-by-mail. Trump has been falsely claiming that this will lead to vote fraud, forgeries and even ineligible voters getting ballots.

In response, Twitter added a few links to corrective stories and a few lines clarifying that there's "no evidence that mail-in ballots are linked to voter fraud" and that ballots are mailed only to registered voters.

Deranged lies

First, let's note the truly deranged nature of Trump's lies. Republicans have falsely screamed about voter fraud for many years, to justify all manner of voter suppression. But now Trump is doing this amid a pandemic — that is, to dissuade states from relieving people of having to choose between exercising the franchise and protecting their health and lives.

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And so, Trump is not just actively hoping the pandemic helps keep voter turnout down in a way that will help him win reelection. To serve these designs, he's also pushing states to refrain from taking actions that would protect the public health by limiting the novel coronavirus's spread.

This has also included vague threats to cut off disaster funding to states he must win, such as Michigan, further exploiting the desperation of states amid an emergency to serve his naked political ends.

It's not yet clear how effective all this will be. It's true that some states are moving forward in expanding vote-by-mail despite Trump, and his threats to cut off funding appear largely meaningless. Those on the “feckless autocrat” side of the debate will seize on these facts.

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And yet, as Rick Hasen points out, some GOP legislators in key swing states *actually are* taking cues from Trump and opposing these measures, even as Trump/GOP opposition is blocking any *federal* action that would help states implement them. That's a serious setback to such efforts, especially since they're even more urgent given the pandemic's unique challenges.

What's more, when you consider the broader context, it's plainly obvious that Trump's larger efforts are having a real impact.

Trump's threats have a real impact

That larger context is a much longer-running pressure campaign by Trump allies to equate any and all fact-checking of Trump with Bias Against Conservatives. In response to Twitter's fact-checking of Trump's lies about voter fraud, Trump campaign manager Brad Parscale said this:

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We always knew that Silicon Valley would pull out all the stops to obstruct and interfere with President Trump getting his message through to voters.

Trump reiterated a version of that, claiming that Twitter is “interfering” in the election and “stifling FREE SPEECH.”

Now let's also note that Twitter's fact-checking also shared information with voters that *could actually inform them* about vote-by-mail, thus potentially giving them additional options to vote amid a pandemic.

Trump and his campaign are quite literally claiming the right to lie to the American people about potentially lifesaving voting options during a pandemic — entirely free of accountability. They are explicitly declaring that any effort to correct those lies will be cast as an affront to the free speech of conservatives.

And Trump is now intimating other forms of state action:

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Brian Beutler
@brianbeutler

He has imposed a test to gauge tech platform and news outlet obeisance to him. Either they let his increasingly dangerous lies spread, or they try to set the record straight, in which case he alleges a conspiracy and threatens to sic Bill Barr on them.



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 21m

...@Twitter is now interfering in the 2020 Presidential Election. They are saying my statement on Mail-In Ballots, which will lead to massive corruption and fraud, is incorrect, based on fact-checking by Fake News CNN and the Amazon Washington Post....

8.9K 10.9K 30.1K



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 21m

...Twitter is completely stifling FREE SPEECH, and I, as President, will not allow it to happen!

11.7K 9.5K 28.9K

688 5:09 PM - May 26, 2020

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It might be argued that Trump won't actually be able to take such concrete retributive action. But as Jonathan Chait points out, Trump has already threatened the *parent companies* of media organizations and has already taken concrete actions against the owner of The Post.

The key point here is that, even if these threats do not end up coming to fruition, the *threats themselves constitute a serious abuse of power*.

The threat of conservative rage via fake claims of "bias" and the threat of state action as retribution are two sides of the same coin: The latter constitutes a deeply corrupt wielding of institutional power in and of itself, and it's also critical to helping mobilize the former. Such a threat is not somehow rendered meaningless if Trump cannot find a way to follow through.

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And this surely works, at least to some degree. This is obvious when you consider how *mild and tentative* Twitter's corrective efforts have been. The tweets spreading Trump's lies about voter fraud remain posted, and he has already posted more such lies that do not yet have any such corrective appended.

Meanwhile, Trump continues to tweet out the deranged lie that MSNBC's Joe Scarborough might be guilty of murder, even though the victim's husband has plaintively asked for the tweets to be taken down to respect the deceased. Those remain posted. And as the New York Times notes, Twitter has largely failed to police Trump's other egregious abuses, even ones that violate its policies.

The ultimate impact of all this remains to be seen. But there can be no doubt that these abuses of power are real and ongoing, and are already having a deeply corrosive impact.

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