

Authoritarian Influence: The United States and France

Andrea Lucas

There is no greater threat to democracy around the world today than that of authoritarian influence. The offenses of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian state have been responsible for some of the most detrimental assaults on democracy today. What tactics are Russia and Putin employing to achieve their goals, and how do their results differ between different democratic states? The characteristics of a democracy can make it more or less susceptible to the threats of authoritarians. The structures of democracy in the United States and France as well as recent election outcomes will give insight into this dilemma and the necessary defenses to utilize in order to resist these influences.

In order to understand this complex issue facing democracy, the United States and France will serve as the primary subjects. The methods used will be the comparison of the structural similarities shared by the two states. The causality of the different outcomes will be based on contrasting systems of governments that are used in coordination with differing electoral practices. The recent election outcomes of 2016 and 2017 will provide evidence to this theory.

To understand how authoritarians gain power, we must also understand the playbook autocratic regimes utilize. According to the logic of political survival, in order for autocrats such as Putin to gain influence, they must be able to divide society to seize power. Authoritarian regimes cannot simply decide one day to take control and influence an established democracy. Well-executed strategies recognizing how to infiltrate different democracies to fracture society, undermine government, and gain power are all employed. How well each democracy is able to withstand these threats is another matter.

In recent years, the threat of authoritarianism, particularly from Russia, has been increasing in democracies around the globe. How have these tactics employed by the Russian state been received in the United States and France? These two states share many striking similarities within their governments, as well as distinct structural differences. The most important contrast, however, is the response each democracy has had on Russia's global assault, and thereby the effect it has had on its own democratic strength.

The 2016 election interference by Russia on the US is noteworthy. Russia has meddled in elections before, but the tactics and scale seen in 2016 proved just how precise and widely executed their plan has been and continues to be. Similar tactics have been witnessed in France, in particular the presidential election in 2017, which resulted in less than desirable outcomes for Putin and Russia. What accounts for this difference? With the many similarities France and the US share structurally, there is a crucial distinction that allows the authoritarian regime to more broadly infiltrate American Democracy than that of France: their system of government in coordination with electoral practices.

Variables:	United States	France
Form of Government	Democracy	Democracy
Head of State	President	President
Type of Legislature	Bicameral	Bicameral
Judiciary	The Supreme Court	The Constitutional Council
Type of Constitution	Strong	Strong
HDI Rating	10th. Very High Human Development	21st. Very High Human Development
	<u>Outcome:</u>	<u>Outcome:</u>
Vulnerable to Authoritarian Influence?	Very likely	Much less likely
	<u>Cause:</u>	<u>Cause:</u>
Hypothesis: System of Government	Federal	Unitary
Hypothesis: Presidential Electoral System	Indirect, Electoral College System	Direct, Two-Round Voting System

Today, both states' governments have very distinct similarities. For example, the US and France both have a strong constitution. Why is this an important focus? Neither democracy has the luxury of relying on a long constitutional history filled with tradition and customs. Without this presence of tradition, as seen in the United Kingdom for example, a strong constitution with specific instructions as well as numerous checks and balances on the government keep the democracy stable. These precautions assure that it will be relatively difficult to alter the constitution. To put this into context, since the US constitution was drafted, "It has been amended only twenty-seven times since its passage, and only seventeen times since 1791" (Dickovick and Eastwood, 2019, pg. 180). France's modern-day constitution, adopted on October 4, 1958, has been amended twenty-four times. While this may seem like considerably more amendments in a shorter timeframe than the US, France still has a detailed process the government must undergo in order to pass a constitutional amendment. "A constitutional amendment can be proposed by the President on advice of the Prime Minister or by members of parliament. It must be passed by both houses of parliament sitting separately and ratified by referendum. If the amendment is a government proposal, it may be ratified by a three-fifths majority of a joint session of parliament" (Constitutional History of France, 2016, para. 10).

Each state also possesses a judiciary that acts as a check on government. In France, this is the Constitutional Council. "This branch oversees review of statutes before they are enacted as well as overseeing national elections and answering questions from citizens regarding the constitutionality of laws" (Layout of French Legal System, 2018, para. 7). The Supreme Court of the United States also acts as a check on the US government with its ability to strike down any law the President or

Congress passes if it is deemed unconstitutional. In addition, the bicameral legislatures present in both France and the US work as another defense against tyrannical decisions made if the executive and legislative branch of government are controlled by the same party. This secondary legislative body exists to provide yet another check on the balance of power.

Another similarity in both states is that of development. Both states rank highly on the Human Development Index (HDI). Most recent figures rank the US 10th in the world on this index with very high human development. GDP per capita averages approximately \$57,400. France ranks 21st in the world on this index and averages approximately \$42,300 GDP per capita. Within the larger context, this is an important consideration as it clearly demonstrates that both states invest in institutions such as public education, healthcare, and social welfare. This contributes to the economy, the development of a middle class to exert pressure on government and institutions and thereby cementing legitimacy of the state. Why then has the US been subject to the ramifications of subversive tactics by Russia while France has proven to be more resilient?

What is it that most predominantly differentiates the structures between the US and France? In particular, why is this difference so important when we look at the global assault facing democracy today? While the issue is a complex one, the answer is simple: the logic of political survival. Authoritarians must first and foremost be capable of dividing a society in order to garner power. If division is difficult, so is the accumulation of power and influence. Putin and the Kremlin are employing complex contemporary methods in order to achieve division. "They hack into computers or phones to gather intelligence, expose this intelligence (or false data they manufacture out of whole cloth) through the media to create scandal, and thereby knock an opponent or nation out of the game. At some point Russia apparently decided to apply these tactics to the United States and so American democracy itself was hacked" (Nance, 2016, preface). There is a definitive structural difference between the United States and France regarding their abilities to withstand such drastic methods of division.

The French government and their elections are set up differently than that of the United States. The United States is a federal government that widely practices First Past the Post (FPP) electoral outcomes. The lack of proportional representation in elections facilitates a two-party system that, by its very nature, lends itself to division. In addition, the Electoral College in the US is another complex addition to the scenario that perpetuates the division seen within the state. By contrast, France has a unitary government that practices a two-round system for electing the President. These governing and electoral distinctions prove vital in the fight against autocratic regimes.

How does a federal government, like the US, facilitate the ability for authoritarians to gain power? By revisiting the logic of political survival, autocrats must determine how to divide. Federal governments, by their very nature, are divided. Local communities, counties, states, and the federal government each have a set of laws. What might work for one state may or may not be appropriate for another state, thus encouraging division. For instance, take the example of using face coverings during the current global pandemic. Local jurisdictions make their own judgements and laws according to what is recommended at the time for their respective locations.

However, this can perpetuate division between counties, states, political parties, and eventually the entire country. Russia and other authoritarians will then pinpoint this and other issues that divide society and further exacerbate those divisions.

The electoral practices in the US also do not facilitate protection against Russian influence. The President of the United States is not directly elected by the people and does not even require a majority of votes to win the presidency. The Electoral College, which was once a useful way to equalize power between small and large states, is now an antiquated system that no longer establishes an effective pattern of representation. Besides the obvious dilemma of not electing a president via the popular vote, the Electoral College allows autocratic actors to figure out which states might “decide” an election, employ their strategy in those specific states, and further divide the electorate on hot-button issues. In 2016, “The Russian operatives’ research guided them to target voters in swing states, especially Florida. Their Facebook ads exploited hot-button social and racial issues” (Diamond, 2019, pg. 115). In addition, these tactics were sophisticated enough to encourage “would-be Clinton voters” to vote third party or not cast a ballot at all, thus inflicting enough influence in the election to Russia’s preferred candidate.

By contrast, France has been more successful in recent years in protecting itself against Russian meddling. The unitary government lends itself to unity by its design. France has a central authority under which all local laws are subject to its authority. The less obvious political cleavages there are within towns, districts, and society as a whole, the more difficult it is then to create the division necessary for autocrats to gain power. Thus, the implications of a unitary or federalist government can be significant.

As an additional shield against authoritarian influence, France has a unique electoral system, specifically regarding that of the president. In France, attempts at influence are more obvious and pronounced. Rather than attempting to influence a particular constituency, such is the case in the US Electoral College system, it is more obvious when a particular candidate is targeted. In France, the president is directly elected by the people. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Most importantly, the French election has two rounds, which creates an additional difficulty for a malign actor to determine which two candidates will make it to the second round. The second round of voting also permits the population to dramatically shift their support to another candidate to block an unexpected result after the first round” (Vilmer, 2018, para. 1). The article continues on to explain that the 2017 French election was the most pronounced failed attempt at Russian election interference in recent history. “The Kremlin neither succeeded in interfering with the presidential election nor in dividing French society” (Conley, 2018, intro). This is absolutely key when it comes to defeating authoritarian influence within a democratic state. Without division, there is no increase in power for the autocrats. In the case of France, the united unitary form of governing, alongside its electoral practices, appear to have saved its democracy from significant division and subsequent foreign autocratic influence.

What can the United States learn from France without turning its federalist and electoral systems upside down overnight? During the 2017 French elections, the institutions in France proved to be strong. France has a National Commission for the Control of the Electoral Campaign as well as a National Cybersecurity Agency. “French

institutions have better protected the integrity of elections than those in the U.S., where, according to Heather Conley, ‘elections are managed at the state level with federal oversight of campaign financing’” (Bulckaert, 2018, para. 5). If the United States could transition to a centralized supervision for elections, this could work to defend against states becoming compromised and less susceptible to foreign influence. Advanced technological warfare is the weapon of choice against democracies around the globe. Every democracy must now learn how to counter these global assaults.

What is truly important as we consider why Russia is interfering in Western democracies, is that for Russia, they are attempting to equate their form of authoritarian leadership with that of democracy. If they are able to sow discord in enough democracies and undermine this system of government, their form of authoritarian government becomes no different by means of rule of law, human rights, and state development. Whichever type of government structure is used, or electoral systems implemented, there will always be strengths and weaknesses of the chosen system. The key to avoiding authoritarian influence is to consistently use strong defense measures, establish effective patterns of representation, and learn from fellow democratic allies how best to win the war against division, disinformation, electoral attacks, and ultimately, authoritarian influence.

If the United States could transition to a centralized supervision for elections, this could work to defend against states becoming compromised and less susceptible to foreign influence.

References

- Bulckaert, N. (2018). How France successfully countered Russian interference during The presidential election. *EURACTIV*.
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/how-france-successfully-countered-russian-interference-during-the-presidential-election/>.
- Constitutional History of France. (n.d.). *Constitution Net*.
<http://constitutionnet.org/country/france>.
- Diamond, L. (2019). *Ill winds: Saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition, and American complacency*. Penguin Press.
- Dickovick, J. T., & Eastwood, J. (2019). *Comparative politics: integrating theories, methods, and cases*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Layout of the French Legal System. (2020). Georgetown Law Library.
<https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/c.php?g=362135&p=2446075>
- Nance, M. and Ackerman, S. (2016). *The plot to hack America: How Putin’s cyberspies and WikiLeaks tried to steal the 2016 election*. Skyhorse Publishing.
- Smith, A. et. al. (2003). *The logic of political survival*. MIT Press.
- Vilmer, J.B., and Conley, H. (2018). Successfully countering Russian electoral interference: 15 lessons learned from the Macron Leaks. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/successfully-countering-russian-electoral-interference>.