



How to destroy a democracy in twelve easy steps...

Posted: Sunday, March 8, 2026

We live in a democracy. Yes, I know, technically it's a republic, but still based on the principle that governments should exist of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Like many readers, for most of my life I've taken the freedoms we all enjoy for granted. After all, generations of Americans have been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to ensure we remain a democracy.

But have you ever wondered what it would take to turn the United States into a third world dictatorship? Turns out, democracies are surprisingly fragile.

I've identified twelve steps that, if implemented in a coordinated manner, could rob us of our heritage in a surprisingly short amount of time. Keep in mind leaders who eventually morph into dictators are almost always elected legitimately in the beginning. They acquire power initially in a completely legal way.

Of course, it helps when a large percentage of voters are stupid, naïve, angry, and gullible. More on that later.

So how could this happen?

First, wannabe dictators present themselves as the only ones who can save the country from the economic, societal and cultural malaise that is obviously overwhelming us from every direction. Only by electing them can we be spared the complete devastation that perpetually lies just around the corner.

Second, wannabe dictators make too-good-to-be-true claims that appeal to voters. These claims may include pledging to make things more affordable, keep us out of foreign conflicts, bring back jobs in dead industries, and maybe even a chicken in every pot. Whatever they think voters want to hear.

Keep in mind wannabe dictators have no intention of actually following through on these promises; most of the time they don't have a clue as to how to make them a reality. But it's what voters want to hear so it doesn't really matter.

Third, once in office, wannabe dictators surround themselves with sycophants who worship them the way they demand to be revered. This means they appoint people based on personal loyalty rather than allegiance to a constitution. Moreover, having any actual competence to do the job is completely irrelevant.

Fourth, shortly after being elected wannabe dictators begin dismantling existing educational systems, prohibiting the teaching of certain subjects, and limiting exposure to alternative ideas. Having a population of educated critical thinkers who demand proof is not to their advantage. Remember, voters need to be kept stupid, naïve, angry, and gullible.

Fifth, wannabe dictators implement some version of their own police force - answerable ultimately only to them - to make sure compliance with their orders is efficient and absolute.

They can't rely on existing law enforcement agencies whose commitment might be to someone or something other than them.

Sixth, wannabe dictators immediately move to neutralize anyone they perceive as a threat, personally or professionally. This routinely involves humiliating, demeaning, and even arresting and incarcerating anyone who criticizes them or advocates for a different way of doing things.

Seventh, wannabe dictators identify and subsequently vilify the folks who are clearly the source of all our problems. This group could be those in a racial/ethnic minority, a religious sect, immigrants, or even an opposing political party. In short, anyone they can scapegoat and blame for their own weaknesses, flaws and deficiencies.

Eighth, wannabe dictators immediately work to nullify any checks, balances or guardrails that might hinder achieving their primary goal: unfettered authority over everyone and everything. They find a way to discredit anyone who stands in their way.

Ninth, wannabe dictators keep us perpetually involved in a series of international conflicts as a way to distract from their domestic failures, self-serving pursuits, or unethical/illegal behavior. Hard for the headlines to focus on their escapades when all our attention is trained on their overseas diversions.

Tenth, wannabe dictators constantly remind everyone of how great things are, even if that assessment doesn't coincide with their lived experience. And if things aren't going well for you, rest assured, it's your own fault.

Eleventh, wannabe dictators continually remind us we're in a constant state of crisis that requires a suspension of the normal rules and conventions – while assuring everyone things will get back to normal as soon as the emergency subsides. But that never seems to happen.

Finally, wannabe dictators suspend future elections, usually under the guise of fraud, rampant cheating, or other forms of corruption. They generally offer no real evidence to back up these claims but once in power they can't risk being voted out if they fall out of favor.

And an added bonus: once they've worked their way through these twelve steps, they can drop the "wannabe" part.

So there you have it. Want to take a once vibrant democracy and transform it into something unrecognizable in less than twenty years? Here's your roadmap.

Don't want that to happen? Here's your warning signs. Your choice.



— Aaron W. Hughey is a university distinguished professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. The views expressed in his columns are entirely his own.