

Civil society helps uphold democracy and provides built-in resistance to authoritarianism

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Alex Soros is the board chair of the Open Society Foundations, the philanthropy funded by his father, George Soros.

AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

The New York Times reports that a senior Department of Justice official recently “instructed more than a half dozen U.S. attorneys’ offices to draft plans to investigate” the Open Society Foundations – philanthropies funded by the billionaire George Soros.

Citing a document that the news outlet said its reporters had seen, the report listed possible charges the foundations could face “ranging from arson to material support of terrorism.”

The philanthropic institution denied any wrongdoing.

“These accusations are politically motivated attacks on civil society, meant to silence speech the administration disagrees with and undermine the First Amendment right to free speech,” Open Society Foundations stated in response to the reported investigations. “When power is abused to take away the rights of some people, it puts the rights of all people at risk.”

The term “civil society” isn’t familiar to all Americans. But it’s part of what helped this country grow and thrive because it encompasses many of the institutions that uphold the American way of life. As a sociologist who studies nonprofits and civil society in the U.S and around the world, I have always been interested in the relationship between the health of a nation’s civil society and the strength of rights and freedom within its borders.

I’ve also noticed that often the term is used without a definition. But I think that it’s important for Americans to become more familiar with what civil society is and how it helps sustain democracy in the United States.

Civil society

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines civil society as “the dense network of groups, communities, networks and ties that stand between the individual and the modern state.”

This constellation of institutions consists of not-for-profit organizations and special interest groups, either formal or informal, working to improve the lives of their constituents. It includes charitable groups, clubs and voluntary associations, churches and other houses of worship, labor unions, grassroots associations, community organizations, foundations, museums and other kinds of nonprofits – including nonprofit media outlets.

Civil society does not include government agencies or for-profit businesses.

Political scientists and sociologists have long claimed that a healthy civil society, which in the U.S. includes a strong and independent nonprofit sector, helps sustain democracy. This is true even though most nonprofits don’t engage in partisan political activities.

My own analysis of survey data from 64 countries has shown that authoritarians have begun to use civil society groups to support their own purposes. But in the United States, at least, most civil society organizations still support democratic values.

Sometimes, scholars call civil society “the third sector” to distinguish it from the public and private spheres.

Most scholars agree that civil society strengthens and protects democracy, and that true democracy is impossible without it. These scholars distinguish between liberal democracies and illiberal democracies.

Liberal democracies have a separation of powers – meaning the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. They protect individual rights, allow a free press, maintain an independent judiciary and safeguard the rights of minorities.

In illiberal democracies, there are periodic elections, but they are not necessarily fair or free. Civil society tends to be more restricted in illiberal democracies than in liberal ones.

An American strength from the start

The strength of America's civil society helps explain the long success of democracy in the United States.

In 1835, when the French scholar and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the country, he marveled at the tendency of Americans to “constantly unite.” They created associations, he wrote, “to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools.”

Whereas the government initiated grand projects in France and the nobility did so in England, in the United States voluntary associations of ordinary individuals were behind most great endeavors.



A Lutheran group that provides comfort dogs after traumatic events visits survivors of a school shooting in Minneapolis on Aug. 28, 2025.

AP Photo/Abbie Parr

What happens in nondemocratic countries

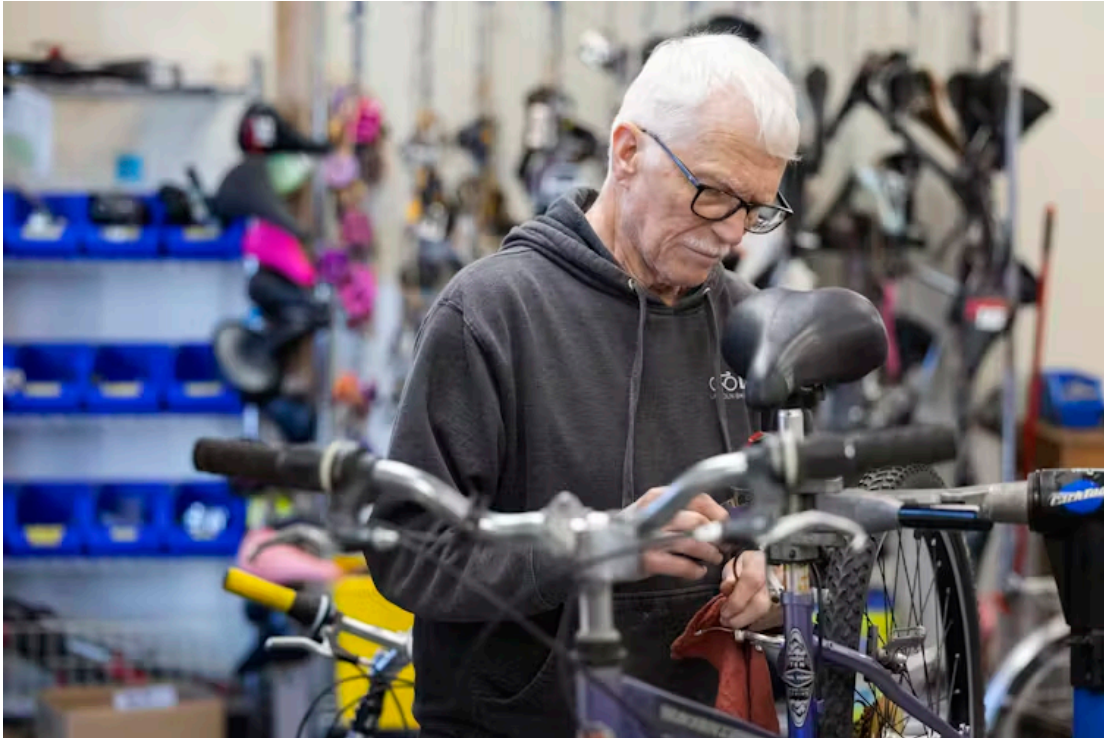
One way to see how important a robust civil society can be is to look at what happens in countries that do not have one.

The totalitarian countries of the 20th century, particularly communist China and the Soviet Union, outlawed civil society under the pretense that the party and the state represented the people's true interests.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the United States and Western Europe devoted much diplomacy and foreign aid to helping the former USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe develop civil society institutions, believing this to be a precondition of those countries' transition to democracy.

Today, civil society flourishes in formerly communist nations that have successfully made the transition to democracy, such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Civil society is restricted in that region's countries that don't embrace democracy, such as Belarus

and Russia.



Volunteer Clayton Streich fixes a bicycle at Lincoln Bike Kitchen, an American nonprofit, in 2024 in Lincoln, Neb.

AP Photo/Rebecca S. Gratz

Not your grandma's authoritarians

Today's authoritarian rulers realize that civil society has the potential to support democracy and pry loose their grip on power. But few of those leaders outlaw civil society organizations entirely.

Instead, authoritarian leaders subordinate civil society organizations to achieve their own ends. In China, which had no civil society before the 1990s, the Communist Party now creates government-organized nongovernmental organizations, or GONGOs, which look like nonprofits and are technically separate from the state, but remain under state control.

Some authoritarians who take power in countries that already have a civil society sector tame these organizations and harness their power through a range of oppressive tactics. They leave alone service-providing organizations, like food banks, free clinics and homeless shelters, and use them to show citizens how they are bringing them benefits.

However, they crack down on advocacy organizations, such as human rights groups, labor unions and feminist groups, as these are a source of potential opposition to the regime. They then cultivate pro-regime civil society institutions, providing them with formal and informal support.

When authoritarians crack down on civil society groups, they sometimes destroy offices and imprison the organization's leaders and members of their staff. But they generally use more subtle means.

For example, they may pass laws restricting the amount of funding, particularly foreign funding, available to nonprofits. They add layers of red tape that make it hard for nonprofits to operate, such as audits, registration requirements and information requests.

Authoritarians may use those hurdles selectively. Nonprofits that are neutral or friendly to the regime may find they can operate freely. Nonprofits the regime perceives as opponents undergo extensive audits, are forced to wait a long time when they seek to incorporate, and face constant demands for personal information about their funders, members and clients.



An activist of the pro-Kremlin National Liberation Movement hands out materials while holding a sign that includes a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Getty Images

Attacks in the United States

Even before news broke of the Trump administration's reported demand that the Open Societies Foundations be investigated, there were mounting signs that the U.S. was becoming more like authoritarian countries than it used to be in terms of how it treats civil society.

In March 2025, for example, President Donald Trump signed an executive order restricting a federal program that forgives student loans for people who work in public service organizations or the government. The order said that employees of institutions that the Trump administration deems to "have a substantial illegal purpose," such as providing services to undocumented immigrants or serving the needs of transgender clients, would become ineligible for loan forgiveness.

Over the summer, Congress held three investigative hearings on nonprofits. The Republican Party's leadership signaled its disdain and distrust of those groups with hearing titles like "Public Funds, Private Agendas: NGOs Gone Wild," "How Leftist Nonprofit Networks Exploit Federal Tax Dollars to Advance a Radical Agenda," and "An Inside Job: How NGOs Facilitated the Biden Border Crisis."

After the murder of conservative activist Charlie Kirk, Vice President JD Vance threatened "to go after the NGO network that foments, facilitates and engages in violence," including the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, despite the fact that there is no evidence that these organizations support violence.

Some nonprofits have published open letters, issued public statements and provided congressional testimony in opposition to the administration's claims.

What happens next is unclear. The threat to strip organizations of their nonprofit status may be an empty one, given that the Supreme Court has already ruled that doing so is regulated by law and the president cannot do it on a whim.

Many scholars of nonprofits are watching to see if the United States takes more steps down this road to authoritarianism, stays where it is or reverses course.

We are studying how America's flourishing civil society resists any restrictions that limit the freedoms that have largely been taken for granted – until now.

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