

Reading MAGA at Harvard

Wednesday, 3:00 PM
Fall Semester, 2025
Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center
Stephen Richer, Senior Fellow

Purpose of The Study Group:

The Make America Great Again (“MAGA”) movement may be the most consequential political movement of the twenty-first century.

The movement’s leader, Donald Trump, is now president of the United States for a second time.

The wealthiest person in the world, Elon Musk, spent much of the past year wearing a “Dark MAGA” hat.

Highly consequential cabinet positions in the United States are filled by MAGA adherents such as Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirsti Noem, and Attorney General Pam Bondi.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, is sometimes nicknamed “MAGA Mike.”

And MAGA politicians increasingly control state and local positions.

The movement’s ascent is not limited to the United States. Right-of-center populist politicians are increasingly powerful and influential throughout the world. They often try to ally with America’s MAGA movement or mimic its politically successful model.

Given MAGA’s central role in both the United States and the world, it is important to understand MAGA. Understand its philosophy. Understand its appeal.

This is important for any political professional – politicians, public policy professionals, foreign service professionals, journalists, and political scholars.

That is the study group’s purpose: increased understanding of MAGA.

What This Study Group Is NOT:

This study group is NOT an effort at political evangelism – to convince you that MAGA is awful or wonderful. I have my thoughts, and I daresay you do (or will) too, but I encourage you to approach the study group with the primary goal of *understanding*.

It is also NOT an attempt to “out” people – identifying the attendees most committed or opposed to the MAGA movement. I will call on people to take positions that may be contrary to their actual positions. Nobody should feel like “if not for me, nobody will attack/defend this MAGA idea.”

This study group is NOT about individual MAGA politicians. It is about the motivations, appeal, and ideas of the MAGA movement.

This study group is NOT about “war stories.” Classes are not designed to sit back and listen about somebody else’s successes or failures within the MAGA movement. To this end, guest speakers will only be invited, if at all, to expound on a certain set of ideas.

This study group is NOT about MAGA’s relationship to Harvard or the ongoing litigation between the Trump administration and Harvard University.

Registration:

This study group is open to all Harvard personnel (students, fellows, staff, etc.) in any school. The sessions will be held in a classroom at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Participants need not have a background in American politics, but that is certainly welcome.

Please register by Sunday, September 14, 2025. If we reach capacity for the room, participants will be selected based on the order in which they registered. Preference will be given to student participants.

The registration link is [here](#).

Expectations:

Please try to attend each session if you register.

Please try your best to read the assigned readings for each session.

Please don’t fight an assigned position. If I ask you to defend or attack a certain idea, please don’t say “but that’s not how I really feel!” Just embrace the intellectual challenge. Everyone will understand that it might not be the position you would take outside of the classroom.

Have fun. Be nice. Life is short.

Format:

This is not a lecture. Please engage.

I may try different formats over the six-class period. This is a new study group, so we'll see what works.

Volunteer Presenters:

Each week will begin with short overview presentations of the readings by volunteer participants. Please let me know if you'd like to volunteer to summarize a certain reading.

These presentations should outline the main points of the reading and serve as a refresher for all participants.

Recording Policy:

Photography and video/audio recording/filming is NOT permitted in this study group. For more information, please see HKS Media Use Policy.

Classroom Conduct Policy:

This study group will follow the HKS Non-Attribution Rule. This means you can share in a general way what you learned, but not who said what, without expressed permission. For more on this policy, please see the HKS Code of Conduct.

Me:

[Stephen Richer](#) is a Senior Practice Fellow in American Democracy at the [Ash Center](#), where he researches and writes on election administration and democracy, and he is the co-host of the Ash Center's [Terms of Engagement show](#). He is also the CEO of [Republic Affairs](#), a Washington, DC-based crisis consulting and communications firm.

Previously, Stephen was the elected Maricopa County Recorder, responsible for voter registration, early voting administration, and public recordings in Maricopa County, Arizona, the fourth largest county in the United States.

Before being elected to public office, Stephen worked at several public policy think tanks, in business, and as an attorney. Stephen received his J.D. and M.A. from The University of Chicago and his B.A. from Tulane University.

Stephen has been broadly recognized for his work in elections and American Democracy. In 2021, the Arizona Republic named Stephen "Arizonan of the Year." In 2022, the Maricopa Bar Association awarded Stephen "Public Law Attorney of the Year." In 2023, Stephen won "Leader of the Year" from the Arizona Capitol Times. And in 2024, Time Magazine named Stephen a "Defender of Democracy."

Syllabus

In progress. Subject to change.

Class 1 – September 17

Topic:

Welcome to MAGA

Readings:

- [“The Flight 93 Election.”](#) September 5, 2016. Michael Anton (Publius Decius Mus). *Claremont Review of Books*.
- [“Donald J. Trump: Inaugural Address.”](#) January 20, 2017. Donald J. Trump.
- [“The Christian Nationalism We Need.”](#) September 4, 2024. Josh Hawley. *First Things*.
- [“We’re Not Going Away.”](#) November 17, 2016. Richard Spencer. *All Things Considered, NPR*.
- [“America’s Delusional Elite Is Done.”](#) October 22, 2019. Costin Vlad Alamariu (Bronze Age Pervert). *The American Mind*.

Class 2 – September 24

Topic:

The rise of MAGA

Readings:

- [“Trump, Brexit, and the rise of Populism: Economic have-nots and cultural backlash.”](#) August 2016. Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris. *Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series*.

- Just read the abstract, the introduction (up until “I: Theoretical Framework,” and Part V (conclusions and discussion).
- [“6 Books to Help Understand Trump’s Win.”](#) November 9, 2016. *The New York Times*.
- [“Why Do People Who Need Help From the Government Hate It So Much? A review of *Strangers in Their Own Land*.”](#) September 19, 2016. Jason DeParle. *The New York Times*.
- [“How I Joined the Resistance.”](#) April 1, 2020. JD Vance. *The Lamp*.
- [“Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has mass appeal despite his extreme ideas. This theory explains why.”](#) February 11, 2025. Darren Loucaides. *The Guardian*.
- [“What Is the Longhouse?”](#) February 16, 2023. Jonathan Keeperman (Lom3z). *First Things*.
- [“How Steve Bannon guided the MAGA movement’s rebound from January 6.”](#) April 4, 2024. Isaac Arnsdorf. *The Washington Post*.

Class 3 – October 1

Topic:

Who is MAGA?

Readings:

TBD

Class 4 – October 15

Topic:

MAGA governance

Readings:

TBD

Readings:

Class 5 – October 29

Topic:

Is MAGA a departure from, or a continuation of, Reagan conservatism?

Readings:

TBD

- [“Why Liberalism Failed.”](#) 2018. Patrick Deneen. *Yale University Press*.
 - Introduction and Chapter 1
- [“Beyond Originalism.”](#) March 31, 2020. Adrian Vermeule. *The Atlantic*.

Class 6 (if needed) – November 5

Topic:

The future of MAGA

Readings:

TBD