

10-30-2023

The Doom Loop: The Subtle Art of Fear-Based Messaging in Politics

Kristen Foley

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October 30, 2023 [No Comments](#)

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Weaponization of the Doom Loop Narrative

Doom Loop (noun) – A scenario in which one negative development causes another negative development, which then makes the first problem worse. A vicious cycle.

Fear-based messaging is a compelling political tool that has been used to shape policy often at the expense of vulnerable communities. A growing example of this has targeted governing practices in San Francisco. San Francisco has seen a barrage of criticisms lately, focused on blatant crime and open-air drug use among its streets. Local and national news have made these topics the centerpiece of a “doom loop” narrative that is plaguing a once thriving and desirable city. It has become a way for stakeholders to denounce city governance as the dangerous origin for social chaos. Most notably, CNN’s “What Happened to San Francisco?” documentary special, which paints San Francisco as a failed city that is out of control and dangerous. In an [article written by Jay Barmann](#), he points out how the fear bolstered by this commentary has targeted the “liberal agenda” and has constructed a perception of crime in San Francisco, that even has residents screaming foul. In a city traditionally known for its avant-garde policies and liberal population, residents are now questioning if these policies are actually working in addressing public safety. As residents are being bombarded with these messages of despair, it seems they are slowly wavering in their support for progressive governing. What may come of this, just might be a political shift that harms the well-being of the community more than the perceived doom on San Francisco’s streets.



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Chesa Boudin – A Doom Loop Causality

In 2022, San Francisco saw the recall of District Attorney, Chesa Boudin. Boudin served in office January 2020 to July 2022, elected for his progressive policies on criminal reform. Chesa touted “[that mass incarceration and privatized prisons disproportionately harm people of color and reflect the institutional inequities of America’s legal system.](#)” His platform as D.A. was to prosecute police misconduct, eliminate cash bail, reduce the jail population by focusing on alternatives, and halting the prosecution of children as adults. A stark difference from traditional “law and order” policies focusing on harsher enforcement and penalties to prevent crime.

Boudin’s tenure was during an unprecedented time, when the country was experiencing a shut-down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As people stayed at home, news outlets publicized widespread crime at the hands of uncontrollable crime rings that were not being held accountable under Boudin’s policies. These high-profile stories incited frustration and anger in the community. The [fixation on Boudin’s lenient policies](#) linked to these crimes prompted a campaign that would radically remove Boudin from office.

The campaign was an arduous one, [funded by](#) Neighbors for a Better San Francisco PAC, whose donors primarily consisted of wealthy individuals in the real estate and finance industries; many with a history of republican support. Looking at it from a place of traditional voting trends, it was obvious that the recall was a targeted attack funded by outside interests and did not actually reflect the will of San Franciscans. Rather it was a campaign focusing on the issues of high crime and danger, that conjured fear in voters to act or to be victims.

However, crime data after Boudin's removal spoke otherwise. From July 2022, when his chosen successor Brooke Jenkins took office, to June 2023 reports of [violent crime increased 5.5%](#) in San Francisco. Largely driven by robberies and assaults, even Jenkins' pledge to increase punishment for criminal defendants has not deterred unlawful activity. Nonetheless, Boudin's expulsion was a win for conservative stakeholders who championed more traditional law and order policies.

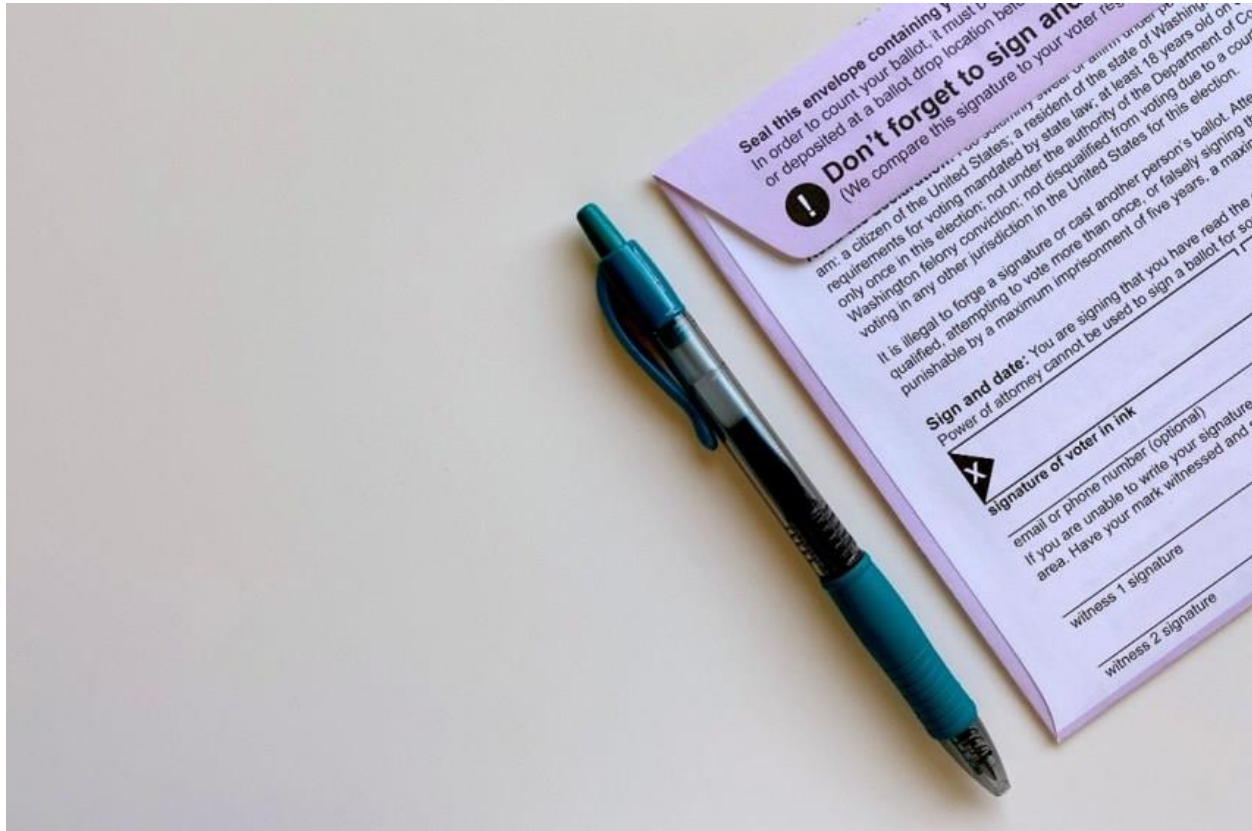


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Doom Movement Invokes More Extreme Policies

As San Francisco progresses into a 2024 election that will decide the seats of a new mayor and multiple supervisors, the doom narrative has gotten stronger, increasing the emphasis of election platforms on more conservative based idealism. Most recently, a long-time San Francisco political contributor and former judge, Quentin Kopp, submitted a ballot measure to amend the City Charter voting procedures for district supervisors to an "[at-large process](#)". An at-large process is a method where all voters cast ballots for all candidates with the top numbers winning seats. Contrary to the Voting Right Act of 1965, which [shields against schemes that limit the voting power of marginalized communities](#), this system has long been condemned for its [enhancement of discrimination](#) against communities of color and socioeconomic disparities. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg reaffirmed that the [Voting Rights Act](#) had properly changed barriers to ballot access in places where the laws required at-large voting in communities with sizable minorities.

However, Kopp argues that representation would not be loss, as voters would choose from a pool of candidates that ensures every [neighborhood has representation](#) on the Board of Supervisors. Kopp is [quoted](#) as saying “what I really wanted to see is the return of at-large election without districts, but the [Pico](#) case blocks that so we’re proposing district supervisors elected at-large.” [Pico Neighborhood Ass’n. v. City of Santa Monica](#), centered on the city’s at-large voting system potential discrimination against Latino voters and subsequent violations of the California Voting Rights Acts (CVRA). Although the court gave no expressed view of at-large voting, it did affirm that if the plaintiff is able to show a dilution in voter representation, an at-large system would be a violation of the CVRA. Kopp’s reference to this case is alarming. It reveals his measure as dangerously teetering on the edge of voter suppression. In spite of that, Kopp is confident he will get the support he needs towards passing this measure citing the doom loop, “[because of the condition of the city.](#)”

Why Fear-Based Messaging Works

The recall of Boudin and Kopp’s crusade to an at-large voting system, shows the danger in how fear-based messaging can introduce harmful measures that can set back policies intended to protect our most vulnerable communities. The method of fear relies on an individual’s [natural instinct to find safety in numbers](#). [Fear appeal](#) motivates the audience to act by linking the perception of a threat to their susceptibility of it and follows with a solution on how to avoid the danger. Fear has a corrosive effect on our political systems and freedoms. It bypasses reason in order to manipulate audiences and is used as a means to maintain the repressive power of the state. [Fear has been a powerful tool in gaining public support for counterproductive policies](#).

Navigating Fear Messaging in Politics

So how can the population avoid becoming susceptible to the doom loop messaging? We might not ever be able to control fear-based messaging in politics or otherwise. Maybe it is as simple as disconnecting from the media when fear is being projected at us or engaging in debate to curb what triggers us. It is important to know that the fear-based messaging tactic is being used to promote agendas that might not serve us in the end. It is crucial for the population to stay informed and attentive to who is controlling the message and what or who the message benefits. Next time you are faced with this type of campaign rhetoric, ask yourself, what are the consequences of adopting this fear-driven policy? Shifting the narrative provides us with the power to shift the agenda.



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Kristen Foley