BREAKING DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that American democracy faces a triple threat of (1) the erosion of public trust, (2) domestic terrorism and political violence, and (3) voter suppression. These threats hasten the breakdown of modern democracy. Using literature assessment and historical explanation, this analysis examines circumstances that brought about today's political climate and the contemporary threat environment and compares the current status to other examples of democratic backsliding. The findings indicate a clear and undeniable pattern of radical, asymmetrical efforts to break down norms, erode public trust, utilize domestic terrorism and political violence to intimidate opponents, and disenfranchise voters to hold power. The efforts rely on politics of extremism to weaken the system of checks and balances alongside the decline of regular order causing democratic backsliding and descent into American authoritarianism. This research examines the mechanisms behind these findings that offer opportunities for correction to slow the descent into authoritarianism. Relying on several recent social and cultural events as a proxy for the future deterioration of norms, these findings are consequential for understanding how best to deploy the government, private sector, and the public to arrest democratic backsliding, stabilize American political institutions, and preserve American democracy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1: Introduction

American democracy faces a triple threat of (1) the erosion of public trust, (2) domestic terrorism and political violence, and (3) voter suppression. A recurrent breaking of institutional norms has primed these threats. Evidence of rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding suggests American democracy is in the greatest peril since the Civil War. How democratic regimes break has long been studied by political scientists. Anti-democratic political currents have exposed weaknesses in the structural integrity of American democracy.

1.1 Destruction from within

The erosion of democracy is not only occurring at the hands of foreign adversaries. It emanates from within. Much like the 1930s rise of fascism in Europe, the United States is experiencing events that are hallmarks of rising authoritarianism. This research identifies the historic assault on democratic norms, draws similarities to other historical breakdowns in democracies, and explores how the erosion of public trust, the rise of domestic terrorism, and renewed efforts to suppress voting further the democratic backsliding in the United States. Finally, it suggests remedies for how these threats can be mitigated at multiple holistic levels, including by the government, the private sector, and the public.

In the simplest terms, the danger to American democracy that scholars (as well as many citizens) see is this: without accountability for malicious actions and a return to

normative democratic guardrails, the American experiment will cease to be recognizable as a representative democracy. The author contends that the ongoing escalation of political warfare by norm-busting behavior imperils the survival of American democracy. Both parties do not symmetrically execute these actions; the Republican party has dominated these efforts. The areas where this norm-busting has been concentrated leave the nation and democracy vulnerable. Thus, the strategic defense of democracy must restore political norms, restraint, the spirit of constitutional rights, and the rule of law. Tactically speaking, solutions must address the weaknesses identified that enable the propagation of misinformation, buttress our intelligence and law enforcement community against radicalization, protect both the free press and freedom of speech in ways that promote national security, and develop comprehensive laws that ensure domestic terrorism is criminalized and voting rights are protected.

Researchers have noted that societies can break, democracies can fall, and ethics can collapse; it would serve us well to understand why.[1] An evaluation of history, an assessment of the literature, and an analysis of current political conditions, this research delivers a comprehensive assessment of factors determinative of how the United States got here, how it's going, and what can be done to correct course. First, this research will discuss a brief history of the breakdown of political norms in the American government and the factors that enabled the demise of bilateral collaborative governance. Next, these factors will be assessed in the context of public trust in the media and government, with particular attention to social media. Third, this research examines how the political

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[1] Timothy Snyder. *On Tyranny*. (La Vergne: Memories of Ages Press, 2021), 12.

climate has impacted the threat of domestic terrorism and political violence. Then, considering previously discussed factors, the viability of democracy will be analyzed through the lens of voter suppression and disenfranchisement. Following, this research will note similarities to the rise of authoritarian leaders in history, and finally, it will provide concrete suggestions to counter the destruction of American democracy.

The breakdown of institutional norms is a hallmark of democratic backsliding. In their book, *How Democracies Die*, Professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt contend that mutual toleration and forbearance are the guardrails of democracy. They note that following the Civil War, Democrats and Republicans accepted each other as legitimate rivals, polarization declined, and they redefined the kind of politics that characterized American Democracy for decades to follow.[2] British scholar James Bryce noted in his 1888 work *The American Commonwealth,* that it was not the Constitution that made the American political system work but rather "usages" or unwritten rules.[3] The late professor of Sociology, William Gamson, said that trust is "the creator of collective power," for national unity to thrive, collective trust must exist. Conversely, when trust is segmented and only exists within partisan spectrums, the collective power of each "side" may become more powerful but will deepen polarization.

The deepening of polarization in political civility shifted in the 1990s from mere disagreement on issues between parties to undermining the legitimacy of opponents, casting them as enemies and criminals. Though the 1950s and 1960s had seen an escalation of rhetoric from Joe McCarthy and Richard Nixon, it was Newt Gingrich's new

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[2] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die,* (New York: Broadway Books, 2019), 125.
[3] Ibid.

brand of political adversarialism and his 1994 legislative platform, the Contract with America (reducing the size of government, cutting taxes and welfare reform), that helped propel the conservative majority to take the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, as well as the Senate. Several government shutdowns followed, and the partisan impeachment of President Bill Clinton. Party warfare and obstructionism increased. He turned partisan battles into blood sport, viewing the animal kingdom as an example for humanity and competitive viciousness as a natural human state.[4] Gingrich viewed nature as, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, a "war of every man against every man."

Gingrich's career spanned two decades in Congress, brought Washington into an era of dysfunction, and stripped American politics of its civilizing traits.[5] His ideology required destroying institutional authority and the "old order" in favor of war for power.[6] But this state of nature did not make Americans free. The instability that personified that time made many Americans feel scared. American government was far more reliant on the political theory of John Locke that humanity has endowed rights and choose to live in a society that requires interdependence for peace. The unpredictable nature of the "id" guiding politics contradicts the foundational nature of a civil society defined by norms.

The public response to the Republican assault on the federal budget in 1996 was not what they expected. Americans largely blamed Congress and its Republican

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[4] McCay Coppins, "The Man Who Broke Politics," *The Atlantic*, November 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/newt-gingrich-says-youre-welcome/570832/
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

leadership[7] for the government shutdowns, not President Clinton. Confidence in the

government declined heavily. For three decades, this see-saw has continued, each side

justifying its transgressions by the actions of the other. Research by political scientists

John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse shows that in popular perception, the

inability of politicians to "get things done" can be explained simply by partisan

bickering.[8] They note that democracy is ugly, and Congress is the institution which

reflects that ugliness more than any other, merely by being itself.[9]

In contemporary political theory and philosophy, Republicanism focuses on

political liberty, understood as non-domination or independence from arbitrary power.[10]

Deliberative Democrats propose that citizens address societal problems and matters of

public concern by reasoning together about how to best solve them. This can be made

possible by deliberative procedures, which help to reach a moral consensus that satisfies

both rationality (defense of liberal rights) and legitimacy (as represented by popular

sovereignty).[11] The galactic gulf between these two approaches is at the heart of clashes

between the two political parties in American politics. But in the face of impenetrable

obstruction and in answer to the Republicans pushing the boundary of norms, Democrats

engaged in some political warfare of their own. In 2013 after threatening to use the

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[7] Stephen Craig, "Reviewed work(s): Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions," *The American Political Science Review*, 92, No.1, (1998): 232-233

[8] John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

[9] Stephen Craig, "Reviewed work(s): Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions," *The American Political Science Review*, 92, No.1, (1998): 232-233

[10] Bozdag, E., van den Hoven, J. Breaking the filter bubble: democracy and design. *Ethics Inf Technol* 17, 249–265 (2015). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-015-9380-y

[11] Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. *Why deliberative democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

"nuclear option" following an excruciating round of broken deals and obstructionism by Senate Republicans (half of the 168 filibusters of executive and judicial nominees in American history up to that point came during the Obama Administration)[12] Senate Majority leader Harry Reid changed the Senate rules that required 60 votes for judicial and executive nominations. In retaliation, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell refused to hold either a hearing or a vote for President Obama's Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland in 2016. Reid's transgression was used as a pretext to McConnell dropping the threshold for Supreme Court confirmations in 2017 to confirm Neil Gorsuch, and enabled Brett Kavanagh in 2018 and Amy Coney Barrett in 2021 to be confirmed, all without enough support to have overcome the filibuster. In retaliation to the Democrats' norm-breaking, the Republicans upped their norm-breaking. And so, the cycle repeats.

Democracy, no matter how fair, no matter how informed, no matter how participatory, does not qualify as deliberative unless reasoning is central to the process of collective decision-making.[13] The tolerance and compromise that had long defined bicameral democratic governance largely evaporated. In its place grew a hostility for decorum. The norm-breaking and increasing discord reflects the growing dysfunction in government and perpetuates public distrust. Polarization and an unwillingness to compromise have replaced the lynchpin of democracy – accommodation and consensus building between opposing groups. Governance in America is now a zero-sum game;

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[12] Molly Ball," Why Harry Reid Went Nuclear," *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2013, accessed October 31, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/11/why-harry-reid-went-nuclear/281728/#.

[13] Bozdag, E., van den Hoven, J. Breaking the filter bubble: democracy and design. *Ethics Inf Technol* 17, 251 (2015). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-015-9380-y

blocking any legislation by the opposition party has become a tactical political win above

achieving anything in a bipartisan manner. The departure from traditional governance,

both intentional and inadvertent, undermined fragile democratic institutions. The

acceleration of this departure has resulted in long-observed norms within law

enforcement, the intelligence community, ethics offices, and the judiciary. In short, there

is far less institutional forbearance[14] in American governance than at any time in our

history. The public also observes a growing disparity between government policy and

popular will. It is possible that this is a ground-up phenomenon, but it's more likely a top-

down one.

1.2 Information Warfare

The erosion of public trust largely accelerated when social media, partisan mass

media, and user-generated content flooded the public square with misinformation. In a

2017 report for the Hewlett Foundation, the authors said problems of propaganda,

misinformation, and disinformation are longstanding, and the forms they've taken have

morphed over centuries as governments, communications technologies, and policies, and

understandings of human psychology have evolved.[15] In the internet age, with

gatekeepers removed, information creation and distribution are highly fragmented, and

citizens are inundated with information.[16] Unfortunately, many of these essential

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[14] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die,* (New York: Broadway Books, 2019), 106.
[15] Kelly Born and Nell Edgington, *Analysis of Philanthropic Opportunities to Mitigate the Disinformation/Propaganda Problem,* (San Francisco: The Hewlett Foundation, 2017) 7.
[16] Ibid, 10.

elements of a healthy information ecosystem in a democracy are undermined in our current media environment.[17]

Freedom of the press is a polestar tradition that democracy relies on to hold people in power accountable and allow for spirited debate. It is one of the most important rights captured in our founding documents and one whose legitimacy was taxed to new levels during the Trump presidency. Social media tests the efficacy of this right. With no clear distinction between legitimate news organizations that deliver information and those that deliver opinion/entertainment, it can be expected that this polarizing content continues to proliferate. Compounding this assault is the intentional malignant effort of adversaries co-opting willing American "fellow travelers." Free speech is the weapon of choice for our most dangerous adversaries.

World chess champion Gary Kasparov said, "The point of modern propaganda isn't only to misinform or push an agenda, it's to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth." Manipulated messaging with malicious intent is woven throughout history. Some information circulates innocently, which ends up being unintentionally false over the arc of history and technology; misinformation appears to be a feature rather than a bug. Misinformation and conspiracy theories have collided with the social media age and created an environment primed for weaponization at breathless speed. While initially, new media technologies were hailed as beneficial to democracy,[18] society at large is now seeing the unanticipated dark side of such platforms. They allow users to

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Jeffrey B. Abramson and Gary R. Orren, F. Christopher Arterton, *Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1998)

stay connected to friends and family, old classmates, and work associates across oceans, but the same "feel good" networks are now helping undermine our democracy. As the prevalence of misinformation has increased, the value of real expertise and academia in the public square seems to have diminished. More often, academics are now cast as "elitists" and viewed as out of touch with the public. This phenomenon, of course, is the real point; the proliferation of mistrust creates a public that cannot distinguish between truth and fiction, real and fake, legitimate, and pretend. When the public is deprived of the right to credible information, the net result can be a population that is desensitized to lies and rule-breaking, feels powerless to effect change, and disengaged. The public feeling overwhelmed and hopeless allows those in power to operate with less accountability. Or, as Steve Bannon termed it, "flooding the zone."

Public trust in government was at an all-time low of 17 percent in 2019, down sixty points from its all-time high of 77 percent in 1964.[19] Research by Vanderbilt University political science Professor Larry Bartels revealed that among the Republican respondents, 50.7 percent agreed with the statement that "The traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it," while 41.3 percent agreed that "A time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands." Further analysis revealed that ethnic antagonism resided at the heart of these results, "The anti-democratic sentiments are not primarily products of social isolation or insufficient education or political interest," said Bartels. "Rather, they are grounded in real political values—specifically, and overwhelmingly, in Republicans' ethnocentric

[19] Pew Research Center, Public Trust in Government, 1958-2022, June 6, 2022, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/.

concerns about the political and social role of immigrants, African Americans and Latinos in a context of significant demographic and cultural change."[20] This flashpoint topic was exploited by foreign adversaries via social media in 2016 and 2020.

The most radioactive factors in all examined contexts (political norm-breaking, public trust, domestic terrorism, voter suppression, and authoritarianism) are race and nationalism. These topics have naturally divided the political parties, offered external and internal forces target-rich environments to further exploit divisions, and driven increases in political violence since the founding. A report from the Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed that African Americans were targeted more than any other group, "by far, race and related issues were the preferred target of the information warfare campaign designed to divide the country in 2016," with 66 percent of Russia's Internet Research Agency's paid Facebook ads invoking race "principally aimed at African-Americans in key metropolitan areas." Furthermore, it weaponized "race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights in an attempt to pit Americans against one another and against their government"[21]

Mainstream media, social media and technology play a role in destabilizing regimes within the United States. Conspiracy theorists form a "unitary closed-off worldview in which beliefs come together in a mutually supportive network known as a

[20] Larry Bartels, "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, August 31, 2020, Volume 117 No. 37 https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.200774711.

[21] "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, August 13, 2020, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

monological belief system"[22]; they can become disenfranchised over time by what they perceive to be a power beyond reasonable limits in the hands of malevolent actors[23] and elevate self and "in-group" by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others. Traditional monological beliefs are merely the tip of the iceberg in which one conspiracy predicts belief in a wide variety of others.[24] From 2016 to present, these traditional monological beliefs have overtaken previously restrained populations and have resulted in some of the most violent and anti-democratic rhetoric to date.

1.3 Normalizing Hate

Compounding the landmines of the media landscape and amplified by it, domestic terrorism incidents have continued to rise. Lawmakers have been unable to cultivate consensus to respond effectively to the threat of domestic terrorism. The recent increase in domestic terrorism and political violence is primarily attributed to a conservative constituency and is deeply rooted in some of the darkest movements in our nation's history. Complicating matters, some in the intelligence community and law enforcement are actively involved in groups hostile to the government. The politicization of national security furthers the breakdown of democracy.

Extremist groups are one of the most active movements on social media. They have long sought to violently exert their dominance to further their ideological beliefs for

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[22] Wood, Michael J., Douglas, Karen M., and Sutton, Robbie M.. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (6): 767–73.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Swami, V., Coles, R., Stieger, S., Pietschnig, J., Furnham, A., Rehim, S. and Voracek, M. 2011. Conspiracist ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a monological belief system and associations between individual psychological differences and real-world and fictitious conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology.* 102 (3), pp. 443-463.

political power and financial/economic gain. The near-anonymous nature and two-way social media interaction provide a previously unavailable platform for radicalization, recruiting, and mobilizing. They have exploited the right to free speech and freedom of assembly guaranteed by the Constitution, virtually daring law enforcement and intelligence to act. The sheer volume of groups, content, and virality of their material is uncontainable. Extremists have employed violence and fear-based tactics to counter progress they deem irreconcilable with their worldview. The growing trend of violence threatens the stability of democracy and the rule of law. In the United States, domestic terrorism falls into several categories, but the most enduring and pernicious is far-right domestic terrorism.

Hate crimes and domestic terrorism significantly undermine the rule of law and openness that underpins American democracy. Yet these threats have been handled very differently than others by our lawmakers and intelligence and law enforcement communities.

Galvanizing events typically unite the public in a common cause - as occurred after 9/11, building a sense of patriotism and unity against a common enemy; this has not happened in domestic terrorism incidents, mainly because the perpetrators are not "foreign" - they are American citizens with a deeply rooted ideological constituency.

Since 2015, 267 plots or attacks have involved right-wing extremists, with 91 fatalities. Far-left views attacks and plots accounted for 66 incidents leading to 19 deaths.[25] The political divide between those who seek limited government versus the

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[25] Robert O'Harrow Jr., Andrew Ba Tran, and Derek Hawkins, "Domestic Terrorism data show right wing violence on the rise," *The Washington Post*, April 12, 2021.

liberal view that government intervention improves people's lives has existed for a century. Adversaries who seek to disrupt democracy, sow division, and promote one political party over the other have weaponized our social media and our political parties to categorize Americans as "patriots" or "enemies" for political gain.

The United States has spent much time, money, and legislation addressing international terrorism and other ideologically based terrorism (eco-terrorism, animal terrorism, anti-abortion terrorism, and international terrorism). Still, meaningful legislation to address the gravest modern threat to the United States is regularly defeated. Domestic political extremists have a constituency that is deeply embedded in political culture.

Some experts say that the country would be more divided if attention is given to violent right-wing extremism. Others believe the domestic terrorism threat cannot be remedied without aggressive action. The freedoms that define our democracy complicate the effort to mitigate these threats. The ideologies themselves, hateful or not, are not a violation of U.S. law; in fact, they are constitutionally protected free speech. From a logistical perspective, the attempt to remedy these threats must be wholly focused on curbing the proliferation of violence as a means of fulfilling those ideologies, and correctly identifying and prosecuting domestic terrorists rather than reserving the term "terrorism" only for foreign Islamic extremists.

The marked rise in domestic terrorism events observed in the last five years should concern everyone. Homegrown terrorism, including white supremacists, is now as

significant a threat as terrorism from abroad.[26] Domestic terrorism is an existential threat to the safety and security of the nation and to American democracy itself. These violent acts exploit safety, security, stability, and public confidence; they perpetuate division and corrode the foundation of public institutions like election boards, public school boards,

Threats to the homeland
United States, terrorist attacks and plots by ideology
% of total

Far-right ■ Far-left ■ Religious ■ Other

Source: Centre for Strategic and International Studies
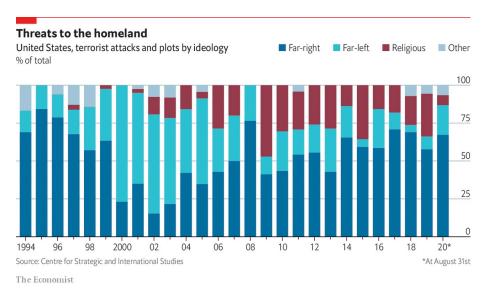
*At August 31st

The Economist

Figure 1 Threats to the homeland, "In America, far-right terrorist plots have outnumbered far-left ones in 2020," The Economist, October 27, 2020, https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/10/27/in-america-far-right-terrorist-plots-have-outnumbered-far-left-ones-in-2020#

health departments and law enforcement entities. They are directed entirely at intimidation and overturning our form of government.

The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the United States Capitol was a watershed moment as the country watched the culmination of years-long agitation of social media misinformation, grievance exploitation, and nationalism unfold at the doorsteps of the People's House. The FBI classified the January 6th insurrection as domestic terrorism. At the Senate Judiciary hearing on March 2, 2021, FBI Director Christopher Wray said, "the problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for some time

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[26] Sabrina Tavernise, et al., "The Threat from Within," *New York Times,* September 16, 2016.

now, and it's not going away any time soon." In total defiance of this reality, the Republican National Committee classified the January 6th violence as "legitimate political discourse," elevating the anti-government groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, normalizing political violence as a means of public activism. Online support networks and the ability to build an online coalition willing to materialize for violence have turned a racist social club into the public arm of Republican party politics. Former Proud Boys chairman Enrique Tarrio said, "The way that we are going to stay legitimate after Unite the Right — when a whole bunch of extremist groups dissolved — is actually to get involved in politics." Ideological beliefs blossomed into political activism, attaching like a remora to the political apparatus of the GOP. This mutual arrangement has offered legitimacy to extremist groups and lent them credibility while providing a platform for messaging, activism, and alliance with the "base" voters.

Confirming Tarrio's claim, election deniers are seeking offices to decide the outcome of elections in defiance of the will of the voters. 299 Republican candidates in the 2022 mid-term election have denied or questioned the outcome of the last presidential election.[27] Claiming to be patriots interested in preserving the American way, these aggrieved candidates appear to feel justified in engaging in anti-democratic rule-breaking retaliation. The overwhelming increase in voter turnout in 2020 and claims of a stolen election have already prompted a nationwide GOP effort to restrict voter registration,

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[27] Adrian Blanco and Amy Gardner, "Where Republican Election Deniers are on the Ballot Near You," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2022, Updated November 8, 2022, accessed November 8, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2022/election-deniers-running-for-office-elections-2022/.

mail-in voting, absentee voting, and drop boxes, making it more difficult for voters to

select their leaders.

1.4 Weaponize the Ballot

A November 3, 2020, statement released by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure

Security Agency said the election was the most secure in American history, saying,

"While we know there are many unfounded claims and opportunities for misinformation

about the process of our elections, we can assure you we have the utmost confidence in

the security and integrity of our elections, and you should too." Agency head Chris

Krebs, a Trump appointee, released the statement, which also confirmed they had no

evidence that any voting system had deleted or lost votes, had changed votes, or was in

any way compromised. The 64 of the 65 lawsuits seeking to overturn the result of the

election have all been unsuccessful. But the ongoing attack on elections systems,

elections boards, and voting rights have only escalated in the two years since the 2020

election.

Not only was social media disinformation pervasive about divisive topics but also

about how and where to vote. Voter suppression has long been a tool of discrimination in

the United States, but this time it was deployed by a foreign adversary in lockstep with

tactics used historically and even contemporarily. As mentioned earlier, the report from

the Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed that African Americans were targeted more

than any other group, "by far, race and related issues were the preferred target of the

information warfare campaign designed to divide the country in 2016" with 66 percent of

the paid advertising from Russia's Internet Research Agency targeting racial issues "principally aimed at African-Americans in key metropolitan areas."[28]

When politicians use the mechanisms of government to codify discrimination to ensure an undefeatable majority rather than appealing to the broad needs of the public, democracy is in jeopardy. When they join with Americans in promoting false information about issues and voting, they further erode trust in institutions. In the wake of the 2020 election controversy, claims of voter fraud and a stolen election dominated the beliefs of those advocating revised election laws that have historically suppressed specific voting blocs: minority communities, students, and young people. Coupled with the slow-rolling assault on other civil rights, these efforts also contribute to polarization and the demise of democracy from within.

Data shows that the history of voter suppression has had a damning impact on voter turnout for nearly the entire history of our nation. The white constituency of 1878 America recognized early on that representation mattered. For the Northerners, population determination for congressional apportionment should only be made based on the free population because they had the power to vote. The Southerners seeking greater representation in Congress without the trouble of granting the franchise to the enslaved people wanted to include their slave population in apportionment numbers. The 3/5ths compromise resulted from the struggle for electoral benefit while maintaining the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Voting rights have been a shell game for over

[28] "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election," U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, August 13, 2020, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf.

a century. Fueled by false incendiary claims of widespread voter fraud, the ongoing

attempts to further separate people from their right to choose their leaders have not

abated. A yo-yo of rights-granting and rights-rescinding decisions have come out of the

Supreme Court, but the growing disparity between Court's rulings and popular will

deepens polarization and the erosion of public confidence in democracy.

The history of voting rights in America reveals a politically driven effort to

minimize the political efficacy of whole populations rather than exposing the political

parties' inability to advocate policies that appeal to diverse populations. Mimicking the

drivers of norm-breaking, the breakdown of public trust, and the forces behind domestic

terrorism, increasing reliance on only base voters for continued hold of power in an ever

more diverse and multi-ethnic country necessitates abrogation of the right to vote for

specific groups of people.

The Supreme Court's conservative majority appears willing to assist in this effort.

The modern assault on voting rights adopts the political rhetoric and propaganda of social

media and the false assertion of voter fraud to justify restrictive "election integrity" laws

and may well intend to eliminate the federal oversight on elections generally. Tight races

in elections over the last 10 years revealed that minority voters possessed the potential to

determine electoral outcomes.[29]

1.5 American Authoritarianism

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[29] Lorraine C. Minnite, *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,2011) https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801459061.

The willingness of Americans to support a leader with autocratic tendencies if they deliver on some crucial partisan issues and express alignment against a common enemy is precisely the position that led both Germany and Italy into fascist rule in the 1930s. The democratic breakdown in world history portents a dark path of eerily similar current events. Based on striking similarities to 1930s Europe, the tipping point of American democracy could be here. Strongmen leaders, intimidation, remaking pillars of a country's values in the party's image, including education, government institutions, denial of long-held civil rights, militarization, threats of violence, traditional submissive roles for women, silencing of opposition, exploitation of religion to both unite and divide groups of people, the criminalization of dissent, and an imagined past that legitimizes anti-democratic actions are all polestar characteristics of authoritarianism. Popular nationalism turns ordinary people's grievances against elites or a ruling class who believe they have been marginalized and are rightfully entitled to exclusive dominance of a nation.

Political scientist John R. Hibbing disputes the categorization of autocrats, saying "the followers of leaders such as Donald Trump stridently oppose all authority figures who divert attention from what they believe are the real threats: immigrants, powerful foreign enemies, diversity, terrorists, and criminals."[30] This explains some of the antagonism of the Republican population toward the COVID-19 pandemic; they opposed the lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccine requirements. Rejecting the idea of being

[30] John R Hibbing, "Why Do Trump's Authoritarian Followers Resist COVID-19 Authorities? Because They Are Not Really Authoritarian Followers," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4:880798, (July 2022): 1, accessed October 15, 2022,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362176484_Why_Do_Trump%27s_Authoritarian_Followers_Re
sist_COVID-19_Authorities_Because_They_Are_Not_Really_Authoritarian_Followers

forced to comply regardless of the justification, the republican conception of political liberty defines freedom as a sort of structural independence—as the condition of not being subject to arbitrary or uncontrolled power.[31] This psychology may be helpful in determining how best to cool the temperature of political discourse and diffuse the threat to democracy, but realistically government exists to create a substructure of civil society. That necessarily implies come subjugation to power.

A December 2021 survey by Schoen Cooperman Research asked 800 voters likely to vote in the 2022 midterm election and found that 51 percent agreed with the statement "U.S. democracy is at risk of extinction."[32] Pollster Carly Cooperman said, "We found that Americans are losing faith in their democracy, arguably worse than ever before. They're losing faith in elections, institutions, and the ability of democracy to survive. Everything is negative." One bright point from the study shows 80 percent of respondents believe it's more important for elected officials from both parties to work collaboratively to solve problems rather than remain dug in on their ideological beliefs.

Civil war nearly split our developing country apart; the Great Depression made Americans question the nation's economic ability to sustain its explosive growth and type of commerce; World War II and the cold war saw the dramatic growth and sudden fall of global totalitarianism. Our system of government withstood the tumult through assassinations, wars, social unrest, and a Presidential resignation. Even through the Watergate scandal, our institutions held against the ambition of a few unscrupulous men

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Douglas E. Schoen and Carly Cooperman, "Rampant Distrust in American democracy persists in 2022," *The Hill*, January 2, 2022, https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/587896-rampant-distrust-in-american-democracy-persists-in-2022/

because the country and our form of government were a priority over party and power. Voters were able to select their leaders. Candidates with the most electoral votes won. There was a peaceful transition of power. Today, this fundamental cornerstone of American democracy is under attack.

In a 2006 essay written by conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, he says, "The American norm … is wholly unlike that [of highly sectarian countries]. People vote Democrat and find themselves ruled by Republicans. And they accept this—unhappy, perhaps, but acknowledging a duty of obedience and a common loyalty that is far more important than any electoral differences of opinion."[33] Democracies endure only if the state maintains equilibrium between changes of government.[34] It remains to be seen if a majority of the population views democracy as merely a means to an end of retaining power, if their thirst for power will overwhelm the strength of our institutions and change the nature of our government, or if democracy, the commitment to the Constitution and to norms and traditions of civil American society will prevail over ambition and power.

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[33] Roger Scruton, "Limits to Democracy," *The New Criterion*, January 2006, accessed November 4, 2022, https://newcriterion.com/issues/2006/1/limits-to-democracy.
[34] Ibid.