



## THE FRAGILE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA AND WHY IT SHOULD MATTER TO THE WORLD

**David Schultz**

Ph.D., LL.M., Distinguished University Professor

Department of Political Science

Hamline University

**Abstract.** The United States at least since World War II was recognized as the most important democratic state in the world. Both by way of its internal governance and foreign policy actions, the US stood as the leader and champion of global democracy, often acting in ways to encourage democratization and democracy building. America was able to do that because of its economic, military, and diplomatic supremacy in the world. Yet in the last two decades several factors both internal to US politics and across the globe have made it increasingly difficult for the US to serve as a role model for democracy. This Article looks at some of these factors and discusses the consequences regarding why the fragile state of American democracy should matter across the world.

**Keywords:** United States; Democracy; International Politics

### INTRODUCTION

Political democracy is under retreat across the world. While during the 1960s and 1970s during the era of African post-colonialism and then in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union democracy seemed ascendant, today the opposite is the case. According to Freedom House's 2020 report, from 2005 to 2020 there has been a consistent pattern of more states annually experiencing a decline in democratic scores compared to gains, with 2020 topping the list of 45 nations (Freedom House 2020). The number of free states have decline from 89 in 2005 to 82 in 2005, with the number not free increasing from 45 to 54 during the same time period.

Globally, the causes for this retreat from democracy are many. They include rising nationalism, economic performance, protectionism, and trade wars, and fear of refugees and immigrants. All of these issues have challenged democratic states, leading many to believe that democracy may not be the best form of government equipped to address these issues. Most recently, the Covid-pandemic has also tested democratic regimes, as the different strains of the virus have proved to be difficult to contain and as mask mandates, quarantines, and the closing of businesses have become unpopular.

Among the states facing challenges to its democracy is the United States. According to Freedom House, from 2013 to 2021, the freedom score for the US declined from 93 to 83, ranked approximately 62 out of the 210 political units ranked by them in 2021. It now trails most of the Western European and North American states (Freedom House 2020).

For a country that once liked to describe itself as the greatest democracy in the world, or the leader of the freed world during the Cold War when it confronted communism or after 9/11 battling terrorism, such a decline should come as a surprise. Some such as Fukuyama saw the US in the 1990s as the last remaining super-power and that its narrative of liberal democracy had won (Fukuyama 1992). This leads to two questions: How did this democratic decline happen and why should the rest of the world care? Providing a preliminary answer to these two questions is the goal of this paper. The argument will be that the causes of democratic decline in the US are many, with some of the reasons years in the making. Two, it should matter to the rest of the world that American democracy is in a fragile state because its decline makes it more difficult globally to confront the challenge to freedom being posed by China, Russia, and other authoritarian states.

## I. DEFINING DEMOCRACY

The type of political system the United States and the West have come to embrace are informed by the confluence of three traditions: democracy, liberalism, and constitutionalism.

One, while the concept of democracy is old and dates back to the Ancient Greeks as a degenerative form of rule by the people, modern conceptions of the term date back to the seventeenth century where it a form of popular government where the people rule, either directly or indirectly through their representatives, based upon the principle of majority rule (Pennock 1979; Pennock, and Chapman. 1983). “Two, Liberalism,” a concept whose origins are often traced to John Locke, represents a set of political values committed to the protection of individual rights, to polities instituted on the basis of the consent of the governed, and to a notion of a limited government (Pennock, and Chapman. 1983; De Ruggiero 1959). Third, “constitutionalism” as a concept is also very old, again dating back to the ancient Greeks, especially Aristotle, and it refers to the basic structures, “grundnorm,” or rules that constitute a government. As the term has evolved in Western Europe and North America, constitutionalism refers to a government of limited powers, which often must adhere to rule of law, procedural due process or regularity, and a commitment to the protection of individual rights. a substantive limit on the government (McIlwain, 1958).

Democratic, liberal, and constitutional values come together to define a political regime committed to majority rule balanced by minority rights, procedural regularity, and a government subject to some limits. Moreover, in addition to the formal requisites of



democracy, others argue that additional background conditions are required. These include economic wealth and modernization (Lipset 1960 28, 87, 116; Dahl 1971, 60-2; Huntington 1984, 193, 199; Lipset 1959; Lipset 1960; Needler 1968; Rustow 1968; and Rostow 1971); political participation (Lipset 1960, 116); civilian control of the government (Diamond 1989, 344, Huntington 1956), and widely-supported and regularized political mechanisms to resolve conflict (Almond and Verba 1965, 363; Dahl, 1976, 364; Huntington 1984). They stressed the importance of a democratic political culture that inculcated toleration and a reasonable balance of both social consensus and cleavage, including a respect for difference and a commitment to resolve these differences through the political process (Almond and Verba 1965, 363; Lipset 1960, 1, 4, 78, 250; Dahl 1971, 105; Dahl 1960, 347; Christoph 1965). Finally, some theories on democracy emphasizes either elite or mass support for such values. In arguing that democracy arises from above, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) see democracy as a byproduct of elite conflict. When elites divide among themselves it develops incentives for them to support democracy. Conversely, theories declaring that democracy comes from below and see it origins in demands among workers initially through mass protests or mobilization. Overall, the point is that liberal democracy is a cluster of values, practices, and institutions that translate popular preferences into government policy, subject to some limits to protect minority rights.

The United States of America generally shares in having democratic, liberal, and constitutional values that inform its political traditions. As conceived in 1787, its Constitution is more specifically indebted to a set of political values found in the liberal, republican, and legal traditions indebted to John Locke, James Harrington, and William Blackstone. The original logic for American government is often referred to as Madisonian democracy, a reference to James Madison, one of the primary authors of the Constitution.

Madisonian democracy is depicted as a government set up to prevent tyrannies of the majority (Dahl 1956). It does that through a complex process of dividing up and checking political power to place limits upon the ability of a majority to suppress the rights of a minority. The core of American democracy is both enabling majorities to translate their preferences into governmental power while at the same time restraining it to prevent them from abusing it.

As America has evolved over time, some have argued that it had become more democratic over time. Some assert that the original US Constitution and political system was not democratic due to the presence of slavery and no constitutional language protecting voting rights, among other factors. However certainly by the end of World War II the US came to be recognized as arguably the most democratic state in the world and it took on the role of promoting democratic values across the world. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, many saw the US as having won the Cold War, emerging the leader of a unipolar world supporting democracy. **The United States and Democratic**

## II. DECLINE

A point was reached in the 1990s where the US was seen as the only surviving super-power (Fukuyama 1992). It also was seen as embracing democratic values and institutions globally, seeking to facilitate the transition of post-Soviet or communist states to democracies, and also pressing to encourage non-democratic regimes to change (Hook 2019). Yet as noted in the introduction, the twenty-first century so far has not been so kind to democracy in America. Its global rankings has fallen. Why? There are several causes.

*Economic inequality and economic restructuring.* Thomas Piketty (2014) points to the fact that in the 1920s economic inequality had risen dramatically in the United States, only to see it fall after World War II. A combination of effects including the economic disruption of the war and the emergence of social welfare measures brought the inequality down significantly. But by the 1970s it again started to move up and since then there are indications that presently the gap between the rich and poor in the US is at record levels. For example, according to the United States Census Bureau in 2010 the richest five percent of the population accounted for 21% of the income, with the top 20% receiving over 50% of the total income in the country. This compares to the bottom quintile accounting for about 3% of the total income (U.S. Census 2010).

A second study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in 2010, drawing upon Congressional Budget Office research, found that income gap between the top one-percent of the population and everyone else more than tripled since 1973 (Goldberg 2012). After-tax income for the top one-percent increased by 281% between 1973 and 2007, while for middle class or middle quintile it increased by 25%, for the bottom quintile it was merely 16%. Looking beyond income to wealth, the maldistribution has not been this bad since the 1920s. According to the Economic Policy Institute, in 2007 the top one-percent controls almost 34% of the wealth in the country, with half of the population possessing less than 3%. After the Great Recession of 2008, most of the economic gains have gone to the more affluent, and during the pandemic that began in 2019, a similar pattern has emerged (Gould 2019)..

At the same time the US has seen economic mobility wane. Compared to other Western Europe style governments, the United States has among the weakest mobility (DeLeire and Lopoo 2010). Simply put, since the 1970s economic inequality had increased and social mobility has decline. There are many reasons for these twin phenomena, including the decline of labor unions, dismantling of the welfare state, and the loss of manufacturing and restructuring the economy that have hit the poorest and the middle class the hardest.

All of these economic changes have political consequences. Although it would be impossible to correlate them, these changes are correlated with declining trust in the US political system as many question whether the government serves their interests. In fact, studies suggest that the policy preferences of the public are not being enacted into law. Moreover, economic polarization has also led to geographic polarization where the rich and poor live in different areas and no longer interact (Bishop 2009).



*Political Polarization.* The economic and geographic polarization is now producing a political polarization where America is increasing dividing into rival political camps, represented by the Republican and Democratic parties. Numerous studies point to the degree of political polarization in the US, with the basis of the divide in economics, but also race and policy preferences (Klein 2020; Hajinal 2020; Enos 2017; Marietta and Barker 2019). This polarization was at the roots of the emergence of Donald Trump as president, and the emergence of a political movement that both took over the Republican Party in the US. It was a movement skeptical of the ability or willingness of the two major parties to serve the interests of initially White Caucasian working class individuals without a college degree. Since then, more working class have moved in the direction of supporting Donald Trump and the economic, racial, and nationalist policies he embraced.

One result of this political movement was the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in the believe that the presidential election had been stolen. This represented only the second time in US history that the Capitol had been attacked, Equally important, this event broke a tradition that begin in the US in 1800 where there was acceptance by the losing party in the legitimacy of the elections and acceptance of losing. Since then, polls also suggest a partisan split in the believe in the fairness of US elections, with the Republican Party seeking to restrict voting rights across the country.

Finally, the polarization has made it difficult for the US national government to legislate or pass laws to protect voting rights or address the economic inequality in the country. Effectively, the US has ground to a halt in terms of its ability to act to address some of its most pressing problems. Overall, there are many indications that internally the operation of US political institutions, and popular if not elite support for political values, is in decline.

### **III. CONCLUSION WHY AMERICA'S DEMOCRATIC DECLINE MATTERS**

The unipolar moment that the US had after 1989 and 1991 is gone. It looks less and less like the end of history has arrived and America has won. The US squandered its American century moment. After WW II the US GDP was nearly half of the global GDP. Today it competes with the EU and China and soon may be surpassed by both. The rise of the BRICS points to a collection of states not willing to concede American supremacy. In Russia one finds Putin lamenting the breakup of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and he appears bent on re-establishing the lost empire. The Eurasian Economic Union, unification or cooperation agreements with Belarus, and the efforts to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence demonstrate Russia remains a major player.

China too is testing US global dominance. The Belt and Road Initiative is its effort to expand its global economic influence. Its growing military confidence in the Pacific, the repression of self-rule in Hong Kong, and impatience with Taiwan's independence and

desires to resolve unification soon demonstrate the challenge to US supremacy. Moreover under Donald Trump across the world many countries questioned US willingness and resolve to organizations such as NATO. The Ukraine conflict and Joe Biden’s statement that he will not send troops there if Russia invades makes one wonder if Russia will be deterred. But especially after the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, many question across the world what the US is willing to fight for now, and even in NATO small states such as Lithuania wonder now if Europe is alone. Finally, the inward turn of the US under Trump and Biden now make democracy less secure, with Freedom House pointing to several years where democracy and individual rights, including in the US, are receding. Illiberalism is on the rise, and there seems to be little resolve to challenge it. What at what point looked like the global victory for democracy and American values is less certain today.

Why is this challenge to America’s global status significant? Historically, or at least since World War II, the United States has made support of liberal democratic values as central feature of its foreign policy. The state of US domestic politics, including a political consensus or commitment to democratic values domestically, made it easier to advance democracy globally (Small 1995). Now with the US internally divided and its own democratic commitment called into question, is it no longer clear if it is in a position to defend democracy across the world. This is not good news for countries such as Georgia or Ukraine, both of which need US support to control threats to the emergence of democracy in their countries. In addition, with the US being tested on many fronts internally and globally, it is perhaps no longer in a position to come to the rescue for democratic threats across the world. Simply put, the fragility of democracy in the US has lessened the image and status of America globally, and it is simply no longer able to serve either as a role model of defender of democratic values and institutions.

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