



Political and
Geostrategic
OBSERVATORY
of the United States

AMERICAN NIHILISM: IS THE US DEMOCRACY IN PERIL?

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PRESENTATION OF THE POLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC OBSERVATORY OF THE UNITED STATES

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As the November 5th 2024 US presidential election approaches, one question is on the minds of many citizens in this country: “Is American democracy under threat?”. Concern about the strength of the nation’s commitment to its core values emerged in the public eye after the January 6th 2021 storming of the Capitol. But among many experts and political observers, doubts concerning the health of democratic institutions have been simmering for some time. Practices such as gerrymandering and efforts to disenfranchise large sectors of the electorate can skew election results. Lobbying and corporate funding of campaigns can call into question the independence of elected officials and members of Congress. Hate speech, violent rhetoric, verbal threats directed at political opponents create a climate of distrust and fear that can sometimes morph into physical violence. Today, the United States ranks 46th in the Global State of Democracy Index¹. According to Freedom House, from 2010 to 2020, “the United States’ aggregate *Freedom in the World* score dropped by 11 points, placing it among the 25 countries that suffered the largest democratic declines in this period.”²

Many political crises and internecine conflicts have tested the strength of American democratic institutions and principles in the past – from the Civil War to the Vietnam War, from the McCarthy era to the Watergate scandal. But several factors indicate that we are at a crossroads today. In addition to the factors described above, the global “democratic honeymoon” brought on by the fall of the Berlin Wall is now on its wane. After a burgeoning of hope and an expansion of political, economic, and individual freedoms in Eastern Europe and in parts of the “Global South”, faith in democracy, particularly among young people, is retreating again. The disappointment – and the return, in countries like Egypt, to authoritarianism – that followed the promise of the Arab Springs further dampened the idyllic belief that the “arc of history” tended towards freedom.

Signs of “democratic backsliding” in the United States must therefore be understood in light of a world trend of erosion of freedoms that includes Hungary, Poland, and Turkey among others. And in China and Russia, political leaders openly vaunt the merits of governing with an iron fist, pouring scorn on democratic rules, which they characterize as inefficient, morally corrupt, and prone to violent civil conflict.

In the face of these challenges, many believe that the American consensus around democratic values and principles is unravelling. Is this really the case? If it is, what are the causes of this unravelling? Who is to blame? Can anything be done to restore trust in the democratic process

¹ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Global State of Democracy Initiative, “Country Rankings” <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/countries/>

² Sarah Repucci, Amy Slipowitz, “Freedom in the World 2021, Democracy under Siege”, Freedom House (2021) <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

and help buttress American institutions? What can the current election cycle teach us about the state of American democracy? To help answer these questions, we propose to examine three types of threats: 1. Institutional erosion; 2. Social fragmentation and polarization; and 3. Political violence.

INSTITUTIONAL EROSION

According to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, the authors of the 2018 book *How Democracies Die*, the biggest threats to democracy are not revolutions, but politicians who “eviscerate democracy’s substance behind a carefully crafted veneer of legality and constitutionality³”. In other words, for democracies, “death by a thousand cuts” happens when political actors use legal and institutional tools – judicial appointments, redistricting, party funding – to undermine the spirit of democracy itself.

Over the last few years, voting rights have become a new electoral battleground. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, since the 2020 elections, legislators have introduced 389 bills that restrict voting rights in 48 states⁴. Such bills would, for example, impose stricter voter ID requirements to voters. They would make it harder to register to vote, require that all mail-in ballots be notarized, or prevent volunteers to offer water to voters waiting in line. In Arizona, lawmakers introduced 11 bills that seek to restrict absentee voting, allegedly to reduce mail-in voter fraud (even though there is little evidence that greater access to mailed ballots increases the risk of fraud). Such legislation could affect Democrat voters disproportionately, however, since they are more likely to vote by mail than Republicans.

An even more potent danger may come from efforts by some officials to interfere with finalizing the electoral results. Steve Banon, former Trump advisor and founder of Breitbart News has championed a strategy to put in place Republicans who believe that the 2020 election was stolen in local election administrations throughout the country. This strategy is designed to pave the way for an overwhelming movement to deny certification of the vote should Kamala Harris prove to be the winner of the November 5th 2024 election. As Mark Brewer, former chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, said recently, “They’re laying the groundwork for a slow-motion insurrection⁵”.

³ Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, “The Biggest Threat to Democracy Is the GOP Stealing the Next Election”, *The Atlantic* (July 9, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/democracy-could-die-2024/619390/>

⁴ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/state-voting-bills-tracker-2021>

⁵ “State Voting Bills Tracker 2021”, *Brennan Center for Justice* (February 24, 2021) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/slow-motion-insurrection-democracy-experts-alarmed-over-gop-takeover-of-election-machinery>

Some analysts worry, therefore, that the election could be “stolen by stealth”. This could happen, for example, if partisan election officials at local levels declared Democratic ballots illegitimate for spurious reasons. Republican state officials could also refuse to certify the vote in case of a Democratic victory. And if the state legislature is controlled by the Republicans, they could decide to send different electors to the Electoral College, even if Democrats obtained a majority of votes in that state. Races for state secretary of state – a post that, typically, includes overseeing the elections – could also increase the risk of election subversion. According to an NPR analysis⁶, in 2022, at least 20 Republican candidates running to become state secretaries of state, doubted the legitimacy of President Biden’s election victory.

As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt said, “The looming danger is not that the mob will return; it’s that mainstream Republicans will ‘legally’ overturn an election”⁷.

SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION AND POLARIZATION

A second factor that threatens democracy in America is the growing polarization that divides its citizens. Economic polarization and the growing gap between rich and poor have a deleterious effect on social trust. According to the Pew Research Center⁸, income inequality has increased consistently since the 1980s and the wealth divide between rich and poor families is also rising. In 2021, 11.6 % of Americans – 38 million people – lived below the poverty line⁹. American citizens may be living in the same country, but the reality they experience is very different, which increases feelings of distrust and resentment. It also provides fuel for political actors bent on exploiting this divide.

Americans are also split along ideological boundaries. Issues like migration, abortion rights, and social justice seem all the more intractable that the Republican and Democratic positions they generate have very little in common. Negotiations on these matters follow a zero-sum game logic, which encourages electors to perceive their fellow citizens at the opposite end of the spectrum as enemies.

⁶ Miles Park, “Here’s where election-denying candidates are running to control voting”, *NPR* (February 3, 2022)

<https://www.npr.org/2022/01/04/1069232219/heres-where-election-deniers-and-doubters-are-running-to-control-voting>

⁷ Steven Levitsky, Daniel Ziblatt, “The Biggest Threat to Democracy Is the GOP Stealing the Next Election”, *The Atlantic* (July 9, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/democracy-could-die-2024/619390/>

⁸ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik and Rakesh Kochhar, “Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority”, *Pew Research Center* (January 9, 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

⁹ Emily A. Shrider, John Creamer, “Poverty in the United States: 2022”, *United States Census Bureau* (September 12, 2023) <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.html>

But, as Rachel Kleinfeld shows in her September 2023 paper, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States”¹⁰, Americans are not as polarized ideologically as they think they are. Even on some controversial issues, such as gun laws, US citizens are often able to meet half-way. Ideological polarization is the strongest at the level of political leadership. This tendency dates back to the 1970s. Before then, policy differences between the Republicans and the Democrats were not as stark. The erosion of this ideological overlap accelerated partly as a result of the primary election mechanism, which rewards more extreme policy positions and discourages candidates from appealing to centrist, moderate voters. The media also helps widen the ideological gap between politicians by amplifying the voice of minor political players whose radical opinions and visual charisma play well with certain sectors of the electorate. As a result, members of Congress, today, very rarely cross the party line. In debates and media interviews, they often tend to demonize their opponents and describe them as enemies.

This hostile rhetoric has an effect on electors. So, even though their disagreements on policy issues might not be as stark as often thought, they are, as Rachel Kleinfeld explains, “affectively polarized”. In other words, the principal determinants of electoral behavior are not necessarily policy-driven. They are based on how strongly a voter identifies with a particular group and on the perceived hostility of members of the other political party. As a result, the majority of electors will vote for political candidates they identify with, even if the policies defended by these candidates might end up hurting them. It is worth noting that, while social media amplifies this “affective polarization”, the growing divide dates back to the emergence of cable television and 24-hour news networks in the 1990s, when large swathes of the American population became increasingly locked in media bubbles that isolated them from opinions and ideas harbored by their fellow citizens.

There are at least two reasons why polarization presents a threat to democracy. First, by pushing voters to the extremes of the political specter, it siphons out the space where individual citizens can meet and battle out their ideas. When individuals are conditioned to perceive fellow citizens from the other side of the aisle as enemies, open debate – the foundational stone of any democracy – becomes impossible. Affective polarization locks citizens into their camp and reinforces feelings of hostility against other groups. Worse, their emotions act as legitimizing vectors of their political positions. Their opinions – on crime, health, childcare, or employment – become grounded not in logical reasoning and fact-based

¹⁰ Rachel Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (September 5, 2023) <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/polarization-democracy-and-political-violence-in-the-united-states-what-the-research-says?lang=en>

arguments, but in their subjective experience and the emotions those issues trigger in them. Under such conditions, there is no hope of ever achieving consensus. You cannot argue with someone who invokes their identity or their God-given right” as justification for their positions. Without an implicit agreement that policy proposals must be grounded in sound reasoning, reaching political common ground will forever remain an elusive goal.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Polarization presents a second danger: it creates a climate that normalizes violence and makes it more acceptable in the eyes of many Americans.

In the last decade, political violence in America has taken different forms. First, threats against elected officials contributed to create a climate of fear and intimidation. The October 2022 attack against Paul Pelosi, the husband of former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, received much media coverage. In her March 2020 testimony before the *Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*¹¹, Rachel Kleinfeld explained that violent threats against members of congress were up tenfold since 2016. From 902 threats in 2016, they jumped to 9,600 in 2021¹². Violent threats – including death threats – against federal judges, local election officials, school board members were also on the increase during the same period. Since 2016, 20 % of elected officials claim that they have been threatened or harassed¹³.

Second, physical acts of political violence have increased significantly in the last ten years. Former President Donald Trump escaped two assassination attempts. Hate crimes and acts of violence against targeted groups – migrants, ethnic minorities, religious communities, women, members of the LGBTQ community – are committed every day in the United States. In 2020, the FBI recorded the highest number of hate crimes – 8,263 – since 9/11¹⁴.

Far-right extremist activity often made the headlines in the last decade. In August 2017, a “Unite The Right” rally turned deadly when a self-identified white supremacist rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and injuring 35. Radical far right ideas are also penetrating the public space. The Anti-Defamation League reports that openly white supremacist activity grew from 421 incidents in 2017 to 5,125 in 2020.

It should be added that violence is also growing on the left – even though physical acts of violence are perpetrated mainly by far-right extremists: 11 % of Democrats and 12 % of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Republicans agree that “assassination of opposing political leaders is justified to advance political goals¹⁵”.

In their book *Hate Speech and Political Violence: Far-Right Rhetoric from the Tea Party to the Insurrection*, Brigitte Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Shapiro state: “January 6th might have been merely a rehearsal for a much greater threat to America’s liberal democracy¹⁶.” There is probably no immediate risk of full-blown civil war following the November 5th presidential election. But the factors discussed above create a fertile ground for militia groups and isolated extremists to further damage the fabric of democracy in America. As the authors of *Hate Speech and Political Violence* argue, “The significant number of current and former members of the armed forces among the violent participants in the January 6 storming of the Capitol, the open support for Donald Trump’s Stop the Steal lies, the vilification of the Democratic Party by a large number of retired admirals and generals, and the mainstreaming of violent far-right extremist groups with military training and equipment at their disposal were dangerous warning signs for an unsettling future¹⁷.”

CONCLUSION

Very rarely can the three interconnected goals most modern societies have set as their core pursuit – prosperity, freedom, and stability – be reached at the same time. In most cases, one of these objectives has to give. Subsistence economies that forsake the imperative of economic growth tend to produce communities that harbor both stability and collective freedom. Countries like China and Singapore have managed to achieve prosperity and stability at the expense of individual freedoms. In the United States and much of the Western world, prosperity and freedom are conceived as mutually reinforcing, but the trade-off entails more transient governments and the uncertainty that comes with vigorous political debate.

What is at stake in the forthcoming presidential election of November 5th is, to some degree, the balance between freedom, stability, and prosperity. Polarization threatens this balance. Americans, as we have seen, tend to disagree on many policy issues – migration, gun rights, abortion, among others – but the deepest rift is based on feelings of identity and belonging.

¹⁵ Rachel Kleinfeld, “The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (March 31, 2022) <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/03/the-rise-in-political-violence-in-the-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy?lang=en>

¹⁶ Brigitte Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, Robert Shapiro, “Hate Speech and Political Violence: Far-Right Rhetoric from the Tea Party to the Insurrection”, *New York: Columbia University Press* (2024) : 248

¹⁷ *ibid* : 245

Americans on both sides of the aisle are more likely to vote for a candidate they feel affinities with than for someone whose ideas and policies they approve of.

What is lost in the current American political equation is a sense of common purpose. Democracies thrive when citizens feel bound together by shared goals and interests. The threat of political violence in America reflects a disillusionment in politics and in politicians. Today's electoral landscape is dominated by a sense of political nihilism – a loss of faith in the virtues of debate and a portrayal of ideological adversaries as enemies. The long and hard slog of congressional deliberations, where each side offers rational arguments and sound reasoning to generate legislation that meets the needs of citizens, is being despised as inefficient and ineffective. Compromise is a word that has become synonymous with weakness and cowardice, instead of embodying political wisdom and pragmatic policy making. All too often, politicians are bent on trading insults rather than on arguing in good faith. Political bargaining gives way to a zero-sum game, where the objective is no longer the pursuit of the common good, but the supremacy of one's ideology. We seem to have forgotten that politics is the art of debate – the capacity to sustain what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur called a “dissensus” – the creative capacity of political adversaries to maintain the tension of disagreement without breaking down into conflict.

Pulling back from the precipice of political violence is not impossible – and indeed, many efforts are being deployed by civil society organizations to build bridges among citizens on both sides of the political spectrum. But systemic reforms – of the electoral process, of the funding of political campaigns, and of the social media landscape – are also needed. Until then, Americans are bracing for the risk of post-electoral violence and hoping that reason and the desire to compromise will prevail.

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