

# Preface

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## **The Changing Face of Democracy**

A majority of Americans are worried about the state of American democracy. Political and social scientists have found, in their studies of Americans' attitudes about pride of country, that the United States may be in a state of democratic crisis. The reasons are complex, and include a loss of legitimacy in America's electoral system, deepening frustration with government's inability to address income inequality and institutionalized racism, and generational shifts in values. In 2001, before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a Gallup poll found that 55 percent of Americans were "extremely proud" to be American. After surging to between 65 and 70 percent after 9/11, levels began to drop after the invasion of Iraq did not produce the desired results. The highly divisive political and social climate of America in the twenty-first century—arguably exacerbated by the election of the polarizing Donald Trump—has resulted in an unprecedented plunge in pride of country. In 2018, for the first time, less than half of Americans reported being proud of the United States. While patriotic sentiment fell among white people, the dip was even more pronounced among people of color, with just over 30 percent reporting a strong sense of "American pride."<sup>1</sup> Whether or not there is a democratic crisis, and what is causing it, is a subject of intense debate. However, the fact that more than half of Americans perceive America's democratic system as failing indicates a legitimate problem.

## **Democracy and Its Alternatives**

American society is a representative democracy, a system in which the people elect representatives who then participate in the process of making and amending laws. Our democratic system was carefully constructed to be resistant to authoritarianism by a complex system of checks and balances to prevent tyranny. Over the centuries, Americans and their representatives have engaged in an effort to refine America's government to expand the benefits of citizenship to the greatest number of people possible.

But unforeseen problems have also arisen, leading to what some view as a shift away from the framers' original intentions. One trend has been a concentration of power in the executive branch. While historians believe that the framers intended Congress to be the most powerful of the three branches, there is evidence that a gridlocked party system and continuing delegation of authority to the executive branch have significantly weakened Congress. And, the Supreme Court has often been unwilling to intervene because of a lack of clearly defined executive boundaries

in the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> Congress is made up of individuals from different parties reflecting differing viewpoints on issues, while the presidency represents one party. As a result, this increased authority in the executive branch means that the will of the people, as expressed through their elected Congressional representatives, is less accurately reflected. Political scientist Yascha Mounk says that Americans' democratic participation has "miniscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy." Mounk envisions the current system as one that violates constitutional principles through voting manipulation and misinformation campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

Changes in society have had a profound impact on democracy as well. The most hopeful view of the Digital Age was that the internet and social media would increase political participation and civic engagement, reaching an unprecedented number of people. Some contend, however, that an unintended consequence of the Digital Age is increased polarization. Georgetown University Professor Joshua A. Geltzer calls this "hyper-democratization," or a "shift away from the mediate, checked republic that America's founders carefully crafted." He says, "We're increasingly ruled by an online mob. And it's a mob getting besieged with misinformation."<sup>4</sup>

The spread of social media in politics has also left Americans vulnerable to targeted misinformation campaigns. A prominent recent example is the Russian election interference scandal of 2016, when Russian intelligence operatives disseminated false information with the following goals: to support the election of Donald Trump; to destabilize American society; to make the U.S. government less effective internationally; and to reduce the possibility of action against Russia under an alternative president, i.e. Hillary Clinton. Though the Trump administration has downplayed this incident, many Americans saw it as undermining the integrity of American democracy.<sup>5</sup>

The current administration has also been accused of utilizing authoritarian tactics to control the information environment, particularly by referring to mainstream news outlets as "fake news." Republican Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona criticized Trump's actions regarding mainstream media:

2017 was a year which saw the truth—objective, empirical, evidence-based truth—more battered and abused than any other in the history of our country, at the hands of the most powerful figure in our government. It was a year which saw the White House enshrine "alternative facts" into the American lexicon, as justification for what used to be known simply as good old-fashioned falsehoods. It was the year in which an unrelenting daily assault on the constitutionally protected free press was launched by that same White House, an assault that is as unprecedented as it is unwarranted. "The enemy of the people," was what the president of the United States called the free press in 2017.

Mr. President, it is a testament to the condition of our democracy that our own president uses words infamously spoken by Josef Stalin to describe his enemies. It bears noting that so fraught with malice was the phrase "enemy of the people," that even

Nikita Khrushchev forbade its use, telling the Soviet Communist Party that the phrase had been introduced by Stalin for the purpose of “annihilating such individuals” who disagreed with the supreme leader.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s digital environment has also seen the birth of an industry in which individuals earn profits for creating fake news based on the number of times that internet users “click” through their post or article, encouraging the invention of highly sensationalized and often false claims. The inability of many Americans to differentiate between willful manipulation and fake media content, coupled with a movement away from legitimate news, has resulted in more Americans developing skewed and potentially dangerous views. The infamous Comet Ping Pong pizza incident, in which fake news influenced a man to travel to Washington D.C. armed with an assault rifle to free children from a child trafficking ring allegedly led by Hillary Clinton, is one example of a situation in which the erosion of trust in information nearly led to violence.

The free press is a cornerstone of any true democracy because it is through the press that the people access information from experts, evaluate the claims of politicians and pundits, and inform themselves to take part in the democratic process. The health of any democracy is equated to the degree to which citizens participate, and the degree to which they have access to legitimate information. Current attacks on America’s media and information environment have no doubt encouraged the perception that American democracy is in decay.

The challenges currently faced by democracy have impacted attitudes about it. In October of 2017, Pew Research found a shift away from democratic ideals in some of the world’s bastions of democratic government and an increasing interest in alternative forms of government, the very thing that the framers were aiming to prevent. Also, a large percentage of Americans and those in other democracies demonstrated interest in exploring radical departures from representative democracy, believing that nations would be better governed by experts in the sciences and other fields than by elected politicians, a belief tied to the growing international perception that elected leaders have been ineffective at dealing with the world’s most pressing problems. Pew Research found that 40 percent of Americans hold favorable views of a system in which experts, rather than professional politicians, decide how best to manage the country. Similarly, in America and other democracies, an increasing share of people expressed support for a shift away from representative democracy toward direct democracy. In this most basic and earliest form of democracy, people, rather than elected representatives, vote directly on policy proposals.<sup>7</sup>

The 2018 election of New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders have stimulated interest in democratic socialism, a system of government that blends socialist and democratic principles and focuses on utilizing the government as a force for equalization and social welfare. Ideals such as socialized healthcare and higher education have captivated millions of Americans frustrated with the rising costs of even basic services in the United States. Whereas expressing support for socialism was once considered taboo in America, many Americans—especially younger Americans—are

warming to the idea and this may play an important role in the future of American policy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Economic Roots of the Conflict**

The willingness of Americans to look for more extreme solutions—like direct democracy, democratic socialism, and even authoritarianism—to the country’s perennial problems reflect their growing insecurity about the American economic system and quality of life. Though it was once widely accepted that American democracy and capitalism were necessary to one another, the advance of China’s economy, a semi-free-market system existing within an otherwise authoritarian regime, questions whether the democratic system is necessary or helpful in addressing America’s economic challenges.

America’s particular form of free-market capitalism is dominated by conservative attitudes regarding economic regulation, enabling corporations and wealthy individuals to concentrate wealth. Even as Americans at every level of the economy participate in the growth of the economy and the rise in productivity, few reap the rewards. Income and wealth inequality in 2019 are at the highest levels since just before the turn of the last century, likely one of the reasons for the uptick in political activism and why more Americans are demonstrating interest in radical solutions.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Matter of Perception**

America’s democratic system can be said to be working if most, if not all, Americans have faith and trust in the system; when a majority lack this faith, the system is failing. Politicians and political scientists have identified many areas of concern in America’s political environment, but less clear are the solutions that might be utilized to restore America’s democratic institutions or American faith in the system. At the founding of the American experiment, the framers envisioned an agile, changeable governmental system that could withstand the test of time and adapt to changing social and cultural realities. An evolution of America’s governmental system may demonstrate that the democratic system itself can be changed without sacrificing the most fundamental value of America—government by *and* for the people.

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## Notes

1. Mohdin, "Fewer Than Half of Americans Are 'Extremely Proud' of Their Country."
2. White, "Democracy, Delegation, and Distrust."
3. Mounk, "America Is Not a Democracy."
4. Geltzer, "America's Problem Isn't Too Little Democracy: It's Too Much."
5. Todd, Murray, and Dann, "Russian Interference Is the Red Flag from Mueller That Everyone Is Missing."
6. "Read Sen. Jeff Flake's Speech Criticizing Trump," *CNN*.
7. Wike, Simmons, Stokes, and Fetterolf, "Democracy Widely Supported, Little Backing for Rule by Strong Leader or Military."
8. Stiglitz, "A 'Democratic Socialist' Agenda Is Appealing: No Wonder Trump Attacks It."
9. "Income Inequality." *Pew Research Center*.

# 1

## Democracy Defined



By Marc Schlumpf, via Wikimedia.

While the United States is a representative democracy, Switzerland is a modern example of a direct democracy. Above, Swiss citizens attend a 2009 Landsgemeinde, or “canton assembly”—a public, non-secret ballot voting system—in 2009 in the canton of Glarus.

# What Is American Democracy?

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Is American democracy unique? The answer to this question depends on one's perspective. Though some believe that America is the birthplace of democracy, American democracy can best be thought of as an amalgamation of political and philosophical ideas from a variety of sources. These ideas were put together in such a way as to avoid the failings of Europe's authoritarian monarchies. Academics and political scientists from around the world have theorized that, in the twenty-first century, American democracy may be in peril. A loss of popular faith in the government, related in part to the inherent stagnation of America's adversarial two-party system, has led to a situation in which few Americans feel adequately represented. This is to some degree a function of America's democratic history, which prioritized limiting governmental power over fostering a cooperative system in which governmental function necessitated compromise and moderation.<sup>1</sup>

## Constructing American Democracy

A democracy is any form of government in which the political power is seen as originating with the people. The simplest form of democracy is direct democracy, in which citizens of the state create and vote directly on laws and policies. The Athenian democracy of ancient Greece is the best-known historical example of this; all free male citizens were empowered to create and vote on the laws of the state. In Athens, the direct democratic approach was taken to such an extreme that citizens even voted on the outcome of court cases.<sup>2</sup> The nation of Switzerland is a primary example of a twenty-first century direct democracy. All Swiss citizens over the age of 18 are able to propose and vote on policy through public referenda. The direct system provides the simplest and most direct route for each citizen to see his or her own view on their country represented in the law, but political scientists generally believe that direct democracy is most effective when a population is small and relatively homogenous, as has been the case in Switzerland until recently.<sup>3</sup>

When debating the formation of America's democracy, the framers rejected direct democracy for several reasons. Direct democratic systems work best when the largest number of citizens participate and when a majority are informed enough to participate intelligently. When participation wanes, or when a large share of the population lack the information needed to contribute meaningfully to the process, direct democracy can lead to a state's laws originating from a small minority. It is often believed that direct democracies tend to stagnate when the population cannot agree on major issues, and critics of this form of government argue that there must be a system in place to essentially "break ties" and keep the government moving forward.

Thus, the framers of the United States chose a representative democracy, which is one in which the people elect representatives to make and change laws, in most cases without further direct input from citizens. At the time of America's establishment, most of the population were farmers or laborers with little formal education and little interest in the legal issues involved in forming America's political system. Under the representative system, individuals need not be cut out of the process entirely but could still play a role by making the far more basic decision to vote for certain candidates or align with a political party or group. A single vote cast for a candidate or party becomes dozens or even hundreds of votes cast by those elected representatives. On the most basic level, representative democracy is a simplified political system in which the only requirement for participation is that citizens choose between people or broad political philosophies, while the remaining function of government is handled without the need for direct public participation.

It is often argued that America is not really a democracy but a republic. This distinction has little importance as a republic—a system of government in which supreme power is vested in the people and executive power is vested in an elected representative—can be viewed as a type of representative democracy. The Founding Fathers debated republicanism versus democracy, but such debates were generally meant to differentiate the representative American system from the direct democracy of ancient Athens and of some European societies today, which the Founding Fathers sometimes referred to simply as a “democracy.” Thus, when Americans argue about whether America is a democracy or a republic, generally the debate is a “pure” or “direct” democracy vs. a representative one.<sup>4</sup>

### **Representation or Marginalization?**

One of the primary aims in establishing the American democratic system was to avoid the shortfalls of the European monarchies, in which families of aristocrats wielded absolute power and subjected their populations to what the founders typically described as “tyranny.” In establishing the constitutional rules for American government, steps were taken to ensure that no single individual could wield sufficient power to become a tyrant. This took the form of “checks and balances” between the three branches of the American government: the legislature, the executive, and the judicial. For such a system to become tyrannical, an individual or group would need to control all three branches of government simultaneously. In America, this would mean that a single party controlled the presidency, both houses of Congress, and the judiciary, a situation that is extremely unlikely given term limits, local election systems, and other measures. However, if a single political group controls two branches of government, such as the presidency and Congress, the development of policy can become increasingly lopsided.

While the Constitution provides clear rules regarding the powers and responsibilities of Congress and the judiciary, the powers of the executive branch are not as clearly delineated. Historians believe that many of the framers intended for the president to be subservient to Congress except in special circumstances. Over time, the American political system has become increasingly generalized such that



Americans focus on presidential elections and give far less attention to legislative or local elections. As a result, presidents have assumed more power and have utilized executive orders and other means to dominate congressional developments. This evolutionary pattern may be one reason that Americans have grown dissatisfied with their government. Whereas Congress is composed of individuals representing a number of political views, the president and the executive branch represent one party. Presidents, especially in the modern era, have often demonstrated little effort to respond to the views of Americans representing alternative ideologies. By concentrating power behind the presidency, people can potentially see themselves as unrepresented by their government.<sup>5</sup> The American democratic system is organized to provide representation to the greatest number of Americans possible. However, achieving this in practice has been an elusive goal. There are many examples from American history in which a minority group achieved sufficient power and influence to force its view of American democracy on the broader population. Recent debates about abortion and immigration, for example, reflect this disproportionate influence.

The concentration of power behind the presidency is but one of the possible causes of the perceived crisis in American government. German American political scientist Yascha Mounk argued that what Americans see as democratic participation amounts to a “miniscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy.” According to Mounk and similar theorists, the “game” of American democracy has been rigged in favor of certain individuals, who have manipulated voting systems, controlled the flow of information, and used misinformation and propaganda to marshal power to the disadvantage of most Americans and in violation of the constitutional principles of American democracy.<sup>6</sup> If this perception is correct, then America is a democracy in name only, and might better be described as an economic aristocracy.

On the other hand, Professor Joshua A. Geltzer of Georgetown University’s Constitutional Advocacy and Protection institute argues that the proliferation of technology has led to “hyper-democratization,” which he describes as a “shift away from the mediate, checked republic that America’s founders carefully crafted toward an impulsive, unleashed direct democracy that’s indulging the worst impulses of our most extreme elements.” Geltzer summarizes, “We’re increasingly ruled by an on-line mob. And it’s a mob getting besieged with misinformation.”<sup>7</sup> Such misinformation influences the voting and political activities of a core group but marginalizes the majority of Americans. Again, this is an example of minority rule, but one in which the views of the minority have been shaped by manipulation rather than information. Even members of this minority who trust that the government will represent their interests may have been misled into supporting political initiatives that will ultimately prove a disadvantage to them.

Some might object to the above arguments or even to the idea that American democracy is in any way in a state of crisis. But the growing concern about the state of American democracy from many directions—liberal and conservative, domestic and international—cannot be dismissed. Poll after poll has demonstrated an

increasing perception that democracy is in decline and that the government does not legitimately represent the interests of the people. If a majority of Americans perceive a crisis, then by definition there is a crisis, as the health of a democracy only exists in the minds of its citizens. However, the question of why American democracy is ailing is very much in debate. Are the problems with American democracy inherent to the American democratic system itself, or a representation of how the system has been misused and abused by politicians and interest groups? Are the problems with American democracy modern or are they problems that have always plagued the American system? These are some of the questions that citizens and political analysts are struggling to answer in the hopes that determining the cause of the increasing schism between the American people and their government might lead to changes that can strengthen the American system for future generations.

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