

DEMOCRACY AT RISK IN THE UNITED STATES: STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES AND ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES AND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This paper discusses the backsliding of democratic systems that are occurring throughout the world and focuses on the decline in the United States of America that began in 2006. It incorporates the important benefits of democracy and what role public administration, non-profit organizations, and higher education can and should play to sustain, maintain, and enhance democratic institutions. Included are also the future of democracy in the USA, threats presented by the binary political system, 2024 presidential election results, and critical importance of constitutional structure. Although the future of democracy remains in question in the USA, the paper concludes with signs of hope that our democratic system will prevail.

Keywords: democracy, benefit of, public administration, role of higher education, non-profit organizations, election results.

1. Introduction

Democracy is at risk throughout the world. A 2023 report from the Varieties of Democracy Institute (further referred to as V-Dem in this paper) at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, shows that advances that have been made in the past 35 years have been diminished, as 72 percent of the world's population now lives in autocracies (Nord *et. al.*, 2024). Performance measures show that freedom of expression is down in 35 countries, government censorship of media has increased in 47 countries, repression of civil society is up in 37 countries, and the quality of elections has decreased in 30 countries.

The United States is not exempt from decline in democracy. Per the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023), the United States state of democracy has been in decline since 2006. The United States democratic institutions were publicly challenged on January 6, 2021, when the capitol building was attacked by Trump supporters questioning the validity of the election. The House Select committee investigated the attack and released a report on 12 December 2022 condemning the action and rejecting allegations of fraud in the election.

The goal of this paper¹ is to share the importance of democracy when it is influx throughout the world, and the value that universities and communities can and should add towards its preservation and growth. It concludes with thoughts on the future of democracy in the US.

2. Benefits to democracy

Characteristics of democracy include adherence to the rule of law, free and fair elections, countries that are better governed, grow faster, and foster more peaceful conduct (Lundsted *et al.*, 2023). Research conducted by V-Dem further shows that democracies with strong accountability systems provide more public goods, including safer water, more immunization for children, more electricity, and far more internet connection.

Internet connection includes freedom to search as desired. Corruption is less likely, there is greater data transparency and gender equality. Although we see greater economic impact, we do not see greater income inequality in democratic countries.

3. Democracy and public administration

Democracy cannot thrive without public servants and strong governmental institutions. Public servants are vital to the government and to a knowledge and service econ-

1 An earlier version of this lecture was presented at the Transylvanian International Conference in Public Administration (TICPA), organized by the Department of Public Administration and Management at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The election has taken place since the presentation, so this paper will contain some of the early outcomes of the 2024 US Presidential election.

omy. Democracy and public administration are mutually supportive, as each depends on the other for its fulfillment. Public administration involves developing and implementing government policies. In a democratic context, it should pursue efficiency, effectiveness, and democratic values such as equity and accountability (also see Bertelli and Schwartz, 2023).

Governmental institutions in the United States are organized around the legislative, executive, and judicial branch. As a representative democracy, the three branches were designed as a fundamental requirement to avoid one branch having too much power and to allow for representation of the governed.

The US binary political party system makes us vulnerable as there are only two major parties: Democratic, and Republican. When the legislative and executive branch consist of the same party, it is easier to pass laws, but more difficult to implement the checks and balances necessary in a democracy. We now stand to consolidate power with one party which makes checks and balances more difficult to achieve. There is protection for the more extreme, as most measures considered by the U.S. Congress as part of the legislative process require only a simple majority vote for passage; some actions, like impeaching presidents or amending the Constitution, are considered so important that they require a supermajority vote or 2/3 as majority (Longley, 2021).

4. Role of higher education

Public administration degrees are useful and should be encouraged for those who wish to serve in the legislative, executive, or judicial branch of government. An understanding of a representative democracy, its values, and importance of active citizenship is crucial to the success of our democracy.

Rethinking the public administration curriculum is necessary to strengthen democracy. Our curriculum in bachelor's and master's in public administration programs should include courses on civic education, civil discourse, and the importance of civil liberties in a democratic society.

Higher education should focus on fostering students' understanding of democratic values, norms, and institutions and most importantly, equipping students with the necessary skills and attitudes for active civic participation. The US has seen an uptick of civil discourse education and voter registrations are commonly taking place on college campuses today. Bridgeland, Munoz and Allen (2024) provide higher education with the challenge of advancing five important goals: (1) civic learning; (2) national service and volunteering; (3) bridging divides; (4) trusted elections, and (5) trusted news and information.

Nonprofits are partnering to provide education on democracy, civility, and to provide services to reinforce our democracy. For example, The Citizen Campaign (Citizencampaign.org) provides training on service and civility culminating with a leadership certificate for participants in their program. Other nonprofits include, but are not limited to: Law Forward (lawforward.org) which protects our freedoms and ensures fair elections, Jewish Partnership for Democracy (Jewishpartnership.org) a nonpartisan non-

profit that partners with nearly 10,000 American Jewish organizations in a collaborative effort to ensure free and fair elections and to protect and strengthen democratic culture.

5. Future of democracy in the U.S.A.

The question on whether democracy is dying in the US depends on our ability to retain our Founders constitutional structures which clearly restricts the consolidation of power between the executive, legislative, and supreme court. This was referred to by Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders, as ‘the beautiful equilibrium of powers’ (Dhamija, 2023).

I believe that the 2025 Presidential Transition Project or Project 2025 as it is known, poses real threats to democracy in the United States. Politico has called Project 2025 ‘far more ambitious’ than previous editions (Hirsh, 2023) and The New York Times said it operates on ‘a scale never attempted before in conservative politics’ (Schofield, 2024).

The Mandate for Leadership series, published since 1981 by the Heritage Foundation, is in its ninth iteration (Wikipedia, 2024). The project asserts a controversial interpretation of the unitary executive theory, according to which the entire executive branch is under the complete control of the U.S. President (Barrón-López and Popat, 2024). It proposes reclassifying tens of thousands of federal civil service workers as political appointees in order to replace them with people loyal to the president (Haberman and Swan; 2023; Licon, 2024).

Proponents of the project argue it would dismantle what they view as a vast, unaccountable, and mostly liberal governmental bureaucracy (Hirsh, 2023). Legal experts have said it would undermine the rule of law, separation of powers, separation of church and state, and civil liberties (Larson, 2024).

6. Election results

The Presidential elections in the US on November 5 took place in an environment of toxic levels of polarization even among close friends and family. The outcome of the election was framed on both the republican candidate, Donald Trump, and the democratic candidate, Kamala Harris as pivotal for the survival of the US democracy (Swenson and Sanders, 2024).

On October 25, 2024, Newsweek reported that there have been four publicly confirmed assassination attempts on the Republican nominee’s life since he entered politics in 2016. In these 4 cases, law enforcement was able to verify that the intent of the culprit was to kill Trump. Nonetheless, Donald Trump had enough supporters to win with 312 electoral votes to Harris’ 225; he also won the popular vote 76,686,315 votes (50%) to Harris’ 74,113,319 votes (48.3%). Many questions remain as to why the American People chose Trump over Harris.

Mellman (2024) believes that the fundamentals to winning presidential elections include the strength of the economy, incumbency, the partisan distribution in the country and the incumbent president’s approval rating, among others and that the fundamentals

were clearly in Trump's favor. News reports interviewing voters quickly concluded that personal economic well-being was the driver.

7. Signs of hope

According to research conducted by Herre (2022), 'the world has become less democratic before – and turned the tide'. Although a decline in democratic rights might seem like an unprecedented step backwards, it is not, according to Herre (2022). It has happened before as the world underwent prolonged phases of autocratization in the 1930s and again in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1930s, a similar number of democracies experienced backsliding. At that time, this meant more than half of the world's democratic countries. In other words, the decline in the global democratic average was much larger than it has been recently. In the 1960s and 1970s, many countries were becoming less democratic, with as many as 18 countries autocratizing at any given time. Several hundred million people lost democratic rights when India's democracy eroded.

Fortunately, these declines in democracy were temporary and Herre (2022) believes that 'we have done it before and can do it again'. He uses the people's ability to change previous autocratic tides by advocating relentlessly for governing themselves democratically. This is not always allowed by the autocracy and Herre (2022) fails to mention that there are plenty of countries around the world where this has not been the case. Examples include but are not limited to China, Cuba, South Korea, Russia, and Venezuela.

As stated by Winston Churchill—'Democracy is not perfect, but it's the best system we have'. Those of us who have lived in long-lasting autocratic regimes know that democracy is fragile and not to be taken for granted. Long-lasting autocracies continue to exist, and the consequences of even short periods are devastating.

Signs of hope for democracy remain apparent in the United States. The US witnessed a majority pro-democracy coalition gaining momentum and the passage of the Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act of 2022. We are expecting a smooth transition of power in 2025.

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