# *Democracy Under Threat: An Analysis Of The Causes Of Democratic Backsliding*

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**Abstract:** Democracy today is in a precarious state. The optimism following the fall of the Soviet Union, and what was perceived in the early 1990s as "the end of history", has given way to more sober assessments of the health of democratic systems, not only in newly emerging or incipient democracies, but also in some of the world's oldest and most established ones. This article provides an overview of democratic backsliding over the past two decades, and the often interlinked challenges that beset democratic governance today.

**Bottom-line-up-front:** Democracy is not an end state that can be taken for granted. Rather, democratic governance is a work-in-progress, and as such, it will experience both progress and setbacks. Having a more in-depth understanding of the different stresses that democratic systems face is essential to identify realistic pathways, policy approaches and responses to revitalise democracy.

**Problem statement:** Why is democracy backsliding globally, and how can this phenomenon be contextualised, analysed, and understood?

**So what?** Policymakers should prioritise not only the defence of democracy but also its improvement, ensuring it operates more fairly, inclusively, and effectively. Efforts to strengthen democratic systems must remain grounded in a realistic understanding of their limitations and potential. Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the most viable and legitimate form of governance and should be actively supported as such.

**Introduction**

A wave of democratisation, originating in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s, swept across the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s. Democratic transitions occurred in Latin America and Eastern Europe, followed by Asia and Africa, eventually touching even the Middle East with the "Arab Spring" in the 2010s. These political changes challenged many of the assumptions about which factors enable democratic transitions, particularly regarding structural (pre)conditions for democracy, including levels of economic development and the modernisation of society.

Yet, democratic governance today is in a precarious state. The optimism following the fall of the Soviet Union and what was perceived in the early 1990s as the inexorable triumph of democracy and capitalism — or as Francis Fukuyama famously put it, "the end of history"[1] — has given way to more sober assessments of the health of democratic systems. This includes declines in the quality of democratic governance in not only newly emerging or incipient democracies but also some of the world's oldest and well-established ones.[2]

Drawing on a survey of available literature, this article provides an overview of democratic backsliding over the past two decades and the challenges that beset democratic governance. Backsliding can take different forms, from piecemeal, incremental efforts that weaken democratic oversight to more direct attempts to reverse democracy through military coups. As Richard Youngs has emphasised, democratic backsliding is not rooted in a single overarching driver.[3] Its causes are complex and multidimensional. A critical takeaway from the analysis below is that democracy is not an end state that can be taken for granted. Rather, democratic governance is a work-in-progress. As such it will experience both progress and setbacks in the measure that actors at different levels (from the local to the national to the global) and in different arenas (including both state and society) interact to channel different interests, needs and demands, contest power, and mediate conflict. Having a more in-depth understanding of the different stresses that beset democratic governance is essential to identify realistic pathways, policy approaches and responses to revitalise democracy.

**A Global Trend towards Democratic Backsliding**

While there is an ongoing debate about the extent, causes, and implications of "democratic backsliding",[4] there is consensus that, over the past 20 years, there has been a considerable erosion of democratic principles, institutions, and practices, with profound effects on the quality of democratic governance and its legitimacy in the eyes of citizens across countries and regions.[5] Authoritarian tendencies are on the rise.[6] In many countries that are democracies on paper, elected leaders (including, for example, President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh in Djibouti, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, President Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Türkiye, and President Donald Trump in the United States, among many others) have centralised considerable power, undercutting checks and balances and the rule of law in the process.[7] In countries ranging from Cambodia to Nicaragua to Zimbabwe, civic space has been significantly curtailed, with increasing restrictions on the freedoms of association, assembly, expression, and participation.[8]

Alongside this, a deep-seated disillusionment with the workings of democratic governance and its (perceived) performance has set in. In general, evidence suggests that, while socio-economic development is not a prerequisite for the emergence of democracy**,** it may well be a necessary condition for democratic deepening and resilience once democracy has been established. This is why the question of whether and how democratic governance can "deliver" is so vital.[9] There is growing disenchantment with political systems that, while ostensibly democratic, are (or are perceived to be) dysfunctional and unable to provide crucial services and meet the expectations of their populations. There is increasing anger over not only a lack of voice, but also disparities in how prosperity is shared.[10]

Democratic backsliding also has had had a considerably negative impact on women's empowerment. In countries as varied as Afghanistan, India, Poland, and the United States, gains made in gender equality and women's rights have become increasingly curtailed worldwide.[11]Support for the inclusion of women and girls in the political process has often remained tokenistic. For example, in countries like Rwanda and Saudi Arabia, women have been used symbolically through selective promotions into decision-making roles, often to present an image of progress, without these positions actually giving them meaningful power or influence.[12]

There have been a few "bright spots".[13] In an analysis of democratic resilience against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism, Carothers and Feldman highlight the importance of what they define as "pivotal" elections, as well as blocked power grabs, as critical sources of democratic opportunity.[14] The 2023 election in Guatemala, which was marked by the unexpected victory of anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo, is an example of the former. The election faced serious challenges, including attempts by authorities to annul results and prevent Arévalo from taking office. Despite these pressures, Arévalo was peacefully inaugurated in January 2024, demonstrating the strength of civil society and democratic institutions in Guatemala (including, in particular, the Supreme Court) in resisting authoritarian threats, as well as the pivotal role that the international community can play to sustain democratic practice.[15]

Similarly, the attempted power grab by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and its subsequent nullification by Nepal's Supreme Court illustrate how counterbalancing institutions (such as judicial oversight) can keep executive power in check. In 2021, Prime Minister Oli dissolved the Lower House of Parliament twice after losing a vote of no confidence. He argued that a new mandate was necessary as a result of the inability to form a stable government. However, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled to reinstate the dissolved parliament and ordered the appointment of Sher Bahadur Deuba, leader of the Nepali Parliament, as the new prime minister, thereby averting a constitutional crisis and reinforcing the rule of law and the checks and balances essential to democracy.[16]

Despite such bright spots, however, democratic backsliding has been the "defining trend" in global governance over the past two decades,[17] with a variety of indexes, including Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem),[18] Freedom House,[19] The Economist Intelligence Unit,[20] and Polity 5,[21] pointing to a

"democratic recession" from 2006 onwards. According to the data and measures of regime type, the number of liberal democracies in the world peaked before 2010 and has been declining since, with the number of countries moving away from democracy greater than the number of countries moving towards it year after year. [22]

**Geopolitics and Shifting Balance of Global Power away from Democracy**

*Multi-Polar International System*

The 21st century has seen the decline of unipolar dominance by the U.S. and the (re-)emergence of a more complex and fragmented international system. Multiple centres of power now coexist and compete for influence and access. At the global level, power and prestige are shifting away from traditional democratic norms and values towards alternative governance models. Countries like the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia and India are asserting themselves more confidently, while the US itself may be in a process of geopolitical realignment. This is challenging the Western-centric order that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War.

*China's Alternative Governance Model*

The PRC exerts considerable soft power in the Global South following its extraordinary development transformation.[23] The appeal of the PRC's authoritarian model has increased with its meteoric economic rise. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrates the PRC's use of economic diplomacy to expand its influence, offering infrastructure investments without the stringent political conditions often required by Western donors.[24] This approach has resonated with governments seeking rapid development while maintaining political control, despite the risk of falling into levels of debt that may prove unsustainable.

*The Russia Factor*

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has sought to reclaim its status as a major global player. In addition to invading Ukraine twice, it has supported other autocratic regimes that align with its strategic interests, and used energy resources as geopolitical tools to assert its power and influence. Russia has also aimed to weaken domestic democratic processes in countries across the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and beyond through mis- and disinformation. This assertiveness challenges the democratic norms promoted by the West – while, under the current Trump Administration (2025-2028), there is potential for the U.S. to draw closer to Russia as it distances itself from traditional Western partners.[25]

*The State of Democratic Politics in the West*

The state of politics in the West, especially among some of the oldest and well-established democracies, has also contributed to widespread disillusionment with democratic governance and diminished its appeal.[26] While the U.S. has historically positioned itself as a global promoter of democracy, its credibility has been challenged both domestically and internationally.[27] Efforts to impose "regime change" through force in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond have not worked.[28] In addition, a series of actions intended to undermine the rule of law, checks and balances, and basic rights and freedoms under Donald Trump's first presidency (2017-2020), and since his return to power in 2025, have brought into question the U.S.'s commitment to democratic principles, both at home and on the international stage.[29]

While the UK has traditionally been seen as a bastion of democratic values, it too has faced criticism for rolling back democratic protections. The 2016 Brexit referendum and subsequent political turmoil have exposed vulnerabilities in the UK's political system, which have weakened its moral authority to promote democratic governance abroad.[30] Furthermore, both the U.S. and the UK, as well as the EU have been accused of double standards, supporting undemocratic regimes (including, for example, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) when it aligns with their national interests.[31]

**Strongman Politics and Concentration of Power**

Strongman politics and power grabs pose a significant threat to democracy. In many new or more incipient democracies, political leaders have exploited democratic openings to consolidate personal power, manipulate electoral processes, and weaken institutional checks and balances.[32] This trend reflects a global shift where authoritarian-leaning leaders cloak themselves in democratic legitimacy while systematically dismantling democratic norms. Such tactics hollow out democracy from within, making it harder for genuine democratic movements to take root and reducing the credibility of democratic institutions in the eyes of the public.

However, democratic backsliding can also occur in long-standing democracies. In the U.S. and parts of Europe, for example, strongman leaders have challenged electoral outcomes, manipulated legal frameworks to entrench their power, and attacked the integrity of independent institutions. Such tactics have served to normalise authoritarian behaviour at the expense of democratic norms.[33]

Strongmen can prove to be very popular leaders, conveying a sense of action in systems otherwise perceived as incompetent or paralysed by endless rules and procedures. This can be particularly compelling in democratic systems that are characterised by violence and crime (e.g. President Bukele in El Salvador and his aggressive crackdown on gang violence, which has dramatically improved public safety[34]). However, increased autocratisation does not always result in greater effectiveness. At times,

it may exacerbate many of the ills political leaders claim to be combating (e.g., corruption, impunity, violence, etc). For example, in Venezuela, under Presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, as well as in the Philippines, under Rodrigo Duterte, authoritarian measures have not delivered the promised improvements but rather worsened core problems by removing transparency, weakening institutions, and insulating those in power from accountability.[35]

**Inequality and Exclusion**

*Inequality*

While the world has become more prosperous over the past several decades, prosperity has not been broadly shared. Rising inequality has become a defining challenge of our time. According to one estimate, the wealthiest 1% own 43% of all global financial assets.[36]

This widening chasm between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is a challenge for democratic governance because it undermines key principles, including openness, accountability, inclusion, the rule of law, and state effectiveness, which are intended to give it substance and meaning.[37]

As can be seen with the rise or resurgence of populism and nationalist/anti-immigrant discourse in many democracies, inequality feeds polarisation and erodes social cohesion.[38] This makes it difficult to achieve political consensus to promote inclusion and redistribution. Inequality also skews the provision of essential services away from those who are most in need.[39] Young people and women are especially vulnerable because inequality affects their opportunities to engage economically, socially and politically, and to exercise (or even secure) full citizenship. In India, for example, despite constitutional guarantees, socioeconomic barriers continue to marginalise large sections of the population, especially rural women and low-caste youth. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and enduring systemic inequality continue to undermine the promise of inclusive citizenship. Young people in poor or rural communities, which are predominantly black, remain locked out of quality education and job markets.

These imbalances disenfranchise segments of the population (especially among youth), generate social tensions, and undermine trust in (and support for) democratic institutions. They can drive migration towards countries that are perceived as offering greater opportunities, while also increasing support for more extreme political viewpoints and even violent conflict, as can be seen with the growing appeal of Sharia Law in Niger.[40]

*Identity-based Exclusion*

Inequality is not just an individual phenomenon, but can also be a collective one whereby specific groups are systematically excluded, discriminated against, and disempowered on the basis of defined economic, social, political, cultural, territorial, and other characteristics or shared identities. Such "horizontal inequalities"[41] are sustained through political and social institutions, economic structures, legal frameworks, and behaviours embedded in political structures, power relations, and social and

cultural attitudes and values. South Africa under apartheid, Liberia under Americo-Liberian rule, and the oligarchic and discriminatory regimes that ruled in many countries across Latin America (e.g., Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala) for much of the 20th century are all examples that show how patterns of institutionalised inequality and exclusion produce and reproduce themselves over time. The people most likely to be left behind are those who face multiple overlapping or intersecting inequalities, which reinforce and exacerbate each other and endure over time.[42] Women represent an important cross-section of marginalised groups in this regard. In India, for example, Dalit women are among the most vulnerable groups because they suffer discrimination on the basis of class, caste, and gender all at once. Similarly, indigenous women in Latin America and the Caribbean face exclusion because of their gender, class, and ethnicity.[43]

**Electoral Dynamics**

*Electoral Manipulation*

Electoral manipulation refers to practices, both formal and informal, intended to unfairly favour the incumbent and undermine or severely constrain the opposition so that ruling elites retain power. In both well-established and more incipient democratic systems, ranging from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Hungary, Israel and Kazakhstan, to India, Japan, Russia, the United States and Venezuela, tactics such as voter suppression, gerrymandering, vote-buying, media control, and disinformation campaigns have allowed incumbent leaders to entrench their power while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy, thereby eroding public trust, distorting political competition, and weakening institutional accountability.[44]

*Money in Politics*

Money in politics, whether it is channelled legally or through illicit flows, has a pervasive effect on democratic governance. While financial resources are necessary for campaigns to reach voters and communicate messages, money in politics gives outsized voice, power, and influence to those who are wealthy. It increases the risks of corruption and policy capture, and undermines representation.[45] Politicians who rely on campaign contributions from special interest groups may feel obligated to advance those agendas even if these are not aligned with the public interest. This can lead to policies that favour narrow interests–such as tax breaks for the wealthy or deregulation of industries–at the expense of broader social needs, such as healthcare, education, and environmental protection.

The perception and reality of money-driven politics can erode public trust in democratic institutions. When citizens believe that their political system is dominated by special interests, they may become disillusioned and disengage.[46]

**Serious Organised Crime**

One of the most significant ways in which serious organised crime (SOC) and paramilitary groups infiltrate political systems is through electoral politics.[47] This includes political parties and elections at both the national and local levels. This pervasive influence has a profound impact on the quality of democratic governance and representation, including in terms of the rule of law and the relative weight and influence of various actors in a given political system.

The necessity to fund and win elections for political survival, or what Carothers has referred to as "relentless electoralism"[48], often generates incentives for political parties/politicians to engage with serious organised crime actors. There are considerable networks of cooperation and complicity among political actors seeking to gain advantages in competitive elections and criminal groups seeking protection or impunity. In particular, entrenched systems of political patronage, including campaign funds, serve as mechanisms through which SOC can support political parties and candidates.[49]

For example, as Briscoe and Goff have documented, rural voters in Guatemala have been highly supportive of various local drug traffickers when they provide local employment or fund social welfare.[50] This, in turn, makes these criminal actors attractive allies to both national and local political parties and political bosses. Other scandals in the region also illustrate this intense collusion between SOC actors and political parties, including the so-called *parapolítica* scandal in Colombia, whereby large numbers of elected members of Congress have been indicted for colluding with local landlords and narco-paramilitary groups since 2006.[51]

In other instances, where crime-politics dynamics are more competitive and confrontational, SOC actors may seek to influence electoral processes and their outcomes in more violent and coercive ways, such as intimidation and the assassination of politicians and candidates running for office.[52] The June 2024 general elections in Mexico, which were the most violent in the country's history, illustrate this dynamic, while elections in Colombia have also been mired in narco- and paramilitary-fuelled violence.

**Nature and Orientation of the State**

*State Capture*

State capture refers to a process whereby private interests gain control of the state and use it to their ends through systemic corruption and patronage.[53]

State capture, and in particular, the (real or perceived) complicity of the state vis-à-vis corrupt and/or SOC actors, can result in what Briscoe and Kalkman describe as a "near-universal discontent" with political systems that, while ostensibly democratic, are perceived as deeply corrupt and dysfunctional.[54] It also feeds polarisation, fragmentation, and popular mobilisation, as in the so-called "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine.[55] At times, anger and frustration with state capture have created a severe backlash, leading disenchanted pockets of the population, especially among young men, to support extremist groups, as in the case of Mali and Nigeria.[56]

*Weak State Capacity*

Democratic governance needs an effective state to underpin it.[57] Much current thinking on strengthening democratic governance assumes the existence of a state with sufficient capacity, authority and legitimacy to exercise control over its territory, enforce (formal) rules, implement policies, and carry out essential functions. However, this is not something that can be assumed as a given.

In particular, many of the young and incipient democracies that have emerged since the 1980s are simultaneously attempting to establish a full-fledged democratic system and build a state capable of providing better services and the rule of law. While state capacity remains persistently weak in many of these democracies, expectations about how they should work and what they should be able to achieve are very high. This dynamic can generate dilemmas and trade-offs between objectives that are equally compelling but may be at odds with one another. For instance, on the one hand, more inclusive policymaking processes may not automatically be more effective, as they require a larger set of actors to agree on a given way forward, and they may prove more protracted and harder to negotiate. On the other hand, less inclusive decision-making processes may not benefit from the incorporation of a wider set of perspectives, views, and learned experience, even if they are more expedient.[58]

*Poor Performance*

Research consistently shows that, while people care about democracy in principle, they tend to value democratic governance mostly in relation to how it performs and whether it successfully provides expected goods and services. In other words, the legitimacy and stability of democracies hinge on their ability to deliver tangible benefits to their populations.[59] As Larry Diamond has written, if democracies are to retain support from the population, they "must generate economic prosperity and opportunity...while containing corruption, crime, and the abuse of power".[60]

This pressure to deliver can place democracy under considerable strain, especially in settings where state institutions are weak and ineffective.[61] Poor performance of democratic institutions can make authoritarian rule more attractive if it is perceived to deliver more effectively. This has been a leading cause of democratic backsliding over the past two decades, including via military coups in extreme cases.[62]

**Polarising Narratives and Ideologies**

One of the primary consequences of polarisation is gridlock within democratic institutions. When political parties or factions adopt rigid, opposing stances, the likelihood of reaching consensus or compromise across divides diminishes.[63] This stalemate can lead to legislative paralysis, where critical policies and reforms are delayed or blocked. The inability to govern effectively undermines public confidence in democratic processes and institutions, as citizens become frustrated with the lack of progress on important issues.[64]

When extreme viewpoints dominate political discourse, polarising ideologies can undermine social cohesion, exacerbate social conflict and deepen divisions within society. Extreme political rhetoric often frames issues in binary terms, creating an "us versus them" mentality. This feeds a perception that the system is biased or unresponsive, and can alienate significant portions of the electorate, who may feel that their voices are not being represented. As trust declines, so does civic engagement, resulting in lower voter turnout and reduced participation in democratic activities.[65]

Populist political figures mobilise and manipulate grievances as being perpetrated by the existing political system. They often portray themselves as saviours against a corrupt elite or dangerous opposition. They can argue that it is necessary to dismantle democratic norms and institutions to redress underlying wrongs, thereby centralising power and undermining checks and balances. This divisiveness can lead to increased social tension, intolerance, and even violence.[66] Populist and authoritarian leaders also exploit societal divisions for political gain.[67] They appeal to base emotions and promise simple solutions to complex problems, while they blame others (e.g., immigrants) for failures and setbacks.[68]

**Revolution in Technology and Social Media**

All of the challenges highlighted above are compounded by the ongoing revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs) and artificial intelligence (AI).[69] Social media, or "liberation technology"[70] as Diamond once put it, has generated considerable enthusiasm regarding its potential to become a global force for plurality and democracy by connecting people across boundaries and giving them a collective voice. However, the spread of "fake news", greatly enabled by AI, is considered one of the biggest political problems facing democracies today. ICTs/social media have led to significant social fragmentation and fed polarisation. At the same time, they have reduced the relevance of many intermediary institutions/entities, such as political parties and news editors, intended to give democracy substance and meaning.[71] Misinformation and disinformation, which ICTs

and AI have the capacity to produce and amplify at scale, have corroded social and political trust, heightened anger, and undermined democratic accountability, while also making it more difficult for governments to function and for societies to develop and sustain the capacity to check demagogues.[72]

**Conclusion**

This article has provided an overview of democratic backsliding over the past two decades and the challenges that beset democratic governance based on a survey of existing literature.

The analysis highlights that the health of democratic governance stands at a crossroads. Once hailed as the inevitable endpoint of development, democracy now faces serious existential threats from both within and without. A variety of factors, including authoritarian power grabs, rising inequality, state capture, external interference, institutional decay, serious organised crime, and the corrosive effects of digital disinformation, have converged to undermine the foundations of democratic rule across countries and regions.

How best to revitalise the promise of democratic governance in the face of deepening backsliding remains an open question, and this question may well be one of the most pressing challenges of our time. This article has explicitly focused on understanding *why* democracy is under stress, and it does not address this question directly. The hope is that the analysis presented here can provide a foundation for exploring more deeply and explicitly the implications and potential pathways for nurturing greater democratic resilience. Just because democracies around the world are struggling, this does not mean that fighting for democracy is not worthwhile. Democracy is not an end state, but an ongoing work in progress. To borrow from US Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman's powerful words during US President Joe Biden's inauguration in January 2021, the democratic ideal is not broken, "but simply unfinished".[73]

Democratic backsliding is not inevitable. As a few different democratic "bright spots" suggest, pockets of resilience persist, underscoring the importance of, among other things, civic activism, judicial independence, and international support. Ultimately, democracy cannot survive on form alone—it also needs to deliver. If democratic systems fail to respond effectively to the needs and aspirations of peoples, they risk becoming hollowed out or replaced by more coercive and less accountable models of governance. The task ahead is not only to defend democracy but to work towards ensuring that it can function in ways that are fairer, more inclusive, and more effective, while remaining realistic about what democratic governance can reasonably be expected to accomplish.

This is a formidable endeavour, but one that is well worth pursuing. However imperfect, democracy is still better than the available alternatives. This underscores the need for further research to address the challenging yet urgent question of how democracy can be revitalised and reimagined to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

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