

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline.

Mabrouki Abdelkrim,

University of Oran2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, laboratoire Langues
Littératures et Civilisation / Histoires en Afrique (LCET).
abd.mabrouki@univ-adrar.edu.dz

Received: 16/04/2022, Accepted: 31/10/2022, publication: 30/12/2022

Abstract:

The Capitol attack incident on January the sixth, 2021 was an attempt to change the outcomes of the election in favor of former President Donald Trump, whose term in office marked him as a demagogue president going far from mainstream politics. Following this insurrection, the media's focus on discussions about a potential decline of American Democracy became apparent. The attack on Capitol masquerades as a big challenge, but it does not reflect the real shortcomings of American Democracy. This paper suggests that four real deficiencies are undermining American Democracy including the two-party system, the decline of the middle class, polarization, and the lack of political tolerance.

Keywords: Democracy; Decline; Two-party system; Trump; Summit.

INTRODUCTION

After January the sixth talks within the United States about the shortcomings of American democracy became apparent. The day that hundreds of Americans decided to break into the White House attempting to force the government to accept the demands of White supremacists along with other supporters of former president Donald Trump caused Americans to rethink the immunity of their political system. Likewise, it pushed the American government to reconsider the scary red signs that were highlighted by several prominent political scientists in a manner similar to the threatening events leading to the economic crash of 1929 or the Great Depression. Closer to the later crash, presidents as well as many Americans believed that

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

the economic system of pure capitalism would fix itself. Eventually, only the willingness to venture by adopting some social programs that go against the very idea of capitalism was theoretically what saved the day.

Even the worst economic crisis had eventually found some light in FDR's social programs and exceptional presidency which led the nation to move from pure capitalism rooted in the Darwinist understanding of competition, rugged individualism and the government's hands off the economy into a new system of social capitalism where the fundamental role played by the government changed. God knows if the same would happen to American Democracy, but considering the status quo, many observers are not optimistic about the future.

President Biden following his dramatic success in front of the unconstitutional forces attempted to strengthen democracy through several tactics. One of his first moves was to receive the summit of democracy in the United States¹. The primary aim was to reinforce that American democracy is still healthy and a model for other nations, but apparently, this effort would not bring good results considering the internal problems that America is facing especially at the level of its political parties. In other words, the summit at its best outcomes would not be strong enough to return the Republican party to mainstream politics nor does it address the very threatening issue of radicalism that manifested in the popular base of the Republican Party which might not be controlled over the next coming elections. There is no doubt that if Democrats did not act quickly and effectively the nation might confront similar tragic events such as that of January the sixth, and if it were the case then the prophecy anticipating the decline of American democracy seems to be real and is likely to occur soon.

Rhetoric on Risks posed to American democracy became very common following the events of January the Sixth, although the gathered data suggest that the incident itself was a mere symptom of a larger political crisis. In other words, there had been several warning signs within the system that brought wide dissatisfaction on the part of

¹ The summit occurred on December 9-10 2021 through online meetings due to the effects of the Corona epidemic

citizens, as there had been some real economic problems to which the Black Tuesday was nothing but a sign of an intensive collapse. Political scientists had long warned of a potential decline caused by several deficiencies in the political system. This paper aims to review the shortcomings which had long been undermining American democracy leading to issues such as the rise of the Demagogue President Donald Trump, and the political dilemma that followed his policies until he was compelled to leave the Oval Office and be succeeded by the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

A. American Democracy: the Roots of Decline:

The gathered data suggest that four real issues are undermining American Democracy. Some of these problems had been going on for over a century; others might be as recent as the beginning of the twentieth century, but they all collaborate to shape the political crisis of the declining American Democracy. These issues include the two-party system, the decline of the middle class, polarization, and the lack of political tolerance.

1. The American Two-Party System:

American democracy is a two-party system; two parties had been always in charge of the government. The constitution did not specify the type of ruling, and in fact, neither the word democracy nor parties would be found in the wording of the constitution. Even worse, the Founding Fathers expressed strong opposition to the idea of parties believing them to be a source of division in the newly founded republic. Yet parties were established during the first government as a consequence of the great division between Jefferson and Hamilton. Jeffersonians became the current Democratic Party and the Whigs superseded the Federalist Party as a party opposing the growth of the powers of the presidency, especially that of President Jackson. Sectionalism and the salient issue of Slavery were to destroy the Whig party leading to the victory of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 from then on the presidency had been monopolized by these two parties the Democratic and Republican parties.

This domination of power had been challenged repeatedly, but unsuccessfully. The failure, however, is not because Americans refused to seek alternatives; instead, other external factors account for

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

its major part. The Democrats' and the Republicans' monopoly of power began effectively at the turn of the twentieth century when several reforms were introduced to hinder the rise of a third party. Before the 20th century, third parties like the Anti-Masonic party and the populist party had made good results. In fact, the Republican party itself flourished in this era and was successful in replacing a major party. But the growth of the Democrats and the Republicans into giant parties led them to introduce laws preventing political pluralism in the United States. Rosenstone divided these reforms into three categories: constraints, barriers, and major parties' strategies (1996). By barriers Rosenstone referred to the biased laws that prevent the emergence of a third party:

They form barriers that block the emergence and discourage the growth of more than two parties. These biases help ensure that the Democrats and Republicans retain their position of dominance. The founding fathers created some of these barriers; the two major parties have helped erect others (**Rosenstone, 1996, p. 16**).

For instance, the winners-takes-all principle as opposed to proportional representation create the illusion among voters that any vote that does not go to the two major parties is a wasted vote. Other barriers include ballot access restrictions and campaign finance laws.

Handicaps represent the second category of obstacles preventing political pluralism. They are objective challenges that do not stem from any discriminatory laws. They include media coverage, weak third-party candidate, and campaign resources. The third type of constraint is related to major-party strategies that might be implemented against a threatening third-party competitor. Major parties may use cooption for instance and adopt the salient issues that a third party is trying to advocate.

Despite all these obstacles, the dream to break the two-party system is still going on. As recent as 1992, Ross Perot ran as an independent and received 20 percent of the popular vote, a result that pushed the major parties to create a commission that prevented the candidate to participate in the debate, which had undermined his candidacy in 1996. This was part of the delegitimizing tactics of the two major parties against the growth of a major party alternative. Such

misuse of power is a check on the will of the people to the extent that some historians might view this dichotomy as the two-party dictatorship or as Jessie Ventura referred to it in his book *Rebloodlicans and Democrips no more gangs in government.*, but there is some truth in that in the sense that these parties killed competition by weakening other alternatives to win the presidency.

Indeed, American democracy lacks pluralism because of the two major parties that monopolize power. Although scholars recently emphasized the necessity of abolishing the Electoral College and resorting to proportional representation as a remedy to those problems, the possibility of these reforms is doubted because of the possible damage that they would do to the two major parties. the multiparty democracy requires huge effort and resources that a real competing third party seems impossible in the current era, which scholars have labeled “no party period”. At worst, the system might collapse, and the most optimistic view may consider the possibility of division and fragmentation as the only tangible option:

Democrats would probably split into two parties: The Social Democrats, representing the very progressive left, and the New Democrats, representing the center-left. Republicans would probably split into three: a center-right Reform Conservative Party (think Marco Rubio), a consistently conservative Christian Republican Party (think Cruz), and a populist-nationalist America First Party (think Trump). Maybe a small Libertarian Party would win some seats. **(Drutman, 2019, p. 27)**

2. The Decline of the Middle Class:

From an economic point of view, the decline of the middle class may seem a symptom of the decline of American Democracy. Since the foundation of the American constitution, the middle class’s role was crucial in securing the political system in the sense that equality was secured. As Ganesh Sitaraman said, “the idea is that the Constitution relies on a relatively equal society for it to work.” Even Tocqueville, who came to study American democracy during the founding era realized that the main theme of American democracy was equality. The pressure on the middle class continued especially during the gilded age, but it was able to survive due to the various reforms of the progressive movement. Yet what happened later in the

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

1980s was to weaken the middle class, and this had some devastating results:

When the middle class starts to crumble, people increasingly see themselves as different from others. They sort themselves by wealth, by education level, and the result is that there's an increasing fracturing of society, a loss of the solidarity that comes with having a large middle class. And that can be very destructive to a republic, because part of what makes our system work well is that we have a shared sense of who we are as a people, and that we see each other as part of a shared project that's called America. (**Rosen, 2017**)

This large middle class continued to perform its role during the nation's major challenging eras such as the civil rights movement and the Cold War until it was weakened through the revival of the capitalist philosophy. Thus, middle-class participation was seized as the rich corporations took over. Without an effort to revive the middle class's role, democracy may come to an end.

3. Polarization:

The third threat to American democracy apparent in the modern era is polarization, a term that refers to the extent of division between opposing parties or their voter base in a particular nation. In theory, polarization may have positive results, especially in participatory democracy, but within the context of the United States it had caused great damage:

Recent research in psychology has primarily highlighted the negative consequences of polarization in America. Americans accept smaller paychecks to avoid listening to opposing partisans, move to new places to surround themselves with ideologically similar residents, and swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically. Polarized Americans are more willing to exclude people with opposing political beliefs than to exclude people of other races—a jarring comparison considering the prevalence of race-based exclusion. (**Heltzel & Laurin, 2020**)

Distrust and animosity between the Democrats and Republicans had been linked to the followings of the 2000 election. While George Bush's election had helped strengthen the religious conservative in

government, it had deterred the Democrats to the far left through his 2003 invasion of Iraq. The coming of Obama to the White House in 2008 had fueled the conflict between both sides resulting in a lack of compromise and tolerance between the two camps. While the rise of President Trump came to reflect the most intensive rate of polarization in America, with both parties incapable to form a common ground; the socio-cultural groups only worsened the situation:

The problems of U.S. politics are deeper than the results of a single presidential election. They reflect a binary party system that has divided the country into two irreconcilable teams: one that sees itself as representing the multicultural values of cosmopolitan cities and the other that sees itself as representing the Christian values of the traditionalist countryside. Both believe they are the true America. The many individuals and groups that don't slot neatly into one of these two teams have no other place to go. **(Drutman, 2019, p. 22)**

Strong polarization contributed to extremism between parties and their bases. In his book *How Democracies Die*, Daniel Ziblatt asserted that the rise of demagogue presidents such as Donald Trump represents a threat to American Democracy. Ziblatt believed that the American political system had been effective to control demagogue candidates such as Henry Ford, Joseph McCarthy, and George Wallace, though alienating them from the mainstream. But if “fear, opportunism, or miscalculation leads established parties to bring extremists into the mainstream,” as the Republican Party had done with Trump then “democracy is imperiled”. The suggestion that the American Constitution through the system of checks and balances would contain this demagogue is not guaranteed because, as Ziblatt emphasized, checks and balances performed well throughout the years, not because they were the founders' invention:

Two basic norms have preserved America's checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives. These two norms undergirded American Democracy for most of the twentieth century. **(Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018, p. 11)**

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

The point is rote Levitsky and Ziblatt. “Unless and until the GOP recommit itself to playing by democratic rules of the game, American democracy will remain at risk. Each national election will feel like a national emergency.”

Milan W. Svolik highlighted another important mechanism that is bound with the will of voters. Svolik noted that “Voters in democracies have at their disposal an essential instrument of democratic self-defense: elections. They can stop politicians with authoritarian ambitions by simply voting them out of office.” (**Svolik, 2019**). It is remarkable that in a polarized political system voters may refuse to abide by this role and vote for their favorite candidate allowing him to undermine the whole process of democracy. This scenario fits the context of the United States. Mathew H. Graham pointed out in his paper *Democracy in America* that supporting democracy “can no longer rely on voters to serve as a roadblock against authoritarianism” (**Graham & Svolik, 2020**)

4. Lack of Tolerance:

The last threat to American democracy is the lack of tolerance. Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld were right when they asserted that “Americans on both the left and the right now view their political opponents not as fellow Americans with differing views, but as enemies to be vanquished.” (**Rubenfeld, 2018**). This type of thinking serves as a justification for several evil deeds committed by mobs, criminals as well as extremists: the attack on the capital is perhaps the first incident. No doubt, without tolerance, a nation with various ethnicities and races can not remain unified:

On the other hand, and more troublingly, polarization’s most destructive consequences have worsened in recent years. For example, Americans’ support for tear gassing counter-party protesters has risen since 2012, and 5–15% of partisans support violence against political opponents. Likewise, politically motivated hate crimes and aggression have increased recently, especially among the alt-right. For example, after Trump’s election in 2017, the United States witnessed 1600 more hate crimes than its annual average. (**Heltzel & Laurin, 2020, p. 181**).

B. Republican Demagogues and the Attack on Capitol:

Donald Trump represented another tribulation of American Democracy although many historians believe that he was much of a symptom rather than a cause. His term in office was characterized by demagogue deeds and mob pressure directed by his speeches and twits that up to this moment Cnn's reporters such as Jake Tapper's special reports such as *Trumping Democracy: an American Coup*, are struggling to interpret those events believing that Trump had intended to make a coup against President-Elect Joe Biden through the attack on the capital. Yet the crisis of American Democracy has a coherent framework that includes several interrelated factors:

These crises of democracy did not occur randomly. Rather, they developed in the presence of one or more of four specific threats: political polarization, conflict over who belongs in the political community, high and growing economic inequality, and excessive executive power. When those conditions are absent, democracy tends to flourish. When one or more of them are present, democracy is prone to decay (**Mettler, 2020**)

Perhaps the 2020 election and the following events gained prominence because they were decisive and very intense. Mettler (2020) insisted that although the trump presidency had generated ways of saving American Democracy, it was the other factors that would deliver the death blow to Democracy prior to the policies of any leader:

for the first time in its history, the United States faces all four threats at the same time. It is this unprecedented confluence — more than the rise to power of any particular leader — that lies behind the contemporary crisis of American democracy. The threats have grown deeply entrenched, and they will likely persist and wreak havoc for some time to come (**Mettler, 2020**)

C. Biden's Effort to Save American Democracy:

After the apparent settling of the issue of the election, Joe Biden, the American president, realized as many Americans that Democracy in America went in peril. For a quite long time, this has not been a secret, but the last crisis with Demagogue President Donald Trump had been a harsh lesson. This summit came to rectify the situation that became apparent with the Republican party going to the far right. It

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

was attended by leaders of the international community and human rights activists.

President Joe Biden condemned the attack stating that “I’ve never seen anything like the unrelenting assault on the right to vote. Never,” he added that “This new sinister combination of voter suppression and election subversion, it’s un-American, it’s undemocratic, and sadly it is unprecedented since the Reconstruction.”(*Remarks by President Biden at South Carolina State University’s 2021 Fall Commencement Ceremony | The White House*, n.d.) Biden also took the initiative and organized the Summit for Democracy in which he admitted that democracy is a continuing conflict between American ideals and their applicability. However, many political scientists insisted that if the Democrats could not contain the radicalism of the Republican Party the political system may witness a tragic scenario in the short term. Even worse if politicians continue to ignore the real issues like political pluralism then the decline of American democracy might begin if it did not start already considering how Republicans are preparing for the next election:

For more than a year now, with tacit and explicit support from their party’s national leaders, state Republican operatives have been building an apparatus of election theft. Elected officials in Arizona, Texas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and other states have studied Donald Trump’s crusade to overturn the 2020 election. They have noted the points of failure and have taken concrete steps to avoid failure next time (**Gellman, 2021**).

For others, the nations had only one solution to preserve their historical legacy as Durtman suggested,

The only way to make America governable for the foreseeable future is to allow new and more fluid political coalitions. Major electoral reform may seem radical, but the challenges that the American political system faces right now — toxic polarization, a major party that is rapidly embracing illiberalism, widening economic inequalities, and a racial reckoning — are immense and will blow right through straw and sticks. Only a genuine transformation of the structures of American democracy offers a solution (**Edsall, 2022**).

CONCLUSION

Today democracies are facing many challenges, and the United States should is not an exception. As Larry Diamond once noted, “Democracy is facing setbacks around the world, but there hasn’t been reason to doubt America’s resilience_until now”(Diamond, 2016). American Democracy confronts several challenges despite its historical legacy. The attack on Congress came as a reminder and caused an intensive shock to politicians who had long been praising the current political system and believing it would be able to fix itself. This paper however insists that those events do not represent the real threats to this democracy. Instead, four real problems are responsible for the threatening division of the American nation. These problems include a lack of political pluralism, strong polarization, the decline of the middle class, and the lack of political tolerance.

Bibliography List:

Biden, J. (2021, December 17). Remarks by President Biden at South Carolina State University’s 2021 Fall Commencement Ceremony. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/17/remarks-by-president-biden-at-south-carolina-state-universitys-2021-fall-commencement-ceremony/>

Diamond, L. (2016, October 19). It Could Happen Here. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/trump-democracy-election-2016/504617/>

Drutman, L. (2019). Let a Thousand Parties Bloom. *Foreign Policy*, (234), 22–27. <https://doi.org/issn 0015-7228>

Edsall, T. B. (2022, April 13). Trump Poses a Test Democracy Is Failing. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/13/opinion/trump-democracy-decline-fall.html>

Gellman, B. (2021, December 6). Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/january-6-insurrection-trump-coup-2024-election/620843/>

Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in

American Democracy Following January the Sixth Insurrection: Roots of Decline

America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States. *American Political Science Review*, 114(02), 392–409.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>

Heltzel, G., & Laurin, K. (2020). Polarization in America: two possible futures. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 8, 179–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.008>.

Mettler, S., & Liberman, R. C. (2020). The Fragile Republic: American Democracy Has Never Faced So Many Threats All at Once. In *Four Threats: the Recurring Crises of American Democracy*. New York: ST.Martin's Press.

Rosen, R. J. (2017, March 21). Can the Country Survive Without a Strong Middle Class? Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/03/middle-class-constitution/519909/>

Rosenstone, S. J., Behr, R. L., & Lazarus, E. L. (1996). *Third Parties in America: Citizen Response to Major Party Failure*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rubinfeld, A. C., Jed. (2018, September 13). The Threat of Tribalism. Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/the-threat-of-tribalism/568342/>

Svolik, M. W. (2019). Polarization versus Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(03), 20–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039>

Ziblatt, D., & Levitsky, S. (2019). *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future*. New York: Viking.