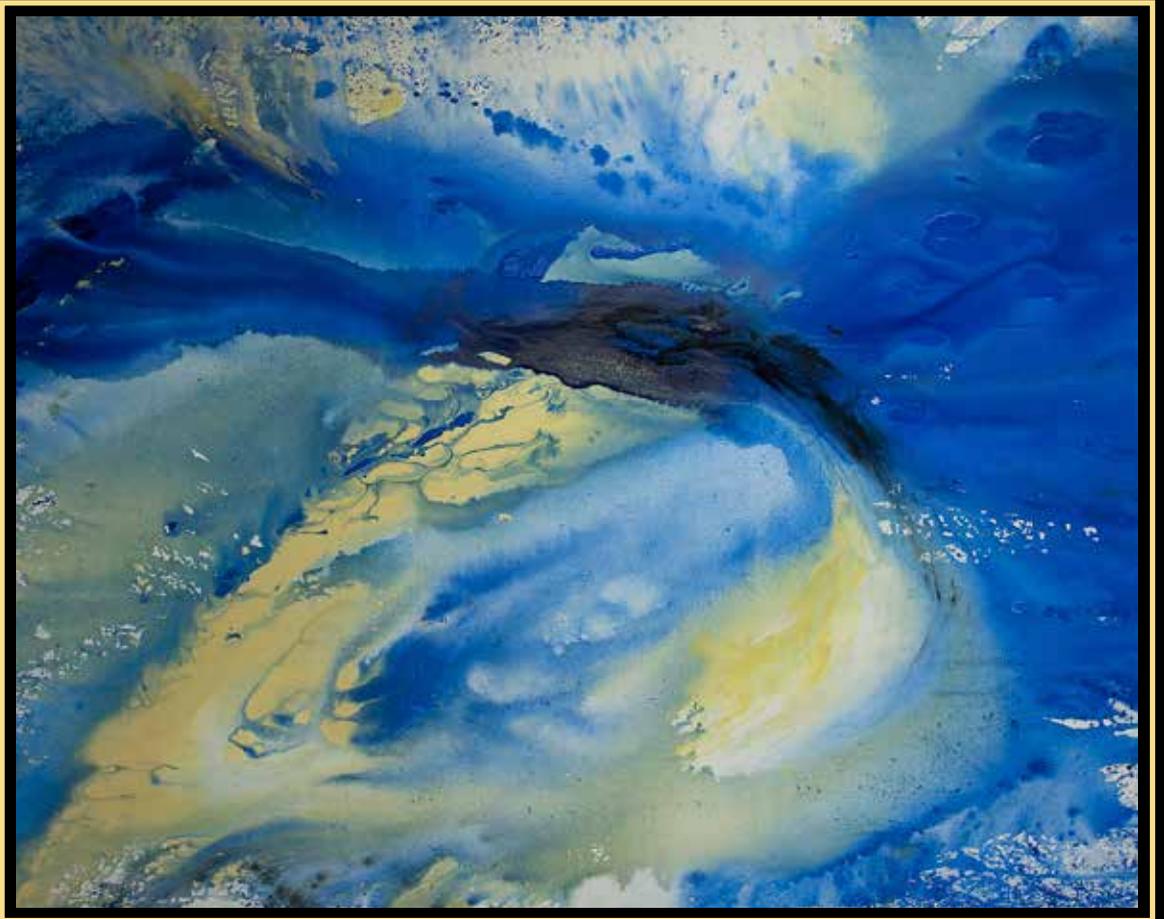


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Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy

by Suzanne Mettler and Robert C. Lieberman

*At any given time,
a regime can be more
or less democratic,
depending on how
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of democracy.*

Many Americans think of the United States as synonymous with democracy. After all, the nation was born through a revolution against tyranny and monarchy. Emboldened colonists insisted on the creation of a government in which authority flows from the people themselves. The nation's founding documents herald democratic ideals, from the Declaration of Independence's claim that "all men are created equal" to the Constitution's preamble identifying "We the People" as its source. The ancient Greeks, in city-states such as Athens, had practiced direct democracy, in which citizens made decisions by deliberating face-to-face in assemblies. It was Americans who brought the concept to scale for a larger society, particularly through the Constitution, which established national institutions of government with representatives selected by the people themselves, through a combination of direct and indirect means. By the early 19th century, states extended the vote to nearly all white men, regardless of whether they owned property. These measures made the United States more inclusive than its European counterparts in that era, and the nation became renowned for its boisterous, highly participatory politics that included newly enfranchised men of modest means.¹

Yet the young nation simultaneously repudiated democracy in crucial ways that would shape its development down to the present. It did this by embedding social hierarchies into the Constitution and cementing them with

the power of law. When the Constitution was ratified, nearly one in five Americans—all of them of African descent—were enslaved, and the document itself sanctioned the practice. In the case of women's status, which was among the topics relegated to the states under the 10th Amendment, once women married—as was expected of them—they relinquished their legal and economic rights to their husbands. As the country moved toward universal voting rights for white men, inclusion occurred on the basis of race and gender, establishing the United States in its early years as a “white man's republic.”² Full membership in the political community—entailing the right to vote and to participate fully in public affairs—expressly excluded women and African Americans.

Over two centuries of struggle and contention, the United States democratized. The nation's conception of “the people” slowly grew more inclusive and more Americans gained the rights of citizenship. But it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the United States formally extended civil and political rights to all Americans regardless of race or gender.³ The road toward full democracy was neither straight nor smooth. Generations of Americans organized, signed petitions, and marched in the quest for equal rights of citizenship, and they often faced violence, defeats, and reversals of progress.

But even though the United States has not been a full democracy from the beginning, the American Revolution established the modern *idea* of democracy—a system of government in which those who govern are held accountable to the people through competitive elections. However imperfectly the principles of American

democracy may be realized, inherent in them are standards by which we can measure the state of American politics. At any given time, a regime can be more or less democratic, depending on how close it comes to meeting these standards of democracy. Think of democracy as a continuum rather than an on-off switch. A country can be somewhere between being a full democracy and not being a democracy at all. As we look at democracy through American history, we can assess where on the continuum it is.

Democratic regimes can also move along the continuum in either direction. A regime might be moving toward more complete democracy, as the United States did during Reconstruction after the Civil War and in the 1960s. But regimes might also move in the other direction, toward less democracy, a process known as “backsliding.”⁴ There is no guarantee, even in the United States, that we will move in the right direction, and it is a grave mistake to assume either that the United States is automatically democratic because of what our Constitution says or that we have moved steadily and inexorably toward greater democracy.

History reveals that neither assumption is correct.

Thinking about Democracy . . . and Backsliding

The United States has not always been democratic. Moreover, American democracy has not developed through steady progress over time; sometimes it has been subject to decay or derailment, and the question is whether that is occurring again now. Before we can assess the prospects of democratic deterioration, what do we mean by democracy?

We tend to think of democracy as a political system in which authority flows from the people, rather than from an individual leader or a small group of powerful elites. But of course many autocrats around the world also claim to be the people's true representative. How then can we distinguish democracies from authoritarian governments—or, more to the point, identify whether a single nation exhibits signs of becoming more or less democratic?

Democracy is a system of government in which citizens are able to hold those in power accountable, primarily through regular competitive elections, and in which representatives engage in collective decision-making, seeking to be responsive to the electorate. Modern democracies that conform to this definition are systems of representative government, not direct democracies or systems of mob rule. Successful democracies also tend to be *liberal* democracies, regimes that effectively protect their citizens' rights to express their views, participate in the political process, and have their voices heard. Effectively functioning democratic systems tend to share four key attributes.⁵

These attributes—free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of the opposition, and the integrity of rights—provide us with clear indicators that we can use as standards to assess whether democracy is advancing or retreating in any given period of history. Nations that call themselves democracies may have some of these attributes but not others; variation abounds. Many nations, for example, hold democratic elections but do not respect their citizens' freedom of expression or dissent, and they have leaders who rule arbitrarily with little heed to the rule of law. Scholars describe such



regimes as “competitive authoritarianism,” a hybrid form of governance that combines democratic and nondemocratic elements.⁶ Just because a nation has attained a robust combination of all four attributes of democracy, moreover, is no guarantee that it will continue to maintain them: lapsing toward weakened or hybrid forms is common.

In recent years, some critics have begun to wonder whether the United States itself is undergoing democratic backsliding. Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization that is highly regarded for its rankings of democratic fitness based on political rights and civil liberties, downgraded the United States from a score of 94 (out of 100 points) in 2010 to 86 in 2019. While the nation still ranks among the 87 countries regarded as “free,” its rank fell from 31st to 51st in less than a decade. In a democracy index prepared annually by the *Economist*, the United States slipped from the classification of “full democracy” to that of “flawed democracy” in 2017. In doing so, it departed the ranks that included most

western European countries and Canada, and joined Argentina, Greece, and several eastern European countries, among others.⁷

Some scholars who study democratic deterioration worldwide seek to evaluate the United States today by comparing and contrasting it to Germany under Hitler and Italy under Mus-

For many Americans, partisanship has become a central part of their identity.

solini and, more recently, to Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Russia under Vladimir Putin, and Peru under Alberto Fujimori.⁸ But none of those cases involves a country with such a long constitutional tradition and established political institutions, not to mention the United States' wealth—all features assumed to ensure the continuation of democracy.⁹

The Four Threats

The history of American democracy has hardly been serene; to the contrary, it has involved extreme conflict and frequent violence and bloodshed. While developments in the past 60 years went far to deepen and expand democracy, earlier periods often witnessed it in peril and even being rolled back. In order to make sense of the conditions that most put democracy at risk, we have learned a great deal from scholars who study its rise and fall in countries around the world. In particular, we discern four major threats that can endanger it: politi-

cal polarization, conflict over who belongs in the political community, high and rising levels of economic inequality, and executive aggrandizement.

Political Polarization

Americans have heard plenty in recent years about the dangers of rising political polarization. Not many years ago, lawmakers in Washington frequently cooperated across party lines, forging both policy alliances and personal friendships. Now, hostility more often prevails, and it has been accompanied by brinksmanship and dysfunction that imperil lawmaking on major issues.

The public is no different. In the 1950s, when pollsters asked Americans whether they would prefer that their child “marry a Democrat or a Republican, all other things being equal,” the vast majority—72 percent of Americans—either didn’t answer or said they didn’t care. By contrast, in 2016 the majority—55 percent—did express a partisan preference for their future son- or daughter-in-law. For many Americans, partisanship has become a central part of their identity.¹⁰

But could rising polarization actually harm democracy? At first blush, this might seem unlikely; in fact, many political scientists have long argued that vibrant political parties are actually essential to the functioning of democracy. They bring elected officials together around a common set of priorities and foster cooperation so that they can accomplish goals on behalf of the public. They help citizens, who lack the time and expertise to study every issue, to make sense of politics and decide which candidates to support; this enables them to participate in

elections and hold elected officials accountable. Distinctions between parties help make democracy work by presenting citizens with meaningful choices. Yet when parties divide both lawmakers and society into two unalterably opposed camps that view each other as enemies, they can undermine social cohesion and political stability. Democracy is put at risk.

Polarization grows when citizens sort themselves so that, instead of having multiple, cross-cutting ties to others, their social and political memberships and identities increasingly overlap, reinforcing their affinity to some groups while setting them apart from others. In the mid-20th century, this process commenced as white southerners, beginning as early as the 1940s and accelerating by the 1970s, distanced themselves from the Democratic Party and shifted gradually toward the Republicans while the Democrats increasingly embraced the cause of racial equality. These new groupings diverged more from each other on ideology (conservative versus liberal) and views of particular issues (such as civil rights, abortion, and more recently gun rights).¹¹

Polarization intensifies as ambitious political entrepreneurs take advantage of growing divisions to expand their power. They may do this by adopting opposing positions on issues, highlighting and promoting underlying social differences, and using polarizing rhetoric and tactics in order to consolidate their supporters while weakening their opponents.¹²

But this approach hinders democratic governance by making it more difficult for Congress to work across party lines and address the major issues that most concern Americans today.¹³ This occurs in part because polarization makes

many of the attributes of a well-functioning polity—such as cooperation, negotiation, and compromise—more costly for public officials, who fear being punished at the polls if they engage in these ways with opponents. After the conservative political movement known as the Tea Party emerged in 2009, rallying against taxes, government programs, and immigration, its activists lambasted moderates and threatened them with primary challenges from the right. This strategy bore fruit in 2010, when the newly elected Republican majority contained several fewer moderates and many more hard-core conservatives.¹⁴

As division escalates, the normal functioning of democracy can break down if partisans cease to be able to resolve political differences by finding middle ground, through mutual accommodation. Politics then instead becomes a game of mortal combat in which winning is the singular imperative and opponents are seen as enemies to be vanquished. Furthermore, polarization is not a static state but a process that feeds on itself and creates a cascade of worsening outcomes.¹⁵ Over time, those who created it may find it difficult to control what



they have wrought, as members of the base become less and less trustful of elites and believe that none are sufficiently devoted to their core values. These dynamics give rise to less-principled actors, as epitomized by Donald Trump's ascendance. During the 2016 campaign, numerous established Republican politicians—such as Senators Lindsey Graham and Marco Rubio—expressed their strong disdain for him, only to eat their words once he was elected and to support him faithfully once he was in the White House.

Deep, almost tribal partisanship divides not only elected officials but also ordinary Americans today. People who identify with one party have become more distinct in terms of race, religiosity, and ideology from those identifying with the other. They are also more socially distant and more likely to hold stereotypes and negative views of one another. Partisans are animated even more by their shared dislike for the other party than by their own shared perspectives,



and this “negative partisanship” spurs them to react emotionally and to harbor anger toward members of the other party.¹⁶ Such polarization can affect social life, making gatherings between partisans of different stripes—including family occasions—fraught with tension.

As such dynamics intensify, people come to view society and politics as divided between “us” and “them.”

The culmination of polarization can indeed endanger democracy itself. If members of one political group come to view their opponents as an existential threat to their core values, they may seek to defeat them at all costs, even if it undermines normal democratic procedures in the process. They may cease to view the opposition as legitimate and seek permanent ways to prevent it from gaining power, such as by stacking the deck in their own favor. They may become convinced that it is justifiable to circumvent the rule of law and defy checks and balances or to scale back voting rights, civil liberties, or civil rights for the sake of preserving or protecting the nation as they see fit. Political polarization presents these very threats today, and they show no sign of abating.

Who Belongs?

Democracy has been built most successfully in places where citizens share broad agreement about the boundaries of national community: who should be included as a member, and on what terms, meaning whether all should have equal status or if rights should be parceled out in different ways to different groups. Conversely, when a nation features deep social divisions along lines of race, gender, religion, or ethnic group, some citizens may favor excluding certain

groups or granting them subordinate status. When these divisions emanate from “formative rifts” that either predated or emerged with the nation’s founding, they can prove particularly pernicious, and persist as formidable undercurrents in politics.¹⁷ Unless such rifts are purposely eliminated, conflict over them can habitually resurface and spur deep divisions, making democracy vulnerable.

Formative rifts may come to a head as the result of political change that prompts the two parties to take divergent stands over the status of implicated groups. Politicians may deliberately seek to inflame divisions as a political strategy that can unite and mobilize groups who would not otherwise share a common goal.¹⁸ Or social movements might mobilize people on one side of a rift, leading to a countermobilization by those on the other side. For example, the Civil Rights Movement sought to include more Americans within the boundaries of full citizenship, and that prompted racial conservatives to mobilize themselves to resist such changes; similarly, the feminist and LGBTQ movements each led to backlash movements by evangelical Christians. In either case, when such divisions are triggered, those who favor a return to earlier boundaries of civic membership and status may be convinced that they must pursue their goals at all costs, even if democracy is curtailed in the process. They may support political leaders who flout the rule of law and trample on voting rights, civil liberties, and civil rights, justifying it as necessary to preserve or restore the nation.

The United States at its inception divided the political community by race, creating a formative rift that has organized our politics

ever since. A commitment to white supremacy has often prevailed, impelling many Americans to build coalitions around appeals to racism and segregation in order to further their political interests. After the Constitution itself sanctioned slavery, the quest to preserve it drove politics for decades. Even after slavery ended, white supremacy often reigned in American politics, through decades of voting restrictions, denial of rights, discrimination, and segregation. This tradition has been one of the most important antidemocratic forces in American history.

Yet a countervailing commitment to equality and inclusion also emerged in American politics, fueled by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. This tradition repeatedly and powerfully challenged slavery and white supremacy and brought about critical reforms that expanded rights and advanced American democracy. It continues to do so today.

The American gender divide, also codified in law, made men’s dominance in politics and society appear to be natural and it rendered gender hierarchy resistant to change. A countervailing commitment to equality emerged, however, in the 19th-century women’s movement, articulated in the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal.” Yet not until 1916 would the two major political parties embrace the cause of women’s suffrage at the national level, ushering in the 19th Amendment’s ratification in 1920. Numerous other aspects of women’s status remained defined at the state level for decades.¹⁹

Despite sweeping reforms in the 20th century, legacies of formative rifts around both race



and gender linger. Liberal democratic ideals championing equality and freedom have evolved over time and promoted broader inclusion within the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Yet they continuously contend with persistent traditions that sanction race or gender hierarchies.²⁰

Certainly some tendencies of human nature help explain why formative rifts can prove potent. Many people trust communities that seem familiar to them and that they associate with virtue and safety, while they feel distrustful of other groups, whose customs strike them as strange and even dangerous. When political figures or events ignite voters' anger, particularly around matters pertaining to gender or race, it elevates political participation particularly among those who favor traditional hierarchies.²¹

Yet these views about who belongs in the political community do not always consistently foster political conflict and threaten democracy; it all depends on how they map onto the political party system. In some periods, for example, neither party strongly challenged white supremacy, in which case the status quo prevailed. In

other periods, the conflict between racially inclusive and white supremacist visions of American society and democracy has overlapped with partisan divisions and fueled intense political conflict. At such moments, democracy stood on the brink. When egalitarian forces gained the upper hand, democracy became more robust, as occurred during Reconstruction after the Civil War and in the mid-20th-century Civil Rights Movement.²² But when politicians defending old hierarchies effectively aroused their supporters, democracy was put at risk.

For decades, Republican candidates and public officials mostly refrained from overtly invoking those views in their campaigns and public rhetoric, but Trump seized the opportunity to do so, and it helped him win the 2016 election. Contemporary American politics, more than ever before, features a party system sharply divided between proponents of racial

Countries in which inequality is on the rise are more likely to see democracy distorted, limited, and potentially destabilized.

egalitarianism and defenders of a system that has privileged whites. This political chasm is further exacerbated by rising hostility to immigration and simmering disagreement about the status of immigrants in American society. The resulting divergence makes for extremely

volatile politics, and the potential expansion of democracy—or its rollback—is at stake.

Economic Inequality

High rates of economic inequality can undermine the institutions and practices of existing democracies. Countries in which inequality is on the rise are more likely to see democracy distorted, limited, and potentially destabilized. By contrast, countries in which inequality is low or declining are less likely to suffer democratic deterioration.²³

People typically assume that inequality could make democracy vulnerable by increasing the chances that the less well-off will rise up against the wealthy, but that is rarely the case. Rather, as inequality grows, it is the affluent themselves who are more likely to mobilize effectively. They realize that working- and middle-class people, who greatly outnumber them, tend to favor redistributive policies—and the higher taxes necessary to fund them, which would fall disproportionately on the rich. Fearful of such policy changes, the rich take action to protect their interests and preserve their wealth and advantages. For a time, this may skew the democratic process by giving the rich an outsized voice, but it can eventually cause more fundamental problems, endangering democratic stability itself. This can occur when the wealthiest citizens seek to solidify their power even if it entails harm to democracy. They may be willing to abide a polarizing politics of “us versus them” and the adoption of repressive measures if that is what it takes for leaders to protect their interests.²⁴

Among wealthy democracies in the world today, the United States is the most economi-

cally unequal nation. After a period during the mid-20th century when low- and middle-income Americans experienced quickly rising incomes, they have seen slow or stagnant wage growth and shrinking opportunities since the late 1970s. The affluent, meanwhile, continued

Among wealthy democracies in the world today, the United States is the most economically unequal nation.

to experience soaring incomes and wealth, particularly among the top one percent. CEO pay skyrocketed from 30 times the annual pay of the average worker in 1978 to 312 times as much by 2017.

Early on, the United States did not feature such economic inequality. Of course, in the late 18th century and the 19th century up through the Civil War, the widespread existence of slavery made for extreme inequality in the American South. Other regions of the nation during that same period, however, featured greater egalitarianism than Europe, being unencumbered by feudalism and the inherited structure of rigid social classes. But as the 19th century proceeded, economic inequality grew, and by the late 19th century—the Gilded Age, as Mark Twain called it—the United States had nearly caught up with Great Britain. These disparities would endure until the stock market crashed in 1929. The wealthy lost much

through the Great Depression, and then, after World War II, the strong economy and government policies fostered upward mobility and the growth of a large middle class, otherwise known as “the great compression.” By later in the 20th century, however, economic inequality grew once again, owing not only to deindustri-

Greater political inequality generally accompanies rising economic inequality, and the United States has been no exception in this regard.

alization and globalization but also to changes (and failure to update policies amid transformed circumstances) in tax policy, labor policy, and other areas that favored the affluent. The fortunes of the wealthy soared higher than ever, outpacing those of their European counterparts.²⁵

Greater political inequality generally accompanies rising economic inequality, and the United States has been no exception in this regard. In the age of the robber barons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Industrial Revolution generated vastly unequal wealth paired with unequal political power, as we will see. Decades of bloody repression of workers ensued as an ascendant class of capitalists enjoyed protection by the courts and the prevailing interpretation of the Constitution. Progressives and populists made some policy

advances that restricted business power, and the New Deal and the postwar era brought a contraction between the rich and poor. As a middle class grew in the United States, a wider swath of Americans took part in public life, and democracy advanced.

As economic inequality has soared since the 1970s, however, the affluent and big business in the United States have become more politically organized than ever, in ways that present major obstacles to democracy. The amount of money spent on politics—both in campaign contributions and lobbying—has escalated sharply since the 1990s, owing to the deep pockets and motivation of wealthy Americans and corporations. Even more striking is the degree to which the rich have organized themselves politically, through highly effective groups such as Americans for Prosperity, American Crossroads, and Heritage Action, which pursue their policy agenda on the state and national levels. The wealthy have reaped windfalls in the signature achievements of the Trump presidency: the immense 2017 tax cuts, which primarily benefited the top one percent and big companies, and the extensive scaling back of regulations. When government responds primarily to the rich, it transforms itself into oligarchy, and they gladly help usher in the new regime, which better protects their interests. Keeping watch over democracy is not their concern.²⁶

Executive Aggrandizement

The final threat to democracy is “executive aggrandizement,” the enlargement of the powers wielded by a nation’s top leader. Democratic backsliding is often associated with the demise of checks on executive power, which typically

results when powerful leaders expand their power and autonomy relative to more broadly representative legislatures and courts that are expected to protect rights. These executive actions might be perfectly legal, such as filling the courts and government agencies with political allies. But executives might also be tempted to stack the deck against their political opponents, making it hard to challenge their dominance; circumvent the rule of law; or roll back civil liberties and civil rights. Such actions can diminish democracy.

The American founders sought to thwart executive tyranny and to prevent a single group of leaders from seizing control of all the levers of government power at once. One of the ways they aimed to do this was to distribute power among different institutions, as James Madison explained in *Federalist 51*. Madison did not expect politicians to act with restraint in wielding power. He assumed, rather, that they would tend to be ambitious people bent on acquiring power and that the separation of powers would help prevent the concentration of power in a single individual or group.

The framers of the Constitution clearly gave the legislature pride of place. Article I establishes Congress as the first branch among three and lays out its powers in detail. The tersely worded Article II, by contrast, offers few specifics about presidential power, and makes constraints on the office—including the power of Congress to decide whether or not to enact measures the president recommends, and also to impeach and convict him—more evident than its powers.

But separation-of-powers systems such as that of the United States are notoriously prone to intractable political conflict between the executive and legislative branches, each of which

can claim democratic legitimacy because it is independently elected. Moreover, a president engaged in such a conflict might be tempted to assume a populist mantle—to equate his supporters with “the people” as a whole and present his preferred policies as reflective of a single popular will as opposed to the multiplicity of voices and interests represented in the legislature.²⁷

Across most of the first 125 years of the nation’s history, with a few exceptions in the early republic and the Civil War period, the very idea of a president achieving autocratic powers would have seemed inconceivable because the office was limited and Congress prevailed as the dominant branch. In the early 20th century, however, presidential power began to grow.

By the time of Trump’s election, the presidency had become a much more capacious and dominant office than the framers ever envisioned. Certainly the president cannot single-handedly create or repeal laws, as those powers are vested in Congress. But in other respects an aspiring autocrat who occupies the White House would find considerable authority awaiting him. Presidents throughout the 20th





century have expanded the powers of the office, whether through the use of executive orders and proclamations, the administrative state, an enlarged White House staff and creation of the Executive Office of the Presidency, or the presidency's control over foreign policy and national security. Meanwhile, Congress—typically in moments of crisis, whether related to foreign policy crises or domestic travails—has ceded considerable authority to the executive branch and enabled presidents to act unilaterally and often without oversight. As a result, the ordinary checks and balances that the framers intended to ensure democratic accountability have grown weaker.

This process of executive aggrandizement, which has been supported by both parties, fueled the development of what has been called the “imperial presidency.”²⁸ It has afforded presidents near-complete autonomy in foreign policy decisions and allowed them to commit the nation to expensive and risky interventions abroad, only later seeking congressional approval. A vast national security apparatus has grown in tandem. It has secretly conducted

domestic surveillance and political repression, often targeted at immigrants, minorities, and the politically vulnerable.

In the hands of a leader who envisions himself above the law, these tools provide ample means to further the leader's own agenda, at great cost to accountable democratic government.

The Danger and Promise of Democracy

Today, for the first time ever, we face the confluence of all four threats at once. We would be foolhardy to ignore these circumstances, which undeniably make democracy more vulnerable. Polarization has become extreme, prompting members of Congress to act more like members of a team than as representatives or policymakers; their unwillingness to cooperate and compromise makes it impossible to address many major issues. Among ordinary citizens, polarization is prompting a sense of politics as “us versus them,” in which people's political choices are highly motivated by their hostility toward the opposition. Polarization coincides with a sharp divide between an increasingly strident vision of white dominance in American society, on one side, and an increasingly diverse and inclusive coalition, on the other. Economic inequality has skyrocketed, and wealthy Americans and business leaders are highly motivated and organized to protect their interests and expand their riches, whatever the costs to democracy. If the embrace of racist, nativist politics is required to achieve their goals, they are undeterred. And in the face of growing governmental dysfunction and stalemate, a massively powerful presidency has enabled President Trump to pursue much of his agenda by circumventing Congress. In this

context of four threats, all the ingredients for democratic backsliding are in place.

Yet democratic decay is not inevitable. Although this combination of conditions makes democracy more precarious, it does not determine what will unfold, nor does it make the demise of government by the people unavoidable. Rather, it is politics that determines what will ensue. Politics does not adhere to mechanical principles, in which given circumstances foreordain a particular outcome. Rather, politics is driven by human beings who exercise agency and choice, and who can set their sights—if they so choose—on preserving and restoring democracy.

Democracy contains within it many seeds, including some that would hasten its own demise, but they must be selected and nurtured to produce such devastating outcomes. Ambitious political leaders engaged in intense competition can choose to pursue a strategy of political polarization if they wish. Up to a point, polarization can foster positive developments, such as boosting political participation, strengthening political parties, and simplifying voters' choices. But it must not be permitted to grow out of control. Leaders can decide whether to promote and amplify racism and nativism as a polarizing strategy. They can also decide whether to do the bidding of the most affluent, who will willingly support them, or whether to cast their lot with ordinary Americans instead. Finally, they can decide whether to unleash the executive powers of the presidency, or whether to counter an increasingly powerful president by reasserting the representative power of Congress.

Conversely, democracy also contains the seeds of its own regrowth and renewal. Political leaders and citizens can—through politics—rescue democracy, but they must act before it is too late. Responsible public officials need to tend the garden of democracy in such a way that seeds of destruction do not take root, and if those seeds do sprout, leaders must make it

Today, for the first time ever, we face the confluence of all four threats at once.

their first priority to curtail their growth and to find ways to guard against their proliferation. In addition, they must bolster the laws and procedures that ensure free and fair elections, the rule of law, the legitimacy of the opposition, and integrity of rights. For their part, citizens must demand the preservation of democracy itself over any particular policy issues and seek to foster its revitalization.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Some insist that the Constitution's framers did not actually intend to create a democracy and that the nation is more aptly termed a "republic" at its inception, but we think this is a distinction without a difference. The characteristics of democracy that we describe apply to representative government as well as direct democracy. Robert A. Dahl, "Democracy," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>, February 8, 2019; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
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