

## WORLD AFFAIRS

# Ten Warning Signs that Democracies Are Under Siege

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Across the world, democracy is under siege.

Political discourse tends to focus on the shortcomings of blatantly non-democratic countries such as China and Russia. However, critiques of liberal democracy are becoming commonplace, as leading democratic nations become sources of unprecedented political volatility.

A broad sense of skepticism—embodied in the election of Trump and the Brexit vote—is mounting at precisely a time when leading emerging regimes like China, Russia, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are pivoting toward less competitive elections and away from truly liberal democratic systems.

Here are 10 reasons why liberal democracy appears to be in decay.

## 1) Voter participation across liberal democracies is weak and even falling.

Far from the ideal of “one man, one vote”, voter participation in the 2014 US midterms for low-income households (with an annual income below \$30,000), was around 30 percent. Overall voter

participation in the US has steadily declined, down from over 60 percent in the 1950s and 60s to around 50 percent over the last several decades. And according to an International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [report](#), there has been a near-consistent decline in turnout of about 10 percent in established European democracies since the late 1980s.

## **2) Money buys political Influence.**

According to reports, just 158 families composed 50 percent of the political contributions in the 2016 elections. Meanwhile, lobbying has infiltrated the body politic. Cash to lobby political parties has doubled from \$1.57 billion in 2000 to \$3.15 billion in 2016. The Supreme Court's decision in the [Citizens United case](#), which endorsed the ability of corporations or unions to spend money to support or oppose candidates, was clear-cut support for the influence of money in the political process. It was also a green light for wealthy Americans to make unlimited contributions to political action committees thus magnifying the influence of the rich on politics and public policy in a way that the average American cannot afford.

To see the effects of this influence, one only needs to look at the ideological views of our elected representatives. In 2015, the ideological views of US senators were [surveyed and compared](#) to the views of two other groups: voters and donors. He found that Democratic senators' views were significantly to the left of voters, while Republican senators' views were even further to the right. The views of both Republican and Democratic senators, however, lined up almost perfectly with those of their donors—a strong indication that money has a greater influence on policy than votes.

## **3) The key pillars of liberal democracy are weakening.**

A successful democracy is founded on three key pillars: the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. In the US the authority of each pillar is being eroded. Specifically, executive orders are on the rise.

The last three US presidents enacted sweeping executive orders—circumventing the legislative process and even waging wars—all on their own authority. The power concentrated in the White House has expanded in each administration since Franklin D. Roosevelt's. Meanwhile, the legislature is so crippled by gridlock and partisanship that even when the presidency and Congress are controlled by the same party, the system struggles to pass laws. There have been six shutdowns of the federal government since 1981, an indication of political dysfunction.

Finally, the judiciary is not level and fair. Many Americans believe there are essentially two criminal justice systems: one for the rich and white and another for poor minorities who make up a wildly disproportionate percentage of the incarcerated population which currently stands at more than 2.3 million.

#### **4) The political tenures of elected leaders are falling.**

The average tenure of a G20 political leader is at a record low, declining from six years in 1946 to around 3.7 years today. Politicians are in office for terms shorter than a normal economic cycle of five to seven years. This results in a mismatch between the short-term horizons of politicians (ones that reward systemic myopia) and the long-term nature of economic challenges that form the biggest obstacle for global growth. These challenges include technology, mounting debt, income inequality, and rapid demographic shifts. Ultimately, because politicians are tied into a system, the global economy is exposed to poor policy decisions, a sentiment underscored by Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, who said: "We all know what to do. We just don't know how to get re-elected after we've done it."

#### **5) Leading democracies are being challenged from within.**

Populism has risen to its [highest level in 80 years](#). Meanwhile, attitudes regarding the media have taken a turn for the worse.

There is a sense that the news media is no longer the fount of objective information required for a flourishing democracy. The rise of social media has changed consumption patterns, audiences have fragmented, and the proliferation of “fake news” has poisoned the democratic well, rendering voters less capable of making quality decisions based on objective information.

Informal norms of behavior are also [being erased](#). Democracies depend not only on formal constitutions but also on informal codes such as treating political opponents like legitimate adversaries and not illegitimate enemies. This backdrop can help explain why in 2016 the US was [downgraded](#) from a full democracy to a flawed democracy by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

#### **6) Political freedom is on the decline.**

Across the globe, political freedoms have declined for the [11th straight year](#), according to Freedom House. Meanwhile, in the US these freedoms have registered a decline for the second consecutive year in 2018.

#### **7) Trust in political structures is waning.**

Only [18 percent](#) of Americans trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time”. This compares with levels of trust that ran over 60 percent throughout the 1960s.

#### **8) Non-democracies are gaining favor.**

A 2016 global survey found that citizens trust authoritarian leaders more than their democratic counterparts. This is in accord with the growing shift toward less liberal states. On a comparative basis, people are more open to competing political regimes.

#### **9) We have created illiberal, not liberal democracies.**

Although 70 percent of the world is deemed democratic, the majority of these democracies are illiberal democracies and

indistinguishable from authoritarian states.

### 10) Younger generations are turning away from democracy.

Faith in democratic regimes is declining [with every new generation](#). While 71 percent of Europeans and North Americans born in the 1930s think it is essential to live in a democracy, only 29 percent of people born in the 1980s agree. Furthermore, nearly a quarter of American millennials think democracy is a bad way to run a country, and nearly half would like a strongman leader. In a similar vein, a large-scale survey of political attitudes conducted by the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney found that [just 42 percent](#) of Australian 18-to-29-year-olds thought democracy was 'the most preferable form of government', compared with 65 percent of those aged 30 or above.

These 10 trends signal that a radical overhaul of liberal democracy is urgently needed. A reform agenda to reboot democracy must improve voter engagement and the credibility of politicians. These reforms could include minimum requirements for voting such as a government-sanctioned civics test such as the one that is applied to immigrants seeking citizenship. Countries could even consider weighted-voting systems whereby the votes of certain voters carry more weight depending on their experience. For example, the votes of nurses, doctors, and health practitioners would weigh more in healthcare policy while teachers' votes would weigh more in education matters. This system places emphasis on voter knowledge in the creation of public policies.

Reforms to improve the quality of politicians could include setting minimum standards (beyond just age) for a citizen to run for office. This could reverse the phenomenon of the career politician which has coincided with growing cynicism about the effectiveness of elected leaders. By the end of the last decade, the leaders of the major British political parties had less experience in the non-political world than any others of the post-war era. A 2012 study revealed that that the number of career politicians in the British parliament [more than quadrupled](#), from 20 to 90 members of

parliament between 1983 and 2010. The number of political terms for members of parliament could be capped to avoid the culture of complacency that can arise from being in power for multiple decades.

The challenges battering democracies around the world suggest a reform agenda is not only necessary but critical to their survival.

*The views and opinions of the author are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Aspen Institute.*

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