

The Global Crisis of Liberal Democracy

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Introduction

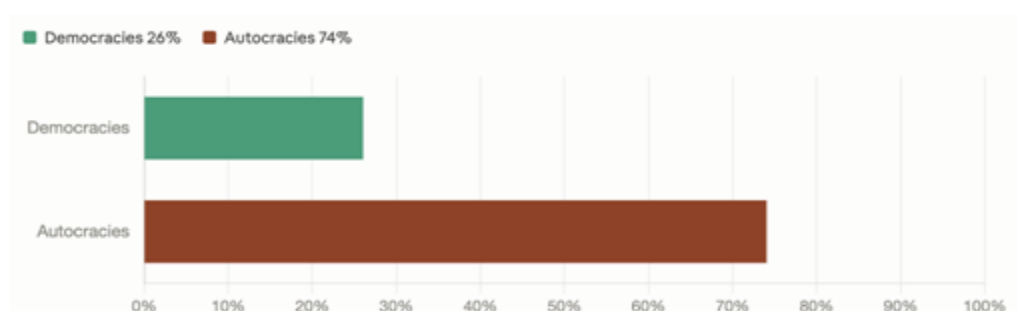
Since approximately three decades after the Berlin wall fell, global geopolitics operated under the teleological assumption of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History. However, this teleological assumption has collapsed, replaced by a pervasive global democratic retrogression. To understand if democracy is in crisis is to pose a question that can be answered by quantitative data and institutional decay globally [1].

This essay argues that global democracy is in a state of terminal foundational crisis stemming from three corresponding factors. These include internal institutional subversion, socio-technological divide in the public sphere, and a lack of socioeconomic delivery which has disequated majoritarian preferences from policy outcomes.

1. The Empirical Baseline of Global Decline

Democracy's recession is a verifiable fact across every prominent independent research organisation tracking global governance. The Varieties of Democracy Institute's longitudinal data shows the world has entered a stage which political scientists classify as the "Third Wave of Autocratization" [1]. The baseline indicates that for the average global citizen, the level of democracy has reached 1978's levels [1].

Figure 1.1



Freedom House's defining findings support this perspective. As of 2025, it documents global freedom has declined for 20 consecutive years [2]. In that year, 54 countries witnessed a deterioration in political rights and civil liberties against only 35 improvements [2]. Similarly, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance confirms this downward trajectory. It reports more-than-half of all assessed nations have suffered decline in at least one primary aspect of democratic function over the past five years [3]. Their data shows global drops in judicial independence, press freedom, and electoral integrity. Rather than occurring as a surface-level phenomenon in politically unstable or historically authoritarian areas, regression now impacts the core of the democratic world. Through the past two decades, many G20 nations have exhibited signs of institutional decay [4]. This crisis prevails via consolidation of illiberal regimes within the European Union, such as Hungary alongside polarisation and the neglect of foundational liberal norms in the United States [1]. The systemic nature of this decline shows via historical data. Since 1900, roughly 80 percent of democracies entering autocraisation periods experience a democratic breakdown [5].

2. Conceptual Clarification: Democracy vs. Liberalism

Democratic theory frequently conflates procedural democracy with constitutional liberalism. Fareed Zakaria conceptualises procedural democracy as the mechanism for electing rulers via popular elections, whereas constitutional liberalism protects individual liberties, minority rights, and the rule of law through institutional checks.

The crisis is dangerous because it exploits this exact conceptual fault. Rather than abolishing elections, modern autocrats build an illiberal democracy, which functions as a system wherein a leader maintains a substantive popular mandate whilst dismantling constitutional constraints that prevent absolute rule.

When elected populists take power, they claim the popular mandate grants them an unquestionable right to rule over independent state apparatuses. In this perspective, independent courts, administrative agencies, and constitutional checks work as obstructions wielded by a corrupt and unelected class to thwart the will of the people rather than serving as pillars of liberty. This ideology views the majority vote as the sole source of political legitimacy. By detaching democracy from its liberal anchor of the rule of law and structural protections, populists transform the state into an instrument of elective majoritarian dictatorship.

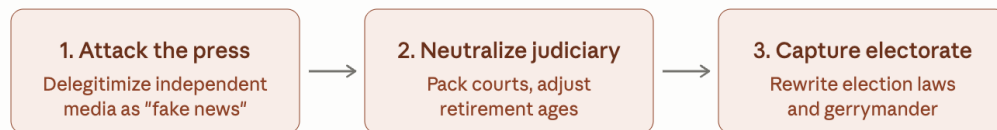
3. Stealth Authoritarianism and Executive Aggrandisement

Modern democratic decay is typically orchestrated from within by elected leaders leveraging popular mandates to systematically dismantle institutional checks. The phenomenon is termed

stealth authoritarianism by legal scholars or executive aggrandisement by political scientists. It relies on a legal facade to mask the concentration of executive power [6].

Elected populists follow a sophisticated, sequential script to dismantle liberal systems:

Figure 3.1



They target the existing informational ecosystem. According to V-Dem data, freedom of expression remains the single worst-affected aspect of global democracy, with 44 countries experiencing severe deterioration whereas only 11 show improvement [7]. Modern autocrats deploy economic and regulatory leverage to choke media independence and convert broadcasting architectures into state propaganda organs

The independent judiciary and mechanisms are neutralised through weaponized statutory legislation. This is achieved by shifting retirement ages, expanding court compositions to facilitate legalistic court-packing, or even gradually defunding anti-corruption watchdogs. Since these updates are passed via formal legislative votes, the hollowing out of judicial independence is insulated by a veneer of proceduralism.

The electoral architecture itself is manipulated to guarantee a permanent structural advantage for the incumbent party. Through hyper-partisan gerrymandering and selective voter registration requirements, regimes transform into electoral autocracies. In India (renowned as the world's largest democracy), Freedom House noted that while the state remains a highly competitive multiparty democracy, regulatory actions have brought increased pressure on independent journalists, NGOs, and the opposition [8]. The democratic husk remains but the liberal substance of the rule of law, institutional constraints, and minority protections have been thoroughly extracted.

4. The Digital Public Sphere and Algorithmic Polarisation

The democratic crisis is tightly bound to the algorithmic transformation of the public sphere. Early optimism viewing social media as inherently liberating has faded as digital infrastructure increasingly threatens democratic deliberation.

Authorities in China, Russia, and Vietnam ranked among the most active culprits in 2025, with collaboration concentrated in Southeast Asia and East Africa. Since their ranking systems optimise for engagement, they tend to amplify high-arousal negative content such as moral outrage, fear, and out-group animosity. As a byproduct, elevating polarising material over nuanced journalism; experimental audits find that increasing exposure to such content measurably raises affective polarisation. [9] Consequently, citizens rapidly inhabit separate, idea-reinforcing camps. This divide erodes the democratic norm of treating opponents as legitimate competitors, pushing toward a distinction that can be used to justify violating institutional rules to deny opponents power.

With this internal decay comes worldwide geopolitical realignment involving increasingly coordinated authoritarian collaboration. Looking beyond isolated, ad hoc actions, autocratic governments have made cross-border repression an imperative part of their foreign policy, cooperating to pursue exiled dissidents and diaspora communities. [10]. Their tactics include detentions and deportations, spyware and digital threats, and abuse of Interpol's Red Notice system to suppress civil society abroad. [10] Compounding the informational dimension, generative artificial intelligence has drastically lowered the marginal cost of producing hyper-realistic disinformation at scale, threatening to overwhelm fact-based public reasoning, though post-2024 assessments caution that the most alarmist predictions of AI-driven electoral collapse have not yet materialised. [11]

5. Economic Dislocation and Technocracy

Beneath political and technological decay lies a structural economic crisis. For four decades, a neoliberal global architecture prioritising deregulation, fiscal austerity, and capital mobility has isolated macroeconomic policy from democratic control.

This economic dislocation created a fertile breeding ground for populist revolts. A homogenous partisan economic consensus isolated critical decisions regarding trade, labour, and monetary policy within technocratic, non-majoritarian institutions. Consequently, elections were reduced to what political theorist Peter Mair termed "ruling the void".

This decoupling of majoritarian preferences from policy outcomes severely degraded democratic legitimacy. Elected populists successfully capitalised on this representation gap by framing the liberal democratic apparatus as an obstructionist mechanism used by a corrupt globalist elite to thwart the popular will. Economic anxiety was thus transformed into cultural grievances, encouraging support for neonationalist right-wing movements promising to restore sovereignty by dismantling the very guardrails that define constitutional democracy [4].

6. Divergent Geographies of Decay

The democratic crisis features a stark divergence between advanced Western decay and Global South institutional failures.

Table 6.1

Dimension	Advanced Western Democracies	Global South Regimes
Primary Vector	Polarised civil society & executive aggrandizement	State incapacity, security failures, & military interventions
Economic Context	Post-industrial stagnation & middle-class dislocation	Structural poverty, infrastructural deficits, & cartel capture
Technological Impact	Algorithmic tribalism & information echo chambers	State-led digital blackouts & computational propaganda
Systemic Threat	Stable "illiberal" electoral autocracies	Total collapse into military junta rule or warlordism

In advanced Western democracies, such as the United States, France, and parts of Central Europe, the threat remains fundamentally ideological and systemic. While these nations possess high state capacity alongside stable bureaucratic infrastructures, they suffer from severe societal polarisation, institutional gridlock, and elite-backed norm erosion. The danger here lies in a gradual transition into stable hybrid regimes or electoral autocracies that retain formal state machinery while lacking liberal protections.

Conversely, in large sectors of the Global South, the democratic crisis occurs due to a fundamental deficit in state capacity and security. Freedom House noted that the sharpest declines were caused by explicit military coups alongside the total collapse of basic constitutional order.

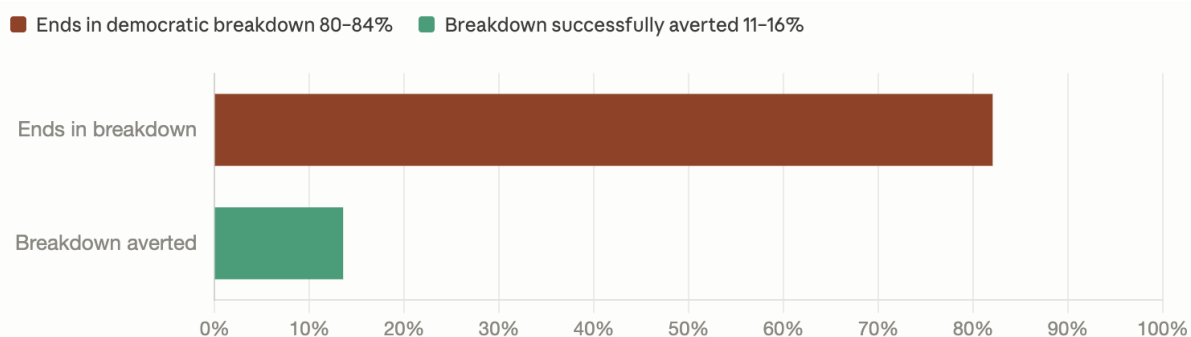
Furthermore, across regions of Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, democratic governments are failing as the state cannot sustain a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. When a democratic government is outgunned by transnational criminal groups, narcotrafficking networks, or regional insurgencies, the institutional apparatus becomes futile to citizens. It makes them prioritise basic physical survival over procedural rights.

7. Refuting the Optimists: The False Promise of Self-Correction

Leading structural optimists and institutionalists argue that the crisis narrative is overstated looking at historical examples of democratic endurance. They claim that democracies possess embedded self-correcting functions because mechanisms like electoral accountability, independent judiciaries, active civil societies, and institutional adaptation allow them to endure prolonged periods of populist stress. To support this view, these scholars look at several publicised electoral outcomes, including the 2023 unseating of the Law and Justice party in Poland, Jair Bolsonaro's 2022 defeat in Brazil, or the 2024 return to a coalition governance model in India.

While these instances of electoral pushback provide vital case studies in democratic endurance, a thorough analysis emphasises that these successes are exceptions that mask a malicious setting. The V-Dem Institute's analysis of regime transformation shows that once a democracy enters an active episode of autocratisation, averting breakdown altogether is extremely rare, occurring in only 11 percent of cases between 1900 and 2023. [13] The asymmetry is greater in the modern day: from 1994 to 2023, democracy was dismantled in 41 of 49 autocratisation episodes— a failure rate of ~84 percent. [5] Although many democracies do eventually recover after a breakdown through later reversals, the recovery typically follows a collapse rather than preventing one, meaning the trajectory of an active backsliding episode leans overwhelmingly towards breakdown.

Figure 7.1: AUTOCRATISATION EPISODE OUTCOMES



The asymmetry's cause alludes to the structural imbalance of power that occurs once an autocrat takes control of the state apparatus. In Poland, despite the pro-democratic coalition's electoral victory, the incoming government has faced immense legal gridlock attempting to restore law and order. In Poland, the post-populist pro-democratic coalition remains systematically gridlocked by deep-seated loyalist administrative holdovers.

This reveals the "trapdoor" effect of modern autocratisation. Entering a period of democratic decay is easy while exiting it through the mere act of winning the next election is immensely difficult. Once an authoritarian regime bends the institutional architecture to its advantage, it creates a self-reinforcing environment. The structural vectors of decay outweigh contemporary mechanisms of endurance since relying on democracy's inbuilt capacity to self-correct exposes a dangerous type of institutional complacency that empirical data thoroughly contradicts.

Conclusion and Concrete Institutional Alternatives

The global crisis of liberal democracy is a structural breakdown targeting the institutional, technological, and economic foundations of the state. The transition from liberal regimes to electoral autocracies through sophisticated legalistic subversion from within has proved increasingly effective and difficult to stop. Concurrently, polarisation's algorithmic inflation has dismantled the shared reality imperative to peaceful democratic coexistence, while years of economic inequality have undermined the social contract, isolating millions of citizens from traditional democratic institutions.

To preserve liberal democracy, democratic societies must move past defenses of abstract norms and aggressively deploy specific institutional reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of decay such as:

- **Information Architecture Reform:** States must legally differ platform profitability from engagement maximisation by outlawing behavioural surveillance capitalism and mandating chronological, opt-out algorithmic choice across all major communication spaces.
- **Radical Constitutional Innovation:** Democracies must introduce permanent, randomly selected Citizen Assemblies structured by demographic sorting. These bodies insulate critical macroeconomic and ecological policy choices from hyper-polarised lobbying
- **Economic Re-Anchoring of the Social Contract:** States must transition away from the neoliberal model toward active, state-led industrial policy, progressive wealth taxation, and universal public goods. By ensuring material security, democracies can systematically dismantle the economic anxiety that populists weaponize.

If the democratic core fails to execute these substantive institutional adjustments, the current global movement toward authoritarianism will inevitably accelerate and render the post-WWII democratic era a brief anomaly in the broader historical arc of human governance.

Endnotes

1. V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling the Democratic Era?* (Nord, Marina, David Altman, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, University of Gothenburg, 2026). The world has entered a "third wave of autocratization"; for the average global citizen, the level of democracy has reverted to 1978 levels; autocracies outnumber democracies 92 to 87, governing about 74% of the world's population ($\approx$ 6 billion people). The United States was reclassified from liberal democracy to electoral democracy for the first time in over 50 years, with a Liberal Democracy Index score of 0.57, its lowest since 1965. Liberal democracies are home to roughly 7% of the world's population (about 600 million people). [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem Institute Democracy Report 2026 lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem%20Institute%20Democracy%20Report%202026_lowres.pdf)
2. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy* (March 2026). Global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025; 54 countries experienced deterioration in political rights and civil liberties while 35 registered improvements. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2026/growing-shadow-autocracy>
3. International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move* (September 2025). Of 173 countries assessed, 94 (54%) declined in at least one factor of democratic performance over the prior five years versus 55 (32%) that advanced; the report documents unprecedented global declines in judicial independence, press freedom, and electoral integrity across the four pillars of Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation. <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move>
4. On the G20's global weight, see Council on Foreign Relations, "What Does the G20 Do?" (Backgrounder). G20 members account for roughly 85% of global GDP and about two-thirds of the world's population. Independent indices (V-Dem 2026; Freedom House 2026; International IDEA 2025) document democratic decline across numerous major industrialised and emerging economies over the past two decades, including members of the G20. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-does-g20-do>
5. Boese, Vanessa A., Amanda B. Edgell, Sebastian Hellmeier, Seraphine F. Maerz, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "How democracies prevail: democratic resilience as a two-stage process," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021); modern figure from V-Dem, *State of the World 2024: 25 Years of Autocratization* (*Democratization*, 2025). Once autocratization begins, only about one in five democracies avert breakdown ($\approx$ 80% break down); from

1994 to 2023, democracy broke down in 41 of 49 episodes ($\approx 84\%$).
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413>

6. On "stealth authoritarianism," see Ozan O. Varol, "Stealth Authoritarianism," *Iowa Law Review* 100, no. 4 (2015); on "executive aggrandisement," see Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016). Both describe the incremental, legalistic concentration of executive power by elected leaders.
7. V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2026* (Nord et al., 2026). https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_lowres.pdf
8. Freedom House, *India: Freedom in the World 2026 Country Report* (2026). India remains a competitive multiparty democracy, but harassment of journalists, NGOs, and government critics has increased under the Modi government, and the BJP has used state institutions to target opponents; in 2025 the government expanded its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls from Bihar to 12 additional states and territories, with opposition figures alleging that excessive verification requirements disenfranchise minority voters, allegations the government rejects.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2026>
9. Piccardi, Tiziano, et al., "Social Media Algorithms Can Shape Affective Polarization via Exposure to Antidemocratic Attitudes and Partisan Animosity" (2024); and Brady, William J., et al., "How social learning amplifies moral outrage expression in online social networks," *Science Advances* (2021); see also the 2024 preregistered field experiment on X published in *Science*, "Reranking partisan animosity in algorithmic social media feeds." <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adu5584>
10. Freedom House, *Collaboration and Resistance: Tracking Transnational Repression in 2025* (April 2026). <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2026/collaboration-and-resistance-tracking-transnational-repression-2025>
11. Brookings Institution, "When it comes to understanding AI's impact on elections, we're still working in the dark" (March 2025); see also reporting on generative AI and the 2024 election cycle (PBS NewsHour / Associated Press).
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/when-it-comes-to-understanding-ais-impact-on-elections-were-still-working-in-the-dark/>
12. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026: The Growing Shadow of Autocracy* (March 2026). The year's largest freedom declines were caused by military coups and incumbent efforts to crush dissent or rewrite constitutional rules; Guinea-Bissau recorded the single

largest score drop (−8) after a November coup in which armed men stormed the electoral commission and destroyed ballots, and military officers ousted the elected government in Madagascar (−5). <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2026/growing-shadow-autocracy>

13. V-Dem Institute, *Threats to Democracy Are Growing*, Policy Brief No. 42 (January 2025), drawing on Maerz, Seraphine F., Amanda B. Edgell, Matthew C. Wilson, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Episodes of Regime Transformation," *Journal of Peace Research* (2024). Breakdown resilience, a democracy avoiding regime change once autocratisation is underway, is rare, occurring in 11% of episodes (N=9) from 1900 to 2023, though it has become somewhat more common (22%) since 1994. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/PB_42.pdf