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IS (TOXIC) POLARIZATION A CATALYST OR DETRIMENTAL FOR DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING? AN EMPIRICAL CASE-STUDY OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE CAPITOL ATTACK OF JAN 6TH, 2021.

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Contents

Abstract

This dissertation is a reflection on what democracy is today and what are the causes that make it hanging by a thread. What is the current state of democracy? What constitutes the endpoint of democratization? Should we seek this endpoint empirically by examining existing regime cases, or can we envision new forms of democratic governance that surpass the existing models? Does an endpoint even exist? Is an eroded democracy still a democracy? In order to answer all these questions, there needs to be a comprehensive analysis on the significance of democracy, its history, and the dangers that pernicious polarization poses. The United States is probably the most glaring example of a fully-fledged democracy, which, however, is experiencing a rapid decline. Its causes, however, cannot only be attributable to the figure of Donald Trump, rather on the political polarization –thus also social polarization– which started decades ago. The magnitude of Trump's impact, nonetheless, exceeds that of any historical precedent. It produced a widespread sense of skepticism toward the political system, democracy, and the governing institutions, effectively dismissing democracy, casting doubts upon the legitimacy of elections, and positioning himself as the sole remedy to a purported radical-left assault against him, culminating with the attack on Capitol Hill on January 6th, 2021.

Introduction

The future of democracy has been vastly discussed in the past decade. Aside from conjecturing what the future of current democratic countries might look like in the long run, however, it is also crucial to understand the reasons why democracy is backsliding in the world. This dissertation, therefore, aims at exploring the causes and the factors which contribute to the erosion of this mainstream regime, one which less-developed countries strive to achieve. Predominantly, it will be argued that democratic backsliding stems from the toxic levels of polarization in the current political landscape, especially considering the United States as the leading country of this phenomenon. First and foremost, it is crucial to explain why Trump, and especially the attack of January 6th have been chosen as case-studies and why they occupy a principal part of this dissertation.

This thesis has adopted a political anthropology stance, focusing on political processes and transformations, highlighting the value of political rhetoric that leader use to convey a specific message to the citizens. The main purpose is to be a dynamic piece of writing, which, starting from a more 'informal' passage –the description of a disruptive event– strives to make the reader aware of the broader causes of the current democratic decline in various parts of the world. The significance, therefore, stems from the conclusion that democracies exhibiting lenience or tolerance towards such events could face dire repercussions in the long run. It will be shown, therefore, how failure of American democracy to harshly deal with such occurrences may even threaten democratic development in other parts of the world. The United States, as it will be explored, has always been considered a model of democracy to follow, even though it can be argued that it wasn't fully a democratic country until the 1980s. Ultimately, it is vital to read this dissertation in light of democracy, which is the central thematic thread throughout this work.

The first chapter is dedicated to an in-depth examination of the events surrounding the assault on Capitol Hill on January 6th, 2021. It seeks to dissect the factors that triggered this disrupting incident and evaluate its implications for the democratic foundations of the United States. The chapter unfolds as follows: the first part starts with a comprehensive account, or 'chronicle,' of the events that occurred during the assault on Capitol Hill. Subsequently, it delves into a meticulous analysis of the political discourse employed by Donald Trump on the day of the riot, his sustained incitement in the preceding months, and their collective role in fomenting the insurrectionary fervor. This investigation prompts a critical examination of the United States Constitution, specifically its provisions pertaining to the freedom of speech, which will draw upon existing jurisprudence to assess Trump's position within the broader discourse on freedom of speech. Then the scope of analysis expands to encompass Donald Trump's political discourse

from his ascent to power to his advocacy of a populist narrative. This expanded view serves as a backdrop to address a pivotal question: Does the Capitol Hill attack constitute an attempted coup? Two overarching inquiries guide this chapter, encapsulated in the following question: to what extent and in what manner did Donald Trump present a challenge to the democratic fabric of the United States? Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate that the magnitude of Trump's impact exceeds that of any historical precedent. It produced a widespread sense of skepticism toward the political system, American democracy, and the governing institutions. Simultaneously, Trump effectively cultivated an audience by loudly dismissing democracy, casting doubts upon the legitimacy of elections, and positioning himself as the sole remedy to a purported radical-left assault against him.

The second chapter gives a broad and detailed theoretical background on the definition and history of democracy, which will serve as a basis for the analysis of the third chapter, focused on the American experience. It is widely recognized that the term democracy encompasses not only the intricate interplay between power and the people but also the inherent link between diverse interpretations held by numerous scholars, citizens, and elites, on the one hand, and the normative and idealistic concepts that permeate it with meaning, on the other. Starting therefore with a minimalist definition, understood both in procedural and substantive terms, a comprehensive theory will be developed, by uniting all the minimalist definitions to have a clear perception of democracy: in this way, democracy is not normative and theoretical, but it is empirical and practical. The difference stems from the fact that normative studies are focused on theoretical basis and theoretical construction of the variables that shall define democracy, whereas practical and empirical studies are based on the measurement of specific variables. Subsequently, different historical definitions will be highlighted, starting with the significance of public opinion as a substantive foundation and integral part of democracy.

It is then important to cite the works of Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Madison, who largely warned about the dangers of democratic rule: the presence of a multiplicity of factions and interests can bring about a democratic tyranny, where the dominant group violates the rights of the citizens. Starting with this premises, then, it is crucial to highlight the clear dichotomy between liberalism and democracy, as this form of governance cannot achieve true consolidation unless the significance of both elements of 'liberal democracy' is analyzed. Whenever democracies are formed, they are created from a phase of transition, where they do not yet constitute fully-fledged liberal democracies. They can, however, be considered 'hybrid regimes', a sort of grey zone between democratic and non-democratic systems. Nowadays, instances where democracies are downgrading and becoming hybrid regimes are not unfamiliar: the current crisis in democracy is

termed democratic backsliding, wherein a country experiences a regression in its democratic performance due to a weakening of the values and institutions that support it. Political thinkers of the past were already skeptical of democracy, starting with Rousseau, who believed that there will never be a true democracy or Plato, Hobbes, and Burke, who essentially considered that democracy tended to lead to unintelligent decisions, corrupt the moral of society, and foster factionalism that could empower demagogues to seize power. Currently we are facing a phenomenon of pernicious polarization, a dynamic process wherein both political elites and the general public progressively grow apart in their positions on public policy and ideology and create a 'us versus them' mentality, thus endangering democracy.

The third chapter delves more deeply into this latter matter, with the exemplary case represented by the United States, especially with Trump's presidency. The chapter will describe what happened in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century and what were the key events that changed the governmental structure to the point where it became a model of democracy to follow, ultimately proving that within the realm of advanced democracies, the United States stands out as a notable instance illustrating how its political system can inadvertently facilitate democratic erosion. More in particular, despite its outward appearance of consolidation, the American political system exhibits inherent vulnerabilities that make it susceptible to democratic backsliding. A brief history of the political parties of the US will be made, in order to better grasp how such polarization and democratic erosion is possible today. Therefore, the current state of American politics is marked by extreme polarization between the two major political parties, and while the nation may not be on the verge of a coup or civil war, this polarization poses significant challenges to its democratic system. Over the past half-century, the level of polarization has intensified, with a growing number of Americans expressing strong displeasure of the other party.

This pernicious polarization the United States is experiencing –and which encompasses economic, geographic, racial, and policy divisions–, played a significant role in the rise of Donald Trump as president and the ascendancy of a political movement that reshaped the Republican Party. Particularly, the election of Trump as President of the United States, characterized by his admiration for authoritarian leaders, encouragement of violence among supporters, threats against political opponents, and labeling of mainstream media as the enemy, has sparked concerns that the U.S. may be at risk of moving toward a form of regime termed 'competitive authoritarianism'. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that the erosion of democracy in the United States started way before the Trump administration, stemming from persistent gridlock in the U.S. Congress, escalating political polarization, and the corrosive influence of undisclosed campaign

contributions in politics. The chapter concludes with a comparative framework with three other countries where democracy is eroding: Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela.

Chapter 1. Attack on Capitol Hill

1. Introduction

"Turn your cameras please and show what's really happening out here. (…)

Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore and that's what this is all about. And to use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with: We will stop the steal. Today I will lay out just some of the evidence proving that we won this election, and we won it by a landslide. (…)

And after this, we're going to walk down, and I'll be there with you. (…)

And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. (…) And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give."

(Trump - Jan 6th, 2021)

Unprecedented. This is undoubtedly the most fitting word for the events unfolded on January 6, 2021. An assault at the foundation of American democracy and a major dismissal of it by Donald Trump, a threat which is still very much present and ongoing in the second half of 2023.

In the morning of January 6th, 2021, a mob of fervent supporters of Donald Trump forcefully stormed the Capitol building as the congressional certification process for the 2020 presidential election results was underway. Although the incident's impact on the certification was brief, its ramifications transcend the immediate disruption, signifying a profound transformation within American politics and democracy. Throughout the majority of the nation's history, the notion of a politically incited crowd surrounding the halls of Congress –a phenomenon more commonly associated with other countries, was inconceivable. However, the surge and normalization of extreme right-wing ideologies, coupled with acts of terror and violence, have reshaped the political landscape within the United States, representing an existential threat to its democracy. The sequence of events on January 6th, initiated with a politically charged crowd of Trump supporters gathering in the vicinity of the White House. The political situation was already volatile, attributable not only to the impending confirmation of the presidential election results but also to the recently confirmed outcomes of the Georgia Senate runoffs, which granted control of the Senate to the Democratic party. In response to the Capitol breach, both chambers of Congress suspended their meetings, temporarily halting the election certification process. While it might be convenient, and even reassuring, to interpret these events as an isolated occurrence, a conclusion to the turbulent Trump presidency, they are instead the culmination of years of transformative political dynamics. Upon careful evaluation of the evidence, it becomes clear that the events of January 6th, 2021 transcend the characterization of a mere exuberant crowd or an uncontrolled

protest. These occurrences amount to a riot, potentially even a behavior akin to a coup, tacitly supported and encouraged by former President Trump.

The first chapter of this dissertation aims at exploring the attack on Capitol Hill, at analyzing what led to it and how it poses a threat to democracy in the United States. It will be outlined as following: the first part will be a 'chronicle' of the attack on Capitol Hill of Jan 6th, 2021; then, it develops with sections analyzing Trump's political discourse the day of the riot, the incitement in the months preceding it and how it contributed to the insurrection. This brings to question the Constitution itself, particularly the provisions regarding the freedom of speech, which will be covered using existing case law and will try to assess Trump's stance in the broader freedom of speech discussion. Afterwards, the analysis widens and considers Trump's political discourse from his rise to power to his populist narrative in order to reflect on the following question: is the attack an attempted coup? This will serve as a basis for the broader discourse on democracy of the next two chapters.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, it is important to consider democracy as the reading thread, and following this statement, there are two main lines guiding the chapter, which can be encapsulated by the following question, which this chapter will answer: to what extent and in what ways did Trump present a challenge to American democracy? Eventually, it will be shown that the magnitude to which Trump arrived is far worse than any other case in history: a phenomenon of mass skepticism in the system, in American democracy and in the government. On the other hand, he managed to reach this audience with a loud dismissal of democracy by delegitimizing (or undermining the legitimation) of elections, by presenting himself as the only person capable of fixing the system and appealing to the alleged radical-left attack on him.

1.1 Attack on the Capitol: description and timeline of events.

Wednesday, January 6th, 2021. A day that will be studied in history classes, the day of the attack on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, during a rally of Trump supporters. More than two years have passed since the riot on January 6, 2021 and, as time has progressed, citizens have acquired a great understanding of the extent of the aggression and devastation witnessed on that day, along with insights into the individuals accountable for these events. This has been facilitated through comprehensive efforts, primarily spearheaded by the Justice Department, which has undertaken the prosecution of 950 individuals thus far[1]. The selected committee dedicated a span of 18 months

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[1] Macfarlane, Scott. Mcdonald Cassidy. "Jan. 6 timeline: Key moments from the attack on the Capitol". CBS News. https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/jan-6-capitol-riot-timeline-key-moments/

to meticulously investigating the assault on the Capitol. During this investigative endeavor, countless witnesses were interviewed, and an extensive array of resources such as documents, text messages, and emails were meticulously scrutinized, thereby fostering a more profound understanding of the events surrounding the incident.

The planning of the attack on the Capitol started months before the actual riot happened. From the false claims and accusations of the stolen presidency and election fraud even before the polls closed on November 3rd, 2020, to the countless mentions of a retaliation against the broken system, it was all there: rioters were organizing themselves on the social media Parler[2] and the designed authorities failed to see the early signs, which were there for weeks prior to the event[3]. A combination of radical and conspiratorial factions remained committed to their belief that the election had been unlawfully taken. In various internet forums, there was persistent discourse pertaining to an eventual resort to arms and the potential for employing aggressive measures. There are several online sources describing the timeline of events, without, however, an insightful analysis of the incident, which this section will try to cover. This is, thus, how the day unfolded.

7.00-11.39 am: from the morning hours, a large crowd of approximately 10,000 individuals started gathering to witness a speech delivered by Donald Trump at the Ellipse in Washington, D.C. This marked the initial signs of the impending violent events of the day. Noteworthy occurrences included a man exhibiting a pitchfork in the vicinity of the Washington Monument, reports from Park Police concerning the presence of a crowd at the Lincoln Memorial as early as 7.30am, and the appearance of certain attendees at the rally donning ballistic armor. Concurrently, President Trump persisted in disseminating falsehoods regarding an allegedly stolen election via his Twitter[4] account. In a parallel development, Vice President Mike Pence, through a formal communication addressed to Congress, affirmed his intent to fulfill his constitutional obligations by certifying the election results. Simultaneously, as throngs of attendees amassed in the thousands at the Ellipse, Capitol Police commenced an inquiry into accounts of groups adopting militia-like formations in

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[2] Parler was a social media platform that was founded in 2018. It aimed to provide a platform for free speech and open discussion, positioning itself as an alternative to other social media platforms that were perceived to be stricter in moderating content. Parler gained popularity among individuals who felt their voices were being suppressed on other platforms due to differing political views.

[3] Sardarizadeh, Shayan. Lussenhop, Jessica. "The 65 days that led to chaos at the Capitol". BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332

[4] Elon Musk, who completed the acquisition of Twitter in October 2022, recently changed the name of the social media Twitter in "X". For the sake of continuity with previous analysis, this dissertation will use the former name "Twitter".

close proximity to the Capitol building. At precisely 11:39 a.m., President Trump left the White House for his planned speech at the rally.

11:57 am: Trump takes the stage to begin his speech in front of thousands of supporters. His voice resonated clearly through the speakers, as he revisited debunked claims of fraudulent elections that he had been disseminating over the past months[5]. Before him, his lawyer Rudy Giuliani takes the stage and begins his discourse by advocating for legislators, especially Mike Pence (former Vice President –VP) to reverse the outcome of the election. He further entreats the assemblage with the phrase, "let's engage in trial by combat"[6]. Alongside Giuliani, another attorney aligned with right-wing ideologies, John Eastman, occupies the same platform. Eastman is renowned for conceptualizing a strategy supported by Trump, which involves Vice President Pence intervening to annul the election outcomes while presiding over the concurrent session of Congress. This particular session of January 6, 2021, holds the responsibility of confirming the winner of the Electoral College. Trump's speech will be analyzed in the following section.

12:54 pm: the rioters on the walkway overpowered United States Capitol Police (USCP)[7] and streamed across the lawn of the Western entrance of the Capitol building screaming "traitors" at the Police.

1:12 pm: MPD (Metropolitan Police Department) officers arrive to reinforce police line on the West front of the Capitol. Commander Glover requests the Joint Operation Command (coordinating police response) for 'hard gear', which refers to CDU –Civil Disturbance Units and police wearing protective equipment and DSO– Domestic Security Operations team, handling chemical crowd control munitions. The USCP, however, exhibited shortcomings in establishing comprehensive policies and procedures for its CDU, encompassing the definition of its roles, obligations, composition, equipment provisions, and training protocols. CDU's operational preparedness was further compromised due to a deficiency in standardized equipment guidelines, inadequacies highlighted by these events, gaps in specific certifications, inaccuracies, staffing

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[5] Mogelson Luke. "Among the Insurrectionists". The New Yorker.
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/01/25/among-the-insurrectionists
[6] Durkee Alison. "Giuliani Claims His Call For 'Trial By Combat' On Jan. 6 Shouldn't Have Been Taken Literally As Legal Woes Mount". Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2021/05/18/giuliani-claims-his-call-for-trial-by-combat-on-jan-6-shouldnt-have-been-taken-literally-as-legal-woes-mount/
[7] USCP Official Site. https://www.uscp.gov/

uncertainties impacting the unit, a lack of conducted quarterly audits, and non-adherence to property inventory directives.

It was at this time that violence intensified.

12:45 pm: first bomb found at Republican National Committee headquarters (RNC)[8].

1:15 pm: second explosive found at Democratic National Committee (DNC). The strategically placed bombs[9] represent a further effort by the right-wing extremists to direct the authorities far from the Capitol building. The intelligence operations division of the Capitol Police department, tasked with counter-surveillance efforts, had a mere 13 officers in deployment[10]. Furthermore, a significant portion of these officers were redirected to investigate the discovery of two pipe bombs in close proximity, diverting their attention away from the primary focus on safeguarding the Capitol. This is crucial as it underlines the deficiencies in the police system and in threat assessment. Indeed, according to a Statement of Inspector General of US Capitol Police Bolton[11], "the department lacked adequate guidance for operational planning"[12].

Mr. Steven D'Antuono, who served as the Assistant Director in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Washington Field Office (WFO), played a pivotal role, as he supervised the WFO's inquiries into the occurrences at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, including the examination of the placement of pipe bombs near the headquarters of the DNC and RNC. Mr. D'Antuono's testimony introduced fresh insights into the FBI's investigation of the pipe bombs, underlying that an analysis from an FBI laboratory ultimately proved that those bombs were indeed viable, but inoperable, given the time passed between the placement and the discovery –17 hours[13].

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[8] United States Senate Homeland Security. *Examining the January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol.* Washington D.C. February 23, 2021. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21002-7testimony-contee-2021-02-23pdf

[9] Which were put the day before –Jan 5th, 2021, as shown in this video released by the FBI: FBI. *FBI Washington Field Office Releases Video and Additional Information Regarding the Pipe Bomb Investigation.* https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/washingtondc/news/press-releases/fbi-washington-field-office-releases-video-and-additional-information-regarding-the-pipe-bomb-investigation-090821

[10] Grisales Claudia. "Watchdog: Capitol Police Need To Boost Counterintelligence To Address Rising Threats". NPR. https://www.npr.org/2021/05/10/995433965/watchdog-capitol-police-need-to-boost-counterintelligence-to-address-rising-thre

[11] United States Senate. *Statement of Inspector General Michael A. Bolton United States Capitol Police Office of Inspector General.* June 16, 2021. https://www.rules.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony_Bolton1.pdf

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] United States Congress. *Letter to FBI Director on the Interview to Steven D'Antuono.* June 14, 2023 https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2023-06-14-tm-ab-jdj-bl-to-wray-fbi-re-pipe-bombs.pdf

1:49 pm: a dispatcher of MPD declares the situation a riot[14]

1:55 pm: officers on the West side were outnumbered 58 to 1, with more than 9400 people compared to 157 officers, according to an analysis by The Washington Post and Carnegie Mellon University[15]. By 2:31 pm Commander Glover had already asked for reinforcements and munitions 17 times, along with requests for the deployment of the D.C. National Guard (DCNG). The USCP was deficient in establishing explicit policies and protocols that delineated the responsible personnel for operational planning, the specific nature of operational planning documents to be generated, and the appropriate timing for their creation. Furthermore, there was a noticeable absence of directives mandating the synchronization of planning endeavors across diverse USCP units to formulate a comprehensive overarching plan.

The Department further faced limitations in accessing the Capitol's physical security infrastructure. Oversight of door and elevator security was under the purview of Architect of the Capitol-associated facilities personnel. Requests for access, triggered by events like alarm system notifications, necessitated contact between FRU (First Responders Unit) officers and these staff members. During the breach of the Capitol Building complex FRU officers stationed in the Capitol Subway system assumed the responsibility of securing the area as a final defensive measure against the rioters. An official from the Department[16] revealed that officers encountered difficulties in both unlocking and locking the numerous doors and elevators. This challenge was evident during the riot, prompting officers to resort to unconventional methods, such as utilizing furniture to immobilize elevators around the Capitol Subway system.[17]

2:10 pm: the rioters make their way into the building on the West side by breaking windows, and also on the East side by breaching the Senate door. Rioters flooded the capital building corridors.

2:52 pm: First FBI SWAT team enters the Capitol building.

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[14] United States Senate Homeland Security. *Examining the January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol*. Washington D.C. February 23, 2021. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/21002-7testimony-contee-2021-02-23pdf

[15] Bennett Dalton et al. "17 requests for backup in 78 minutes". The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/dc-police-records-capitol-riot/

[16] According to Bolton, as in *op. cit*. United States Senate. *Statement of Inspector General Michael A. Bolton United States Capitol Police Office of Inspector General*. June 16, 2021

[17] Op. Cit. United States Senate. *Statement of Inspector General Michael A. Bolton United States Capitol Police Office of Inspector General*. June 16, 2021.

4:17 pm: Trump tells his followers –in a recorded statement– to go home.

5:02 pm: Departure of 154 officers of the National Guard from D.C. Armory in support of Capitol Police.

6.14 pm: USCP, MPD, and DCNG successfully establish perimeter on the west side of the U.S. Capitol[18]

7:30 pm: Eventually, Capitol Police cleared Congress to resume its work.

8:00 pm: Capitol was finally declared secure[19].
5 people died and 140 officers were injured.

The actual number of protesters varies according to the source –White House transcripts state one million people present, Trump accounts for hundreds of thousands, while for local authorities the number was close to 10,000[20]. These numbers, however, are not central, as the event accentuated the broader concerns of numerous experts who had consistently cautioned that internet platforms had not taken sufficient measures to mitigate extremism and the spread of false information. This vividly demonstrated how online radicalization could escalate into violence, posing a substantial threat to the integrity of US democracy[21]. The turmoil and violence witnessed in Washington on January 6 gathered significant television attention as well. Over 23 million individuals tuned in to cable news channels to witness the event, marking it as CNN's most-watched day in its 40-year history[22], with an average of 5.22 million viewers. Additionally, millions more engaged through online livestreams. Online, the unrest at the Capitol garnered over 4.6 million mentions between 12 am and 6:30 pm ET on that day, as reported by Zignal Labs[23]. The

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[18] United States Department of Defense. *Planning and Execution Timeline for the National Guards' Involvement in the January 6 2021 Violent Attack at the Us Capitol.* https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/11/2002563151/-1/-1/0/PLANNING-AND-EXECUTION-TIMELINE-FOR-THE-NATIONAL-GUARDS-INVOLVEMENT-IN-THE-JANUARY-6-2021-VIOLENT-ATTACK-AT-THE-US-CAPITOL.PDF

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Sardarizadeh Shayan. Lussenhop Jessica. "The 65 days that led to chaos at the Capitol". BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332

[21] Heilweil Rebecca. Ghaffary Shirin. "How Trump's internet built and broadcast the Capitol insurrection". Vox. https://www.vox.com/recode/22221285/trump-online-capitol-riot-far-right-parler-twitter-facebook

[22] CNN. "Yesterday was CNN's Most-Watched Day in History". https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2021/01/07/yesterday-was-cnns-most-watched-day-in-history/

[23] https://zignallabs.com/, Zignal Labs is a firm specializing in tracking online misinformation. This study is taken from op. cit. Heilweil Rebecca. Ghaffary Shirin. "How Trump's internet built and broadcast the Capitol insurrection". Vox.

frequency of mentions experienced a notable increase following Trump's address at the rally in front of the White House and further rose after the mob breached the Capitol.

1.2. "We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore".

Trump's speech has –allegedly– been the trigger for the escalating violence of Jan 6 according to hundreds and also according to his impeachment official document. This section will analyze the significance of it, both in the broader democratic implications and in the specificity of the event. Within this call for action, his words were non-specific, and this is ultimately the reason why his conviction sentence didn't reach the majority in the Senate, as he gave no explicit instruction to actually enter the Capitol. Is instigation enough? Scholars and legal experts are unsure about the course of action and this section will analyze the different sides.

Haslam et al.[24] argue that we all have a personal identity coupled with a collective one and their core basic reasoning is that when we find someone with similar ideals, we put them as part of our self rather than as the other ("us" versus "them" mentality) and Trump indeed appeals in the context of group identity. Donald Trump's address during the January 6th rally serves as evident illustration of these mechanisms in operation. Just as he had done on multiple occasions prior to his election in 2016, Trump emphasized the concept of American exceptionalism, highlighting the unique characteristics that set the nation apart. Simultaneously, he underscored his role in endeavors to 'make America great again', while also prominently identifying adversaries, whether they were internal or external, who had attempted to obstruct his efforts. A meticulous examination of Trump's speech offers additional insight into his endeavors to emphasize a collective social identity, rendering it salient and relevant in the context. Saliency is a particularly crucial concept when dealing with the idea of convincing and framing the public. The following section, indeed, represents an effort to summarize the theories that surround Trump's use of rhetorical figures, framing his political discourse in a way that brings people to continuing to follow him i.e., how prominent political figures repeat the same narrative in order to make it credible and valid to the public.

1.2.1 Theoretical background

This section of the dissertation will be devoted to the explanation of the theories that best explain the attack, in particular investigating the aspects that were used to legitimize the

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[24] Haslam, S. Alexander et al. "Examining the role of Donald Trump and his supporters in the 2021 assault on the US Capitol: A dual-agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership." *The Leadership Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2023): 101622.

insurrection in Trump's followers' eyes. The reason behind the decision to focus on the dialectical aspects is based on the assumption that "words do not simply describe the world, they also change it"[25]. Moreover, the construction of a certain truth takes place both because of the structure of discourse and of the larger interpretative web in which it is embedded[26]. Therefore, by shaping reality, political discourse justified the attack, the delegitimation of the system, which calls to investigate how rhetorical strategies have proved sufficient to legitimize and support it. "For truth claims to become widely accepted as valid and credible versions of reality, they must enter into the public domain where they are repeated, reaffirmed, and reified"[27], as successfully done in this case and in this way the allegation of fraudulent election became prominent in far-right discourse.

Following this logic, the first theory which helps the frame of a particular narrative is the Ethos of Conflict (EOC). According to Bar-Tal[28], EOC is the configuration of central, shared societal beliefs that provide a particular dominant orientation to a society and give meaning to societal life under conditions of intractable conflict. It creates a comprehensive image of the society and serves as the basis for the societal consciousness and its future direction. The fundamental beliefs and values held by a society regarding a conflict can, in turn, be considered a set of ideological principles that enable individuals to perceive reality in a holistic manner, serving as a lens through which society members interpret their experiences, events, and new information and offers guiding principles for social action, all within the intricate framework of an intractable conflict. In the description of the theory there are eight interrelated themes, which together provide for a "single holistic and coherent worldview"[29]. This section will show that not only conflicts comply with the categories and definition of EOC, but it is also particularly relevant for this particular insurrection, as it deals with techniques of legitimation.

Bar-Tal analyzed the difficulties posed by conflicts and identified eight key societal beliefs. These themes have been identified through comprehensive and systematic research carried out in societies experiencing such conflicts, including Israeli Jews, Serbs, Kosovars, Albanians, Croats, Bosnians, Hutus in Rwanda, and Greek and Turkish communities in Cyprus. As the ethos of conflict develops, these eight themes gain prominence and become dominant, serving as frames and symbols that extend beyond specific issues and hint at broader worldviews. The first criterion

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[25] Hodges, Adam. "The dialogic emergence of 'truth' in politics: Reproduction and subversion of the 'war on terror' discourse." *Colorado Research in Linguistics* (2008): 2.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Ibid.

[28] Bar-Tal, Daniel. "Ethos of Conflict". Beyond Intractability. *Conflict Information Consortium*, University of Colorado, Boulder (2004).

[29] Bar-Tal, Daniel, Keren Sharvit, Eran Halperin, and Anat Zafran. "Ethos of conflict: The concept and its measurement." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2012): 43.

is societal beliefs of justness of the society's own goals: the premise is that individuals are unlikely to engage in collective activities, if they do not believe that such actions are justified and appropriate. "Without societal motivation, mobilization would be impossible"[30]. This requires a coherent and persuasive justification for their participation. The societal beliefs that emerge from such conflicts provide a clear and meaningful explanation for the growth of the conflict and the necessity to continue it. Individuals cannot accept conflict goals as arbitrary and unjustified; they require a coherent and legitimate justification for their involvement.

Moreover, societies that are involved in intractable conflicts tend to adopt societal beliefs that delegitimize their opponents. Delegitimization refers to the process of categorizing a group or groups in highly negative terms, thereby excluding them from the realm of human groups that abide by acceptable norms and values. This is because such groups are perceived as violating fundamental human values and norms, which further magnifies the differences between the groups involved in the conflict, intensifies negative emotions such as hatred, anger, scorn, fear, or disgust towards the adversary, encourages deep mistrust and animosity, and implies that the adversary is capable of negative behavior. Delegitimization, therefore, ultimately psychologically legitimizes harming the rival, and ultimately has a motivating and mobilizing function.

Furthermore, there is the societal belief of victimization, influenced by several factors. These include experiencing violence, perceiving one's own goals as just, having a positive collective self-image, and consequently a negative image of the opponent, thus highlighting the adversary's malevolent goals, and discrediting their characteristics ("them" and "us" differentiation). This leads individuals within a society to perceive themselves as the victims of the conflict by emphasizing injustice, harm, evil, and atrocities committed by the opponent, while portraying their own society as morally upright, just, and humane. The feeling of victimization implies that the conflict was initiated by the adversary, who employs unjust and immoral tactics to achieve their goals. Even if individuals in the society did not personally know those who were harmed or killed, they still perceive it as a collective loss that they bear responsibility for. This collective sense of victimhood impedes the ability to empathize with the adversary's perspective and suffering.

Societal beliefs regarding security, then, outline the nature of threats that arise during times of intractable conflict, emphasize the significance of personal and collective safety, and establish the necessary conditions for achieving security. The preservation of security becomes in this context a primary objective for society, often entrusted to the state and its institutions, resources, and personnel. Over time, security has been continually utilized as a primary rationale for many

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[30] *Op. cit.* Bar-Tal, Daniel. "Ethos of Conflict". Beyond Intractability: p. 176.

governmental decisions, even those with no direct impact on security. It has become a justification for initiating actions and responding in military, political, societal, educational, and cultural spheres. Societal beliefs concerning patriotism are somewhat connected to beliefs about security, centering on the crucial bond between society members and their collective as necessary for involvement in a conflict. Patriotism is rooted in people's yearning to be a part of a society that they view positively, with accompanying feelings of belonging, affection, and concern. It also fosters integration and solidarity within the society. In addition to patriotism, beliefs regarding unity are seen as an extension, emphasizing the necessity of preserving unity in the face of external threats by disregarding internal conflicts and disagreements. They center on shared origins, history, and traditions, underscoring the importance of consensus regarding goals, values, and norms. Conflict situations amplify the need for unity and solidarity, while societies experiencing peaceful conditions may tolerate divergence from social norms and criticism of the collective. Failure to maintain unity results in societal polarization and internal tension that may hinder the struggle against the adversary. Finally, there are beliefs about peace, which underline that societies engaged in conflict need "a light at the end of the tunnel"[31], a source of positive expectation.

According to those with criteria, therefore, EOC functions as a "system of interpretation that (becomes) well accepted"[32]. In this context, individuals require a frame, a cognitive structure that facilitates comprehension of the social world in terms of direction, orientation, and perspective. This principle ultimately impacts the societal perception of conflict-related occurrences, the interpretation of such experiences, and the appraisal of potential solutions aimed at resolving the conflict.

Here the analysis turns to framing theory. The concept of framing provides a consistent means of understanding the power of communication. Framing analysis sheds light on how information transfer, such as through a speech, utterance, news report, or novel, exerts influence over human consciousness[33]. It involves two key elements: selection and salience. To frame is to choose specific aspects of a perceived reality and highlight them in a communication, in a manner that advances a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the subject matter at hand. Salience refers to making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences. Texts can achieve this by placing information in prominent locations, repeating it, or associating it with culturally familiar symbols.

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[31] *Ivi.*: p. 200.

[32] *Ivi.*: p.211.

[33] Entman, Robert M. *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and US foreign policy.* University of Chicago Press, 2004.

This framing approach has significant implications for political communication[34]. Language, indeed, helps in the explanation and the creation of narratives; it is integral in the construction of social reality and, ultimately, it is the frame critical to the narrative's acceptance of rejection[35]. Frames, as a consequence, refer to shared and enduring principles that symbolically structure the social world. Media outlets do this by selecting and highlighting specific aspects of events in order to construct a narrative or interpretation. This is in line with Goffman's definition of framing, which posits that the media focuses its attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. This process of construction operates by making certain elements more salient than others, which then frames the event and provides a reference point for viewers to interpret subsequent information[36].

Another prominent definition is offered by Reese: frames are "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world"[37]. This definition contains different aspects, which together are essential in understanding how frames emerge and persist in time, by conditioning the audience. Among the features it is crucial to note that they frame reality, through patterns that ultimately structure (frame) the social world and the meaning the audience gives to it. This is done thanks to the rhetoric employed, through the use of specific communicative and persuasive tools[38].

1.2.1.1 Parallel with the War on Terror rhetoric

The above-described theories can be relevant for any type of political discourse. Before showing how they apply to Trump's widespread appeal to the public, it will be shown how the initiation of the War on Terror in 2001 was legitimized through framing political reality and appealing to broader societal beliefs. Why is this important for the current analysis? Because it is shown how in another circumstance (and in a limited period of time), a series of interconnected speeches reinforced the idea of waging war against the enemy and succeeded in both initiating the conflict and mobilizing enough support to legitimize it with a convincing and fascinating story[39]. This is

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[34] Entman, Robert M. "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm." *Journal of communication* 43, no. 4 (1993).

[35] Ryan, Michael. "Framing the war against terrorism: US newspaper editorials and military action in Afghanistan." *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)* 66, no. 5 (2004).

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] Reese, Stephen D., and Seth C. Lewis. "Framing the war on terror: The internalization of policy in the US press." *Journalism* 10, no. 6 (2009): 777.

[38] Carter, Michael J. "The hermeneutics of frames and framing: An examination of the media's construction of reality." *Sage Open* 3, no. 2 (2013)

[39] Mitchell, Lynsey. "Monsters, Heroes, Martyrs and Their Storytellers: The Enduring Attraction of Culturally Embedded Narratives in the 'War on Terror'." *Liverpool Law Review* 35, no. 1 (2014).

exactly Trump's strategy to appeal to the public and mobilize support both for the 2016 elections and for the fraudulent claims of the 2020 elections.

It is therefore shown by the instance of the War on Terror how framing and rhetorical tools are found in presidential speeches, journalistic articles and how they were used to legitimize it. Legitimation of any action (be it a war or any legislation) is imperative before it is undertaken, and the War on Terror is not an exception. The principal way it is validated is through the framing of rhetorical speeches and text. Oddo[40] underlines that this is achieved through the "soft power" that the leaders, as well as the prominent newspaper exert over the citizens: the media and important political figures have used the EOC criteria to legitimize it. First of all, both corporate television and radio in the US following the attack have used the framing of "war in America", "America under attack" without any interruption for three straight days after the attack, thereby "driving the country into hysteria and making it certain" that the country, the Americans, would understand the need for military intervention[41], thus making it legitimate to initiate a war. "These measures are essential. The only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows"[42]; "Our military action is also designed to clear the way for sustained, comprehensive and relentless operation to drive them out and bring them to justice"[43]; "In our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment"[44]. Other than freedom, humanitarian rights discourse played a role in justifying the intervention[45], as well as the so-called "civilizing mission": "by aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder"[46].

This also confirms the use of rhetoric for the delegitimation of the enemy, aimed at exploiting people's perception of the other[47] and, consequently, the legitimation of the home force. It is crucial to underline that from the first speech on the evening of the terrorist attack, President

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[40] Oddo, John. "War legitimation discourse: Representing 'Us' and 'Them'in four US presidential addresses." *Discourse & Society* 22, no. 3 (2011).

[41] Kellner, Douglas. "Bushspeak and the politics of lying: presidential rhetoric in the "war on terror"." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007).

[42] Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001*. George Bush White House Archives. Selected Speeches of George W. Bush 2001 – 2008. (2001c): 65-73. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html

[43] Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan, October 7, 2001*. George Bush White House Archives. Selected Speeches of George W. Bush 2001 – 2008. (2001d): 75-77. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html

[44] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001*.

[45] *Op.cit.* Mitchell, Lynsey. "Monsters, Heroes, Martyrs and Their Storytellers: The Enduring Attraction of Culturally Embedded Narratives in the 'War on Terror'": 84-85.

[46] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001*.

[47] *Op. cit.* Mitchell, Lynsey. "Monsters, Heroes, Martyrs and Their Storytellers: The Enduring Attraction of Culturally Embedded Narratives in the 'War on Terror'": 95.

Bush and the media have constantly evoked the evilness of terrorists, implying the "goodness" of the Americans: in his first statement only, the word 'evil' has been used five times[48], thus framing the attack as "act of war", legitimizing a military reaction, because "fanatical terrorists" threats the existing world order. The discourse of evil in the political realm, as well in the media realm, is thus "totalizing and absolutistic"[49], assuming a binary, Manichean logic in which no contradiction of understanding is allowed. Those binary opposites represent two sides of the same coin, both necessary to construct a narrative based on the attempted disruption of the existing order, the presence of a hero or "white knight" the spectator identify with, and the enemy, namely the radicalized character that foil the hero's actions[50]. This is linked also with the notion of sacrifice, to be invoked for potentially infinite gains to outweigh immediate losses[51], by making references to intangible values such as the ideal of freedom and to spirituality, through secular and spiritual elements, necessary to prove that the home front is ready to make greater sacrifice than the enemy. Legitimation is not found in adults only, but in the entirety of the population: "As much as I don't want my dad to fight (...) I'm willing to give him to you."[52]–from a letter of a fourth grader with a father in the military.

This is further connected to the criteria of national unity, and the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon, a rhetoric often used for the further legitimation. "Terrorist attacks can shake the foundation of our biggest buildings. But they cannot touch the foundations of America"[53]; "To all the men and women in our military –every sailor, every soldier, every airman, every coast guardsman, every Marine– I say this: Your mission is defined; your objectives are clear; your goal is just. You have my full confidence, and you will have every tool you need to carry out your duty"[54]; "We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail"[55]. The features through which the legitimation is appealing are therefore mostly based on the importance of the national culture of America "under attack" and

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[48] Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks, September 11, 2001.* George Bush White House Archives. Selected Speeches of George W. Bush 2001 – 2008. (2001a):57-58. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html#:~:text=THE%20PRESIDENT%3A%20Good%20evening.,and%20dads%2C%20friends%20and%20neighbors.

[49] *Op. Cit.* Kellner, Douglas. "Bushspeak and the politics of lying: presidential rhetoric in the "war on terror".

[50] *Op.* Cit. Mitchell, Lynsey. "Monsters, Heroes, Martyrs and Their Storytellers: The Enduring Attraction of Culturally Embedded Narratives in the 'War on Terror'": 97.

[51] Houen, Alex. "Reckoning Sacrifice in "War on Terror" Literature." *American Literary History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 575.

[52] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan, October 7, 2001.*

[53] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks, September 11, 2001.*

[54] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan, October 7, 2001.*

[55] *Ibid.*

consequently an appeal for unification[56], with an accentuation on compassion, sacrifice, national service, and community. The use of rhetorical "We", "I", "You", in the political discourse serves as a further rhetorical toll to "bind himself" –Bush– with the country, repeatedly invoking the difference between good and evil, with the proposal of "eradicating the evil from the world"[57].

This is also the confirmation of security needs "These acts of mass murder were intended to frighten our nation into chaos and retreat. But they have failed. Our country is strong"[58], but also of the positive self-image instilled in the country, "The USA is a friend to the Afghan people"[59]. This is almost an oxymoron, but this narrative of being peaceful has been constantly practiced: "Generosity of America (...) As we strike military targets, we'll also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan"[60]; "The United States respects the people of Afghanistan –after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid -- but we condemn the Taliban regime"[61]; "I gave Taliban leaders a series of clear and specific demands… none of these demands were met. And now the Taliban will pay a price" (…) These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. (Applause.) The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate"[62]

Delegitimization is also achieved through the appeal to identity, through the boundary between the "Us versus Them" rhetorical tool, which identifies and "otheres"[63] the enemy, thereby determining who is the rival and legitimizing the motivations for an intervention. Polarization, therefore, is a key legitimation (and delegitimation) strategy for intervention[64]. "Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber –a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms –our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other"[65]. Unilateral military action was being legitimized from September 11 until the beginning of the

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[56] *Op. Cit* Kellner, Douglas. "Bushspeak and the politics of lying: presidential rhetoric in the "war on terror"." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007)

[57] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001.*

[58] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks, September 11, 2001.*

[59] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan, October 7, 2001.*

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001.*

[62] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on Operations in Afghanistan, October 7, 2001*

[63] Esch, Joanne. "Legitimizing the "War on Terror": Political myth in official-level rhetoric." *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2010).

[64] *Op. Cit.* Oddo, John. "War legitimation discourse: Representing 'Us' and 'Them' in four US presidential addresses."

[65] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Remarks to New York Rescue Workers, September 14, 2001*

intervention, through a further use of a rhetorical toll of victimization and the shift from U.S. attacked to 'America strikes back'.

Framing, as a final instance of the use of rhetorical tools for justification of the War, is a prominent practice, as demonstrated as well by the EOC criteria. Framing, as the intentional selection of certain aspects of given events to shape public opinion and gather support. It is an additional tool used to reinforce Bush's War on Terror and pre-defined social meaning, through a set of assumptions and explanations about the US struggle against terrorism, while constructing a specific view of reality. Indeed, the invocation of key phrases, often repeated or very similar to each other, may be sufficient to point to that reality and reinforce it.

For consolidating the US positive image as a friend of the Afghan population, the US shared with the public its alliance with Afghan factions and the commitment in building civilian infrastructures, including schools and clinics, while avoiding references to the civilian casualties[66]. The aim was preventing the public from questioning the ethical nature and moral foundation of the intervention because of "collateral damages". Additionally, crucial has been the mechanism of non-mentioning the downside(s) of military intervention: the dominant US rhetoric claimed the military intervention and the use of force to be legitimized by self-defense and humanitarian reasons, but the same action of self-defense could be understood as direct assault by the enemy. Still, while the public perceived the operation as legitimate and hoped justice for 9/11 to be achieved, it is not realistic to send soldiers for saving life and to justify warfare on humanitarian issues, but rather, on self-interest and reaffirmation of the American identity. Another crucial example in which rhetoric through language is used as a means to framing the conflict is found in newspapers, in media frames. Ryan[67] analyzed more than 100 newspapers following 9/11 and found that writers for the major US newspapers posited a singular narrative, without ever changing it: military intervention as necessary and the only effective "deterrent to terrorism", with no mention of any alternative of any argument against war. There is no reference, therefore, to any option different from the military operation, probably because, rather than considering any alternative to the War in Afghanistan in light of reconciliation, the Bush Administration was driven by functional motivation to pursue the War, instead of looking for cooperation.

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[66] Connah, Leoni. "US intervention in Afghanistan: Justifying the Unjustifiable?." *South Asia Research* 41, no. 1 (2021): 75.

[67] *Op. Cit.* Ryan, Michael. "Framing the war against terrorism: US newspaper editorials and military action in Afghanistan".

Language, thus, is an essential tool used in the framing of the conflict by media: through the use of general terms, of quick and familiar interpretation[68], the audience is drawn to interpret the narrative as posited by those broad term, usually organized into opposition with each other (the narrative of "us" versus "them"). Moreover, the War on Terror, through the framing of a simple, broad, and general discourse, creates a sort of "political myth"[69] and makes the individuals more personally connected to the events and narrative, which lessens their indifference to the war, thereby providing particular significance and legitimacy. "National tragedy", "wound to our country", "great suffering and sorrow"[70]. This rhetorical emphasis on the national grievance was achieved through the use of repetition, of the underlying victimization and sorrow of the country, thus affecting even those individuals who were not previously either directly or indirectly influenced by the attack. Frame, in this context of legitimacy, lies in the variation to symbols, key words and concepts that the media outlets make us of. And, when used in rhetoric, "these words allow a myth to serve as an implicit frame of reference for understanding the given narrative"[71].

1.2.1.2 Trump's use of frames as a legitimation tool

Trump, as most political leaders, strategically employs discourse strategies in a calculated and persuasive manner to achieve political advantages over his adversaries. The analysis of different speeches reveal that Trump employed a range of linguistic strategies to actively construct the perception of a new generation of leaders who guide the American people, foster popular sovereignty, advance progress, and dutifully serve the citizenry. The extensive utilization of physical processes within transitive systems communicates the statement that American citizens should aspire to rewarding and fulfilling careers. The heightened prevalence of relationship processes underscores the idea that every task, regardless of its difficulty, challenge, should be regarded as honorable and noble. The application of modal verbs, particularly medium modals, renders the political prospects conveyed by Trump more acceptable to the general public. The recurring usage of inclusive pronouns like "we" and "our" forges a sense of closeness between Trump and his audience, generating popular support for his stance.

The following analysis –carried out through the study of several Trump official speeches mentioned above– shows how a specific narrative is repeated to mobilize support for legitimizing

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[68] Boulton, Jack. "Defining the enemy: myth and representation in the War on Terror." *vis-à-vis: Explorations in Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (2013).

[69] *Op. Cit.* Esch, Joanne. "Legitimizing the "War on Terror": Political myth in official-level rhetoric."

[70] *Op. Cit.* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks, September 11, 2001;* Bush, George, W. *Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001.*

[71] *Op. Cit.* Esch, Joanne. "Legitimizing the "War on Terror": Political myth in official-level rhetoric.".

his cause (the election) and presents similarities with the rhetoric and narrative used in the War on Terror –as well as in many other cases. Trump perhaps fits best the EOC theory, as he continues to have popular support notwithstanding –and even because of– his political discourse, mainly based on discrimination of the "others" (non-American citizens), delegitimation of the adversary, many addresses based on patriotism and *mak(ing) America great again* (MAGA), which have a great appeal to the ordinary citizen, attracted by proposals such as to generate new jobs for Americans, against the established system which is giving away contracts to give it to foreigners.

Trump's speeches present a range of similarities, from praising himself, the work he has done throughout his life, his achievements and how his successes can benefit the American citizens if he gets elected. They cover several assurances, alternating from political, ideological, and self-praising: "a Trump rally involved much more than just a Trump speech"[72]. Put plainly, a Trump rally is a vivid portrayal of a particular idea of America, showcasing how Trump and his supporters want America to be.

How does trump continue to maintain (and even increase) his support? How is it possible that someone who has been impeached twice, faced four indictments, denied the election results twice, incited the Capitol attack, and is under investigation in various legal cases –including election interference– continues to exert significant influence within the Republican Party and its followers? Unsurprisingly, he asserts his innocence while leveling accusations against the Biden administration for engaging in extensive election interference and manipulating the Justice Department and the FBI for political purposes. And it has always been his political strategy, framing the discourse in such a way that his followers have always remained devoted.

Donald Trump's success can be attributed to his charisma and his expertise at tapping into feelings of fear, resentment, and humiliation that are embedded in a deeper narrative. Trump himself harbors resentment toward the New York elite and holds negative views towards successful Black figures, such as Barack Obama, whom he perceives as undeserving or responsible for diverting his achievements through a focus on racial tensions in American politics. What is noteworthy, even if it seems counterintuitive, however, is that this narrative of racial animosity is occasionally embraced by minority groups who hold antagonistic feelings towards other minority communities. A recent study[73] indicates that a growing number of Latinos and people of color are being drawn into the white supremacist movement. Donald Trump has skillfully crafted a narrative

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[72] Reicher, Stephen D. Haslam, Alexander S. "Trump's Appeal: What Psychology Tells Us". Scientific American. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/trump-rsquo-s-appeal-what-psychology-tells-us/

[73] Hernández, Tanya Katerí. *Racial innocence: Unmasking Latino anti-Black bias and the struggle for equality*. Beacon Press, 2022

around himself where he assumes the position of a "victim-in-chief"[74], even adopting the role of a martyr, allowing his electorate to connect with him. Simultaneously, he portrays himself as a hyper-masculine superhero, a projection point for his base. In the lead-up to the 2016 elections, he positioned himself as the "voice of the forgotten"[75]. As the 2024 primaries approach, he presents himself as their "warrior" and "champion of justice," pledging to deliver "retribution" for those he claims have been mistreated and betrayed[76].

While studying three speeches in particular, it emerged both the charisma and the repetitive narrative of Trump's discourse. Starting with the delegitimization of his opponent(s), Trump conveys the idea of a system in failure, already flawed and he blames the existing government, which he quickly intends to change and improve. "For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost (…) And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay."[77]. This immediately resonates in the logic of the self-legitimization while placing a negative image of the other. The following further promotes his image: "Under Biden and the radical Democrats, America has been mocked, derided, and brought to its knees perhaps like never before. But we are here tonight to declare that it does not have to be this way, it does not have to be this way"[78]. Trump's central focus was thus to depict America as deeply deteriorated. He famously asserted, "We don't win anymore". Interestingly, then, Trump's campaign differed from the conventional Republican notion that America is already exceptional. This contrast was particularly evident in his campaign book, "Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again"[79] where he declared: "the concept of American Greatness, of our country as the leader of the free and unfree world, has vanished". Instead, Trump's campaign pivoted around the belief that a singular

[74] Friedersdorf, Conor. "America's Victim in Chief". The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/victim-in-chief/544463/

[75] Trump, Donald J. *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.* (2016). https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-cleveland

[76] Trump, Donald, J. *Conservative Political Action Conference (2023).* https://www.c-span.org/video/?526456-1/president-trump-speaks-cpac

[77] Trump, Donald, J. *Inauguration Address. (2017)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRBsJNdK1t0

[78] *Op. Cit.* Trump, Donald, J. *Conservative Political Action Conference (2023).*

[79] Trump, Donald J. "*Crippled America: How to make America great again.*" (2015), Simon & Schuster in Gilmore, Jason, Charles M. Rowling, Jason A. Edwards, and Nicole T. Allen. "Exceptional "We" or exceptional "Me"? Donald Trump, American exceptionalism, and the remaking of the modern jeremiad." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2020)

individual, himself, possessed the capability to restore the nation's exceptional status. Succinctly put, he emphasized: "nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it"[80].

At the same time, he conveys in his speeches an image of victimization, of being the target of the corrupted system. This is particularly relevant after the 2020 elections, for which he ultimately instilled violent conduct on people and culminated in the attack at Capitol Hill. Certainly, in addition to numerous enthusiastic mentions of the ingroup (observable through the usage of terms like 'we', 'our'), Trump equally employed nearly as many references to different outgroups that were perceived as threats to him and his followers, groups they were opposing ('they' and 'them'— including Democrats, 'weak' Republicans, and the media — all of which were perceived as being un-American). "We must conduct a top to bottom overhaul to clean out the festering rot and corruption of Washington DC. (…) And I'm a victim. I will tell you I'm a victim. Think of it. (…) –The FBI– hired somebody Timchenko for $200,000 a year to focus on Trump and to get Trump and other things, including the raid of a very beautiful house that sits right here, the raid of Mar-a-Lago. Think of it and I say, why didn't you raid Bush's place? Why didn't you raid Clinton? 32,000 emails, why didn't you raid Clinton's place? Why didn't you do Obama who took a lot of things with him?"[81]. Again, by showing how he is the victim, and the authorities are more inclined to exonerate from legal consequences other Presidents –or, as in this case, exonerate others from the scrupulous research of their belongings–, he generates more support for his cause.

Central to his discourse are the American people, the importance of the country and the unity of its citizens. "Now, our country needs –our country needs a truly great leader, and we need a truly great leader now. We need a leader that wrote "The Art of the Deal. (…) We need a leader that can bring back our jobs, can bring back our manufacturing, can bring back our military"[82]. Trump is a great public speaker, in that he succeeds in conveying the idea that the more people vote for him, the better for the economy, for security and for giving the people what they ultimately are in need of. "We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people. Together, we will determine the course of America and the world for years to come. Because today (…) we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People"[83]. This was during his inaugural speech in 2017, and years later, in 2023, when he announced his 2024 candidacy, he asserted the

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[80] *Op. Cit.* Trump, Donald J. *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.* (2016).

[81] Trump, Donald J. *Former President Trump announces 2024 presidential bid.* (2022). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tSYwJ1_htE

[82] Trump, Donald J. *Presidential Announcement Speech for the 2016 elections. (2015)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkysjbM

[83] Trump, Donald, J. *Inauguration Address. (2017)* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRBsJNdK1t0

greatness of the nation under his presidency and has been following this line of reasoning for every speech since he left office. "Two years ago, when I left office, the United States stood ready for its golden age. Our nation was at the pinnacle of power, prosperity, and prestige, towering above all rivals, vanquishing all enemies, and striding into the future confident and so strong. In four short years, everybody was doing great. (…) But we will not be intimidated. We will persevere. We will stand tall in the storm. We will march forward into the torrent and we in the end will win. Our country will win. We will win"[84]. In Trump's case, along with positive acknowledgments directed towards his supporters, which served to reinforce their identity, values, and distinctions, there was a consistent effort to remind them of their collective identity as American patriots, shaped by their shared sense of victimization. Previous research has demonstrated that victimhood can be a potent catalyst for stimulating group members into participating in destructive collective actions, and Trump's followers have been found to resonate with the rhetoric of "collective victimization", a theme also central to a variety of conspiracy theories. Significantly, this process contributed to establishing a united ingroup identity by highlighting perceived adversaries that the group must confront and oppose[85].

1.2.2 Trump's speech on Jan 6, 2021: an analysis.

Effective leaders must function as "entrepreneurs of identity"[86], articulating their leadership using terms rooted in social identity. A particularly impactful method they employ is through the utilization of references like 'we' and 'us', which foster a connection and create a shared identity between the leaders and their audiences. This was particularly evident in Trump's address on Capitol Hill, as well as his capacity to determine a 'us versus them' mentality in terms of both the economy and politics. This served as a means to persuade the public to take action, to mobilize for a cause. This section will thus analyze the rhetoric and narrative used in Trump's speech the day of the attack at the Capitol, a speech that will remain engraved in America's history.

It is first of all crucial to acknowledge that the context in which Trump delivered his speech on January 6th was distinct from his previous addresses. Previously, Trump spoke as a presidential candidate (2015-2016), as the President (2017-2021), or to remain in office (2019-2020). These speeches generally involved discussions about opponents, the necessity to defeat them, and the call for people's support in that effort. In contrast, his January 6th speech was geared towards

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[84] *Op. Cit.* Trump, Donald J. *Former President Trump announces 2024 presidential bid.* (2022).
[85] *Op. Cit.* Haslam, S. Alexander et al. "Examining the role of Donald Trump and his supporters in the 2021 assault on the US Capitol: A dual-agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership".
[86] *Ibid.*

preventing a specific event – the certification of the 2020 election results, which required direct action from his followers, not just their support[87]. As the 2020 election approached, Trump increasingly criticized COVID-19 lockdowns, framing them as a façade for election fraud[88] that could lead to the theft of the election from him. Even before the election took place, he hinted that he might not accept the election's outcomes, especially in swing states. This was a shared sentiment, leading to the emergence of the 'Stop the Steal' movement on social media in early September 2020 –a phrase that saw its first appearance in 2016[89]. The movement gained traction during the election with armed protests at election counts in Michigan and Arizona on election day[90]. It gained even more prominence after November 7th, 2020, the day Joe Biden, with 80 million votes compared to Trump's 74 million, was projected to win the presidency. This period saw 'Stop the Steal' protests across the nation, attended by groups such as the Proud Boys, resulting in violence against counter-protestors during a 'Million Maga' march on November 14th[91]. In this instance, it was Trump himself who justified the attack as a response against antifa[92].

Soon, the various groups contesting the election results united on January 6th, 2021 –the day Congress, as abovementioned, under Vice-President Pence's oversight, was set to formally certify the election outcome. While usually a ceremonial event, it holds significant decision-making weight. In 2021, Trump and others hoped it could be exploited to challenge the result and declare Trump President for a second term. Consequently, a 'Rally to Save America' was scheduled for that day. Trump himself tweeted on December 19th: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!"[93]. He continued to post similar messages, encouraging attendance and reposting advertisements for the event in the following days and weeks. In this context, the Rally to Save America began around 9 am on January 6th and before Trump's speech, there were 12 other speakers. Among them, Mo Brooks, a Republican representative from Alabama, addressed the

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[87] Ntontis, Evangelos et al. "A warrant for violence? An analysis of Donald Trump's speech before the US Capitol attack". *British Journal of Social Psychology*. (2023).

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] Holt, Jared et al. "#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection". Just Security. (2021). https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/

[90] Crump, James. "'Stop the count' or 'count those votes'? Trump supporters chant conflicting statements in Michigan and Arizona". Independent UK. (2020). https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/trump-supporters-vote-michgan-arizona-us-election-2020-b1622609.html

[91] Allam, Hannah. "A March Without Millions Is Still A Worrying Sign Of A Nation Divided". NPR. https://www.npr.org/2020/11/15/935181031/a-march-without-millions-is-still-a-worrying-sign-of-a-nation-divided

[92] Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. Nov 14, 2020. https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump

[93] Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. Dec 19, 2020. https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump

crowd as American patriots, urging them to be willing to fight for America and take the fight to Capitol Hill. Similar sentiments were echoed by other speakers: Katrina Pierson stated, "we are going to fight for our country"; Amy Kramer urged continued fight for America, and Donald Trump Jr. echoed the call to stand up and hold representatives accountable; Eric Trump told the crowd to "March on the Capitol today".

President Trump's speech followed, starting just before noon, and lasting around 70 minutes. The rally's title, 'Save America,' along with preceding speakers, had already established a clear frame for his remarks. The context was well-defined as a crisis endangering the nation, necessitating a fight by American patriots to prevent its theft. The key issues of this current analysis aim to address how Trump characterized the sides involved in the election dispute, whether he moralized these as good or evil, how he described relations between the sides, what forms of action he advocated for his followers, and if there are any other critical aspects of his speech essential to his advocacy. All of this can be brought back to the EOC and framing theories, which are used as an astute technique to convey a message, to legitimize specific actions.

The categorization is unequivocal[94]. On one side, the ingroup embodies American patriots –we– who not only belong to the nation but also actively advocate for it. This means a politicized activist identity where individuals stand up to safeguard the country when it faces threats, and particularly electoral malpractice, as articulated by Trump: "American patriots are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious Republic"[95]. On the contrary, the outgroup –they– are not simply labeled as Democrats but are depicted as "emboldened radical-left Democrats"[96]. It is essential to underline that this characterization seeks to differentiate a faction of extremist Democrats from the broader party. Still, Trump elsewhere in the speech contends that all Democrats are complicit in election fraud.

Thus, what Trump suggests is that identifying as a Democrat inherently aligns with being radical, left leaning, and emboldened. In essence, Democrats are portrayed as ideologically foreign to the American tradition –against "our country"[97]. This implication is further elucidated later in the speech where he argues that " Democrats enacted policies that chipped away our jobs, weakened our military, threw open our borders and put America last"[98]. Sometimes, Trump implies that Democrat voters are merely foreigners. However, even as (emboldened, radical, left)

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[94] *Op. Cit.* Ntontis, Evangelos et al. "A warrant for violence? An analysis of Donald Trump's speech before the US Capitol attack".
[95] Trump, Donald J. *Trump's Speech at D.C. Rally on Jan. 6.* (2021). https://www.wsj.com/video/trump-full-speech-at-dc-rally-on-jan-6/E4E7BBBF-23B1-4401-ADCE-7D4432D07030.html
[96] *Ibid.*
[97] *Ibid.*
[98] *Ibid.*

Democrats constitute the primary outgroup, it is evident that Trump doesn't perceive them as acting in isolation. From the outset, Trump urges the media to "show what's really happening out here"[99] while simultaneously alleging that "the media will not show the magnitude of this crowd". The 'fake news' media is depicted as accomplices in 'the steal.' Just like Democrats, the media is not aligned with the people and certainly not for the people. On the contrary, Trump asserts that "our media is not free. It's not fair. It suppresses thought. It suppresses speech, and it's become the enemy of the people"[100]. However, the media, no matter how flawed, is not alone in this view and the list keeps expanding –an anti-American outgroup comprised of Democrats, the media, and big tech. There's an additional element in this coalition, particularly significant in Trump's overarching argument. He sometimes refers to them as "weak Republicans" and at other times as 'RINOs' (Republicans in name only). "Democrats have gotten away with election fraud and weak Republicans. And that's what they are. There's so many weak Republicans"[101].

While Trump's portrayal of the outgroup is rich with negative moral attributions, he equally illustrates and emphasizes the moral values of the ingroup. For instance, he articulates "As this enormous crowd shows, we have truth and justice on our side. We have a deep and enduring love for America in our hearts. We love our country. We have overwhelming pride in this great country, and we have it deep in our souls"[102].

Furthermore, he states "we fight like hell, and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore"[103] underscoring that failure to do so jeopardizes the very existence of the nation. This argument combines pragmatism with a sense of urgency – confronting an existential threat that necessitates immediate action to prevent the dissolution of the collective. Simultaneously, Trump's argument encompasses both universal and particularistic moral dimensions. On one hand, there's a universal duty to challenge immorality. On the other, our specific group –American patriots– is characterized by their commitment to upholding moral correctness, particularly in relation to America. The universal aspect is exemplified in the assertion that "you don't concede where there's theft involved"[104]. The particularistic facet is evident in the characterization of American patriots as those who never give up or concede, as well as in the portrayal of American institutions with terms like 'honesty' and 'integrity,' and the American

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[99] *Ibid.*

[100] *Ibid.*

[101] *Ibid.*

[102] *Ibid.*

[103] *Ibid.*

[104] *Ibid.*

Republic as 'glorious'. "American patriots who are committed to the honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic"[105].

In a nutshell, therefore, to be recognized as genuine Republicans and American patriots, individuals are compelled and bound to take action. Failure to do so results in exclusion, as indicated by Trump's assertion regarding Republicans who neglect to oppose certification: "we have to primary the hell out of those who don't fight"[106]. Beyond this, individuals are not only obliged but also morally justified in relinquishing conventions and resolutely battling to safeguard America (the virtuous) from its adversaries (the malevolent). Moreover, as already highlighted, Trump's older speeches were situated within the framework of seeking general endorsement for his presidency or continuation in office and therefore, the context of Jan 6th was particularly distinctive in its rhetoric. Going more into detail, the older speeches did not revolve around specific actions or the audience taking matters into their own hands against adversaries. Rather, they centered on validating Trump's measures against those adversaries. In contrast, this particular speech unequivocally focused on rallying support for a specific objective: obstructing the impending certification of the election by Congress. This goal was to be achieved through the direct actions of his followers. The emphasis shifted away from delineating Trump's intentions to prescribing what his followers should undertake.

Moreover, Trump's stance became more radical compared to previous MAGA rhetoric. While he previously argued that America's adversaries had diminished the nation's prominence, with restoration under his leadership being the solution, he did not cast doubt on the nation's very existence. However, on January 6th, he asserted that the certification of the election would effectively dismantle the nation, leaving nothing left to restore. Consequently, on that crucial day, immediate action was imperative. Any individual identifying as an American and valuing the virtues of the nation could not abstain or postpone involvement. This rationale illuminates the recurring emphasis on a moral duty to act –a factor that has garnered significant attention in recent social movement literature as a pivotal driver of participation[107]. Arguably, the higher the potential consequences of inaction, the more substantial the influence of this moral obligation becomes.

Crucial for the inquiry of the next section is that while Trump occasionally mentions walking or marching to the Capitol and encourages the crowd to "peacefully and patriotically make (their) voices heard"[108], these statements do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the

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[105] *Ibid.*

[106] *Ibid.*

[107] *Op. Cit.* Ntontis, Evangelos et al. "A warrant for violence? An analysis of Donald Trump's speech before the US Capitol attack".

[108] *Op. Cit.* Trump, Donald J. *Trump's Speech at D.C. Rally on Jan. 6.* (2021).

actions required along the way and/or upon reaching Congress[109]. Defining violence remains a complex matter, as actions deemed violent by one may be construed as legitimate self-defense by another. The ambiguity persists in terms of the precise actions that must be taken to halt Congress –particularly Republican members– from certifying the election. Although Trump emphasizes that the crowd, as American patriots, must act and transcend their customary restraint, the specifics of the required actions remain uncertain. Nevertheless, he assures them that embracing the necessary measures to vanquish America's adversaries will lead to a promising future. This future envisages the resurgence of America's greatness. The question which remains debated is therefore the following: can Trump be –legally– held accountable and liable for the events unfolded at the Capitol on Jan 6th, 2021?

1.2.2.1 Freedom of speech: codification and role of social media

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees various freedoms including speech, religion, press, and assembly[110]. However, a critical issue arises when differentiating between free speech and speech that incites harm or violence. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of recent discussions surrounding Donald Trump's actions, as he was acquitted of charges related to his speech[111]. The challenge lies in establishing a clear boundary between the right to free speech and the dissemination of hate speech.

In democratic societies, freedom operates as a vital instrument for the practice of democracy, facilitating the connection between representatives and citizens. Nevertheless, the contemporary surge in conspiracy theories challenges the traditional assumption that rational discourse consistently prevails in the realm of liberal democratic public discourse[112]. This trend not only jeopardizes the democratic structure but also undermines its foundational cornerstone—the Constitution. Donald Trump, since assuming office, has notably altered the implicit and unspoken regulations governing rhetorical interactions and political communication. This transformation is particularly evident in his escalated use of conspiracy theories on the Twitter platform, culminating in allegations of election fraud. This communication strategy raises an array of concerns and

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[109] *Op. Cit.* Ntontis, Evangelos et al. "A warrant for violence? An analysis of Donald Trump's speech before the US Capitol attack".

[110] Constitution of the United States. *First Amendment*.
https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-1/#:~:text=Congress%20shall%20make%20no%20law,for%20a%20redress%20of%20grievances

[111] Hamed, Dalia M. "Trump's January 6 address: Hate speech or freedom of speech? A transdisciplinary study." *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences* 4, no. 5 (2022).

[112] Boyer, Cynthia. "Conspiracy Theories and the US President's Exercise of Free Speech on Social Media: Constitutional Issues and Challenges." U. St. Thomas JL & Pub. Pol'y 15 (2021).

questions aligned with the principles of the First Amendment. Consequently, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the employment of conspiracy discourse as a form of speech act executed by political figures to achieve specific political goals.

It is first of all essential to clarify some key terms. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a conspiracy theory is "a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators or a theory asserting that a secret of great importance is being kept from the public"[113]. Legally speaking, on the other hand, a definition is offered by the Cornell Law School, asserting that "conspiracy is an agreement between two or more people to commit an illegal act, along with an intent to achieve the agreement's goal"[114]. Yet, in contemporary times, lies have taken on a more democratic nature, affecting not only political parties but also the media. This phenomenon has not only entrenched itself in the political landscape but has also become a strategic communication tactic and a prevalent political discourse worldwide, notably in the United States. However, the use of lies as a political instrument is not a recent development. Jonathan Swift, a renowned writer and satirist, highlighted this in his 1710 essay titled "The Art of Political Lying", exploring the widespread occurrence of untruths in politics and raising a timeless ethical dilemma: should misleading the public be justified for their own benefit? Swift's insights remain particularly relevant in modern society, as the various common practices, spanning the entire political spectrum and varying in frequency, have coincided with a decline in voters' trust in institutions[115]. To illustrate this, in 1958, at its launch, the National Election Study initiated inquiries into trust in government. At that time, nearly three-quarters of Americans expressed trust in the federal government's ability to consistently make right decisions. However, a recent Pew Research Center survey conducted between April 5 and 11, 2021 presented a drastically different scenario[116]. The survey indicated, therefore, that public trust in government remains notably lower in comparison to previous decades.

Over a span of four years, President Trump accumulated a total of 30,573 false or misleading statements[117]. This distinctively sets Donald Trump apart from many other politicians.

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[113] Definition of Conspiracy Theory. Merriam Webster. Last Updated Aug 2023. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theory

[114] Legal Definition of Conspiracy. Cornell Law School. Last Updated Jan 2022. https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/conspiracy

[115] *Op. Cit.* Boyer, Cynthia. "Conspiracy Theories and the US President's Exercise of Free Speech on Social Media: Constitutional Issues and Challenges.".

[116] Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021, PEW RESEARCH CTR. (2021).
 https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust- in-government-1958-2021/.

[117] Fact Checker database. "In four years, President Trump made 30,573 false or misleading claims". The Washington Post. (2021).
 https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/?itid=lkinlinemanual_11

While other political leaders might retract false claims once their falseness is exposed, Trump opted to persistently reiterate the same false assertions as part of his communication strategy. As Rousseau aptly observed[118], the act of lying for one's own gain amounts to deceit, lying for the betterment of others constitutes fraud, and lying with the intention to harm equates to slander – the most egregious form of falsehood. Notably, Rousseau's insights underscore the significance of the act of speech itself, which is often defined by its linguistic aspects. Specifically, it emphasizes the ability of language to generate new realities (and this is explained in the previous sections with the framing and EOC theories), including works of fiction, thus highlighting its inherent propensity to transcend mere factual accuracy.

The exercise of free speech stands as a cornerstone of civil liberties, yet its nuances can often be intricate. As aptly articulated by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Marshall[119], the First Amendment indicates that the government is prohibited from curbing expression based on its message, ideas, subject matter, or content. However, the question arises concerning the government's capacity to place no limitations on its own speech, particularly that of its highest authority, the President. While many politicians are constrained by considerations of politeness and the acceptability of their policies to the public, the President's exercise of free speech encounters constraints stemming from the political realities. Throughout history, presidents have recognized their role in articulating the values of the nation. In contemporary times, the advent of social media networks has become a pivotal element in political communication, fundamentally altering the dynamics of interaction and sparking fresh debates.

In the landmark case of Brandenburg v. Ohio[120], the U.S. Supreme Court introduced a three-prong test that has since served as the basis for evaluating the legal boundaries of free speech. Throughout its history, the Supreme Court has consistently regarded political and ideological speech as central to the First Amendment's protections. Legally speaking, political discourse enjoys the highest level of protection, prompting some scholars to argue that political speech should be the sole form of expression safeguarded by the First Amendment. Thus, the U.S. Supreme Court's precedent set in Brandenburg v. Ohio outlines specific conditions under which speech inciting violent or criminal behavior is no longer protected by the First Amendment. The analysis made by Azriel and DeWitt[121] investigates the application of the speech test derived from that ruling to

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[118] *Op. Cit.* Boyer, Cynthia. "Conspiracy Theories and the US President's Exercise of Free Speech on Social Media: Constitutional Issues and Challenges."

[119] *Ibid.*

[120] Brandenburg v. Ohio, 395 U.S. 444 (1969)

[121] Azriel, Joshua, and Jeff DeWitt. "" We Fight like Hell": Applying the Brandenburg Test to Trump's Speech Surrounding the Siege at the US Capital." *Crim. L. Prac.* 12 (2021).

President Trump's communication and this dissertation will try to establish a connection to the subsequent siege at the U.S. Capitol. Three crucial components of the speech test –advocacy, incitement, and imminence– are satisfied. Holding President Trump personally accountable in this context could establish an updated standard of constitutional jurisprudence applicable to future cases involving speech incitement. However, rather than advocating for a specific position on Donald Trump's accountability in relation to the events at the Capitol siege, this section focuses on dissecting the fundamental components of the Brandenburg test and how they relate to his public discourse. This analysis encompasses his communication through various channels, including the social media platform Twitter, and examines how his words potentially influenced the actions taken by others during and after the Capitol incident.

Even before assuming the presidency, Donald Trump was an active user of Twitter. Prior to his election, he reassured concerns within the Republican Party about his tweeting habit, stating that he would give it up after assuming office. However, from Inauguration Day until January 8, 2021, President Trump continued to tweet prolifically. Using his personal account @realDonaldTrump, he collected over eighty million followers. Notably, he utilized both @POTUS and @realDonaldTrump accounts, with the former often retweeting content from the latter. In his first year after winning the election, Trump tweeted 2,461 times, averaging around six to seven tweets daily. This was a decrease compared to the previous year, during which he tweeted approximately 4,994 times. His tweets held significant influence, setting the agenda for other media outlets, and sparking national conversations on a daily basis. Notably, his tweeting frequency grew from an average of 5.7 times per day during his first half year in office to 34.8 times a day in the latter half of 2020[122]. According to Trump, social media allowed him to communicate directly with the public without relying on traditional media, which he often criticized as disseminating fake news. However, his use of Twitter wasn't routine; it can be argued that his status as President endowed his tweets with official authority, with a guarantee that they would be noticed and widely discussed. These tweets exerted, as a matter of fact, an immediate influence, not only through retweets but also in the broader media landscape. They were covered in newspapers, discussed on news platforms, debated on television, and broadcasted on the radio.

The discussion around whether the principles established by the Brandenburg ruling serves as a guiding precedent for constitutional inquiries regarding the interplay between speech and action and can be applied to the circumstances surrounding the Capitol events. More specifically, it has been a recurring question among scholars, and ultimately the issue of interest is: did President

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[122] *Op. Cit.* Boyer, Cynthia. "Conspiracy Theories and the US President's Exercise of Free Speech on Social Media: Constitutional Issues and Challenges.

Trump's public discourse cross the threshold from protected speech to instigating the imminent violence that occurred?[123] As succinctly summarized by law professor Erwin Chemerinsky[124], the fundamental issue revolves around "how should society balance its need for social order against its desire to protect freedom of speech?" Advocacy, incitement, and imminent violence are pivotal elements of federal law that must be present for public speech to lose its First Amendment protection, leading to potential accountability for ensuing criminal acts[125].

For over five decades, the Brandenburg test has served as the foundation for assessing the constitutionality of speech that advocates for and potentially incites violence. The initial element of the test defends words that involve advocating for ideas, beliefs, or political reforms, even if they express strong sentiments. This falls within the realm of legally protected speech, including abstract discussions of political change. The second element of the Brandenburg test examines whether the language used actually urges or directly encourages acts of violence. This goes beyond mere advocacy, requiring an assessment of whether the speaker is aware that their words could prompt illegal actions, and if so, whether incitement is their intended motive. If the speaker is aware that their words could likely lead to illegal conduct, the speech is not protected; however, if this awareness is absent, the speech remains protected. Finally, the third element of the test centers on determining whether the speech itself triggers immediate or imminent violent actions[126]. This facet lies at the core of the Brandenburg test.

The next section will analyze the three-prong test in connection to Trump's speeches before and the day of the Capitol attack. The advocacy test is relatively easy to assess: throughout

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[123] Some scholars, however, contrary to what this section eventually contends, argue that Trump's speeches do not constitute incitement or legally criminal behavior. It is important, nonetheless, to note that the free speech doctrine is a subjective determination, and this is the reason why many scholars and legal specialists have different views on the outcome of the Brandenburg test. Cfr. Conklin, Michael. "Capitol Offense: Is Donald Trump Guilty of Inciting a Riot at the Capitol?." *U. St. Thomas JL & Pub. Pol'y* 15 (2021): 483.

[124] *Op. Cit.* Azriel, Joshua, and Jeff DeWitt. "" We Fight like Hell": Applying the Brandenburg Test to Trump's Speech Surrounding the Siege at the US Capital."

[125] *Ibid.* summarizes the legal statutes and law which could be applied for ascertaining Trump's contribution to the insurrection: The U.S. Department of Justice would likely employ the Brandenburg precedent as a legal framework for any potential prosecution. On the federal level, two statutes may be invoked. Firstly, 18 U.S.C. § 373 (2018), "Solicitation to Commit a Crime of Violence," applies to individuals who "solicit, command, induce, or otherwise endeavor to persuade such other person to engage in conduct." Under this law, someone who encourages illegal actions is held accountable similarly to those who carry out the actions. The primary defense under this statute rests on disavowing criminal conduct. The second federal statute, 18 U.S.C. § 2101, directly pertains to communication that incites violent behavior. This law prohibits the use of communication devices to incite, organize, or encourage a riot. Alternatively, authorities could examine and prosecute evidence under the District of Columbia's statute criminalizing incitement to rioting, where charges would be brought under § 22-1322 (d), penalizing anyone who "willfully incited or urged others to engage in the riot."

[126] *Ibid.*

the campaign period, Trump consistently claimed that he would only lose the election if it was fraudulent. On election night, he indeed raised concerns about the fraud on the American public, insisting that he had won the election. To sum up a long period of tweets, speeches and rallies to counter the election results, Trump's fulfillment of the advocacy aspect of the Brandenburg test was effectively illustrated through his repeated expressions of suspicion regarding the legitimacy of the election, his involvement in planning and promoting the Save America rally, and ultimately his and his supporters' calls for the rally participants to march to the Capitol and disrupt the certification process.

For what concerns the incitement part of the test, Trump appealed to the crowd into taking action, emphasizing the collective potential to halt the certification process. Subsequently, he articulated intentions to march alongside them towards the Capitol, leading the charge in support of senators and congresspersons while insinuating that some may not warrant the same level of support due to their perceived weaknesses. This statement embodies a group-centric perspective, with the president assuming a central role in the planned march aimed at "Saving America". In accordance with federal legislation, incitement pertains to the act of inducing one or more individuals to partake in unlawful activities[127]. Among the criteria, establishing incitement is the most challenging, and necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of the speech's contextual framework. A plausible argument can be made that Trump's discourse, encompassing his remarks during the rally and those preceding it, may have incited the violent criminal conduct which followed. He actively motivated protestors to attend the rally, employing Twitter to communicate messages such as "Be there, will be wild!" and "Stop the Steal"[128]. These declarations could be construed as both advocative and prone to incitement, as they supported a defined cause while urging others –through unlawful means– to advance that cause.

As already explained, the sequence of events saw some protestors exiting the Ellipse area and proceeding towards the Capitol even as Trump was still addressing the crowd. Subsequently, more protesters converged on the Capitol grounds after his speech concluded, merging with those already present. The ensuing course of action unfolded as an unparalleled and aggressive endeavor, seeking to disrupt the functioning of the American democratic process. At this stage, Trump was aware of the unfolding events at the Capitol. In his capacity as President and Commander in Chief, he would have been swiftly informed of a national crisis, particularly one transpiring just around two and a half miles from the White House and in which he held a deeply vested personal interest. Notably, the attempt by rioters to locate and harm Vice President Pence, who was relocated to a

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127 *Ibid.*

128 Trump, Donald J. Twitter Post. Jan 6, 2021. https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump

secure area, not only highlights incitement but also underscores the tangible peril spurred by the tweet. Despite this, Trump did not urge the crowd to disperse, nor did he take any evident steps, either through Twitter or other means, to control the violence and breach of law. Following the riot, Capitol Hill police diligently worked to evacuate and secure the premises. At 6:01 p.m., nearly five hours after the conclusion of the Save America rally, President Trump posted a tweet expressing support for those involved in the siege, even rationalizing their actions.

Employing the Brandenburg v. Ohio legal framework as a foundational basis for examination, it becomes evident that Trump's rhetoric can be construed as an incitement to action, albeit possibly in an implicit manner. This interpretation is particularly applicable to his address at the rally, a culminating event that occurred after months of inflammatory discourse. Moreover, Trump's silence, in light of the unfolding events and the absence of any direct condemnation or disavowal, could be interpreted as tacit approval for the unlawful actions carried out by his supporters. This sequence of events, when analyzed under Brandenburg, reinforces the argument that Trump's actions, both in his speech and his subsequent lack of response, may be seen as inciting individuals to engage in criminal conduct.

Eventually, Twitter suspended Trump account, not after having put a message warning for months before Trump's tweets, which reads: "Some or all of the content shared in this Tweet is disputed and might be misleading about an election or other civic process"[129]. The implications of Donald Trump's social media account suspension prompt a discussion regarding governmental speech in relation to the blocking of specific accounts, such as @realDonaldTrump's and raises questions about the constitutionality of such actions. Regarding the accountability for user comments on platforms like Twitter, the liability falls on the user rather than the platform itself. This approach is guided by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), enacted in 1996, which grants social media platforms immunity in this regard[130]. The President holds a "special status" within the American administration. In the case of Garcetti v. Ceballos, the Supreme Court established that when public employees make statements as part of their official duties, they are not speaking as private citizens for First Amendment purposes. Instead, their communications are considered within their official capacity, thereby lacking constitutional protection against employer discipline. This distinction between public and private roles becomes particularly intricate when applied to the presidency, further compounded by the emergence of new platforms like social media, such as Twitter, which have become arenas for political discourse.

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[129] Twitter Guidelines. https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules
[130] *Op. Cit.* Boyer, Cynthia. "Conspiracy Theories and the US President's Exercise of Free Speech on Social Media: Constitutional Issues and Challenges."

Further, the crucial element that accentuates the imminence aspect, as outlined within the Brandenburg v. Ohio context, is the direct act of marching a distance of one and a half miles along Pennsylvania Avenue, from the rally to the scene of the subsequent siege. This temporal immediacy significantly contributes to showcasing the imminent nature of the actions taken. Another perspective can be drawn from the NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co. case[131], where Justice Stevens highlighted the absence of evidence linking speech to authorization, ratification, or direct threats of violence. In this case, the absence of immediate violence following speech was a key factor leading to its protection. This contrastingly differs from the circumstances of the January 6 rally. Trump's tweet about Vice President Pence, posted at 2:24 p.m., exemplifies further evidence of incitement towards imminent violent conduct. The speed at which the protesters reacted to Trump's statement demonstrates a direct and immediate response to his communication. In essence, the rally's attendees, functioning as a mobilized group with a specific objective, rapidly acted upon Trump's rhetoric. This dynamic of a purpose-driven crowd promptly responding to the president's words conforms to the standard of imminence outlined in the Brandenburg framework. In summary, the decisive factor of the immediate march, the swift and coordinated response by the crowd, and the pursuit of a specific objective –all of this following Trump's rhetoric– contribute to satisfying the Brandenburg imminence criterion.

Finally, the application of the Brandenburg speech test presents a complex challenge within the realm of constitutional jurisprudence, resulting in its limited usage in legal proceedings. In summary, attributing personal accountability to Trump for the events at the Capitol could establish a groundbreaking legal precedent within constitutional jurisprudence, applicable to forthcoming cases involving speech and incitement. Given the contemporary landscape of politics, rhetorical discourse often serves as a catalyst for political demonstrations spanning ideological spectrums, some of which might straddle the boundary between expression and instigation of violence. This phenomenon is accentuated by the expansive dissemination of communication within both physical and virtual realms, facilitated by digital platforms like social media. Nevertheless, instances where speech is harnessed to incite others toward illegal or violent acts underscore the relevance of the Brandenburg standard. This constitutional framework maintains a delicate equilibrium, safeguarding freedom of speech while upholding accountability for those whose words trigger unlawful behaviors.

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[131] As explained by *Op. Cit.* Conklin, Michael. "Capitol Offense: Is Donald Trump Guilty of Inciting a Riot at the Capitol?."

1.3. Broader view on Trump political discourse

Leadership can be defined as the process by which individuals within a group exert influence and inspire fellow group members to actively contribute toward achieving the collective objectives of the group[132]. This viewpoint implies that the concept of leadership is intrinsically connected to followership, as emphasized by Haslam et al. More specifically, scholars in the field of identity theory propose that effective leadership relies on engaged followership, wherein followers enthusiastically dedicate their efforts and creativity to meet the challenges presented by a leader whose cause resonates with their own beliefs. A significant aspect to consider is that the underlying motivations linked to engaged followership stress the notion that successful leaders often refrain from dictating explicit instructions to their followers. It is significant that the efficacy of leadership lies in the fact that followers are not primarily influenced by mere orders. In fact, the act of issuing specific directives proves to be an ineffective strategy for eliciting compliance. Instead, people tend to display higher levels of compliance when they are encouraged to collaborate in a shared endeavor, allowing them to experience a sense of self-determination.

Another method (American) leaders often utilize –and Trump is an exceptional example for these theories– is relying on a shared sense of American exceptionalism. Here Gilmore[133] distinguishes between explicit and implicit expressions of American exceptionalism. The former is characterized by unambiguous portrayals of the United States as an unparalleled nation, leaving no room for interpretation and thus underscoring the belief that the United States stands as a unique and incomparable entity on the global stage, forming the bedrock of all references to American exceptionalism. Such references establish the country's distinctiveness in contrast to others, and they also carry an element of superiority, positioning the United States as superior to all other nations. The latter category pertains to implicit depictions of American exceptionalism. While these references do not openly label the United States as an exceptional nation, they nevertheless invoke this concept by alluding to the distinctive roles that America assumes in international affairs. Particularly, these mentions imply that the United States should actively take on the role of guiding the global community, determining the terms, norms, and regulations that other nations should adhere to, driven by the belief in its exceptionalism. Consequently, U.S. presidents frequently evoke the idea of American exceptionalism by referring to the United States as a global leader, thus positioning it not only as a front-runner but also as a model and inspiration

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[132] *Op. Cit.* Haslam, S. Alexander et al. "Examining the role of Donald Trump and his supporters in the 2021 assault on the US Capitol: A dual-agency model of identity leadership and engaged followership."

[133] *Op. Cit.* Gilmore, Jason, Charles M. Rowling, Jason A. Edwards, and Nicole T. Allen. "Exceptional "We" or exceptional "Me"? Donald Trump, American exceptionalism, and the remaking of the modern jeremiad."

for other countries to emulate. For instance, at first glance, Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign appears to align seamlessly with this. The very essence of the slogan evokes the notion that the nation has deviated from its cherished traditions but holds the potential for restoration. In fact, for a significant portion of the population, the slogan likely resonated as an implicit call to "Restore America's Exceptionalism Once Again"[134]. Trump, therefore, has always relied more on the notion that America once was exceptional and because of some poor leadership, it is no longer in the front, requiring thus one solution only: himself. This has been a recurring narrative since the announcement for candidacy in 2015 and it is still valid today, in 2023.

A further crucial theme when dealing with the broader view of Trump's political discourse style is linked to how foreigners –especially non-Western and less (or non)-democratic media– perceive his influence. Hinck illustrates how four different countries framed the insurrection of January 6th, showcasing the different narratives adopted when the United States does not have any kind of control over it, as "the United States is not the only storyteller on the world stage"[135]. The narratives transmitted by Chinese, Russian, Iranian, and Saudi Arabia media, while discrediting the supporters and motivations behind the January 6th insurrection by highlighting their violent actions, manipulation of public sentiment, and reliance on official sources, both domestic and international, the reports did not significantly include perspectives from the protestors themselves. Nevertheless, the event assumed a heightened significance. Instead of relegating the movement to the fringes, the media coverage underscored its deeply ingrained origins, foreshadowing a sustained discord within American society. Simultaneously, the incident was projected onto the global political stage to undermine the credibility of U.S. democracy. However, despite the common narrative thread regarding the January 6th attack, variations emerged in how the reports were presented. These accounts intertwined past policies, actions, and relationships to instill the narratives with depth and resonance, presumably enhancing the cohesiveness and authenticity of the narratives conveyed. In a nutshell, while contextually grounded, these narratives are selectively invoked to legitimize state policies, showing how the "event was proof of the false promise of American democracy and evidence of US hypocrisy"[136].

The key takeaway is that recent occurrences within the United States have once again raised uncertainties about the fragile nature of the ongoing democratic experiment in the country. However, a more accurate perspective on an alternate reality involves the notion of democratic order, a concept frequently regarded as fundamental to democratic governance. This perspective

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[134] *Ibid.*

[135] Hinck, Robert S. "US Hypocrisy and the End of American Exceptionalism? Narratives of the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol From Illiberal National Media." *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 6 (2023).

[136] *Ibid.*

asserts that democracy inherently encompasses a sense of structure and that this structure is congruent with democratic principles. Nonetheless, the presence of such an ordered framework is tenuous at best, and this uncertainty has consistently persisted throughout history. In reality, much of what is commonly referred to as "American democracy" exhibits significant flaws. Indulging in the illusion of an idealized classical democratic era that we should strive for can weaken our capacity to engage in the rigorous critical examination necessary for the establishment of more robust and inclusive systems of governance. Hinck argues that "There is no democratic order and never has been. It is not QAnon, Trump, Fox News, and OAN that threaten democratic order, but rather it is the idea that democracy is or ever has been ordered"[137]. It is therefore crucial to always keep in mind the democratic significance which stems from almost everything in American politics. This, however, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.3.1 Trump populism and rise to power

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of populism was perhaps the biggest political global focus. It is debated that the number of populist leaders in power at the beginning of 2020 was near an all-time high. One of the crucial reasons for the rise of modern populism, which has deeply divided and infected politics, are systemic inequalities, arguably more in the United States than in any other country. On its side, the pandemic has radically altered the socioeconomic framework of most democratic societies; and, in this regard, populist leader's response to Covid have been different: some of them downplayed the impacts of the pandemic, which facilitated the forging of divisions between social classes even more than it was before. Moreover, right-wing populists have been playing a populistic 'blame game', claiming that the expansion of the virus, or, as Trump labelled it, the 'Chinese virus', was the fault of the elite, foreigners and consequently of the open borders, which he was against from the beginning of his political career.

In order to have a broader understanding of it, it is crucial to start with the theoretical framework in which populism is usually studied. First of all, it is considered a "thin-centered ideology"[138], as it "only speaks to a very small part of a political agenda". As populism is not a 'thick' ideology, therefore, it is necessary to combine it with other ideological traditions and platforms. In this case Trump is considered a cultural populist, under the assumption of a pure anti-elitist attitude, as elites prevent the people from having a voice in the decision-making process. On his side, he has been condemning political leaders for decades, but, in Mudde's[139] mind, when

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[137] *Ibid.*

[138] Mudde, Cas. Kaltwasser, Cristóbal R. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

[139] *Ibid.*

he joined politics and launched his presidential submission, he was not a populist. He developed his populistic sentiment over time: pointing out that in Trump's presidential announcement speech, he used versions of the word 'I' 256 times, whereas in his inaugural speech after his election win in 2016, he used the word three times. This marks his shift to populism: from 'selling himself to presenting himself as a vehicle of the people', as Mudde detected. Moreover, the legitimacy of populists comes from 'mass opinion', not from popular vote[140]. Indeed, Trump does not have the legitimacy through the Republican Party or through experience, but, as he claims, "the mystical link to the people".

Following populist pattern of coming to power, Trump's win at the 2016 elections proved to be mirroring the global political situation, which was having a height of populist wave. He demonstrated of being popular because he identified problems that were true for the most part of rural society and less-educated Americans. Among those problems there was the need for the US to stop interfering with the world's affairs under the claim of humanitarian concern. His approach to politics was thus validated with his win in 2016, when rural and less-educated voters nominated him for presidency out of the sense of being disrespected by the previous government. Trump's appeal was further strengthened by him picturing himself as a self-made man and by building his campaign on the myths of the American Dream. For four years, Trump has been the world's leader of right-wing populism and before the disruption of Covid-19, Americans generally felt that their economy was going in the right direction and, backing this statement were 44% of Americans, asked in a poll by the Pew Research Center[141]. Supporting this claim is the evidence that under Trump's presidency, economy grew steadily, while unemployment kept decreasing at its historical low, even for discriminated minorities. Moreover, in 2017, Trump reached a legislative achievement with his Tax Cut and Jobs Act[142]: the top individual tax rate was cut from 39.6% to 37% until 2025, while corporate taxes were reduced permanently from 35% to 21%.

The phenomenon of Trumpism proved more enduring than what most media expected. Trump improved his share of overall votes compared to his 2016 win, with a sharp– although subtle– increase of share in minority and women voters. If it wasn't for the pandemic, Trump

[140] Norris, Pippa. Inglehart, Ronald. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

[141] Sabga P. "Data v spin: The truth about Trump and the US economy". Aljazeera. (2020). https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/9/29/data-v-spin-the-truth-about-trumps-economy

[142] Internal Revenue Service. *Tax Cuts and Jobs Act: A comparison for businesses*. https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/tax-cuts-and-jobs-act-a-comparison-for-businesses

would for sure be preparing for the next four years in the White House[143]. Still, socially disconnected voters were far more likely to view Trump positively and support his reelection than those with more robust personal networks. In 2020, he run for the presidency with a similar campaign to the one of 2016: the forgotten Americans, who were living in better times under President Trump, kept supporting him. Moreover, when the subject is the country's economic performance, Trump is better as a leader, and voters have consistently led towards him. This, however, was before the pandemic, which has made the Americans lose countless jobs. Following his belief on Covid, Trump has centered his reelection campaign around the notion that the pandemic is over. The timeline of Trump's coronavirus response is as contradictory as Trump himself. Between his Twitter feed and the media, Trump's response to Covid-19 has been documented almost minute by minute. When the first case of Covid in the US broke out on January 20th, Trump asserted that "[they] have it totally under control. It's one person coming in from China. It's going to be just fine"[144]. As the virus progressed and cases started increasing, Trump administration failed to adequately acknowledge the existence of the pandemic; and this explicit downplaying led to an inadequate response. Indeed, the costliest errors were committed in the pandemic's earliest stages. At first, testing was limited for healthcare workers or hospitalized people, and it was not available for the whole population. After several months, with the year almost being over, diagnostic testing was still too slow, especially in some areas and for asymptomatic people. Trump has cast doubt on the severity of the virus, 'peddled questionable medical-care advice', and called for reopening the economy despite rising case numbers[145]. Throughout the course of the months from January until early April, Trump kept praising his handling of the coronavirus, with a series of false claims about what the US government was doing about the pandemic.

The most interesting factor in the analysis is exactly the degree of minimization of the crisis, which ultimately fueled populistic sentiment. "Lockdowns fail to eliminate the virus and are causing irreparable harm to families and children, especially the working class and people with

[143] Cook J. "Biden will fail to bring back 'Normal' politics. What's needed now is a populist on the left". Countercurrents.org. (2020). https://countercurrents.org/2020/11/biden-will-fail-to-bring-back-normal-politics-whats-needed-now-is-a-populism-of-the-left/

[144] Belvedere, M. "Trump says he trusts China's Xi on coronavirus and the US has it 'totally under control'". CNBC. (2020) https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/22/trump-on-coronavirus-from-china-we-have-it-totally-under-control.html

[145] Serhan Y. "The Pandemic Isn't a Death Knell for Populism". The Atlantic. (2020) https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/08/populism-will-survive-the-pandemic/615358/

limited resources"[146]. Moreover, Trump started mocking social distancing and pushing a conspiracy theory, wherein the basic facts of people dying are an attempt to hurt him. He has accused doctors of exaggerating the disease and "vilified them as enemies in his crusade to return to normal" even if the daily death toll has topped 1000 people[147]. And, in true populist fashion, Trump set out to depict national crises as ones not of his own making, diverting the blame instead to the WHO, to his political opponents, to public-health officials and, in Trump's case, to China.

This fits the populist framework perfectly: the appeal to gut feeling and 'common sense' over science and factual basis, the rejection of mainstream technocracy, the arbitrary definition of 'the people', the opportunism and inconsistency. As already mentioned, populists are playing a 'blame game'; Republicans have been pointing out the pandemic as the 'Wuhan virus', or, as Trump has multiple times called it, 'the Chinese virus'[148]. In essence, what populists claim is that the advantages have been going to the wealthy and undoubtedly, this narrative holds true, even though several other characteristics are at the foundation for healthy inequalities and the fault is in the data; GDP only measures the aggregate national economic growth, but this only benefits the top 10 percent. Therefore, the people turn to the causes dear to populism because they feel despair.

That is the reason why Trump's support, despite all the criticism of the past months, has always remained high –even with the current 2023 indictments. Finally, it is crucial to emphasize what is happening as a consequence of Trump's loss in the populist realm. It is safe to say that world's populist leaders have lost their most "prominent champion"[149], but their economic, social, and political grievance remain potent and can even be reinforced. Moreover, the victory of a politician with the profile of Trump four years ago had more impact among populisms than the current defeat of the Republicans. They indeed have taken a "heavy blow" with Trump's defeat, but Trumpism and populism are still alive. Islam[150] believes that traditional parties would make a mistake if they declared populism in the United States defeated, because, as it is happening in Europe, it can prove just as effective on the sidelines. There were indeed leaders and governments

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[146] Trump, Donald J. *President Trump's Coronavirus Response Has Saved Over 2 Million Lives and Outperformed Other Nations.* Trump White House Archives. (2020). https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-trumps-coronavirus-response-saved-2-million-lives-outperformed-nations/
[147] Hamblin J. "Trump's pathology is now clear". The Atlantic. (2020). https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/10/trump-covid-denial/616946/
[148] Cliff J. "How populist leaders exploit pandemics". New statesman. (2020). https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2020/03/how-populist-leaders-exploit-pandemics
[149] Landler M. Eddy M. "Does Trump's Defeat Signal the Start of Populism's Decline?" The New York Times. (2020). https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/world/europe/trump-populism.html
[150] Islam, S. "Trump's defeat hits populism but doesn't knock it down". (2020). https://www.shadaislam.com/articles

all over the world who were deeply invested in a second Trump term. The outgoing US president is seen as the 'informal leader of the populist international'[151]. Trump is looked at for inspiration and validation by most populists.

It is finally possible to highlight some key comparative findings as well as some indicative markers for future research. First of all, the threat of populism is unlikely to disappear, as populists in power expand their influence and populists out of power learn how to exploit mainstream governments' policy mistakes in response to the virus. That is what Trump is expected to do in order to contrast Biden's policies and gain even more consensus and approval. Secondly, populism won't be killed off by the current persecutions facing Trump. On the contrary, it is flourishing in the crisis. What is often lost in debates over populism is how "deeply embedded it is in modern democracies"[152].

1.4. Is the attack an attempted (and failed) coup?

Coups generally take place within nations where democratic institutions and customs are feeble or absent. Nevertheless, certain instances of coups or presidential efforts to retain power through non-constitutional means could offer instructive insights. In order to ensure enduring stability, efforts should extend beyond mere punitive measures against the offenders. Priority should be given to tackling underlying triggers by reinstating trust in the U.S. electoral mechanism and enhancing safeguards for our public institutions against acts of political aggression[153].

It just suffices to mention the coup d'état which occurred in Nigeria in July 2023, a country in a region –the Sahel– with an ongoing deteriorating climate, particularly vulnerable, due to economic challenges, spread of terror activity and recruitment, and lack of development. The drivers of this instability are therefore multifaceted, ranging from systemic deficiencies –poor water utilization, malnutrition– to underlying structural vulnerabilities –weak governments, absence of rule of law and human rights violations. The expression 'coup' is fairly new to the American political landscape. Given, therefore, the construction of the United States, based on the premise of democracy, how can scholars talk about a 'coup' and not a mere riot?

This dissertation has used –for the most part– the term 'attack' to indicate the storming of the Capitol building on January 6th, 2021. This has also been the official version of the House, which in its official statement also defined it as an 'attack', thereby keeping the description neutral.

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[151] Rachman G. "Populists worldwide have lost their leader". The Financial Times. (2020).
https://www.ft.com/content/9de10cba-7871-4bae-8b0e-0e1d1ed4efd2

[152] *Op. Cit.* Serhan Y. "The Pandemic Isn't a Death Knell for Populism".

[153] Ard, Michael J. *Was January 6 Really an 'Attempted Coup'?.* Discourse Magazine. (2021).
https://www.discoursemagazine.com/politics/2022/07/11/was-january-6-really-an-attempted-coup/

Here, however, the purpose is to investigate whether this attack was a coup, a riot, an insurrection, or even an episode of domestic terrorism, or a combination of all. Can the attack on the Capitol be considered a coup or does this term mean something else? What has the entire world actually witnessed from the major superpower on January 6th, 2021? The White House[154], as mentioned, has used a very unbiassed expression, leaving it therefore, free to outside interpretations. However, harsher versions give rise to debates and broader discussions. Here, what this section is trying to uncover is whether it was an attempt to overthrow not only the elections, but also the impending government or 'merely' an insurrection or riot?

The categorization of the events on January 6, 2021, involving the storming of the US Capitol Building, has been undertaken by the Cline Center's Coup d'État Project[155]. It has identified this incident as both an "attempted auto-coup and an attempted dissident coup". This dual classification captures the varying roles played by different participants in the incident. The project assigns great importance to labels, which becomes evident in the realm of political violence, as each classification carries specific repercussions and ramifications for the overall stability of society. Within the spectrum of destabilizing events, coups and attempted coups stand out as particularly significant due to their far-reaching political implications. According to the definitions established by the Cline Center, an act of insurrection that was meticulously planned, organized, and executed in a manner that presented a believable immediate danger of usurping the lawful authority of a policy-formulating division within the national government qualifies as an attempted coup d'état.

However, the Jan 6th attack significantly from traditional coups. Firstly, the unfolding events were not driven by a national crisis; rather, they were triggered by the electoral defeat of President Trump. The protests stemming from this outcome lacked widespread active backing. In a contrasting example, the case of Peru's President Alberto Fujimori in 1992 is marked by a seizure of absolute authority[156], supported by the military, which was ostensibly necessitated by a severe economic downturn and the need to combat two violent insurgencies. Here, a genuine crisis arguably existed.

Secondly, President Trump's actions lacked a substantial coalition of supporters within the government. Apart from Trump himself, those endorsing the scheme were advisers like Navarro and Eastman, who held no significant leadership roles. This stands in sharp contrast to Turkey's

[154] This can also be seen in the Selected Committee for the event: House of Representatives. *Select Committee to Investigate The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* https://january6th-benniethompson.house.gov/
[155] Coup d'État Project. Cline Center for Advanced Social Research. https://clinecenter.illinois.edu/project/research-themes/democracy-and-development/coup-detat-project
[156] *Op. Cit.* Ard, Michael J. *Was January 6 Really an 'Attempted Coup'?*. Discourse Magazine. (2021).

coup in 2016, wherein Turkish authorities apprehended tens of thousands of alleged conspirators[157] spanning various governmental and civil society sectors. Despite the failure of the coup attempt, the plotters recognized the imperative of gathering broad-based backing.

Lastly, the absence of military support is a notable feature of President Trump's actions. It is uncommon to find an attempted coup, whether successful or not, without some degree of military involvement or, at the very least, an absence of military intervention to hinder the effort. In the context of Trump's conspiracy, there was no viable avenue for invoking martial law or securing military backing for such undertakings.

The absence of some defining characteristics might not ultimately label the situation as a coup; however, this does not diminish the gravity of the event and the imperative for remaining vigilant. An important takeaway is that an unsuccessful coup attempt should not automatically exonerate the individuals involved. Democracies that exhibit leniency towards those implicated in coup plots could potentially face dire repercussions in the long run. Finally, the argument this section makes is that only pursuing prosecutions might not be the best outcome to counter an attempted coup. Concentrating solely on legal prosecutions may serve up to a certain point, yet it could also exacerbate divisions and prove inadequate for resolving the repercussions of the events on January 6. It becomes imperative for public officials to acknowledge that a considerable number of Americans harbor doubts about the security of the electoral processes: the fact that the January 6 incident stemmed from an electoral dispute necessitates the establishment of a high-level, bipartisan commission similar to the Baker-Carter commission of 2005[158], which would aim to instill greater assurance in the population that the delicate balance between security and accessibility in elections can be effectively maintained.

Additionally, the hope lies in the notion that the increased awareness surrounding the events of January 6 will lead to a broader consciousness of political violence within the United States, particularly acts targeting public institutions. Ranging from the urban uprisings in 2020 following the tragic death of George Floyd, to the assault on the Capitol, to the recent threats against Supreme Court justices, unequivocal condemnation of political violence should swiftly transcend partisan lines. Furthermore, a concerted effort is needed to strengthen the protection of American institutions from physical harm, particularly within the nation's capital. An educational lesson gained from both the 2020 protests and the events of January 6 is the evident lack of coordination among authorities in Washington, D.C. when confronting public disturbances. In the aftermath of the January 6 proceedings, Congress must address the shortcomings in

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[157] Esen, Berk. Sebnem Gumuscu. "Turkey: How the coup failed." *J. Democracy* 28 (2017).

[158] *Op. Cit.* Ard, Michael J. *Was January 6 Really an 'Attempted Coup'?*. Discourse Magazine. (2021)

Washington's security responsibilities. Had public authorities acted with more decisive measures against the unauthorized demonstration by Trump supporters, it is plausible that the tragic episode at the U.S. Capitol could have been averted, potentially obviating the need for the January 6 hearings altogether.

In conclusion, yes, it was a coup. It failed, however, in its core definition: to illegally seize power. It represented, however, an important failure in American Democracy, which has and will have repercussions for future governments and may even threaten the existence of democracy in less representative non-Western states. In the midst moments of intense political conflict, the role of scholars remains crucial in classifying and elucidating diverse manifestations of political violence. However, this scholarly involvement poses a –sometimes– impractical need to put theories and concepts behind every action. It is important to have clear insights and acknowledge the complexities and uncertainties inherent in a subject matter. Simultaneously, however, it is also crucial to derive some implications –both in the near future and in the long-run–, while also appreciating the necessity for defining and categorizing events. Therefore, the next chapter will firstly offer some definitional framework to portray democracy and then will assess the current situation in the United States.

Chapter 2. On Democracy and Polarization.

2. Definitions of democracy

2.1 Normative and empirical definitions

It is widely recognized that the term democracy encompasses not only the intricate interplay between power and the people but also the inherent link between diverse interpretations held by numerous scholars, citizens, and elites, on the one hand, and the normative and idealistic concepts that permeate it with meaning, on the other[159]. Furthermore, while its origins lie in the Western world, democracy has now been embraced and disseminated across the globe. The consequence of this diffusion is that political figures often employ democratic rhetoric to characterize a wide array of institutional arrangements as democratic. In essence, democracy can manifest and even become entrenched in virtually any region worldwide, but any given definition of democracy remains inextricably tied to cultural context. While acknowledging this cultural context is essential when discussing a normative understanding of democracy –namely, a definition grounded in the values we uphold–, it becomes apparent that even when striving to formulate an empirical definition, the cultural influences cannot be entirely eradicated[160]. Ultimately, an empirical definition, too, will rely on underlying assumptions and interests, albeit necessitating empirical validation through examination of existing realities. Consequently, the potential for discord over empirical definitions, particularly concerning the term democracy, which enjoys widespread acceptance in political discourse worldwide, remains a persistent challenge.

One suboptimal approach involves constraining the empirical definition of democracy to a limited set of fundamental attributes, enabling them to be shared by the broadest spectrum of individuals, including experts and non-experts alike. In essence, we might presume that a minimalist empirical definition has a greater potential to transcend cultural boundaries, gaining acceptance in certain cultures while facing rejection in others. An added advantage of such a minimalist definition lies in its simplicity, rendering it relatively straightforward to differentiate between empirical instances of regimes that align with our eventual conception of democracy and those that do not. This distinction is crucial for comprehending the critical juncture at which a transitioning regime either attains a minimalist form of democracy or approaches that threshold closely. It is also important to underline that the elements of democracy, once they are "absent or cease to exist"[161], then the regime in analysis represents no longer a democracy.

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[159] Morlino, Leonardo, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Bertrand Badie. *Political science: A global perspective*. Sage Publications Ltd, (2017).

[160] *Ibid.*

[161] *Ivi,* p.82.

Democracy can also be understood in both procedural terms, focusing on the 'how', the institutional organization of the regime –system of rules, rights, and mechanisms to ensure how regimes work– and according to substantive goals, thereby evaluating the 'what', the goals and effectiveness of the regime and positing explicit provisions for equality, fairness, inclusion –which should include all citizens.

The best minimalist definition is the one inspired by Dahl[162], representing an example of a substantive and 'thick' definition of democracy. For him, the key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government towards the preferences of its citizens, who are considered as political equals. Government responsiveness refers to opportunities of the citizens, which should be equal and unimpaired. Those opportunities are for citizens: to formulate their preferences, to signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government and to have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government. Following this substantive definition, democracies exist when the government is responsive to its citizens and all the citizens have the same opportunities. In addition to this, Dahl provides a list of procedural institutional guarantees meant to give citizens equal opportunities: elected officials, free and fair election, inclusive suffrage, right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy. Dahl, moreover, identified three main paths towards liberalization and democracy. The first one is the shift from a regime of closed hegemony (unelected monarchy as in Saudi Arabia) to competitive oligarchy (limited voting participation, as in South Africa during apartheid). The regime, with more opposition, becomes more competitive. The second path is from a closed hegemony to a regime of inclusive hegemony (one party elections, as in the Soviet Union or PRC), in which the regime becomes more inclusive, with an increase in popularization. The third path is the shift from a regime of closed hegemony to a higher level of democracy (more precisely, polyarchy). Here there would be both an increase is popularization and opposition and the regime therefore would become much more open to public contestation and inclusivity.

After the adoption of the minimalist definition, the next analysis centers on whether more refined and intricately developed definitions of democracy exist. Naturally, an affirmative response to this question warrants two immediate considerations. Firstly, it is essential to recognize that these more precise definitions stem from events to isolate the fundamental components inherent in regimes designated as democracies, particularly those that have been established in the Western world over extended periods. Secondly, the prevailing definition of democracy has predominantly

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[162] Dahl, Robert A. *Democracy and its Critics*. Yale university press. (2008).

revolved around the concept of a mass liberal democracy, with a primary emphasis on its procedural dimensions.

Morlino, on this note, underlined that multiple normative definitions exist: they are specific sets of structured rules that define how a democracy should be and how it should work –which is different from what democracy is in reality–, according to certain established norms. The existence of multiple definitions can be explained by the existence and the role of multiple factors, as demonstrated by the seven democracies by Morlino[163]: Liberal or representative democracy – democracy in which the majority of us lives; responsive democracy; participatory democracy –in many cases can be a sort of improvement of liberal democracies (Estonia); deliberative democracy; associational democracy; social or egalitarian democracy; good governance.

Moreover, Morlino concentrated on the quality of democracy to go beyond all those definitions, effectively putting together previous studies in a comprehensive theory. He essentially asserted that three types of quality exist, each with multiple dimensions. Focusing on the procedural side one can see the characteristics of rule of law, electoral accountability, inter-institutional accountability, participation, and competition. After that, the substantial area covers the political, social, and civil rights, with a clear possibility to extend those rights as well as social and economic equality, focusing on egalitarian access. With all of this in mind, it is crucial to have a precise outcome: responsiveness, as outlined by Dahl. The best example of this model is Norway: its first position in the gender-gap report[164] does not make this country the best democracy, but the qualities of this specific variable are better than the one of other states. By uniting all these variables, therefore, a clear perception of the quality of a democracy appears, according to proper measurements: in this way, democracy is not anymore normative and theoretical, but it is empirical and practical. The difference stems from the fact that normative studies are focused on theoretical basis and theoretical construction of the variables that shall define democracy, whereas practical and empirical studies are based on the measurement of specific variables, as the ones underlined by Morlino.

Finally, there are two main rhetoric on democracy and on democratic rule the first is on participation, meaning the emphasis on direct democracy as a way of providing a more efficient representation. This tool is usually used by populists as a critique of the lack of participation in representative democracy to make it more participatory. A proposal was carried out by James

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[163] Leonardo Morlino. *Changes for Democracy: Actors, Structures, Processes*. Oxford University Press, (2011).
[164] Global Gender Gap Report 2023. Available at: https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023/?gclid=CjwKCAjwgZCoBhBnEiwAz35Rws5FY7ehgNN6S-fgMMRx7p2yEgCERQYZJMn9QMx2JKRQDv4_4ysXcxoCd8AQAvD_BwE

Bryce[165], outlining the "government of public opinion": public opinion shall be monitored continuously through polls and, in this way, elections would not be needed, since the state can be simply governed by using polls, aiming at solving the problem of corrupt representation. This can be a sort of technological tool also for cheaper representation. The second rhetoric is on citizenship as status. Typical of democracy is its connection with citizenship, based on multiple traditions in which status and citizenship are central and entitle people to exercise rights in the quality of member of states. This common idea of citizenship as status is shared by different traditions, as a foundational background (Italy: "Prima gli italiani!", UK: "The English first!", USA: "Americans first")

2.1.1 Other definitions

The term democracy derives its roots from the Greek words 'demos' and 'kratos', meaning 'people' and 'power' respectively. This etymological origin encapsulates the core essence of the concept, as eloquently expressed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863: democracy represents a form of governance that is "of the people, by the people, and for the people"[166]. In essence, it is a government that centers on its citizens, with citizens serving as both the agents and the recipients of the decisions emerging from the political process. The conventional doctrine of democracy can be summarized by recognizing democracy as an institutional framework that confers upon the people the authority to make decisions through open and equitable elections. In these elections, individuals drawn from the people themselves engage in a free competition for the right to lead politically, culminating in the formation of a national government. This government is tasked with the authority and objective of making political determinations to advance the common good and to uphold the will of the people. For an extended period, the presence of elections has been considered the indispensable criterion for labeling a political system as democratic. However, it is important to acknowledge that democracy encompasses far more than the mere presence of elections. Robert Dahl, as underlined in the section above, took one step forward and assumed responsiveness to be the key to democracy and democratic governance.

Equally vital is the citizens' freedom to access diverse sources of information, allowing them to gather knowledge, shape their preferences, both in political and non-political matters, independently, and ultimately make informed decisions. Furthermore, it is essential to uphold freedom of expression, association, and the ability to engage in public debates on matters of

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[165] Bryce, James. *The American commonwealth*. Vol. 1. Macmillan, (1889).
[166] Those words were pronounced by American President Lincoln during the Gettysburg Address, a speech given during the Civil War after one of the bloodiest battles.

general interest within the public domain. This affords individuals the opportunity to contribute personally to the unfolding of political activities by influencing the formation of public opinion. The concept of public opinion, along with the public sphere from which it originates, serve as the cornerstones and driving forces of democracy. It is precisely the collective voice of engaged citizens, expressed during elections, to which a democratic government should be accountable. Given the pivotal role that public opinion and the public sphere play in the democratic process, delving deeper into these aspects becomes imperative.

The prominent Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori[167], widely recognized in academia as one of the foremost international experts in the field and the most significant political scientist at the national level, has devoted substantial effort to formulating a theory regarding the significance of public opinion within democratic theory. His definition conceptualizes public opinion as a collective of citizens whose mental states, shaped by values, behaviors, needs, and desires, interact with information flows concerning public affairs and their management within the public sphere. This public opinion is considered as 'public' not only because it concerns the multitude or the majority but also because it concerns matters and subjects of a public nature, a concept encapsulated in the Latin term '*res publica*'. However, the citizenry referred to by Sartori is one that possesses an inherent interest in public affairs and actively engages in these matters. According to his perspective, the intrinsic connection between public opinion and democracy lies in the fact that the former serves as the substantive foundation of the latter. Moreover, democracy rests on the principle of popular sovereignty. Yet, Sartori argues that a sovereign entity devoid of knowledge about public matters, lacking an opinion on these issues, and remaining silent, rendering it meaningless vis à vis the community. Consequently, popular sovereignty must extend beyond being a mere source of legitimacy for democratic governance; it must be an integral part of it. For a people to be sovereign, they must express their content, which constitutes the public opinion, providing substance to the functioning of a democracy. Therefore, one can define democracy as both a government of opinion and a government of consensus, signifying that it necessitates both the consensus and the support of public opinion to survive.

In a parallel vein, the German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas[168], who was roughly contemporary with Sartori, researched into the concept of public opinion. While observing how it shapes political power in democratic processes, Habermas formulated and developed his concept of the 'public sphere', which remains central to contemporary democracies, even though

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[167] Sartori, Giovanni. *The Theory of Democracy Revisited - Part One: The Contemporary Debate*. Chatham House Publishers, Inc. (1987).

[168] Habermas, Jürgen, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox. "The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964)." *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49-55.

it dates back to ancient Greece. In antiquity, citizens in city-states participated directly in public life by exchanging opinions and deliberating on matters of public concern in the so-called *agora*. According to Habermas, the public sphere serves as the bridge connecting civil society and public life, providing a neutral space where free private citizens can engage in debates and deliberate on various issues of public concern. Ideally, these discussions occur independently of the state, the economy, and other potential sources of interference, resting instead on principles of autonomy and rational-critical deliberation. Through these exchanges, a public opinion is shaped, representing a collective will of citizens founded on these structural principles. This public opinion is expressed through opinions and behaviors that may either support or challenge state operations but invariably aim to influence its decisions.

Now that we have established a foundation in understanding the interconnected components of democracy, we can proceed by highlighting the final but equally crucial requirement outlined by Dahl's democratic theory for a government to be considered democratic: accountability and transparency to its citizenry through a system of checks and balances, which includes institutions intentionally designed to ensure that government policies are contingent on the preferences and votes of the people. Once again, it underscores the fundamental belief that citizens, with their communal needs and aspirations, must play a central role in democratic processes. In summary, we can assert that, according to Dahl's perspective[169], democracy encompasses elements of participation and opposition, along with constitutional safeguards and mechanisms for controlling executive power. If any of these elements is absent, it raises legitimate questions about the existence of a robust and healthy democracy, as already underlined above.

On this note, the term democracy is often misused or even *abused*[170]. The misappropriation of the term democratic by various states spans a wide spectrum, ranging from the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, which is essentially a "dynastic dictatorship"[171], to instances like the Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the US refer to their authoritarian regimes as democratic, despite their starkly contrasting nature. This inappropriate application of the term reflects the universal appeal that democracy holds for governments worldwide. Simultaneously, it underscores how the presence of purely procedural elements can lead to the association of democracy with regimes that are far from being truly democratic. One could argue that it is exceedingly easy to fall into the trap of recognizing illiberal democracies, sometimes referred to as liberal autocracies, a term coined by Indian-American political journalist Fareed Rafiq Zakaria in a 1997 essay in Foreign

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[169] Dahl, Robert A. *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale university press. (2008).

[170] Emphasis added

[171] Freedom House. *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*. (2022) Available at:
https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule

Affairs[172]. In this context, Zakaria's work harkens back to the words of political scientist Samuel Phillips Huntington in "The Third Wave", wherein Huntington asserts that "elections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non"[173]. However, governments shaped by elections may exhibit qualities such as inefficiency, corruption, shortsightedness, irresponsibility, domination by special interests, and an inability to adopt policies in line with the public good. While these attributes may render such governments undesirable, they do not strip them of their democratic label. Democracy represents just one among several public virtues, and its relationship with other characteristics of political systems can only be comprehended when it is clearly distinguished from these other attributes.

While somewhat dated, Huntington's statement remains a timeless cornerstone of democratic theory. To offer a more philosophical perspective, Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of the veil of Maya seems particularly fitting. According to Schopenhauer, humans consistently struggle with a distorted perception of reality due to an inherent veil, which in the very essence of the concept. To empirically understand the true nature of things, one must endeavor to transcend this veil. In this current context, the presence of elections within a country's political system could be seen as the 'veil of Maya' that needs to be penetrated to ascertain whether a genuine liberal democracy exists. To do so, it is essential to examine the degree of constitutional liberalism in place, the presence of opportunities for opposition, and the effectiveness of checks and balances in the distribution and exercise of power. If we were to merely equate the presence of elections with democracy, we would be susceptible to deception. Democracy, indeed, encompasses both procedural and substantive dimensions, and it should ideally yield beneficial outcomes for local, national, and international communities. Consequently, democracy emerges as one of the most fundamental common objectives shared by the international community. Nations already experiencing democratic governance bear the responsibility of preserving and equitably disseminating this valuable asset, while those still on the path towards democracy generally strive to attain it. In essence, Schopenhauer's concept of piercing the 'veil of Maya' serves as a metaphor for the need to investigate deeper than the mere facade of elections to truly understand and evaluate the essence of democracy, both procedural and substantial.

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[172] Zakaria, Fareed. "The rise of illiberal democracy". *Foreign Aff.* 76 (1997): 26.
[173] Huntington, Samuel P. *The third wave: Democratization in the late 20th century.* University of Oklahoma Press. (1991).

2.1.2 Democracy as expression of the 'volonté générale"

When one makes reference to the 'general will', we cannot fail to reference Jean Jacques Rousseau, who popularized this expression. The basic meaning of this expression is that in order to ensure freedom and equality, every individual enters into a pact with the entire population, in which each puts in common his person and all his power under the supreme direction of the general will; and each member is considered as an indivisible part of the whole[174]. In essence, according to Rousseau's social contract, the individual, upon entering civil society, surrenders all their rights to the 'general will'. It does not coincide with the will of all or the will of the majority. It cannot coincide with unanimity because reaching agreement among all members of the social body is impossible; each individual will have their own opinion on a certain issue. It also cannot coincide with the majority because decisions made by such a rule, by definition, cannot satisfy everyone. The general will is the will of the sovereign body when the individual thinks rationally: in that case, they will always choose what is best for everyone. Rousseau describes the general will as following: the sovereign, being only a collection of individuals, has no interest contrary to theirs, and therefore, their power needs no guarantee of any kind towards the subjects, because it is impossible that the body should wish to harm all its members. However, Rousseau himself admits that an individual may have a particular will contrary to the general will. In this case, it falls upon the entire social body to compel the individual to obey the general will. As one can observe, the fundamental freedom postulated by Rousseau is to be subjected to the laws that we have imposed on ourselves. Rousseau's described democracy of the general will as a direct democracy. However, in the present era, due to the expansion of cities, only representative democracies exist. Rousseau himself had to concede that there has never been a true democracy, nor will there ever be, arguing that a direct democracy can only exist in a very small state because it is easier to convene an assembly in such a state. Secondly, Rousseau wrote that a great simplicity of manners[175] is required, as well as equality in offices and affluences, and finally, "little to no luxury"[176]. These statements led him to conclude that if there were a nation of gods, it would govern itself democratically. These stringent conditions, however, distanced Rousseau's vision, if ever needed, from any correspondence with reality.

The government of the majority: perhaps this is the definition of democracy we are most accustomed to. When democracy is defined in this way, a valuable analytical reference comes from

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[174] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Il contratto sociale*. Edizioni Mondadori, 2015: 25.

[175] *Ivi, p.115*.

[176] *Ibid.* (Translated from Italian)

the 1835 work of a French liberal, "Democracy in America"[177] by Alexis de Tocqueville –a work composed following his travels in the United States. First and foremost, for Tocqueville, democracy is a regime based on popular sovereignty: "The dogma of popular sovereignty... became the law of laws"[178]. He also notes that to make this principle effective in a democratic regime, universal suffrage is required so that the entire population can express itself. However, describing American democracy, he realizes that it does not speak with the voice of a single body, as Rousseau hoped, but through the rule of the majority. The majority exercises, directly or indirectly, both legislative and executive power, as well as judicial power (through the election of judges). Despite the limits Tocqueville identifies, at least with reference to the American system, we can define democracy as the exercise of the majority's will, as a regime in which the people appoint those who make the laws and those who execute them, themselves forming the adjudicators that punish offenders. "When great perils threaten the State, you often see people happily choose the citizens most appropriate to save them"[179]. Thereby, the people directly appoint their representatives, and it is, therefore, truly the people who command, and although the form of government is representative, it is obvious that the opinions, prejudices, interests, and even the passions of the people cannot encounter lasting obstacles that prevent them from manifesting themselves in the daily direction of society. However, in every country where the people rule, it is the majority that governs in its name. Consistent with his liberal tradition, Tocqueville expresses the following judgment about such a regime: " The very essence of democratic governments is that the dominion of the majority be absolute; for, in democracies, nothing outside of the majority can offer resistance"[180].

2.1.3 Tocqueville and Madison on Democracy

After having given a brief overview of Tocqueville's thinking, this section will delve deeper into his works, and, among the authors who represent the most this line of thought, we must also include Madison. Both are authors who frequently appear in the pluralist debate for their attempt to provide a clear explanation of the structure and functioning of democracy.

Tocqueville, in Democracy in America describes the peculiarities that made the "New World"[181] the system most permeated by pluralist ideology. These characteristics, not surprisingly, lead

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[177] Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy In America, Historical-Critical Edition of De la d´emocratie en Am´erique.* Edited by Eduardo Nolla. Translated from the French by James T. Schleifer. Liberty Fund, Inc. (2010)

[178] *Ivi,* p.47.

[179] *Ivi,* p.318.

[180] *Ivi,* p.546.

[181] *Ivi,* p. 170.

current discussions that consider pluralism as a typically American phenomenon. After his American experience, Tocqueville looked at the young continent as the country of the future, a nation dominated by a strong community spirit and a strong sense of democracy, elements which were inherently absent in Europe at the time. In the introduction to the first volume, the author writes, "I admit that in America I saw more than America; I sought there an image of democracy itself, its tendencies, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to know democracy, if only to know at least what we must hope or fear from it"[182], thus emphasizing the position of the United States as the first large-scale democratic model, a nation that would demonstrate the possible reconciliation between freedom as a value and democracy as its modern content.

It is important to focus on Tocqueville's analysis of the concept of participation and the role it plays in democratic practice. According to the author's thinking, participation is a phenomenon that can be traced back to the equality of individuals, as a principle deeply rooted in American society. Tocqueville believes that political equality can be achieved by granting all citizens the opportunity to enjoy civil rights or by denying them to everyone; this conception of equality allows for the development of a process of participation in public life that represents the ideal form of democracy. For Tocqueville, participation is what makes a person a citizen because by participating in legislation, the American learns to know the laws; by governing, he becomes familiar with the forms of government. This element, according to the author, distinguishes the American society from others. Indeed, an interest in public affairs, provided that it is closely related to individual well-being, leads to "A man understands the influence that the well-being of the country has on his own; he knows that the law allows him to contribute to bringing this well-being into being, and he interests himself in the prosperity of his country, first as something useful to him and then as his work"[183].

In a traditional democratic society, individuals tend to pursue their own goals, neglecting interest in public affairs. In this way, the relationship between public and private interests is overshadowed by the pursuit of individual profit maximization, risking making citizens victims of demagogic political practices[184]. If this were the case, fertile conditions would be created for the establishment of a democratic tyranny in which citizens find themselves defenseless against the egalitarian principle and, in order to safeguard that right, would be subjected to the tyranny of the

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[182] *Ivi,* p.171.

[183] *Ivi,* p.528.

[184] Branchesi, Jacopo. "Il concetto di partecipazione in Tocqueville: il riconoscimento tra individuo e comunità nella democrazia in America." (2007), Available at:
https://www.dialetticaefilosofia.it/public/pdf/35articolo_jbranchesi_tocqueville.pdf

majority. However, American democracy, according to the author, has managed to address this issue through administrative decentralization and associationism. Tocqueville's pluralism is, overall, based on the dynamism of representative democracy founded on consent –a genuine consent that binds rulers to the governed, as it coexists with dissent, ensuring that each individual participates in the socio-political process that sees opinions forming, some of them becoming majority opinions, and finally crystallizing into positive laws.

The tyranny of the majority, as abovementioned, is one of the major dangers that Tocqueville warned against. A great admirer of American democracy, Tocqueville feared that behind the concept of the majority could hide one of the most serious consequences of egalitarian societies, namely, succumbing to social conformity. It is from these premises that we should analyze the radical pluralism of James Madison, who considers the clash between the interests of minorities and democratic principles as one of the foundations of his theory. A non-tyrannical republic, according to Madison, means that the judiciary is carefully limited, and the legislative power is exercised by an assembly large enough to feel all the interests that move a crowd. Democracy can degenerate and not follow this course, but according to the author, there are two solutions to prevent this: an institutional solution to ensure that legislative, executive, and judicial powers are not controlled by the same person, and secondly, not allowing groups formed by citizens based on their interests to violate the rights of other groups.

To better grasp Madison's theory, it is necessary to look at the thematic background of his writings: the content of "The Federalist"[185] is based on the argument concerning the constitutional project of transforming a weak Confederation of 13 States, as it had existed until 1787, into a strong Union. The theme of the multiplicity of interests is expressed in terms of factions, which are necessary for the proper functioning of the state and for which a certain balance is required. For Madison, the emergence of factions is a phenomenon inherent in human nature, especially related to the unequal distribution of property. In this way, the diverse needs of citizens lead them to align with factions that represent their interests. In this context, it is the role of legislation to regulate the variety of citizens' interests. The second aspect analyzed is the relationship between the presence of a multiplicity of interests, characteristic of civil society, and democratic mechanisms. The author compares majority factions with minority factions, which represent nothing more than current interest groups. The possibility of the emergence of democratic tyranny occurs when the dominant group, regardless of its size, violates the rights of other citizens. In this case, while minority factions see the republican principle as a limit to their power, which can be checked through regular voting, majority factions can prevail, sacrificing both the common good

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[185] Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. *The federalist papers.* (1778).

and the rights of other citizens. The decisive solution to this dispute is possible through a representative government, whose characteristics, compared to older democracies, mainly involve the delegation of government to a small circle of elected representatives capable of accommodating and fulfilling the demands of various population factions. Through the institution of representation, it is possible to administer large states. Hence, Madison's contribution to the establishment of a strong federation of states: extending the geographical dimension meant including a greater variety of parties and interests, making it less likely that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a motive exists, it will make it more difficult for all those who feel it to discover their strength and act in concert with each other. The theory of factions by Madison can, therefore, help us understand how in a society rich in different interests and opinions, as is the case with the American society, groups can find their balance by neutralizing each other.

2.1.4 Liberalism and Democracy

What are the consequences of a democratic regime on civil society? In particular, can individual freedoms be effectively protected in a democracy? Consequently, is there a necessary connection between liberalism and democracy? To delve into this issue, this section starts with a hypothesis: a country with a liberal constitution that is, however, governed by a non-elected meritocratic oligarchy. In this state, all individual freedoms are protected through typical liberal mechanisms. Moreover, through freedom of speech and expression, as well as a free press, the people can influence the government. However, there are no mechanisms for sharing sovereign power; government officials are selected by co-optation based on their suitability. Such a government, even if not democratic, is in no way in conflict with the classic liberal doctrine. There are three possible objections to this assertion, as underlined by Graham[186]: democratic institutions are inherently good, and therefore liberals, like anyone else, should defend them; there is a necessary connection between liberalism and democracy, and for this reason, a liberal but non-democratic regime cannot survive for long; there is a conceptual connection between liberalism and democracy, and therefore the image we are given of this hypothetical state is misleading.

Starting with the idea that democratic institutions are inherently good, in order to analyze this statement, one needs to understand what democratic institutions are, or rather, we need to understand by what means a democracy is institutionalized and thus effective. Here we focus essentially on two: universal suffrage and the rule of the majority. Of course, these means are not sufficient for a democracy to be truly such because, for example, if elections were not held regularly

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[186] Graham, Gordon. "Liberalism and democracy." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 9.2 (1992): 151.

and positions were awarded for life after the vote, the people would no longer have power over the rulers. However, for the purposes of my analysis, the two mechanisms mentioned above are sufficient. Analyzing universal suffrage, it must be admitted that, understood as the right to participate in collective decisions for all those subject to central authority, it has never existed[187]. Taking any legal system, for example, one category of people excluded from the right to vote is those who have not yet reached the legal voting age. Thus, should we reject this democratic ideal because it is unattainable? In response to this, a democrat might accept that some categories may be excluded from the right to vote and argue that universal suffrage is not a political goal but rather a regulatory criterion for distributing power. But here too, problems arise. While for some categories, such as newborns, it is easy to understand why they cannot vote, for others, it is not so simple. For example, a 15-year-old is capable of entering a voting booth and marking a ballot, and they may also have decent knowledge of the political system. However, the right to vote is not granted to them because it is believed that a person is not competent to vote until they reach the legal voting age. Herein lies a problem: who determines the criteria by which a person is considered eligible for the right to vote? There are innumerable variables, making the criteria difficult to establish. It would seem, then, that universal suffrage should be understood not so much as the right to participate in collective decisions by everyone subject to central authority but more as the right to participate in collective decisions by those considered more suitable. If we notice, there isn't much difference with a non-democratic government where positions are distributed based on suitability[188].

Next, let's consider the second democratic institution: the rule of the majority. As mentioned, if voting is considered an activity that requires some form of competence, and this competence cannot be guaranteed for all active voters to possess, it is possible that a majority decision could lead, for example, to the formation of a corrupt government or the implementation of disastrous public policies. It could happen that the government transforms from being for the people to being against the people. In this case, it might be natural for some to oppose such a government. It would, therefore, be rational to be antidemocratic, meaning to go against the will of the majority. On the other hand, this action could be seen as promoting a good cause, as the government has failed in its original purposes. From this, it must be concluded that it is not always irrational to be democratic, but that one cannot assert that the rule of the majority has any intrinsic value or virtue because it can also lead to unpleasant consequences. This issue of the rule of the

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[187] As already emphasized in paragraph 2.1.2 above by Rousseau.
[188] *Op. cit.* Graham, Gordon. "Liberalism and democracy."

majority is an even bigger problem for liberals because the unpleasant consequences of this rule could violate individual rights.

Analyzing the second objection, which suggests that a liberal but non-democratic regime cannot survive for long or, in other words, that a liberal constitution without democratic institutions is not stable. Two considerations lead to this conclusion: the first is that it is unlikely that a regime in which power remains concentrated in a small group will continue to provide for the well-being of the population; the second refers to the fact that a liberal constitution leaves ample room for the management of one's affairs, and people raised with a strong culture of individual responsibility are unlikely to be content with being excluded from political power. On the other hand, even in a democratic regime, individual rights and political participation rely more on the actual political life of the community and constitutional limits than on the simple rule of majority decision. In a particular state, the rule of the majority, universal suffrage, and periodic elections can be constitutionally guaranteed. However, this would not be enough: democracy would only be institutionalized, whereas it needs to be realized. Realization is nothing more than the observance by both the rulers and the governed of certain constitutional provisions. This means that to claim that a democracy works and protects certain guarantees, its constitutional provisions must be respected.

Let's turn to the third option, which is that there is a conceptual connection between liberalism and democracy, and therefore a regime like the one mentioned at the beginning is not truly liberal. This hypothesis is based on a fundamental concept of liberalism, that of individual autonomy[189], understood as being the master of one's own destiny. It must be affirmed that some decisions made by a state have a direct impact on individuals' affairs, and excluding these individuals from the formation of collective decisions would infringe upon their autonomy. However, we cannot say that this implies the necessity of a democratic system. We have no reason to believe a priori that a liberal aristocracy cannot take public opinion into account and be influenced by it. And if public opinion influences the regime, it effectively becomes part of the decision-making process, making this process not very different from a normal election. Now, let's consider a majority decision; we must admit that it will be the result of various opinions, not the product of a single voice. But if we cannot demonstrate in any way that an individual has acted against themselves, we can admit that it is possible for the majority to harm all those individuals who participated in the decision-making process but had different views. From this, we can deduce that participating in the decision-making process does not always coincide with being the master of one's own destiny. It must be stated, then, that the incompatibilities between liberalism and

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[189] *Ivi,* p.158.

democracy, as we have understood them, are numerous and substantial. There are actually no particular reasons why a liberal must embrace the democratic ideal, and if they choose to do so, they must inevitably accept the contradictions that exist between these two concepts.

"Do liberals have good reason to be democrats?"[190]. This question of whether liberals have a strong rationale for embracing democracy is a significant one. In the modern political landscape, the ideals of freedom and democracy are so closely linked within the concept of liberal democracy that raising this question can be challenging. People might instinctively wonder how there could be any tension between these two. However, it is essential to recognize that they have distinct origins, with liberalism being a relatively modern theory of the state and democracy representing an ancient form of government, thereby underlining that the two have not always been aligned. Despite the commonly assumed, indeed, there exists a necessary tension between the core principles of liberalism and those of democracy. Considering again a hypothetical scenario where a country has a liberal constitution but is governed by an unelected, meritocratic oligarchy, there are no formal mechanisms for voting or power-sharing, and individuals are appointed to positions of authority based on the judgment of existing officeholders.

For the sake of illustration, let's refer to this hypothetical country as an aristocracy, a government ruled by the most qualified individuals. One consequence of labeling it as such is to highlight its undemocratic nature. It can be argued that while there may not be an inherent connection between liberalism and democracy, such that the value of one necessarily implies the value of the other, liberal and democratic institutions are nonetheless contingently related in the real world of politics. In practice, these two concepts often go hand in hand. Another perspective suggests that there is indeed a conceptual link between liberalism and democracy, implying that the appearance of an undemocratic system like the hypothetical aristocracy is deceptive, and its lack of democracy inherently makes it illiberal. Regarding the first point, one common response is that the concept of a liberal aristocracy may seem appealing in theory but is unlikely to work in practice. This perspective stems from the belief that there is a contingent connection between liberalism and democracy, suggesting that a liberal constitution without democratic institutions is inherently unstable. In other words, it is improbable that a government not chosen by the people will remain a government for the people in the long run. The success of liberalism generates expectations that only democratic institutions can adequately fulfill. In response to the second point, it can be argued that individuals raised under a liberal constitution would not remain content with exclusion from political power and would eventually demand constitutional changes toward a more democratic system. However, it is important to note that while respect for individual

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[190] *Ivi,* p. 149.

autonomy may imply a right to some degree of political decision-making, it doesn't necessarily mandate a specific system of democratic elections in a liberal society. Furthermore, despite being an ideal often discussed and pursued, it is doubtful if true democracy has ever been fully realized in practice (looking back at what Rousseau has believed). Many countries considered democratic models fall short of fully embodying the democratic ideal.

Another important contribution to the liberal and democratic realm relates to the book "The People vs. Democracy" by Mounk[191]. The fundamental point of the book is the rise of populism and the consequent decadence of liberal democracies. This fits to the current discourse as he underscores the consequences of having too much liberal or too much democracy. The first chapter argues that liberal democracies are now giving rise on one hand to illiberal democracies governed by populists and on the other to undemocratic liberalism run by technocratic elites. The former are also referred to as 'democracies without rights', while the latter are also appointed as 'rights without democracy'. The rise of populist parties, in Mounk's analysis, is considered illiberal and democratic and the aim is to undermine political institutions. Consequently, as populist claim to represent the will of the people, then "politics quickly becomes an existential struggle between the real people and the enemies"[192]. He also warns the reader that illiberal democracies might descend into dictatorships if the "defenders of liberal democracies' do not withstand populists. For what concerns rights without democracy, Mounk asserts that democracy is being undermined by the fact that "many political topics have been taken out of political contestation"[193] and have been given to technocratic institutions, increasingly excluding citizens from the decision-making process and politics. This has resulted in political insulation from the popular will, which now has "near-zero" influence on political acts. Ultimately, Mounk believes that both illiberal democracies and undemocratic liberalism cannot be stable forms of government, as both elements –liberalism and democracy– are essential. He proposes, therefore, a system in which institutions are reformed in order to balance better "expertise and responsiveness to popular will"[194].

In the end, Mounk fails to prove that liberalism and democracy are conflicting: there is a clear dichotomy between the two processes. Contrary to what the title of the book implies, the enemy of democracy is not the people, but those who claim to be the sole representer of the people, speaking on behalf of the people and wishing to undermine the fundamental requirements for democracy to function in the first place. The pessimistic account of the current state of liberal

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[191] Mounk, Yascha. "The people vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it." *The People vs. Democracy.* Harvard University Press. (2018).
[192] *Ivi,* p. 46.
[193] *Ivi,* p. 77.
[194] *Ivi,* p. 97.

democracy gets the reader to question what will happen in the future. Moreover, he concludes with a prediction that goes both ways: a pessimistic account or an optimistic vision of the future of democracy. Nonetheless, there is no way of knowing if liberal democracy will be the wave of the future or it is just a phase of the current world. Overall, Mounk's book delivers an insightful interpretation of the circumstances that made liberal democracy a stable form of government and how the collapse of these circumstances is the foundation of the current deconsolidation of democracy.

Having analyzed these preliminary objections to liberalism and democracy, it is crucial to investigate deeper into the question(s): why is democratization expected to automatically include liberalization and democratic consolidation to also include liberal consolidation?

Starting with the main conclusion (which has already been mentioned), it is imperative that the importance of both components is not overlooked in the context of liberal democracy. This form of governance cannot achieve true consolidation unless we fully grasp the significance of both elements. Furthermore, just as democracy has been embraced, liberalism must also be acknowledged and embraced if we are to comprehend the various pathways of transitioning from more authoritarian regimes. An examination of the definitions and compatibility of democracy and liberalism, as well as their role in shaping a liberal democracy, is necessary.

First of all, the idea of transitioning from a more authoritarian form of government to a more democratic one should not be beyond the comprehension of anyone. Such a governmental shift is universally recognized as democratization, involving thus the transfer of state power from a single ruler or a few oligarchs to rule by the people. This concept, on the surface, appears straightforward. However, challenges arise, suggesting that this may be an overly simplistic, minimalist conceptualization that fails to capture the complexities and dynamics inherent in the transition between regime types, as well as the potential endpoints of such processes. The primary concern here is not the former issue but rather the latter question and its derivatives: what constitutes the endpoint of democratization? What type of democracy marks the culmination of democratization? Should we seek this endpoint empirically by examining existing regime cases, or can we envision new forms of democratic governance that surpass the existing models? Does an endpoint even exist?

For many, the endpoint is referred to as democratic consolidation, which, in its simplest form, should represent the ultimate goal of the democratization process. In this sense, democratic consolidation implies that governance by the people has become the norm, and any regression into authoritarian rule is considered unacceptable. Historically, one of the minimal indicators of this consolidation has been the conduct of elections, although this criterion has lost favor among

some scholars, who instead use the term "electoralism" pejoratively[195] (consider the analysis of the factual government mentioned earlier). However, as the concept of democratic consolidation has gained broader acceptance, it has transcended its minimalist origins and is now seen as an aspirational endpoint toward which all post-authoritarian regimes should strive. What was once a basic benchmark for democracy has evolved into something far more substantial[196].

Recalling the essence of democracy, contemporary discussions often approach democracy from different angles, often breaking it down into two primary dimensions –procedural and substantive. However, democracy in its pure form, devoid of the troublesome adjectives frequently attached to it, can be an unsettling concept. This assertion might initially appear alarming, but it reflects the insights of political thinkers such as Tocqueville and later statesmen like Madison. They astutely recognized that a democratic system, in and of itself, is not significantly distinct from despotism. A democracy lacking in fundamental rights or a degree of liberalism can result in one of the most arbitrary and unrestrained forms of governance known to humanity. Even when considering a formulation like Abraham Lincoln's concept of democratic government –that "of the people, by the people, and for the people"– this dissertation expresses concern that this alone cannot encompass the entirety of liberalism's meaning. Without some form of institutional checks and constitutional protections, there is little to prevent a majority from imposing a tyranny of the majority.

Then, the following discussion may be again unsettling, but it is necessary to articulate before the crucial analysis. When democracy is stripped down and defined as "rule by the people"[197] it does not inherently encompass key concepts such as executive adherence to the rule of law, judicial independence or oversight, civil liberties, property rights, religious freedom, media autonomy, or minority rights. These aspects, which are often perceived as inalienable rights and taken for granted in liberal democracies, do not constitute fundamental components of democratic rule itself. Instead, they are a more recent (and potentially tension-filled) addition to the concept of democracy. These fundamental elements, on the other hand, constitute the essence of liberalism. While various political philosophers have contributed to these ideas, including Hobbes, Smith, Mill, and Montesquieu, for the purposes of this dissertation, mentioning Locke suffices. Although the concept of liberalism has evolved and faced misinterpretation over the centuries, the core principles have consistently included these fundamentals. To this core, contemporary concerns such as freedom of speech, media freedom, and rights related to gender, race, ethnicity,

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[195] Rhoden, T. F. "The liberal in liberal democracy." *Democratization* 22.3 (2015): 560-578.
[196] An analysis of a substantial meaning of democracy has been made in section 2.1 above.
[197] *Op. cit.* Rhoden, T. F. "The liberal in liberal democracy.": 561.

as well as socioeconomic considerations like labor rights or health, in a certain interpretation, remain within the scope of liberalism. Furthermore, it is important to note that political liberalism should not be conflated with economic liberalism. The discussion here pertains to political ideology and should be considered independently of the economic system[198].

Therefore, when scholars and ordinary people insist on labeling liberal democracy simply as democracy and omit the crucial 'liberal' component from the term, it raises important analytical questions. The central argument of this section is, therefore, that by avoiding the use of the correct terminology, we may inadvertently overlook the specific challenges associated with that proper name. When the term democracy is employed while actually referring to liberal democracy, one might be setting the bar for an already complex concept of democratic consolidation too high to attain, all the while sidestepping critical analytical concerns that pertain to the consolidation of liberalism itself. It is worth noting that nearly everyone is occasionally guilty of substituting 'democracy' for 'liberal democracy'. This may occur out of convenience, as we tend to use the shorter word when discussing its contemporary variation, sometimes neglecting the three-syllable word that accurately characterizes modern democratic systems. This is also what this dissertation, for sake of convenience, does. However, it is crucial to underline that a difference must be acknowledged.

Rhoden tries to create an analytically useful –at least in the social sciences realm– conceptual map of liberal democracy where the divisions between the two components are not abandoned. To illustrate this, Rhoden has imagined a hypothetical scenario where all contemporary nation-states are arranged on a two-dimensional plane (refer to Figure 1). On one axis, represented by the x-axis, they have positioned the fundamental concept of democracy in its original sense. Concurrently, on the perpendicular y-axis, we situate the concept of liberalism. In this hypothetical construct, "low democracy" signifies governance characterized by monarchic or oligarchic rule, generally exhibiting lower levels of political equality, while "high democracy" stands for the opposite, emphasizing greater political equality. In a similar vein, "low liberalism" denotes a deficiency in the rule of law and civil liberties, whereas "high liberalism" denotes an abundance of rights. Given the uncertainty of the future, they "could leave both high democracy and high liberalism unbounded"[199]. In reality, all contemporary nation-states possess components of both democracy and liberalism, as there are no purely democratic or purely liberal regimes in the modern world. Some may lean more towards democracy than liberalism, while others may exhibit a

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[198] For more in-depth analysis of this latter see: Kurki, Milja. "Politico-economic models of democracy in democracy promotion." *International Studies Perspectives* 15.2 (2014): 121-141.

[199] *Op. Cit.* Rhoden, T. F. "The liberal in liberal democracy.": 568

stronger inclination toward liberalism than democracy. Such a conceptualization, which spans a spectrum for both democracy and liberalism, provides a more accurate depiction of reality than attempting to classify regimes into discrete categories like authoritarianism or liberal democracy. The plotting of the trajectory of a nation-state over the years enables a clearer assessment of whether aspects of democracy or liberalism require consolidation. What is conventionally referred to as liberal democracy corresponds to those nation-states positioned in the top right of the graph (Country F), while those typically categorized as authoritarian tend to cluster in the bottom left (Country A). All others have been assigned numerous qualifying adjectives, each attempting to articulate itself as a distinct, necessitating new theoretical considerations.
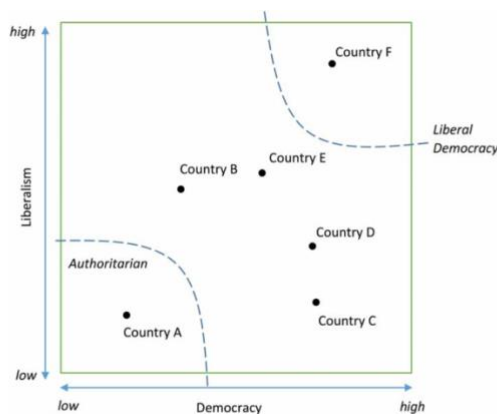

Figure 1. Conceptualizing liberal democracy as two components.

It is important to again underline the fact that democracy and liberalism do not overlap completely, but they may clash with each other. "Constructing a regime that is both more liberal and more democratic will always pose a challenge"[200], as these two dimensions inherently harbor points of contention. Debates concerning the primacy of liberalism or democracy, their relative feasibility, and the question of whether they truly emerged concurrently are not only encouraged but also expected, forming the subject of ongoing debates. The responses to such inquiries benefit not only from a historical investigation but also from a probabilistic assessment. In contributing to this discourse, it is hoped that scholarly discussions will be structured in a manner that leverages the historical, theoretical, definitional, and analytical distinctions between liberalism and democracy.

2.1.5 Hybrid Regimes and systems in transition

Crucial to the current discussion is the notion that democracy is created from a phase of transition[201]. This transitional stage can be characterized as an intermediate and ambiguous period

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[200] *Ivi,* p. 570.

[201] *Op. Cit.* Morlino, Leonardo, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Bertrand Badie. *Political science: A global perspective.*

during which a regime departs from key characteristics of its previous institutional framework, while at the same time not yet fully embodying the features of the new regime being formed. Transition is therefore marked by a state of institutional fluidity where various contrasting political solutions are advocated by different stakeholders. In numerous cases, transition originates from an authoritarian regime, and it commences when the limited pluralism inherent in authoritarianism breaks down. This marks the point where civil and political rights, characteristic of democratic regimes, begin to gain recognition. Transition can be considered complete when the democratic trajectory of the transition becomes evident, and the concrete possibility of establishing a democracy becomes clear, often signaled by the conduct of the first free, competitive, and fair elections. Crisis, on the other hand, is a process in which the institutions of the regime, intermediate institutions including political parties, and society gradually drift apart and experience disintegration. There can also be a crisis not within democracy but of democracy itself. In recent years, the former type of crisis has been more prevalent than the latter. Across various regions of the world, the desirability of a well-functioning democracy is increasingly unquestioned due to learning processes, the absence of viable institutional alternatives, and the global spread of democratic ideals. This latter will be analyzed in detail in the next sections of the current chapter. Moreover, an important aspect that is reminded is that if some procedural and substantial features of the definition of democracy, are not satisfied, then the regime is no longer considered to be a democracy, but rather a hybrid regime.

This section will, therefore, briefly analyze the definitions and the history of hybrid regimes in order to understand that not all processes that eventually bring to democracy are linear and, on the contrary, most of the times, they create ambiguous conditions.

On April 25, 1974, in Portugal, a coup d'état led by officers of the Moviemento das Forcas Armadas marked the beginning of what is better known as the Carnation Revolution, which paved the way for the third wave of democratization[202]. This term, coined by Samuel Huntington, referred

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[202] Samuel Huntington, in his work "Democracy's Third Wave", identifies the factors that contributed to the spread of the third wave of democratic transition worldwide. Specifically, he enumerates the following five factors: substantial problems of political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes: in a world where democratic values had gained acceptance, authoritarian regimes faced significant challenges in maintaining their legitimacy, due to economic crises and, to some extent, military failures, which eroded their legitimacy; unprecedented global economic growth since the 1960s: the world witnessed remarkable economic growth starting from the 1960s, leading to improved living standards, increased education, and urbanization, creating conditions for an increasing demand for democratic governance; radical shift in catholic church doctrine: the catholic church underwent a profound doctrinal transformation, especially following the second Vatican council, aligning with the principles of democracy and human rights; changes in the policies of external actors, which played a significant role, sometimes promoting democracy and providing support for democratic movements in various countries; "avalanche" of transition effects from preceding waves: the cumulative effects of transitions from earlier waves of democratization served as both stimuli and models for subsequent democratization efforts. these prior

to the progressive spread of democratic regimes worldwide. The coup in Portugal had immediate repercussions in Spain, where one year later, in 1975, the long-standing Francoist crisis culminated with the death of General Franco. A few years later, the transition from military regimes to democratic political systems in many countries in Latin America strengthened the image of democracy as a rising global political model, spanning from South America to Southeast Europe and various areas in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War and the ideological competition with the Soviet Union removed the fundamental motivation for supporting anti-communist dictatorships. The outcome of these significant events is evident from a concrete fact: between 1974 and 1990, at least 30 countries completed their transition to democracy.

However, given the complexity of this process, which encountered numerous political, cultural, and economic obstacles, not all affected countries successfully completed their transition. In fact, one of the most interesting outcomes of this wave of democratization is the unprecedented increase in the number of regimes that cannot be clearly classified as either democratic or authoritarian. These political systems, while often representing an improvement over previous authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, do not yet constitute fully-fledged liberal democracies. They fall into what Bogaards defines as the "gray zone"[203] between democratic and non-democratic systems, a phenomenon that appears to dominate many Eastern countries. However, in a broader sense, this 'gray zone' now constitutes a third of all existing regimes.

It is not surprising that scholars like Croissant and Merkel have stated that "partial types of democracy constitute a dominant trend in democratic theory and in studies of democratization"[204]. Additionally, Epstein et al. have noted that partial democracies "constitute a growing portion of current regimes and play a significant role in transitions"[205]. Yet, they have also pointed out the lack of information on what prevents full democracies from reverting to partial democracies or autocracies, what prevents partial democracies from sliding into autocracies, and how the determinants of the behavior of partial democracies elude our understanding.

These regimes are present on all continents and, overall, they outnumber non-free regimes in terms of quantity and percentage of the population. Another observation is that, with the sole exception

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transitions demonstrated the feasibility and benefits of democratic governance, inspiring and guiding later democratization movements. These five factors, as identified by Huntington, collectively contributed to the third wave of democratization, shaping the global landscape of political governance in the late 20th century and beyond.

[203] Bogaards, Matthijs. "How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism." *Democratization* 16.2 (2009): 399-423.

[204] Croissant, Aurel, and Wolfgang Merkel. "Introduction: democratization in the early twenty-first century." Democratization 11.5 (2004): 1-9.

[205] Epstein, David L., et al. "Democratic transitions." *American journal of political science* 50.3 (2006): 551-569.

of Turkey, the majority of countries classified as partially free are medium-sized or small. One of the early authors to recognize and document the existence of façade democracies or semi-democracies was Samuel Finer[206], who, in a contribution dating back to 1970, defined them as regimes that are no longer authoritarian but are in no way democratic, having institutions that are recurring in a democracy, such as a constitution and elections, but where the former is not fully implemented, and the latter are largely constrained. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of ambiguous cases has been investigated by many other authors within the framework of the extensive theoretical reflection and empirical analysis produced by the wave of democratization. This has led to the development of a new category of regimes, defined in various ways but all falling under the broader term of hybrid regimes. Hybrid regimes are ultimately mixed regimes that fall within the broad center of the political continuum, anchored on one side to democracy and on the other to dictatorship.

The term "hybrid regime" was first coined by Terry Lynn Karl[207], a professor at Stanford University, in her 1995 article titled "The Hybrid Regimes of Central America". In her analysis of certain Latin American countries, Karl described the emergence of political systems characterized by a mix of democratic and authoritarian elements, capable of enduring over time. She asserted that today's regimes are not merely reconstitutions of previous authoritarian coalitions; rather, they are a hybrid form that has the potential to mobilize mass pressure for increased political contestation and inclusion. Furthermore, Karl argued that these regimes were not just mere façade democracies but represented a genuine advance from the past and a significant step in the long-term process of constructing democracy. Over time, the term "hybrid regime" has been adapted and refined into various labels. For instance, Epstein defines them as partial democracies; O'Donnell and Schmitter referred to such political systems as dictablandas, meaning liberalized authoritarian regimes, or democraduras, signifying illiberal democracies; Larry Diamond distinguishes between liberal democracies and electoral democracies[208], with the latter further categorized into competitive and hegemonic electoral democracies. Diamond proposes, however, a more articulated analysis, encompassing a further sub-categorization of those latter into competitive and hegemonic. The ambiguous category of hybrid regimes includes cases displaying both authoritarian and democratic characteristics, necessitating therefore a more in-depth analysis. Levitsky and Way[209], on their side, identify competitive authoritarianism as a specific subtype of hybrid regime. It involves incumbents regularly abusing state resources, limiting media coverage

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[206] *Op. Cit.* Morlino, Leonardo, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Bertrand Badie. *Political science: A global perspective.*

[207] Karl, Terry Lynn. "The hybrid regimes of Central America." *J. Democracy* 6 (1995).

[208] Diamond, Larry. "Thinking about hybrid regimes." *J. Democracy* 13 (2002)

[209] Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. "The rise of competitive authoritarianism." *J. Democracy* 13 (2002): 51.

for the opposition, and sometimes manipulating electoral outcomes. Ottaway[210] characterizes these regimes as semi-authoritarian, stating that they are ambiguous systems combining rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, some formal democratic institutions, and respect for limited civil and political liberties alongside essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits. Mikael Wigell, then, proposes a four-fold regime typology based on the dimensions of electoralism and constitutionalism[211]. This typology includes democratic, constitutional-oligarchic, electoral-autocratic, and authoritarian regimes. Hybrid regimes can be situated within this classification system, allowing for analytical relationships with other regime types. These diverse terminologies reflect the complexity and variation within hybrid regimes, highlighting the challenge of categorizing and understanding these political systems that exhibit a blend of democratic and authoritarian characteristics.

Ultimately, the author that has deepened and developed the concept of hybrid regime is Leonardo Morlino, mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph and elsewhere. According to him, these are political systems that have adopted certain aspects of democracy while retaining authoritarian elements. They exist somewhere between authoritarianism and democracy[212] and can be considered as transitional regimes. Morlino further emphasizes that hybrid regimes are those that have lost certain democratic features while introducing authoritarian elements. In his work, Morlino provides a more detailed perspective, stating that the definition of hybrid regimes is most appropriate when considering the regime's historical context. In this context, hybrid regimes are those that have experienced previous authoritarian or traditional rule and have subsequently undergone some degree of opening, liberalization, and partial expansion of pluralism. These regimes may have experienced a period of minimal democracy followed by interventions by unelected individuals, particularly military leaders, who restrict competitive pluralism without establishing a full-fledged authoritarian regime. Therefore, a definition that takes into account the regime's historical context points to three possibilities: the regime emerges from various forms of authoritarianism that have existed in recent decades or even earlier; it can emerge from a previous traditional system, monarchy, or sultanate; or the regime emerges from a crisis within a previous democratic system. Starting from these, another possibility can be added: the regime results from decolonization but lacks subsequent stabilization –this can also be considered as a specification to the second option.

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[210] Ottaway, Marina. "Democracy challenged." *The rise of Semi-authoritarianism. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2003).

[211] Wigell, Mikael. "Mapping 'hybrid regimes': Regime types and concepts in comparative politics." *Democratisation* 15.2 (2008): 230-250.

[212] *Op. Cit.* Morlino, Leonardo, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Bertrand Badie. *Political science: A global perspective*

Regardless of the terminology used to refer to this phenomenon, hybrid regimes are not entirely new. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, there were electoral regimes characterized by multi partisanship but lacking full democracy. Throughout history, Europe and Latin America have witnessed cases of limited party competition with restricted voting rights. As Morlino points out, the concept of hybrid regimes existed in the literature for several decades, but it is only in recent years that the phenomenon has taken on significant diversity and magnitude, leading to what can be termed a "wave of hybridization"[213]. What is particularly interesting is that, thirty years after the start of the third wave of democratization and a decade after scholars began to question its trajectory, the study of the outcomes of this democratic transition has been somewhat complicated by the abundance of different subtypes of democracy and authoritarianism. There is a lack of a common understanding of the phenomenon, both in terms of definition, as evidenced by the multitude of terms used, and empirical measurement. It is important to note that complex phenomena like transitions to democracy are rarely linear, and the possibility that they lead to situations of ambiguity and liminality, rather than being the exception, is often the rule.

2.2 Crisis of Democracy

Starting from the theoretical premises, one important factor that emerges is that there is no perfect democracy, and we can even go as far as saying that it can never exist. Rather, situations in which democratic rule is challenged or even uncertain seems to be the new normal. In particular, currently the study of democracy is associated with the study of the crisis of democracy, one that results from sixteen consecutive years of decrease in the level of freedom worldwide.

According to the Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2022 Report[214], an annual comprehensive global assessment of freedom that evaluates civil liberties and political rights across 195 countries using a scoring system, only 20.3% of the world's total population of 7.8 billion resides in Free countries. In contrast, 38.4% of the global population resides in Not Free countries, while the remaining 41.3% live in Partly Free nations. For the purposes of this discussion, it is reasonable to assert that Free countries can be equated with liberal democracies, Partly Free countries may be viewed as exhibiting characteristics of illiberal democracies or hybrid regimes, and Not Free countries typically align with authoritarian regimes, given the intrinsic relationship between constitutional liberalism and democracy. An examination of the global data presented in the report reveals that out of the 195 countries assessed, 42% fall into the Free category, 29% are

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[213] Morlino, Leonardo. "Regimi ibridi o regimi in transizione?." *Rivista italiana di scienza politica* 38.2 (2008): 169-190.

[214] *Op. Cit.* Freedom House. *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule.* (2022)

classified as Partly Free, and the remaining 29% are categorized as Not Free. A research that further confirms that democracy is facing a global crisis is made by V-Dem[215], which shows that the number of liberal democracies has declined from forty-two in 2012 to thirty-two as of March 2023, and these remaining democracies only represent 13 percent of the world's population. When viewed as a dynamic process rather than a static snapshot, there were thirty-three countries heading towards autocracy in 2021, which includes nations like Brazil, India, Turkey, and the United States[216], while only fifteen were moving towards democratization. Consequently, the level of democracy that the average global citizen enjoyed in 2021 has regressed to levels last seen in 1989, effectively wiping out the democratic progress made over the past decades.

These percentages offer clear insights into the global landscape, and it is evident that countries categorized as illiberal democracies, occupying a middle ground between democracy and authoritarianism, are increasingly leaning towards the latter end of the spectrum. Despite freedom and democracy maintaining their significance, democracy faces growing threats. These challenges are particularly pronounced in the context of contemporary global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the civil conflict in Myanmar, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and escalating tensions between China, Taiwan, and the United States. These developments underscore the fact that global democracy is gradually losing ground and becoming increasingly suppressed with each passing day. Moreover, the current crisis affecting democracies is largely driven by a prevailing sense of political distrust within well-established liberal democracies. This pervasive sentiment of mistrust translates into skepticism, disenchantment, and political apathy toward politicians and the political institutions that are meant to represent their interests. Consequently, political disengagement and division have reached unprecedented levels, leading to a decline in party membership and voter turnout, as well as an increase in the prominence of populist parties within the political landscape. Populist parties have exhibited an extraordinary ability to mobilize the masses by capitalizing on the negative perceptions surrounding politics. They achieve this by creating a perceived conflict between the citizens (referred to as the pure people) and the political establishment (portrayed as corrupt elites). This dynamic, reminiscent of what scholars Lipset and Rokkan might have termed a 'cleavage' back in 1967, serves as a central feature of contemporary populist movements. Furthermore, populism leverages an unmediated relationship between charismatic leaders and the masses. This is facilitated through the use of plain and relatable language, as well as political rhetoric designed to persuade voters by addressing a wide range of issues, spanning from

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[215] Varieties of Democracies report, March 2023. Available at: https://v-dem.net/documents/30/V-dem_democracyreport2023_highres.pdf

[216] Boese, Vanessa A., et al. "State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?." *Democratization* 29.6 (2022): 983-1013.

traditional left-wing to right-wing concerns. Populist leaders also engage in notable negative campaigning. Populism's strategy involves appealing to the emotions of the people and mobilizing them by amplifying negative sentiments. However, it is essential to recognize that when populism attains power, it undergoes transformations that can undermine democratic principles in various ways.

To better illustrate the increasing disinterest and passivity among citizens towards democratic participation, it suffices to look at the recent referendum in Italy concerning justice and the legal process. This referendum turned out to be a significant *débâcle*, with a turnout of only 20.9% of all eligible voters. According to a political survey by Ipsos[217] as of May 25, 2022, just 56% of Italian citizens were aware of the referendum, and a majority of them consciously chose to abstain from voting or did not participate at all. In fact, nearly half of Italians, roughly 48%, predicted that the required 50% quorum would not be reached, and their prediction turned out to be accurate. This phenomenon reveals a dual challenge for democracy. On one hand, it is increasingly weakened by the often-ineffective conduct of the political class in fulfilling its mandate. On the other hand, citizens themselves have become passive in their engagement with politics, contributing to this weakening. What is concerning is that this trend is not limited to Italy; it extends to numerous democracies in Europe and beyond. Thus, the crisis of democracy encompasses what scholars refer to as a crisis of representation, characterized by a growing disconnect between citizens and political institutions, including political leaders and parties.

Further, alongside the crisis *of* democracy, there is a distinct phenomenon referred to as a crisis *in* democracy, which has gathered increasing attention in academic research and literature. This crisis is characterized by what scholars term democratic backsliding, wherein a country experiences a regression in its democratic performance due to a weakening of the values and institutions that support it. In addition to having established democratic norms, a functioning democracy relies on safeguarding the institutions, values, outcomes, rights, and duties that underpin it. Studies conducted over the past decade have shown that most liberal democracies worldwide, including the United States, are exhibiting concerning signs of backsliding. Among the various contributing factors, the global digitization of society stands out due to the systemic changes it has ushered in and its substantial redesign of the social paradigm's infrastructure.

Despite these challenges, democracy is not without hope. It may appear under attack and weakened from multiple angles, seemingly on the brink of decline. However, it retains robust

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[217] "I sondaggi politici di Pagnoncelli: Referendum 12 giugno 2022 sulla giustizia, quanto ne sanno gli italiani?", Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/it-it/sondaggi-politici-pagnoncelli-referendum-12-giugno-2022-giustizia-italiani-dimartedi-puntata-24-05-2022

support, as emphasized by Professor Manuel Castells, who stated that "democracy lives in the minds of the people". This suggests that as long as this support remains strong, democracy can withstand and overcome the distortions it encounters.

2.2.1 Backsliding

Democracies, therefore, much like individuals and social groups, undergo processes of transition as they evolve and mature, as noted by Wydra[218], but also by Morlino[219]. These transitions are not merely a matter of implementing certain institutional elements, such as holding elections, establishing the rule of law, or creating state bureaucracies in societies unfamiliar with such institutions. Instead, political regimes change when societies experience the dissolution of existing power structures. This transformation affects not only the formal institutions of governance but also the emotional bonds and symbolic frameworks that shape people's identities and beliefs. On this note, Claude Lefort's concept of the "empty place of power"[220] offers a valuable anthropological tool for understanding the complexities of contemporary democracy. Drawing inspiration from the French Revolution, Lefort argues that the essence of democracy does not lie in a fixed substance, specific content, or absolute certainty. Instead, it resides in the enduring presence of an authority vacuum, where the locus of power remains vacant and can only be temporarily filled.

In the realm of social science, the primary task is to interpret facts and phenomena. However, interpretation often involves adopting a position of intellectual detachment, where the observing analyst seeks to maintain distance from events, cultural contexts, and meanings. Some scholars view democracy as an objective social reality, reflecting people's engagement in self-governance within modern constitutional states, while others emphasize the gradual acquisition of individual rights and freedoms, often grounded in enlightened reasoning and rationality. Nevertheless, it is evident that without the transformative experiences of the revolutionary era in the late eighteenth century, the resurgence of democracy as the aspirational form of political organization would not have been possible. Lefort highlights specifically the pivotal role of the French Revolution, specifically the downfall of absolutist monarchy, in creating an authority vacuum. In his holistic view of politics, he rejects the compartmentalization of politics into neatly defined sectors where individuals and institutions act rationally and strategically based on predictable norms and rules. Instead, he posits that the French Revolution introduced radical

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[218] Wydra, Harald. "The liminal origins of democracy." *International Political Anthropology* 2.1 (2009): 91-109.

[219] *Op. cit.* Morlino, Leonardo, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Bertrand Badie. *Political science: A global perspective.*

[220] *Op. Cit.* Wydra, Harald. "The liminal origins of democracy."

uncertainty not only within the state but across all dimensions of society, encompassing psychological, economic, legal, and political aspects. Essentially, politically, the French Revolution initiated a significant disintegration of power structures, freeing individuals from their reliance on collective bodies or feudal lords. However, sociologically, individuals were not inherently autonomous but had to undergo a process of individualization. As they separated from their previous social affiliations, questions about their status, identity, and life prospects became uncertain and unpredictable.

In Lefort's perspective, the essence of democracy lies in the dissolution of "markers of certainty"[221], encompassing institutional, symbolic, and mental structures. Unlike monarchies, where power was embodied in the king and the corporate social body, democratic governance cannot lay claim to incorporating or possessing power. Instead, the exercise of power in democracy becomes subject to periodic competition. Democracy emerges from the ruins of the old social hierarchy, but it does not inherently produce fully autonomous beings. In a democracy, the locus of authority is void of actual individuals and can only be temporarily occupied, never truly possessed. While power in monarchies was intimately tied to the king's person, in democracy, it is the power of nobody. The head of state, a prime minister, or a government does not act as supreme rulers or representatives of the sovereign; they serve as temporary custodians of an empty position. This vacant position forms the backbone of political and social order in democracies, but nobody can genuinely speak in its name. Any claims to substance, such as the collective good, public interest, or the will of the nation, are subject to the competitive struggle to attain the authority of office and governance. Those in authoritative positions have limited terms, are open to criticism, and are accountable to the public.

The revolutionary era, or the 'Third Wave' of democratization, started in the mid-1970s with Portugal (as explained above in more detail) and then picked up steam in other European countries, then Latin America and East Asian countries, culminating with the expansion in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, by the early 2000s, significant doubts had started to emerge regarding the sustainability and even the classification of the new democracies that had emerged. Prominent scholars such as Zakaria (1997), Diamond (2002), Ottaway (2003), Zakaria (2007), and Levitsky and Way (2010) raised questions about whether these countries could truly be considered democracies in the long run. Many of the nations that had undergone

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[221] Lefort, Carl. *Essais sur le politique*, Paris: Seuil. (1986), in *Op. cit.* Wydra, Harald. "The liminal origins of democracy."

transitions to democracy found themselves struggling to maintain these democratic systems[222]. What was particularly distinctive and troubling about these instances of democratic regression was not just the fact that they occurred but also the mechanisms through which they unfolded. Unlike the classic coup d'état, where regime change is swift and forceful, the process of democratic regression that emerged was characterized by a gradual erosion of democratic institutions, rules, and norms. This process has come to be known as backsliding and involves the incremental weakening of democratic foundations and practices and is typically driven by actions taken by duly elected governments, often under the influence of an autocratic leader. While backsliding may not always lead to outright authoritarian rule, in some cases, it did result in a complete reversal of democratic progress. In essence, it appeared that democracy was "consuming itself"[223] from within.

Democratic backsliding, however, is not a new concept: political thinkers of the past were already skeptical of democracy –although they lived in other times, where democratic institutions were different from today's and there was close to no liberalism in their democracies.
The foundations of much democratic theory can be traced back to the ideas of Plato[224], who was famously skeptical of democracy. His concerns centered around several key points: he believed that democracy tended to lead to unintelligent decisions, corrupt the moral of society, and foster factionalism that could empower demagogues to seize power. In Plato's view, moreover, these concerns were interrelated: the inclusivity of democracy encouraged foolishness, which led to moral decay, which in turn fueled factionalism, ultimately resulting in instability. This latter point will be crucial for the analysis in the next section. Plato's work 'The Republic' is widely recognized as one of the most influential texts in moral and political thought. However, in modern political thought, the work of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), particularly his book 'Leviathan' published in 1651, holds a pivotal position. It is particularly noteworthy when compared to earlier political philosophy. Unlike his predecessors, who often assumed that people would naturally live under some form of government and debated which type of government was best, Hobbes took a different starting point. He treated anarchy, not in the sense of chaos or a lack of moral rules, but as the absence of government itself. Hobbes defined government as an institution holding a monopoly on rulemaking and the enforcement of those rules through violence and coercion. Hobbes argued indeed that the most stable form of government is an absolute monarchy. He believed that any form of divided sovereignty –and democracy is included– would inherit the same

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[222] Haggard, Stephan, and Robert Kaufman. *Backsliding: Democratic regress in the contemporary world*. Cambridge University Press. (2021).

[223] *Ibid.*

[224] Brennan, Jason. *Democracy: A Guided Tour*. Oxford University Press, 2023: 41.

problems as the state of nature, which he equated with anarchy. In a democracy, individuals may hope to achieve their personal goals, but the reality is that some will succeed while others will not. Thus, democracy perpetuates a continuous competition for power so that individuals can pursue their objectives. Rather than eliminating the destructive competition of the state of nature, democracy merely shifts and refines this competition.

Edmund Burke[225] differs from the philosophers and theorists we have just analyzed as he was also a practicing member of the British government. His work was strongly influenced by practical concerns and often directed toward immediate issues. He was not particularly interested in making sweeping judgments about whether democracy, in a general sense, was good or bad. Instead, he believed that such evaluations depended on specific circumstances, including the people, the time, the place, and facts that might not be fully accessible. For Burke, democracy's ability to bring about positive and stable change was limited. He argued that democratic bodies, like philosophers and theorists, lacked the understanding to implement their utopian visions effectively. His approach can be characterized as a theory of the constraints on democracy's capacity to produce desirable outcomes. He advocated for gradual social changes, introduced incrementally, to allow societies to experiment and learn what works and what doesn't. While Burke aligned with the principles of liberalism, particularly the protection of liberty as a crucial governmental objective, he also had conservative tendencies. He cautioned against a style of politics that aimed to eliminate human imperfections entirely. He warned that when a mass movement promises to solve all problems, it is essential to recognize that its proponents often lack a deep understanding of social dynamics. Furthermore, the more ambitious the movement, the more likely it is to fail and potentially become tyrannical in its desperation for success.

Marx, the German philosopher, had a different perspective. He was a persistent critic of liberal capitalist democratic states. Marx did not oppose democracy as a concept; however, similar to Burke's view on revolutionary democracy, Marx believed that liberal capitalist democratic states would ultimately collapse due to their internal contradictions. His significance lies not only in the historical impact of his work, which was used to justify revolutions and one-party, anti-democratic states in the 20th century –although whether Marx would have condoned or condemned these revolutions remains a matter of debate[226]. What sets Marx apart is his emphasis on the interconnectedness of governments with economic and cultural structures. He argued that democracy under capitalism and democracy under socialism are fundamentally different. In his view, democracy in capitalist countries often serves capitalist interests rather than subordinating

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[225] *Op. Cit.* Brennan, Jason. *Democracy: A Guided Tour.* 49.
[226] *Ivi,* p. 55.

the market to democratic politics. However, contemporary empirical evidence tends to suggest that capitalist democracies are generally more stable than socialist democracies, contrary to Marx's predictions. In later years, political scientists and economists argued that well-designed democratic rules could ensure the representation of a wide range of interests, not just those of the majority. One reason for this is that even within majorities, there are often diverse and sometimes conflicting interests. With the right rules in place, any winning coalition would need to make numerous compromises and policy trades with minority groups to accomplish their goals. This approach fosters a system where everyone involved gets something in the process.

Moreover, the term democratic erosion or backsliding is frequently used by scholars to describe the gradual decline of democratic principles and practices, yet there is some ambiguity regarding what constitutes a democratic setback and what does not. This ambiguity has been discussed by various scholars[227]. Democratic erosion has been employed to characterize situations where there is a decline in the level and/or quality of democracy without a complete regime change, as well as transitions away from democracy towards hybrid or fully authoritarian systems. While both of these phenomena are significant, they are distinct from each other. To distinguish between them, a nuanced definition of democratic erosion is necessary. The backsliding of democracy can be therefore considered as a gradual process, involving a transition from democracy to autocracy over an extended period. Governments that successfully erode democracy significantly undermine the formal institutions responsible for ensuring horizontal accountability and guaranteeing free and fair elections to such an extent that they effectively obstruct electoral accountability. The following question then arises: is an eroded democracy still a democracy? The answer is that although it may retain some minimal aspects of competition, a democracy that has experienced erosion can no longer be classified as a democracy but rather as a competitive authoritarian regime[228].

Here it is also important to notice that Gamboa makes a distinction between backsliding and erosion, while this dissertation has used them interchangeably. A complete erosion of democracy is distinct from democratic backsliding, which refers to the deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance without a change in the regime itself. Democratic decline is a broader process where democratic regimes experience a loss of democratic quality, which can potentially result in various outcomes such as a diminished democratic regime, a hybrid regime, or a fully authoritarian regime. In the case of advanced democracies like Portugal or Germany, they

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[227] Cfr. Gamboa, Laura. *Resisting Backsliding. Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy.* Cambridge University Press. (2022)

[228] *Ivi,* p. 26.

may undergo democratic decline, where the quality of democracy decreases to some extent. However, they are still considered stable democracies. In these countries, there might be a decline in the quality of democracy, but there are no consistent signs that they will undergo a regime change. On the other hand, a full erosion, as understood by Gamboa[229], always leads to a regime change. A country is said to be undergoing erosion when there is evidence of a transition from democracy to a semi-authoritarian regime. A complete erosion of democracy occurs when this process pushes the regime entirely out of the democratic category into the authoritarian category, resulting in the establishment of a competitive authoritarian regime. In essence, a complete erosion represents a more advanced stage of democratic decline where the regime has shifted significantly away from democratic principles and practices, ultimately leading to a change in its categorization. The next section will analyze one important cause of backsliding, permeating nowadays new and old democracies: pernicious or toxic polarization, both in the political realm and in the population.

2.2.2 Polarization

The current state of the world cannot be attributed to a single, isolated cause. Instead, it is the result of a multitude of interconnected elements that, through their interactions, influence and reinforce one another, contributing to the overall deterioration of democracy. Before attempting to address the complex question of what gave rise to these issues, it is crucial to acknowledge two fundamental realities: firstly, complex problems rarely have straightforward or easy explanations, and as such, one must reject simplistic solutions and arguments. Secondly, while identifying, understanding, and attempting to explain these challenges is a significant step forward, it is far from being a complete solution or a cure-all for addressing global issues. Tangible and concerted action is still very much necessary and remains a critical component in tackling these problems effectively.

Contemporary political science research has shed light on concerns that democracy might suffer from persistent internal factions and conflicts. Surprisingly, many of these conflicts do not necessarily stem from differing interests or ideologies. In modern democracies, citizens exhibit a strong sense of tribalism but often lack strong ideological orientations, and their voting behavior does not consistently align with their self-interest. Since the 1950s, political psychologists have extensively studied how people think about politics and group affiliations. One significant finding is the existence of "intergroup bias"[230]. This bias leads people to form and strongly identify with specific groups, and it involves favoring one's own group members as respectable, smart,

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[229] *Ivi,* p.28.

[230] *Op. Cit.* Brennan, Jason. *Democracy: A Guided Tour.*60.

competent, and trustworthy, while viewing members of other groups as bad, unintelligent, incompetent, and untrustworthy. People tend to be more forgiving of their own group's transgressions while harshly criticizing even minor infractions by members of opposing groups. If this sounds like the behavior of contemporary political partisans—making excuses for their side while condemning the other—then it reflects the influence of this bias.

Drawing from an expanding body of literature, this dissertation conceptualizes political polarization as a dynamic process in which both political elites and the general public progressively grow apart in their positions on public policy and ideology. In the most extreme cases, previously existing cross-cutting divisions are overshadowed by a single, reinforcing division that sets one group against another, creating an "us versus them"[231] dynamic across a range of issues. This also adds to the definition of polarization as it somehow simplifies politics[232] by representing either-or choices to the voters and eventually becomes "pernicious" or harmful for democracy, by dividing the electorate into two camps, opposite of each other. The animosity between, for example, Republicans and Democrats is often attributed to disputes over justice or policy. However, research in political science consistently reveals that the vast majority of citizens, including registered party members, are not highly ideological, have few specific policy preferences, and often do not fully understand or endorse their party's policies[233]. Most citizens hold few political opinions, and those they do hold tend to be unstable and difficult to reconcile into a coherent political stance.

How does this translate in practice? After having given a theoretical background on democracy and on its current backsliding, this section will cover the emergence of polarization, which is posing a challenging threat to the very essence of democracy, undermining its principles, and eroding its foundations.

Conditions of pernicious polarization can "trap societies in a vicious cycle of polarizing strategies and democratic erosion"[234], by using the "us versus them" rhetoric –employed by various politicians to achieve disparate ends (on that, Chapter 1 has a section dedicated to this kind of rhetoric for gathering support for a specific cause)– thus casting blame on alleged enemies, fueling distrust in the opponents, and mobilizing the electorate on their side. Polarization is therefore a strategy used to achieve certain political ends, but also a multifaceted process that can range from

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[231] Haggard, Stephan, and Robert Kaufman. "The anatomy of democratic backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 32.4 (2021): 27-41 and Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. "Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies." *Democratization* 28.5 (2021): 929-948.

[232] McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. "Overcoming polarization." *Journal of Democracy* 32.1 (2021): 6-21.

[233] *Op. Cit.* Brennan, Jason. *Democracy: A Guided Tour.*

[234] *Op. Cit.* McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. "Overcoming polarization.": 1.

opposing factions competing in elections to a fundamental transformation of society. It develops through the interactions between opposing political camps and can lead to an equilibrium –or better, *disequilibrium*– where actors become entrenched in behaviors that perpetuate divisive polarization. This status quo may persist unless it is disrupted by an external shock or voluntary actions from within the political arena. Leaders who promote polarization often seek to reshape the constitutional order to their advantage, such as securing unfair electoral benefits or manipulating judicial institutions. Polarization also influences citizen attitudes toward democracy. In polarized environments, public opinion becomes less effective as a check on politicians who undermine democratic norms. Recent research has shown that in such contexts, highly partisan voters are less likely to hold candidates accountable, especially those from their own party, for positions that violate democratic principles[235].

One troubling aspect of pernicious polarization is the growing perception among supporters of both parties that the policies of the opposing party pose a threat to the nation. This perception can lead polarized voters to tolerate or even support policies that erode democratic norms. Populist polarizers may offer simplistic solutions and employ anti-democratic tactics, but they may not always be incorrect in identifying genuine problems. Across various countries, including Turkey, Thailand, Colombia, Venezuela, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, legitimate socio-cultural and political-economic grievances have emerged alongside declining public trust in the ability of democratic systems to address these issues. These grievances predate the rise of polarizing politicians. While some problems may result from government actions, others stem from demographic, economic, and technological shifts that citizens expect their governments to address. As grievances intensify, citizens become more receptive to political leaders who highlight or exaggerate these issues. Recognizing and addressing these governance shortcomings is an essential initial step toward reversing polarization. Therefore, depolarizing efforts aimed at preserving democracy by returning to the status quo may delay the problem but are unlikely to provide a long-term solution. Reversing polarization[236] and the related backslide of democracy requires a well-thought-out strategy, especially in the period following the removal of a polarizing leader or party. However, merely ousting a polarizing figure or group does not automatically resolve polarization. Partisan animosity, societal distrust, heightened resentments, obstructionist habits, and perceptions of incompatible goals are likely to persist. New leaders must consequently address the underlying grievances and shortcomings related to representation, equity,

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[235] This will be seen, for instance, in Chapter 3, where the phenomenon of Trump continuous growing of loyal followers –notwithstanding his incessant breaking of (democratic) laws– will be explained.

[236] *Op. Cit.* McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. "Overcoming polarization."

inclusion, and fairness that initially fueled polarization. However, it is crucial to understand the fundamental causes of polarization, instead of merely trying to find a solution: only by focusing on the problem it can be solved. However, as it will be argued next with the figure of Trump, it is not only one factor that determines a democratic backslide. That is the main reason why removing a polarizing leader might not solve the crisis.

Moreover, political scientists often differentiate between two levels of polarization: elite polarization, which pertains to polarization among formal political actors such as political parties and politicians or the institutions comprising these actors, and mass polarization, which encompasses society as a whole. However, it is important to emphasize that not all forms of polarization are detrimental to democratic processes. A certain degree of polarization in a democratic system is not only natural but also desirable. It presents voters with clear programmatic alternatives, stimulates their interest in political affairs, and contributes to the overall stability of the democratic system. Healthy polarization fosters honest political debates with distinct choices, encourages political participation, and serves as a remedy against political disillusionment. In simple terms, "democracy requires conflict – but not too much"[237]. Therefore, the damaging consequences of polarization on democracy manifest on two distinct levels: the level of political actors and that of citizens.

This phenomenon is not confined to the relatively young and evolving Central and Eastern European democracies like Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Poland. It finds a prominent illustration in the world's oldest democracy, the United States of America, highlighting that even a well-established and historically stable democracy can experience erosion due to toxic polarization. In the US, the Democratic Party espouses an inclusive vision of the nation that encompasses minority populations, while the Republican Party has increasingly come to be associated with the 'white' population. This shift in the concept of national identity within the Republican Party resembles the far-right Rassemblement National of France. This toxic polarization has paralyzed the political system and triggered a surge in norm violations. In addition to long-standing practices such as gerrymandering and voter suppression, the presidency witnessed a lack of restraint, questioning of the legitimacy of the opposition and election outcomes, erosion of non-partisanship in judicial appointments, instances of violence against individuals with differing political views, and attacks on mainstream media. These elements have become integral to the American political landscape since the election of Donald Trump as president. The conduct

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[237] Little, Adrian. "Between disagreement and consensus: Unravelling the democratic paradox." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42.1 (2007): 143-159.

of the Republican Party following recent presidential elections does not offer much hope for a swift reversal of this trend.

Moral and Best[238] have conducted a study, the purpose of which is to analyze the interplay between citizen and party polarization on a cross-national scale, with a particular focus on the temporal dynamics of this relationship. To achieve this, they have gathered data on citizen and party positions from a total of 174 election surveys spanning 19 industrialized democracies, covering the period from 1971 to 2019. Their modeling approach has allowed to simultaneously estimate models for party polarization and citizen polarization and, at the same time, to investigate the time it takes for citizen polarization to react to party polarization, and vice versa. Consequently, they did not make the assumption that the effects of party and citizen polarization occur instantaneously or after just one or two elections. Instead, their models account for the possibility of long-term processes at play. The connection between party and citizen polarization is likely to be most pronounced among politically engaged and well-informed citizens who are informed about the ideological positions of political parties. While prior research on political polarization often presupposes that the causal link between party polarization and citizen polarization originates from political parties or party elites and extends to citizens, scholars of democracy have long contended that parties' policies and ideological offerings should be responsive to changes in citizens ideological preferences. The findings of Moral and Best, however, do not offer robust empirical evidence in support of this relationship. This is a noteworthy result, given the crucial roles typically attributed to political parties in translating citizen preferences into the realm of policymaking. It underscores the need for further research in this area. Regarding the impact of party polarization on citizen polarization, they observe that both voters and groups with high and medium levels of political sophistication exhibit responsiveness to party polarization over the long term. Furthermore, these politically informed segments of society tend to adjust their ideological views more quickly in response to parties' more polarized policy offerings. Only the most politically informed citizens, however, do so in the shortest timeframe, while it takes a longer period for others. In these aspects, findings provide empirical support for the commonly assumed relationship in the literature on political sophistication, which posits that politically astute citizens are more adaptable to changes in parties' ideological positions compared to those less politically sophisticated. Crucially, the conclusions underscore the importance of addressing both short-term and long-term relationships between citizens and their elected representatives, as well as recognizing the varying timing of responses among different groups of voters.

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[238] Moral, Mert, and Robin E. Best. "On the relationship between party polarization and citizen polarization." *Party Politics* 29.2 (2023): 229-247.

Overall, polarization per se is not always a negative connotation for a democratic regime, but can also be constructive: firstly, it distinguishes political parties and groups while providing citizens with a sense of belonging. Secondly, it can be a useful force for challenging norms that are undemocratic, such as social injustice and racial hierarchies[239]. The key lies in managing polarization to prevent it from deepening into its more harmful and divisive forms.

2.3 Polarization and backsliding

While there is a widespread consensus among political scientists regarding the detrimental effects of polarization on democracy, only a limited number of studies empirically explore the connections between political polarization and the backsliding of democratic principles. Most of these studies rely on "diversity measures"[240] that fall short in capturing the contemporary form of polarization, which often manifests as a stark division of society into two large and antagonistic factions. Over the past decade, numerous instances worldwide have illustrated the harmful consequences of political polarization on democracy. It has resulted in the downfall of electoral democracies in nations such as Turkey and Venezuela, eroded the integrity of representative institutions and civil liberties in Hungary, and even impacted long-established democratic systems like those in the United States and the United Kingdom. Polarization, however, is not a novel phenomenon. According to social identity theorists, humans tend to align themselves with larger social groups based on various factors like socio-economic status, culture, and other traits. Individuals within an 'in-group' tend to hold favorable views of their own group while developing less favorable attitudes toward members of an 'out-group'. These pre-existing divides form the foundation for the formation of political parties and voter affiliations, frequently exploited by political elites for electoral gains. However, what distinguishes contemporary political polarization is its sweeping nature and the existential threat it poses to democratic regimes, becoming increasingly prevalent in the realm of politics. The decline of modern democracies is not typically a sudden event; rather, it occurs gradually and inconspicuously. In practical terms, this means that political leaders do not immediately resort to overtly undemocratic practices. Instead, they gradually introduce measures that undermine democratic institutions. The black-and-white –the 'us versus them'– perspective makes voters more receptive to accepting illiberal measures against their political opponents. This tacit approval becomes even more pronounced during election periods when political controversies proliferate, and the stakes are at their highest.

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[239] *Op. Cit.* McCoy, Jennifer, and Murat Somer. "Overcoming polarization."
[240] Arbatli, Ekim, and Dina Rosenberg. "United we stand, divided we rule: how political polarization erodes democracy." *Democratization* 28.2 (2021): 285-307.

Intense polarization, therefore, eventually contributes to a phenomenon known as "autocratization"[241], suggesting the gradual erosion of democratic principles within democracies and the democratic aspects within electoral authoritarian regimes. While temporary spikes in political polarization may be inherent to politics and could potentially aid democratization, as indicated above, the concept of pernicious polarization –which entails the division of society into opposing camps, each marked by mutual distrust, wherein political identity merges with social identity– exerts detrimental effects on both democracies and the process of democratization within autocratic systems.

This dissertation defines democratic resilience as a democracy's ability to either recover or maintain a similar level of democratic quality when confronted with challenges emanating from illiberalism and authoritarianism. In the same vein, "democratic capacity"[242] can be characterized as a democracy's capability to enhance its democratic standards and an electoral autocracy's potential to incorporate more democratic attributes. The focus here centers on the resilience of democracies in withstanding and the capacity of electoral autocracies in navigating a specific challenge: enduring and severe polarization. Again, polarization is conceptualized both as a process that simplifies the political landscape and as a state in which a state of severe political polarization is eventually reached, wherein neither side has the motivation to adopt a depolarizing approach, unless influenced by external shocks or the emergence of new actors and innovative political realignments.

Excessive polarization at toxic levels impedes cooperation among political elites and encourages citizens to forsake democratic values in order to maintain their leader in office and achieve their preferred policies. Consequently, this toxic polarization frequently results in heightened backing for autocratic leaders and strengthens their illiberal agendas. In this context, disinformation, polarization, and the process of autocratization mutually reinforce each other.
The danger to democracy arises from a political dynamic wherein a healthy level of polarization transforms into a toxic one. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer define this particular type of polarization as "a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'us' versus 'them'"[243]. This form of polarization reduces respect for democratic norms, corrodes fundamental legislative processes, undermines the impartiality of the judiciary, fosters public disillusionment with political parties,

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[241] *Op. Cit.* Somer, Murat, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke. "Pernicious polarization, autocratization and opposition strategies."

[242] *Ibid.*

[243] Milačić, Filip. "The Negative Impact of Polarization on Democracy." (2021): 4.

exacerbates intolerance and discrimination, erodes societal trust, and heightens levels of violence within society. It is crucial to note that merely having a social division rooted in national identity is not sufficient to engender toxic polarization. The identity-based divide only metamorphoses into a toxic form when it is manipulated by political entrepreneurs who employ exclusionary and demagogic rhetoric to establish an 'us versus them' categorization within the political system for their own advantage.

To state again a significant point, a certain level of polarization within a democratic system is not only expected but can also be beneficial as it provides voters with distinct programmatic choices, which in turn enhances their engagement in political processes, thereby contributing to the stability of the democratic system. The transformation of identity divisions into toxic polarization occurs when political entrepreneurs strategically employ exclusionary and demagogic rhetoric to establish an 'us versus them' categorization within the political landscape. An examination of the past three decades of democracy research by Milačić[244] reveals a turbulent period in historical terms. It began with the triumph of liberal democracy as a prevailing form of government and concluded with a widespread notion of democratic decline, substantiated by various indicators. These indicators include the unprecedented surge of right-wing populism, declining public trust in democratic institutions, a growing disregard for democratic norms and rules by numerous political actors, and the adverse effects of events like Covid-19, particularly the expansion of executive powers and restrictions on political and civil rights. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that discussing a crisis of democracy in general is somewhat futile, as democracies worldwide have varying degrees of development and are confronted with distinct challenges. What makes those polarizing trends concerning is that they affect both new and already-established democracies. These political developments have demonstrated that political polarization, defined as the ideological gap between opposing political factions, is a significant component of this worrying trend. The rise of social media plays a pivotal role in facilitating this development by enabling like-minded individuals to interact within their own ideological bubbles, thereby reinforcing their divisive perception of society.

Finally, the United States stands out as a unique case within the realm of democracies due to its distinctive institutional framework. It features a combination of minoritarian elements, such as an indirect presidential election system and a powerful Senate that provides advantages to less populated states, along with strong majoritarian aspects that promote a two-party system, including single-member plurality districts at both the national and state levels. In addition to these institutional factors, the United States also boasts a long-standing constitution, informal

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[244] *Ibid.*

democratic norms, a robust civil society, and a federal system. Historically, these features have been viewed as sources of democratic resilience. However, in recent times, the United States has been grappling with concerning dynamics of polarization, which have led to a deterioration in the quality of its democracy. These patterns of polarization and their resulting impact on democratic quality bear resemblance to trends observed in some less-established democracies. This deterioration is exemplified by a decline in the country's Freedom House[245] political rights score and its reclassification as a "flawed democracy" by the Economist Intelligence Unit[246]. The example of the United States will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter, highlighting the history and the dynamics of its backsliding, which often is presumed to come from one single source: Trump and Trumpism. However, as will be explained, there is no single cause –in the US as well as in the other countries experiencing democratic backsliding–, but it represents the synthesis of different triggers that together put liberal democracies at risk.

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[245] *Op. Cit.* Freedom House. *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule.*
[246] Democracy Index 2022, Economist Intelligence Unit. Available at:
https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/

Chapter 3. Democratic Decline in the United States
3. Introduction

What happened in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century? What were the key events that changed the governmental structure to the point where it became a model of democracy to follow? When examining American history, it is evident that the journey was rather tumultuous, to the extent that one might wonder if it has truly concluded. It truly is practically impossible to confine the realization and completion of a socio-political-cultural prototype for export to the world within such a short context: the events that marked the transition to the new millennium and that characterize the choices of recent and current administrations suggest that the United States remains an imperfect democracy. In it, the same anomalies identified in the nineteenth century are fully applied when the American dream embodied the desire of its inhabitants to definitively shake off the remnants of European colonialism, based on a monarchical and imperial framework. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his essay "Democracy in America"[247], already in 1835 described a modern and innovative political system, but one that concealed within it the deviations that the rapidly advancing democracy could generate. Within the realm of advanced democracies, therefore, the United States stands out as a notable example illustrating how its political system can inadvertently facilitate democratic erosion, which is a noteworthy observation considering the nation's widespread reputation as a democratic exemplar. However, the United States serves as a prominent instance of a democratic system encumbered by its own institutional framework. Despite its outward appearance of consolidation, the American political system exhibits inherent vulnerabilities that make it susceptible to democratic backsliding. These weaknesses encompass various aspects, including an electoral system plagued by numerous deficiencies that are widely characterized as outdated and undemocratic by experts in the field, the presence of an influential presidency that holds a central position in federal governance, surpassing both the legislative and judicial branches, and the recent transformation of the Republican Party into an illiberal entity primarily focused on gaining political power rather than effective governance. These institutional shortcomings within American democracy underscore the imperative need for any efforts aimed at combating democratic regression to be firmly rooted in comprehensive political system reforms.

Throughout much of history, the decline of democratic systems has typically involved either a radicalized being or a violent event, often manifesting as a military coup. Furthermore, the damage inflicted on democracy by backsliding is distinct from the damage caused by economic

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[247] Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy In America, Historical-Critical Edition of De la d´emocratie en Am´erique.* Edited by Eduardo Nolla. Translated from the French by James T. Schleifer. Liberty Fund, Inc. (2010).

crises, divisive policies, or even endemic corruption. Backsliding represents a direct menace to democracy, involving actions such as tampering with the electoral process, undermining the independence of the judiciary, and politicizing the military. Importantly, the process of backsliding does not unfold as a singular, decisive event; instead, it emerges through a series of incremental actions that are not always immediately recognizable, especially since initial actions are often framed as efforts to protect democracy. However, it is worth noting that the theoretical framework surrounding backsliding remains a subject of ongoing development. Firstly, there is no universally accepted set of criteria for assessing the progression of backsliding –as already seen in Chapter 2–, which is further complicated by scholarly disagreements regarding the very definition of democracy. Consequently, it is challenging to determine whether a democracy experiencing backsliding is merely facing difficulties or is nearing the threshold of becoming a hybrid regime that combines democratic and autocratic elements. It is even more challenging to pinpoint when democratic institutions and norms have eroded sufficiently to indicate a complete breakdown of democracy. Often, we only recognize backsliding when democracy is on the brink of collapse. Adding to the complexity, democracies undergoing backsliding can simultaneously exhibit strength and vitality. This paradoxical situation is not unfounded, as backsliding may not uniformly affect all aspects of the political system; it can weaken specific components, such as the judiciary, while leaving others untouched. Additionally, it can trigger defenses that mitigate or counterbalance the corrosive effects of actions taken by leaders engaged in backsliding. Unsurprisingly, a vigorous debate has emerged concerning the severity of the threat posed by backsliding. As Yascha Mounk asserts, "The danger is real," and even supposedly well-established democracies like the United States "have experienced signs of democratic deconsolidation in recent years[248].

3.1 History of United States Political Parties' Polarization

American politics emits directives through the central government that are applicable to all states, which are then left to the discretion of local governments. These local governments can also interact through the implementation of laws that may not be valid in other states. Despite the oversight provided by the decisions of the Supreme Court based on constitutional principles, each state essentially retains the autonomy to enact its own laws, which can even place citizens on different levels, as is still the case today, particularly in the areas of healthcare and justice. This section will analyze the recent history of the United States, with a particular outlook on how it became so polarized that its democratic foundations are now in danger.

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[248] Mounk, Yascha. "The Danger is Real." *Journal of Democracy* 33.4 (2022): 151.

Starting from the Civil War, one can state that it hadn't produced the expected outcomes, despite the abolition of slavery. Due to its federal framework, in the defeated South, civil rights legislation was deferred in favor of other priorities. African Americans did not possess what was considered adequate culture to understand the significance granted by the right to vote. Moreover, they lacked the skills to be self-sufficient. On the other hand, landowners, forced to surrender half of their cotton and tobacco holdings, no longer had a labor force to exploit. The increased costs and decreased availability of fields had essentially impoverished everyone, as the overproduction had exceeded demand, leading to a subsequent collapse in prices. This exacerbated the social gap with the North, which, in addition to the influx of laborers from Europe and China willing to endure any necessary hardship to survive or to colonize new lands taken from Native Americans, could rely on a pioneering spirit and the development of steel and assembly-line production.

The elimination of competition and the creation of monopolies often forced workers to labor for specific companies without any choice. Although the Sherman Anti-trust Act of 1890 prohibited the existence of monopolies as a criminal offense, major corporations found loopholes that allowed them to continue controlling national industries and their conditions. As one moved westward, railway companies prospered more, both for the transportation of goods and passengers, who were forced to pay exorbitant fares. At the same time, technological innovations that significantly contributed to the nation's productivity continuously reduced the demand for specialized labor while increasing the demand for unskilled labor. It was inevitable that such a situation would necessitate a reorganization of territories and greater central control capable of limiting the political influence of wealthy railway lobby groups. The need to prioritize the collective good over the individual, an idea first expressed by James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers of the Constitution and the fourth President of the United States, became a goal of the federal government. However, it had to contend with the various legislations of the states, which, then as now, regulated the lives of citizens at the local level.

Unlike Europe, where political parties began to develop strong internal structures, widespread membership systems, permanent territorial branches, and an inclination toward internal leadership formation and selection, political parties in the United States emerged in the late 18th century with a different character. In the United States, parties have primarily served –and still do nowadays– an electoral function and play a decisive role, especially through conventions – which operate for the selection and nomination of candidates for elections– starting with the most significant political event, the presidential elections.

The 20th century witnessed the rise of mass parties in Europe, where stable and structurally integrated formations replaced parties dominated by notables. In contrast, the mass characteristics

of American political parties gradually weakened. The popular dimension that had distinguished American parties in the previous century found new vitality in other forms of association and participation, such as the feminist movement and those advocating for the rights of African Americans. Such interest groups external to the parties, starting from the 1920s and continuing to this day, play a significant role in American society. These essentially independent structures are capable of influencing decisions and thus serve as one of the fundamental elements in contemporary pluralistic democracy, fostering both representation and participation.

Since its early administrations, the U.S. political system has gravitated towards a two-party system, which is still in effect today. However, over time, the parties have changed in form and categorization. At the turn of the 20th century, the American political system already had its current composition with Democrats and Republicans, although their ideological distinctions were not yet fully defined, which would only occur in the 1930s. Both parties trace their origins to factions within the Republican-Democratic Party (or Republican Party) founded by Thomas Jefferson, who sympathized with France and opposed the Federalist Party, led by Alexander Hamilton, which had pro-British leanings. The repeated victories of the Republican-Democratic factions –starting from the 1800s– marginalized the Federalists to a few isolated strongholds. However, this also undermined the unity of the majority party, which between 1824 and 1828 split into the followers of Andrew Jackson, who would establish the modern Democratic Party, and the followers of Henry Clay, who formed a Whig-inspired party.

Until the Civil War, consequently, the American political system primarily featured major contenders in the Democratic Party and the Whig Party[249]. However, there were also emerging parties advocating special causes such as the anti-Masonic movement and the abolition of slavery. This latter tended to violate the agreement between Democrats and Whigs not to raise the slavery question. In particular, the Democratic Party also represented Southern agrarians who opposed industrial protectionism and upheld the doctrine of 'states' rights' –which effectively defended slavery– in opposition to the Republican agenda of strengthening central power. A significant turning point occurred in 1855 with the formation of the Republican Party. Comprised of liberal modernizers with Whig leanings and anti-slavery activists, this party quickly became the antagonist of the Democratic Party. In the presidential elections of 1860, Southern and Northern Democrats fielded two different candidates, leading to victory for the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln. The Republican resurgence was influenced by factors such as a strong Protestant presence and a

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[249] Borgognone, Giovanni. *Storia degli Stati Uniti: La democrazia americana dalla fondazione all'era globale*. Feltrinelli Editore. (2021).

powerful nationalist appeal, which became especially prominent in response to the secession of Southern states.

The Civil War and its outcome reinforced Republican hegemony[250], which extended into the post-war Reconstruction era, characterized by significant industrial development and massive public works projects such as the railway network. Meanwhile, the Democrats, who had also been divided during the Civil War, tended to consolidate their positions in the Southern states. The United States' entry into the 20th century was dominated by Republican influence, ushering in the Progressive Era, a period that American historians often identify as spanning from 1901 to 1917. However, calls for reform had already begun in the late 19th century with the closing of the western frontier.

The assassination of President McKinley in 1901 paved the way for Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), who provided cohesion to progressivism that previously lacked. Between 1901 and 1917, two Republicans and one Democrat embraced a shared ideology of liberal reforms, which found support among various groups with divergent, if not contradictory, viewpoints. Progressivism can be primarily seen as a response to the pleas of the impoverished. Among those advocating for social reform were industrialists and members of the professional classes with good education, who recognized that the era of abundance could not last indefinitely, necessitating greater industrial efficiency and the conservation of natural resources. Roosevelt's authority over Congress was initially low because he had become president only after McKinley's assassination. However, his re-election in 1904 changed the dynamics. He now championed social justice and public welfare, balancing the interests of capital and labor. He gave the green light to the Panama Canal to connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, enacted a series of antitrust laws to ensure fair competition in commerce, modernized the federal administrative machinery in Washington, promoted the income tax, a significant shift for the U.S. tax system and beyond, and in 1906, he became the first U.S. president to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the war between Russia and Japan. His presidency spanned a tumultuous and contradictory era. Economic development created wealth and attracted millions of immigrants from Europe and the Southern states, but it also saw the harshest segregation of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. The following four years were marked by the conservative leadership of William Howard Taft (1909-1913), a Republican president with a conservative reputation stemming from his hostile stance toward labor when he served as a federal judge.

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[250] Phillips, Kevin P. *The emerging republican majority: updated edition*. Princeton University Press. (2014).

Later, the administration led by Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) implemented some populist measures, reducing taxes on steel and providing farmers with credits on terms they had long desired. Women also gained the right to vote in 1920. Wilson was undeniably driven by his personal idealistic vision, especially his reflection on the nature of an international system in the world. The Wilsonian administration marked the beginning of a new U.S. presence in global politics. After an initial period of neutrality, the United States participated in World War I, declaring war on Germany in 1917 and contributing to the victory of the Allies the following year. Wilson was not only the president who used American power more than any of his predecessors, from Mexico to Siberia, but he also sought to integrate these two factors into a unified vision. Indeed, he believed that tensions could not be resolved through increasingly destructive wars; they needed to be defused and restrained, even through the use of force if necessary. The League of Nations, for Wilson, was the lever through which the power of America and other democracies should serve as a deterrent. The "Wilsonism"[251] did not replace the logic of power with democracy but rather sought to integrate or, more precisely, harmonize these two elements in a vision that arose from the recognized danger of interdependence, which is positive and indispensable, provided that it is structured, regulated, and defended. The belief in progress and modernity had to be accompanied by a global awareness that American security, interests, and prosperity could not be asserted on a purely national basis if they were disconnected from a transformation of the entire global environment. A world that was not secure for democracy and liberal capitalism was unstable and dangerous. According to Wilson, either progress together or regress; there is no stability that is not continuously dynamic and, if not global, risks not existing.

From Wilson onwards, this became the intellectual and emotional foundation of the American approach to international relations, as it would emerge clearly with the Atlantic Charter of 1941 and later with the Bretton Woods framework of 1944. What intervened in the meantime, as is evident, is a more urgent and profound appreciation of the indispensable role of American power as the linchpin and guarantor of that dynamic global order. Wilson sensed this but had not explicitly theorized or openly proclaimed it. With Franklin D. Roosevelt, this would become an explicit and unquestioned assumption. During this period, American society underwent radical transformations linked to economic development and new production standards. Industrial goods permeated the daily lives of thousands of families, altering their customs and habits. Clothing, food, household organization, transportation –every aspect of material life urbanized, becoming altered due to the proliferation of consumer goods. After a decade of substantial economic prosperity shared between Republicans Warren G. Harding (1921-1923) and Calvin Coolidge

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[251] Ellwood, David W. *Una sfida per la modernità: Europa e America nel lungo Novecento*. Carocci, (2012): 42.

(1923-1929), which led the population to accept that the common good took precedence over individual interests, the institution of Prohibition and the war on the black market, the Black Tuesday stock market crash in 1929 marked the beginning of the Great Depression. The economic crisis also brought about significant political changes. With Herbert Hoover (1929-1933), the Republicans, already accused of failing to anticipate the financial collapse and allowing speculative bank actions to go unchecked, could not find an adequate countermeasure to the economic decline of the middle-class, which, during the 1920s, had not only invested its savings but also driven demand for durable consumer goods. Their exit from the market weakened industries producing durable consumer goods (such as the automotive industry), with a ripple effect on supplier companies and personnel. The situation was exacerbated by the close interconnection between the industrial and banking sectors. When the stock market crashed, a devastating wave of panic spread among small savers, who rushed to withdraw their money from banks.

To understand the transformations within American political parties, it is crucial to employ certain key concepts, particularly with respect to the ideological dimension. One of the terms that warrants focused attention is undoubtedly liberalism, which has been largely described in its link with democracy in Chapter 2. Until the 1930s, both political camps harbored individuals who could be somewhat described as liberals. However, it was during the New Deal era that the Democratic Party exclusively appropriated this term, largely thanks to the figure of Franklin D. Roosevelt. This latter figure succeeded in securing the White House in 1932, thereby ending Republican dominance. In a United States grappling with a devastating economic crisis, the President became convinced of the necessity to reconsider the role of the state, which was called upon to intervene in ensuring social equality. Naturally, this meant paying greater attention to the less privileged classes and their rights. In this new form of liberalism, the relationship between equality and freedom underwent a reversal. Whereas in the 19th-century tradition, American liberals regarded the expansion of personal freedom as instrumental in achieving equality, the 'modern' liberal considered equality as the necessary condition for realizing personal freedom. Roosevelt implemented the New Deal, an economic and social reform plan that introduced, among other measures, unemployment benefits, support for farmers, a social security system (the Social Security Act), and a minimum wage. The New Deal ultimately had a decisive influence on modern American liberalism.

With the onset of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as rival superpowers. The United States, at the forefront of technological innovation, ventured into new frontiers of prosperity. The pivotal term in this context is, naturally, 'national security', a concept that remains relevant to this day. It first emerged between 1938 and 1941 when the

aggressive expansionism of dictatorships presented not so much a direct territorial threat to the USA but rather a transformation of the global landscape. In the emerging geopolitical discourse, the threat was represented by the potential domination of Eurasian resources by hostile powers. When Franklin D. Roosevelt (the only president to serve four terms) passed away, America still faced the Japanese threat. With the country at war, it was challenging to implement the political and economic efforts necessary to counter communist expansion in Europe. Shortly after taking office, his successor, Henry Truman (1945-1953), authorized the atomic bombing of Japan. Deemed a necessity for reasons of state, to prevent an invasion that would have incurred considerable time and thousands of casualties, including among soldiers, Truman never regretted the decision, which ultimately led to the unconditional surrender of the Japanese emperor.

The USSR declared war on Japan on August 8th, with military intervention occurring on the following day, coinciding with the second atomic bombing of Nagasaki. By surrendering directly to the United States, Japan facilitated a swift unilateral occupation by the Americans. The surrender treaty was signed on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. Truman's decision to use atomic weapons was never disowned: he was convinced that another year of war with the invasion of Japan would have resulted in far greater casualties. Whatever the predominant motive may have been, Truman needed to showcase military power to focus on implementing the Marshall Plan, effectively marking the beginning of the Cold War against Stalin's Russia. Totalitarianism was not merely an adversary to be deterred or balanced according to the classical principles of power equilibrium. It was instead a mortal enemy with which coexistence was deemed impossible. The Rooseveltian logic of unconditional surrender inaugurated an absolute delegitimization of the antagonist, which would later define the characteristics of the Cold War –and would eventually permeate all politics in the U.S. When it proved impossible or too risky to integrate Stalin's USSR into that democratic and hegemonic order, the same concept of national security provided the framework for defining a Soviet threat in 1947-1949, leading to the development of containment. Until the end of 1949, the Soviet threat was not primarily seen as a military one. Instead, American concerns centered on the convergence of factors of fragility and uncertainty in Europe and the Mediterranean. The weakness of Great Britain, the power vacuum in Germany, and the political-economic instability of France and Italy created a scenario of prolonged instability that offered opportunities to the adjacent Soviet power. Therefore, the American response was articulated through the division of Germany, the economic restructuring of Western Europe, and an Atlantic Pact initially conceived as political and psychological reassurance. In essence, the goal was to consolidate democracies as actors and bulwarks of

interdependence, with the United States becoming the guarantor of this evolving European arrangement.

Starting from 1950 –a period marked by the Soviet atomic bomb, the Chinese revolution, and the Korean War– we witnessed the rapid militarization of the bipolar confrontation, and national security increasingly took on a strategic-military character, tied to the issues of deterrence. However, its primary rationality and fundamental political-cultural legitimacy remained rooted in the original concepts. During this period, any form of criticism or heterodoxy was labeled and ostracized as a sign of anti-Americanism. A kind of collective anxiety gripped the middle class, which saw these behaviors as a threat to the hard-won prosperity. The fear of the "red" and the different, the resurgence of racial and religious intolerance, are just a few of the most striking phenomena expressing the profound sense of insecurity prevalent in American society at that time. Liberalism had long enjoyed widespread support among the American people. However, starting in the 1950s, within the ranks of the Republican Party, a front composed of 'classical liberals' advocating for a free market and a less interventionist role of the state, along with conservatives more attentive to ethical dimensions and religious tradition, organized in response to this cultural trend. This alliance would never have emerged without a leftward shift within the Democratic Party. In fact, if the two groups had agreed on economic liberalism, there were nevertheless significant differences. These differences, however, were subordinated within a project that reconciled strong individualism and community bonds, respect for tradition, and trust in progress. While the Democratic side included movements such as the civil rights movement and environmental organizations, the Republican side featured religious groups, business interests, and movements advocating for the Second Amendment (which guarantees the right to bear arms for personal defense). Many of the issues raised by these groups are related to the identity dimension, which still occupies a central position in the American public sphere.

In the 1960s, thanks to the significant contributions of the civil rights movement, another wave of social reforms was enacted, bolstering the constitutionally guaranteed rights of African Americans, including the right to vote and freedom of movement. Non-violent demonstrations led by Martin Luther King and the increasing voices from various civil sectors supporting the cause persuaded President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) and Congress to support the monumental recognition for the abolition of legally enforced public segregation. One year after Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act on June 2, 1964. This federal law declared electoral registration disparities and racial segregation in schools, workplaces, and public facilities illegal. The implementation of this law had far-reaching effects and had a significant long-term impact across the country. It became unlawful to maintain ethnic segregation,

which was legally enforced in the South and, in practice, in the North, in school admissions, housing, or employment practices.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, along with the Vietnam War, introduced highly divisive issues into the political landscape. However, it is noteworthy that these issues did not distinctly delineate partisan divisions between Republicans and Democrats. Similarly, the matter of slavery, though deeply polarizing, did not align with partisan affiliations before the disintegration of the Whig Party and the establishment of the Republican Party[252]. Rather, influential figures within both major political parties endeavored to navigate the volatile issue cautiously. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that party polarization does not necessarily equate to societal polarization. In fact, when compared to previous periods in American politics characterized by fervent ideological convictions and social upheaval, the post-1980s era appears relatively tranquil. Movements such as the Tea Party and Occupy, though significant, do not match the intensity and grassroots activism witnessed during periods marked by antislavery activism, Prohibition, the Vietnam War, and the struggle for African American civil rights, a period often described as defined by Huntington "creedal passion"[253].

It might be tempting to assume that the enduring democracy in the United States, which has spanned centuries, is immune to the threat of democratic erosion. However, such confidence is misguided. In reality, liberal democracy in its contemporary form, characterized by universal adult suffrage and comprehensive protection of civil and political liberties, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States. By today's standards, the country achieved full democracy only in the 1970s. Commencing in the 1890s, following the aftermath of the Civil War and the unsuccessful period of Reconstruction, Democratic politicians in each of the states of the former Confederacy began constructing single-party, authoritarian strongholds. Through strategic maneuvering within the Supreme Court, the executive branch, and their national party, conservative Democrats disenfranchised both Black citizens and many economically disadvantaged white voters. They also suppressed opposition parties and enforced racially segregated civic spheres, which were notably devoid of true freedom. Their primary objectives were to secure a cheap agricultural labor force and maintain white supremacy, and they resorted to state-sponsored violence to achieve these ends. For a span of fifty years, southern states utilized their influence in Congress and the national Democratic Party to shield themselves from external

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[252] Hetherington, Marc J. "Putting polarization in perspective." *British Journal of Political Science* 39.2 (2009): 413-448.

[253] Lee, Frances E. "How party polarization affects governance." *Annual review of political science* 18 (2015): 263.

reform efforts[254]. However, a pivotal moment occurred in 1944 when the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the white-only Democratic primaries in the region. Following this landmark decision, black activists leveraged federal judicial rulings, legislative actions by Congress, and reforms within the national political parties to dismantle the systems of disenfranchisement, segregation, and state oppression. By the early 1970s, the authoritarian forces in the South had been defeated, and today, approximately 6,000 black elected officials represent constituencies in the southern states.

However, it is essential to recognize that authoritarian practices in the United States were not confined solely to the southern states. From the establishment of agencies like the FBI, the CIA, and the National Security Agency, presidents utilized them to surveil White House staff, journalists, political adversaries, and activists. During the period spanning from 1956 to 1971, the FBI initiated over 2,000 operations aimed at discrediting and disrupting black civil rights organizations, antiwar movements, and other perceived threats. Notably, it even supplied derogatory information about Adlai Stevenson, Dwight Eisenhower's Democratic opponent in the 1952 election. Similarly, the Nixon administration deployed the resources of the U.S. Attorney General's Office and other government agencies against its "enemies" within the Democratic Party and the media. Congressional investigations into alleged subversion further imperiled civil rights and liberties. Like the authoritarianism witnessed in the South, the misuse of federal intelligence and law enforcement agencies largely came to an end in the 1970s, particularly in the wake of the post-Watergate reforms. While American democracy remains far from perfect, with issues such as the disenfranchisement of ex-felons, the adoption of various voting restrictions in many states, and concerns over the concentration of campaign contributions among the wealthy, it has functioned as a genuine multiracial democracy for nearly half a century. Paradoxically, as the United States began to fulfill its democratic potential, the very processes of democratization in the South gave rise to the intense polarization that presently threatens the foundations of American democracy.

Even today, it is not uncommon to wonder, as Alexis De Tocqueville did a century earlier while observing these events[255], how deeply aware the American people are of what is being realized in their name. The perspective of the French magistrate has been duly substantiated: America, a country with a well-established democracy, rights, pioneering press, and progress, is also a land of persistent inequalities, long-denied rights, racial hatred, once acute and total, now

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[254] Mickey, Robert, Steven Levitisky, and Lucan Ahmad Way. "Is America still safe for democracy: Why the United States is in danger of backsliding." *Foreign Aff.* 96 (2017): 23.
[255] *Op. Cit.* Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy In America*

regulated by laws but still a lingering reflection in American culture. It is a country of wars fought and sought, of military expeditions in homage to the enduring idea of an empire, of dominion unwilling to be relinquished. One could even assert that the United States has, since its inception, been a military democracy, composed of armed citizens and often led by political leaders with military backgrounds. There is no doubt that 'democracy' has been and continues to be not only a principle and, of course, a public slogan but also the lens through which American statesmen have envisioned the future of the international system, assessed the chances for peace, and structured their mental frameworks regarding international affairs.

The narrative that prevails in a strategy centered on the effort to make the world safe for democracy[256] is inseparable from a persistent fear that the American experiment may not prove to be a universal value promise, but a long-standing illusion, perhaps not even replicable or defensible without distorting its essence. Boasting of being the world's oldest democracy may hold true in terms of the principles laid out in the first constitutional document in history. However, if one uses a definition of democracy that includes as a requirement the right to vote for women and minorities, America becomes one of the world's youngest democracies. The issue, therefore, lies in refining and delineating the meanings encompassed by this term, and preferably contextualizing them to reconsider the linear narrative of an epic of progress and the struggle for democracy. The United States is an extremely contradictory power where the idea of democracy has long blended and intertwined with that of liberalism, becoming somewhat inseparable from the values of capitalism. Thus, the emphasis on what should be the most 'advanced' form of American democracy does not seem to take into account the approximately 330 million citizens who still do not have access to universal and free education and healthcare rights, not to mention the death penalty, which is still in force and practiced by 16 states, unlike all other modern democracies.

3.2 Polarization today in the United States

When political parties start viewing each other not as legitimate rivals but as dangerous enemies, it can have detrimental consequences for the democratic process[257]. This shift in perspective can lead to several concerning outcomes, including –but not limited to– polarization, or the perception of the other side as a dangerous enemy, which can make it difficult for parties to find common ground and work together to address important issues; gridlock, which happens when politicians see their opponents as threats and therefore they may become less willing to

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[256] Michelangelo, Morelli. "Il sogno americano di Franklin Delano Roosevelt", *Pandora Rivista. (*2021).
[257] Levitsky, Steven and Ziblatt, Daniel. "How Wobbly Is Our Democracy?" The New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/27/opinion/sunday/democracy-polarization.html

compromise or engage in constructive dialogue, making it challenging to pass essential laws and policies. This gridlock results in Congress passing fewer laws and leaving essential issues unresolved. As a consequence, the government becomes less effective in addressing critical challenges and delivering on its responsibilities. Another outcome is erosion of democratic norms: a win-at-any-cost mentality can erode democratic norms and values. Politicians may be tempted to use tactics that undermine the integrity of the electoral process, such as voter suppression or gerrymandering. Parties that consider their rivals as illegitimate are therefore more likely to employ extreme measures to undermine their opponents. This can result in the abandonment of established norms of restraint and cooperation, which are essential for the stability of U.S. democracy. When these norms are discarded in favor of divisive tactics, it raises the stakes of political conflict and threatens the functioning of democratic institutions. It is essential for a healthy democracy that political parties maintain a level of respect for each other as legitimate competitors rather than dangerous adversaries. While healthy competition is a fundamental aspect of democracy, it should not devolve into a winner-takes-all mentality, where winning by any means becomes the primary goal. Instead, parties should prioritize the democratic process, open dialogue, and compromise for the betterment of the nation and its citizens.

A poll[258] carried out by Plutzer and Berkman of 307 voters who supported Republican Congressional candidates in the midterm elections, provides insight into the perception and attitudes of Republican and Democratic voters toward each other. The findings reveal a deep divide in the United States, characterized by a lack of mutual understanding and significant skepticism on both sides. Among Republican voters surveyed, only 25% believed that most or almost all Democratic voters sincerely believed they were voting in the best interests of the country. Moreover, many Republicans attributed Democratic voters' choices to being influenced by what they perceived as mainstream media propaganda or voting for self-interest, particularly related to social welfare and food stamp benefits. A common perception among Republicans was that Democrats were voting to receive "free stuff"[259] without working for it. A 77-year-old Republican woman told the surveyors: "This is really hard for me to even try to think like a devilcrat!, I am sorry but I in all honesty cannot answer this question. I cannot even wrap my mind around any reason they would be good for this country"[260]. On the other hand, among Democratic voters surveyed, 42% believed that most Republican voters had the country's best interests at heart, showing a somewhat more generous view compared to Republicans. Democrats, however,

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[258] Plutzer, Eric, and Michael Berkman. "Americans not only divided, but baffled by what motivates their opponents." *The McCourtney Institute for Democracy* (2018).

[259] *Ibid.*

[260] *Ibid.*

often viewed Republicans as ill-informed, guided by conservative media outlets like Fox News, or as uneducated and misguided individuals influenced by the media. The poll underscores the deep polarization and lack of empathy between the two major political camps in the United States. Many respondents on both sides struggled to understand the motivations of voters from the opposing party, with some finding it extremely difficult to imagine why the other side's perspective might be in the best interest of the country. These findings highlight the importance of bridging the divide and fostering constructive dialogue between Democrats and Republicans to promote a healthier and more functional democratic system. Addressing misinformation, promoting media literacy, and encouraging empathy and understanding among voters from different political backgrounds are key steps in addressing these divisions.

The current state of American politics is therefore marked by extreme polarization between the two major political parties, and while the nation may not be on the verge of a coup or civil war, this polarization poses significant challenges to its democratic system. Over the past half-century, the level of polarization has intensified, with a growing number of Americans expressing strong displeasure at the idea of their child marrying someone from the opposing political party. This growing divide is evident in survey data, where a substantial portion of Republicans and Democrats admit to being "afraid"[261] of the other party –respectively 49 percent of Republicans and 55 percent of Democrats. This extreme partisan polarization was already eroding democratic norms well before Donald Trump's presidency. During Barack Obama's tenure, some Republicans "had abandoned mutual toleration"[262] and questioned the patriotism of Democrats, portraying them as anti-American. In the 2016 presidential election, the Republican Party nominated a candidate who propagated conspiracy theories about his opponent and cast doubt on his predecessor's legitimacy. History teaches us that extreme polarization can undermine even well-established democracies, and the United States is no exception. As long as Americans remain deeply divided along partisan lines and harbor strong animosities toward each other, the health of American democracy remains at risk, regardless of who holds the presidency. Overcoming this polarization and finding common ground are crucial steps toward maintaining a healthy democratic system in the United States.

Moreover, rather than describing a simple shift from a non-polarized system to a polarized but stable one –as most scholarly articles tend to do–, one should consider the conditions under

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[261] Pew Research Center. "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System". Available at:
https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/
[262] *Op. Cit.* Levitsky, Steven and Ziblatt, Daniel. "How Wobbly Is Our Democracy?"

which polarization might feed on itself. In particular, the main concern should be that polarization brings about new developments in a certain polity with eventually fuel further polarization. Only by doing that a comprehensive plan or theory to eradicate toxic polarization might be advanced. Rather than viewing polarization as a static point along a continuum[263], it is more productive to consider it as an ongoing developmental process. Taking a developmental approach requires examining how high levels of polarization can be not only self-reinforcing but also susceptible to escalation. To do this, one must pay careful attention to how institutional arrangements can either mitigate or exacerbate the polarization process once it has commenced. The contemporary dynamics of polarization raise significant questions about the traditional Madisonian perspective on American politics. Madison and the Founders were primarily concerned with establishing a stable republic. Recognizing that factional divisions were inevitable, Madison famously argued that American political institutions were designed to prevent all-out conflicts between competing factions. The constitutional system was intentionally structured with critical mechanisms that aimed to dampen or counteract polarization rather than perpetuate it. In essence, the concern is whether these institutions, which were meant to encourage compromise and stability, are effectively fulfilling their intended role in today's highly polarized political landscape. This calls for a reevaluation of how well the constitutional framework is functioning in the face of contemporary polarization and whether adjustments or reforms may be necessary to promote greater political cooperation and stability.

This polarization the United States is experiencing –and which encompasses economic, geographic, racial, and policy divisions–, played a significant role in the rise of Donald Trump as president and the ascendancy of a political movement that reshaped the Republican Party. This movement was characterized by skepticism toward the traditional political establishment's ability to serve the interests of working-class individuals, particularly those without a college degree. Over time, more working-class voters gravitated towards supporting Trump and his policies, which encompassed economic, racial, and nationalist themes. One of the notable outcomes of this political movement was the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, fueled by the belief among some that the presidential election had been stolen. This event marked a departure from the longstanding American tradition of accepting the legitimacy of elections and benignly conceding defeat. Subsequently, polls have indicated a partisan divide regarding the perception of election fairness, with the Republican Party actively seeking to enact voting restrictions in various states. Moreover, this polarization has severely hindered the ability of the US federal government

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[263] Pierson, Paul, and Eric Schickler. "Madison's constitution under stress: A developmental analysis of political polarization." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23 (2020): 37-58.

to pass legislation addressing crucial issues such as voting rights and economic inequality. Consequently, the United States has encountered obstacles in addressing some of its most pressing challenges. There are clear indications that the country's political institutions are facing internal challenges, and there is declining support for certain political values, both among the general population and within elite circles. This polarization raises concerns about the functionality and stability of the overall state of democracy in the United States.

3.3 American Democratic Decline and Trumpism

3.3.1 Democratic Decline

Considerable scholarly articles have been dedicated to explaining the reasons behind the collapse of democracies. However, there has been a relative scarcity of comprehensive and explicitly comparative research concerning the specific mechanisms by which democratic breakdown occurs. Within the field of political science, there has been a greater emphasis on examining the economic and institutional factors associated with such breakdowns, rather than delving into the roles of decision-making processes and individuals responsible for these decisions. Remarkably, the latter aspects, namely choices and the actors making those choices, may offer more potential for direct influence and swift intervention in safeguarding democratic systems. This is also why this dissertation took into consideration different polls and surveys made both to citizens and to the general parties' structure.

The United States is currently encountering significant challenges to its democratic system. According to Freedom House, between 2013 and 2021, the freedom score of the United States witnessed a decline from 93 to 83, placing it approximately 62nd among the 210 political units assessed in 2021. Notably, these ranking positions the United States behind most Western European and North American nations, as reported by Freedom House in 2021[264]. Considering the historical context wherein the United States has often characterized itself as the preeminent democracy globally, assuming leadership roles during pivotal moments like the Cold War against communism and the post-9/11 battle against terrorism, this decline may appear surprising. Renowned scholars like Fukuyama[265], for instance, held a perspective during the 1990s that positioned the United States as the sole remaining superpower and champion of liberal democracy.

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[264] Freedom House. *Democracy under Siege.* (2021). Available at:

https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege

[265] Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man.* New York: Free Press (1992). In Schultz, David. "The fragile state of democracy in America and why it should matter to the world". *Iustitia Journal.* (2022): 54-61.

This prompts two fundamental inquiries: How did this erosion of democratic principles transpire, and what significance does it hold for the international community? This section aims to offer a preliminary response to these inquiries. The argument herein posits that the reasons underpinning the decline of democracy in the United States are multifaceted, with some causes tracing their roots back several years. Furthermore, it asserts that the international community should be concerned about the precarious state of American democracy as its decline impedes global efforts to address the challenge to freedom posed by authoritarian states such as China, Russia.

The United States of America is fundamentally rooted in democratic, liberal, and constitutional principles that have shaped its political traditions. Initially conceptualized in 1787, the U.S. Constitution draws inspiration from a distinct set of political values grounded in liberal, republican, and legal traditions, which can be traced back to influential thinkers, as the ones analyzed in Chapter 2. This constitutional framework is often associated with the concept of Madisonian democracy, named after James Madison, one of the principal framers of the Constitution. Madisonian democracy is characterized as a system of government designed to safeguard against the potential abuses of majority rule[266]. It achieves this by employing an intricate mechanism that divides and checks political power, thereby imposing limitations on the capacity of a majority to infringe upon the rights of a minority. The essence of American democracy lies in its dual role: empowering majorities to translate their preferences into governmental authority, while simultaneously constraining them to prevent any potential misuse of that authority. As the United States has evolved over time, some have argued that it has become increasingly democratic. Critics of the original U.S. Constitution and political system point to factors such as the existence of slavery and the absence of constitutional provisions protecting voting rights as evidence of its initial lack of full democracy. However, by the conclusion of World War II, the United States had gained recognition as arguably the most democratic nation globally, and it assumed the role of championing democratic values on the international stage.

Eventually, in the 1990s, the United States achieved a status of being the sole surviving superpower. During this period, the country was also perceived as a global advocate for democratic values and institutions, actively working to facilitate the transition of post-Soviet and communist states toward democratic systems, and exerting pressure on non-democratic regimes to embrace change, as observed by Hook[267]. However, the twenty-first century has not been as favorable to democracy in the United States, with its global rankings experiencing a decline. This decline can be attributed to several underlying causes. One prominent factor is economic inequality and the

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[266] *Op. Cit.* Dahl, Robert A. *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition.*

[267] Hook, Steven W. *US foreign policy: the paradox of world power.* Cq Press, (2015).

process of economic restructuring. In the 1920s, economic inequality in the United States had surged significantly, only to see a decline following World War II. This decline was attributed to a combination of factors, including the economic disruptions caused by the war and the implementation of social welfare measures that helped reduce inequality. However, starting in the 1970s, economic inequality began to rise once again, and there are indications that the wealth gap between the rich and poor in the U.S. has reached historic levels. Simultaneously, economic mobility in the United States has dwindled. Compared to governments following Western European-style social models, the United States exhibits notably lower economic mobility. In short, since the 1970s, economic inequality has increased while social mobility has decreased. These twin phenomena can be attributed to various factors, including the decline of labor unions, the erosion of the welfare state, and the transformation of the economy, particularly the loss of manufacturing jobs, which has disproportionately impacted the poorest and the middle class. These economic transformations have had significant political repercussions. While it may be challenging to establish direct causal relationships, these changes are correlated with a diminishing trust in the U.S. political system, as many individuals question whether the government truly serves their interests. Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that the policy preferences of the general public often fail to translate into enacted legislation. Additionally, economic polarization has given rise to geographical polarization, with the wealthy and economically disadvantaged residing in separate areas and having limited interactions. This spatial separation exacerbates societal divisions and contributes to the challenges facing American democracy.

Focusing more on the political realm, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, characterized by his admiration for authoritarian leaders, encouragement of violence among supporters, threats against political opponents, and labeling of mainstream media as the enemy, has sparked concerns that the U.S. may be at risk of moving toward authoritarianism. While predictions of a descent into full-fledged fascism are deemed exaggerated, the Trump presidency could potentially lead the U.S. toward a milder form of authoritarianism referred to as competitive authoritarianism[268]. In such a system, meaningful democratic institutions technically exist, but the government employs its state power to disadvantage political opponents. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the challenges confronting American democracy began emerging long before Trump's presidency. These challenges have been evolving since the 1980s, with deepening political polarization and the radicalization of the Republican Party eroding the institutional foundations that historically upheld U.S. democracy. This erosion makes a Trump presidency considerably more perilous today than it might have been in prior decades.

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[268] *Op. Cit.* Levitsky, Steven and Ziblatt, Daniel. "How Wobbly Is Our Democracy?"

Paradoxically, the divisive dynamics jeopardizing democracy today have roots in the delayed democratization of the United States. It wasn't until the early 1970s, following the civil rights movement and federal government intervention to combat authoritarianism in southern states, that the nation truly achieved a democratic system. However, this process also contributed to congressional division, realigning voters along racial lines and pushing the Republican Party further to the right. Consequently, this polarization facilitated Trump's ascent and rendered democratic institutions more susceptible to his autocratic tendencies. Surprisingly, the safeguards of American democracy may not necessarily come from the expected sources. The nation's professed commitment to democracy does not guarantee protection against democratic backsliding. Historical tolerance for severe restrictions on democracy in the South before the 1960s serves as a testament to this. Furthermore, reliance on the Constitution alone to impede backsliding may prove insufficient. In the absence of informal norms of restraint and cooperation, even a well-constructed constitution cannot fully shield democracy from erosion.

3.3.2 Is Trump the cause of the decline?

The election of Donald Trump has disrupted the prevailing notion that affluent, liberal democracies are resistant to subversion by autocratic leaders who ascend to power through democratic elections. This disruption is evident in his electoral campaign, his tenure as president and after the election of Biden, during which Trump has displayed numerous autocratic tendencies. He has exacerbated latent ethnic and socioeconomic divisions, vilified his political adversaries, launched attacks against the media, undermined the safeguarding of civil and political freedoms, and questioned the autonomy of the judiciary, as well as the independence of federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies. In the perception of a substantial portion of the population, activists, commentators, and academic experts, there is a prevailing concern regarding the state of American democracy. Various indicators point to a growing sense of apprehension and distrust concerning American democratic processes and governing institutions. The presidency of Donald Trump has exacerbated these apprehensions. Beginning with his candidacy, continuing during his presidency, and persisting as he seeks a second term –notwithstanding all the charges he is being investigated for–, Trump has openly criticized and undermined many fundamental pillars of democratic governance. These include the independent press, the judiciary, the bureaucratic apparatus, the legitimacy of elections, the acceptability of democratic competition and dissent, and the importance of objective facts in political discourse. This is not the first instance where liberal democracy in the United States has faced a threat. In prior cases, while certain elements of liberal democracy such as civil liberties, the integrity of elections, and adherence to constitutional

principles faced significant challenges, the American political system managed to recover, due to the resolute and constitutionally grounded actions of individuals playing their designated roles within the system itself. Given the resilience of America's political institutions, why does President Trump and the phenomenon of Trumpism, whether considered in isolation or as symptomatic of a more extensive and profound issue within democracy, engender such apprehension? This concern extends beyond being a typical political challenge to an established liberal policy framework; it is also seen as a potential existential threat to the stability of the American political system, the integrity of liberal democracy, and the robustness of the global liberal order. What precisely characterizes the threat posed by Trumpism? Addressing these questions and comprehending what uniquely endangers democracy at this stage necessitates transcending the immediate particulars of Donald Trump and his presidency. Instead, it necessitates adopting a historical and comparative perspective when examining American politics.

Numerous analysts have posited that the 2016 election marked a significant shift in public preferences, either towards President Trump's distinctive brand of conservatism or due to Trump himself introducing an anti-democratic element into American politics through his forceful personality and divisive rhetoric. The interpretation of the 2016 election and its consequences can take various forms. One viewpoint suggests that President Trump has garnered a broader and more intense level of disapproval than previous presidents, leading to doubts about his suitability for the office that spill over into doubts about the legitimacy of his presidency. Furthermore, and potentially more significant, President Trump has garnered an unprecedented level of animosity and disdain from individuals across the political spectrum. This stems from various aspects, including his brash and confrontational style, his self-centered and unfiltered communication (as exemplified by his use of Twitter), his propensity for falsehoods while accusing others of disseminating fake news, his approach to governance that combines ignorance and indifference, conflicts of interest involving his family's business interests and public duties, the controversy surrounding Russian interference in the 2016 election, potential ties between his campaign and Russia, and his apparent efforts to obstruct investigations into these matters. Additionally, his refusal to accept defeat and the events of January 6th, 2021, further contributed to this contentious atmosphere. Similar to populist figures in other parts of the world, President Trump has sought to authenticate his status as a political 'outsider' by openly disregarding established norms and procedures[269], often indulging in forms of coarseness and incivility that are considered shocking by those accustomed to the decorum associated with political establishments. Another perspective

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[269] Benjamin Moffitt, "The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation". *Stanford University Press.* (2016).

on the concerning nature of Trumpism could focus less on President Trump himself and more on the electoral process that brought him to power. President Trump not only campaigned against many foundational policies and political principles of the global liberal order that had prevailed for roughly the past eighty years but also repeatedly challenged the very legitimacy of the fundamental mechanics and norms of the American electoral system. This included baseless claims of widespread voter fraud, encouragement of voter suppression, selective criticism of the Electoral College, and even threats to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power.

Exit polls have indicated that Trump voters were primarily motivated by their dislike for his opponent, whereas Clinton supporters expressed strong favoritism for their candidate. Only thirty-eight percent of voters held a favorable opinion of Trump, and an equivalent percentage believed he was qualified for the presidency[270]. Crucially, partisanship continued to be the most reliable predictor of voting choices, with 89% of Democrats supporting Clinton and 88% of Republicans backing Trump (independents slightly favored Trump). In essence, it can be inferred that Republicans adhered to their party's nominee, despite his outsider status within the party and his vocal criticism of party leadership. It is noteworthy that in the entire history of the United States, no individual had been elected president without prior experience in elected office, a cabinet role, or military service. Moreover, in the modern era, no presidential candidate had previously threatened to imprison their opponent, publicly and repeatedly criticized people based on characteristics like their country of origin, religion, gender, disability, or other traits that temporarily displeased them, or displayed such a blatant disregard for factual accuracy and truth. These idiosyncratic traits and character markers did not dissuade Trump's supporters from voting for him, despite widespread disapproval. In light of these factors, Trump's ascent to political prominence appears historically atypical and warrants comprehensive historical analysis. Furthermore, President Trump's election marked the convergence of his unique brand of autocratic populist leadership with an existing, pronounced form of partisan and ideological polarization. As we will expound upon, populist leaders openly reject or antagonize conventional democratic norms, processes, and institutions, asserting that they alone represent the popular will (as exemplified by Trump's declaration at the Republican National Convention: "I alone can fix it"[271]). Simultaneously, hyperpolarization exacerbates the tendency for partisan domination of institutions intended to uphold checks and balances, potentially transforming them into unaccountable tools of partisan or incumbent advantage.

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[270] Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump Sets New Low for Second-Quarter Job Approval". Gallup. (2017). Available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/214322/trump-sets-new-low-second-quarter-job-approval.aspx
[271] *Op. Cit.* Trump, Donald J. *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.* (2016).

Taken all of this into consideration, the US finds itself in the midst of a political crisis that is threatening democracy. The storming of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, marked an important point and a severe assault on democracy that continues to reverberate. Contrary to hopes that Donald Trump would fade from the political scene following the insurrection and his subsequent electoral defeat, his influence endures, casting a significant shadow over the political landscape and the Republican Party. Trump has cultivated a movement centered around his cult of personality, enabling him to maintain high levels of popularity and support among his followers[272]. Plato's cautionary words about the potential danger posed by demagogues who could captivate the minds of the populace have proven prescient. To counteract such risks, the framers of the Constitution established a system of checks and balances. These checks and balances, resilient both at the federal and state levels, effectively withstood the challenges posed by Trump's assault on democracy. Congress twice impeached the president, demonstrating its ability to hold its ground. The judiciary remained independent and resisted efforts to overturn the election results. Similarly, states resisted federal actions or decisions by Trump, particularly concerning the handling of the pandemic. The military adhered to the long-standing democratic tradition of civil-military relations, maintaining its apolitical stance under civilian control. Additionally, the press, despite enduring four years of presidential derision, retained its fundamental freedom. However, the discrediting of traditional media, coupled with the decline of local news precipitated by the 2008 financial crisis, and Trump's adept use of social media, especially Twitter, contributed to a distortion of truth and reality during his presidency. In a functional representative democracy, relying solely on social media for information is inadequate. Social media platforms can intensify our propensity to seek emotional stimulation and comfort, blurring the line between what feels true and what is factually accurate. While the checks and balances within the American political system successfully withstood the frontal assault on democratic institutions, norms, conventions, and traditions during Trump's presidency, his tenure greatly polarized the system and exposed weaknesses in its institutions. His consistent attacks on the truth, culminating in the dissemination of the rumor about a rigged election, have misled, disoriented American citizens, and eroded the foundations of American democracy. The future of constitutional democracy remains uncertain, with no assurance that it will endure another sustained, and possibly more organized, assault in the years to come[273].

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[272] Arvanitopoulos, Constantine. "The state of American democracy after Trump." *European View* 21.1 (2022): 91-99.

[273] Galston, William A. and Elaine Kamarck. "Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?." *Policy Commons.* (2022)

The erosion of democracy in the United States started way before the Trump administration, stemming from persistent gridlock in the US Congress, escalating political polarization, and the corrosive influence of undisclosed campaign contributions in politics. This decline gained momentum during the last four years, characterized by attacks on the news media, concerns about the impartiality of the courts, and a diminished role for Congress as an effective check and balance on executive authority[274]. Moreover, a confluence of profound structural challenges and significant historical shifts occurring simultaneously has transformed this situation into an existential crisis for American democracy. The corrosive impact of polarization on American politics exacerbates these issues further. A recent analysis from the Carnegie Endowment[275] posits that the United States is unique among advanced Western democracies in enduring such sustained and intense polarization. One contributing factor to this heightened polarization is what's referred to as the 'white backlash', the reaction of the white population to demographic changes that challenge their historically dominant position across various realms of power. This polarization transcends the political sphere and extends to the very foundations of the social hierarchy, influencing even consumer preferences and lifestyle choices. Consequently, both the political system and society at large have become increasingly polarized. The bedrock of democratic institutions lies not only in their structural design but also in the norms they uphold, such as compromise, cooperation, respect for truth, and reliance on an engaged, self-assured citizenry and a free press. When these democratic values face sustained attacks, and the press and civil society are marginalized, the institutional safeguards lose their effectiveness. This gradual erosion of checks and balances can ultimately lead to abrupt institutional breakdown (Acemoglu 2020). In addition to undermining democratic institutions, the Trump presidency significantly eroded trust in these institutions among many Americans, a development of profound consequence[276].

One example is particularly relevant to the discussion: following the tragic murder of George Floyd, a wave of unprecedented global social justice protests emerged in terms of their scale and the diverse range of participants involved. Millions of Americans, as well as supporters around the world, took to the streets to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and to demand racial justice. This mobilization was not limited to major cities but spanned across

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[274] Norris, Pippa. "American democracy is at risk from Trump and the Republicans: What can be done?" The Guardian. (2021). Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/06/republican-party-donald-trump-american-democracy-elections

[275] Which can be found in *Op. Cit.* Arvanitopoulos, Constantine. "The state of American democracy after Trump."

[276] Acemoglu, Daron. "America's democratic unraveling". Foreign Affairs (2020). Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-democratic-unraveling

small towns and even within the boardrooms of some of the world's wealthiest corporations. It represented a collective call for racial justice and a resounding commitment not to evade a profound examination of anti-Black racism. Participants hailed from various racial backgrounds and virtually every sector of society, demonstrating the widespread engagement in this movement. Furthermore, this effort went beyond mere demonstrations, as there was also a significant outpouring of financial contributions and commitments, which was remarkable given the absence of a centralized leadership or organization steering these protests. It's worth noting that during this period, several best-selling books delved into the understanding and combatting of anti-Black racism. The terms "anti-Black racism," "systemic racism," and "white supremacy"[277] found their way into the discourse of individuals typically associated with upholding the status quo, including heads of state and police chiefs. Notably, President Biden, in his inaugural address, made a commitment to address white supremacy, marking the first time a sitting president had publicly employed this terminology. However, juxtaposed against this backdrop of calls for racial justice and reconciliation, on January 6, 2021, a significant gathering of Trump supporters launched an attack on the Capitol with the aim of halting or disrupting the peaceful transfer of presidential power. General Mattis, who served as the Secretary of Defense under President Trump, sounded the alarm about the growing threat of white nationalism and white supremacy, factors that were evident in the insurrection. He also emphasized Trump's role in fomenting this situation[278], a sentiment echoed by other former aides and staff members of Trump, as well as by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. These examples are cited not to endorse particular political views but to provide context for understanding the nature of the polarization gripping the nation. Importantly, concerns about the state of affairs are not solely expressed by Democrats or those on the political left; they also come from impartial observers. The fact that a sitting president encouraged an insurrection during the transfer of power is unprecedented in the American context and led to Trump's second historic impeachment. Despite this, Trump continues to command substantial support. Over 70 million Americans voted for him, the second-highest number in history, and a significant majority of Republicans expressed their support for his potential future candidacies. These facts are presented not to validate these beliefs but to shed light on the extent of the polarization confronting the nation. By many accounts, the United States has not experienced such profound divisions since the Civil War. While there may not be a consensus on the precise nature

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[277] Powell, John A. "Overcoming Toxic Polarization: Lessons in Effective Bridging." *Law & Ineq*. 40 (2022): 254.

[278] Goldberg, Jeffrey. "James Mattis Denounces PresidentTrump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution" The Atlantic (2020). Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/james-mattis-denounces-trump-protests-militarization/612640/

and causes of this divide, there are certain aspects that most people can agree upon. One key axis of this division is political affiliation, with a sharp divide between those identifying as Democrats and Republicans.

Finally, it is crucial to state that "Trump hasn't destroyed the republic"[279]; the democratic institutions in the United States are robust, and despite Trump's disregard for democratic norms, he has proven to be an ineffective and weak leader. However, this does not mean that democracy is secure. The challenges the United States faces go deeper than just the Trump presidency. While Trump's autocratic tendencies have contributed to the mounting crisis in the American political system, he is both a symptom and a cause of this crisis. Even a well-designed Constitution, such as that of the United States, cannot guarantee the survival of democracy by itself. If it could, the republic would not have experienced a civil war only 74 years after its inception. To function effectively, democratic constitutions must be underpinned by two fundamental norms, which are often unwritten but critical. The first is mutual toleration, which entails politicians accepting their opponents as legitimate. When mutual toleration prevails, it means that a party recognizes its partisan adversaries as loyal citizens who share a love for the country, and it should be mutual. The second norm is forbearance, which involves exercising self-restraint in the use of power. Forbearance means refraining from fully exercising one's legal rights, even if doing so would be within the bounds of the law. History teaches that these democratic norms are vulnerable to polarization. Some level of polarization is healthy and even essential for democracy to function, but extreme polarization can be its downfall. When society becomes divided into partisan factions with deeply divergent worldviews, and when these differences are seen as existential and irreconcilable, political competition can degenerate into partisan animosity and hatred.

3.3.2.1 Impeachment in the Constitution.

The process of impeachment, although a mechanism for bringing charges against a President exists in several other countries, has assumed a significance and symbolic value in the United States that has not been observed elsewhere. It may appear that here, more than elsewhere, Freudian psychosociological theory[280] holds relevance. To discuss impeachment, it is imperative

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[279] *Op. Cit.* Levitsky, Steven and Ziblatt, Daniel. "How Wobbly Is Our Democracy?"

[280] Freud, Sigmund. *Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'Io.* Newton Compton Editori, 2012: 10-11. From this psychosociological theory one can understand modern leadership studies: in the context of a group, individuals tend to relinquish their selfish instincts due to the need to identify with a symbolic figure. Translating this concept to the realm of constitutional structure, the President of a state is, therefore, the leader of the individuals who effectively constitute the state entity itself. The strong symbolic significance of the role of the President has allowed them to preserve their authority even in the face of the modernization processes that have revolutionized society.

to start with the constitutional framework. Within Article 2, Section 4[281], the offenses that make the President subject to removal from office are described. However, what is relevant in this context is that competence lies with Congress. In particular, Clause 6 in Section 2 of Article 1[282] begins to outline the institutions involved in the impeachment process. This provision states that only the House of Representatives has the authority to impeach the President. To do so, a simple majority is required: the House of Representatives consists of 441 members, with 6 not having the right to vote; therefore, as it is a simple majority, the outcome of the vote is strongly influenced by the number of those who actually exercise this right. Article 1, Section 2, Clause 6, continues by stating that Senate members, after taking an oath or solemn declaration, will be the only ones able to judge all accusations against the Head of State. If the President is to be judged, he must be found 'guilty' by two-thirds of the Supreme Court (6 out of 9 justices). The next Article contributes to explaining what happens in the event that the President is convicted in an impeachment trial. The Article accomplishes this by developing the concept along two separate tracks: in the first part, it establishes what happens in the political life of the convicted, asserting that convictions for cases of impeachment shall not extend beyond removal from office and disqualification to hold and enjoy any office of honor, trust, or profit under the United States; however, in the second part, it is emphasized that the party convicted shall nevertheless be liable and subject to indictment, trial, judgment, and punishment, according to law.

Therefore, the framers made it clear that in addition to removal from the presidential office, there are further legal implications as per the provisions of common law. The connection between these two types of proceedings is the subject of multiple interpretations, all of which can be considered valid as long as jurisprudence does not lean towards any one of them. Interpreting the above Article as literally as possible, impeachment could be considered a precondition for the criminal process. Isenberg[283] argues that since the President cannot be arrested during their term, he then possesses official immunity, at least in civil disputes. This position aligns with that expressed in the Supreme Court, which has held that as the President is granted executive power and derives their powers from the Constitution, they are outside of any other department, except as provided in the constitutional text, which is the power of impeachment. Consequently, in addition to enjoying immunity in civil disputes, the President would not be criminally liable until

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[281] ArtII.S4.1 U.S. Constitution. Available at: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artII-S4-1/ALDE_00000282/

[282] ArtI.S1.6 U.S. Constitution. Available at: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artI-S1-6-1/ALDE_00001321/

[283] Joseph Isenberg. "Impeachment and Presidential from Judicial Process, Public Law and Legal Theory", *The Law School, University of Chicago*. (1998): 8.

they are removed from office. With these premises in place, another debate has emerged regarding the President's immunity. The first of the two positions that emerged, embraced by Richard Nixon's legal team in the Watergate case, believes that any criminal action against the President, from formulation to conviction, is precluded. On the contrary, it is not wrong to consider it possible that the proceedings can still commence and that they should only be halted when it is necessary to formulate the conviction and the related penalty.

President Donald Trump's single term in office faced impeachment proceedings on two separate occasions, with both instances resulting in his acquittal by the Senate. The first impeachment stemmed from a phone call between President Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine. In this call, President Trump requested investigations into his potential 2020 election opponent and unsubstantiated claims of Ukrainian interference in the 2016 election. This call occurred while military aid to Ukraine was on hold. The information about this call initially came to light through an intelligence community whistleblower report, but a summary of the call was later released by President Trump. The impeachment process began in the House of Representatives, where it went through two phases. The initial fact-finding phase involved the House Intelligence Committee, the Committee on Oversight and Reform, and the Committee on Foreign Affairs. There was some debate over whether the House had explicitly authorized the impeachment investigation, which led to resistance from the White House in cooperating with the inquiry. However, the House later passed a resolution authorizing the investigation explicitly. The second phase of the impeachment inquiry was conducted by the Judiciary Committee, focusing on whether President Trump's conduct constituted impeachable offenses. Following hearings, the committee recommended two articles of impeachment, one for abuse of power and the other for obstruction of the House impeachment investigation. The House adopted both articles on December 18, 2019, but they were not delivered to the Senate until January 15, 2020[284]. The Senate trial was marked by deep partisan divisions and disagreements over issues such as the relationship between impeachment and criminal law. The House asserted that high crimes and misdemeanors did not require evidence of a criminal act, while President Trump's attorneys argued that an impeachable offense must be a violation of established law. The Senate acquitted President Trump on both counts. The second impeachment occurred in the aftermath of the events on January 6, 2021, when some of President Trump's supporters attempted to disrupt the certification of the 2020 presidential election results at the U.S. Capitol. The House swiftly passed a single article of impeachment, charging President Trump with incitement to insurrection. The Senate trial began

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[284] ArtII.S4.4.9 President Donald Trump and Impeachable Offenses. Available at:
https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artII-S4-4-9/ALDE_00000035/

after President Trump had left office. During the trial, there were discussions about whether the Senate had jurisdiction to try a former President and the application of the First Amendment to the impeachment charge. The former President's attorneys argued that his statements constituted protected free speech, while the House managers contended that impeachment did not seek to punish unlawful speech. Ultimately, President Trump was acquitted by the Senate. In both impeachment trials, deep political divisions were evident, and the outcomes reflected these divisions, with President Trump being acquitted in both instances.

3.4 An overview of democratic decline in other countries

Nonetheless, some insights can be gathered from a comparative analysis between the Trump presidency and instances of democratic erosion in other three middle-income countries: Venezuela, Turkey, and Hungary. These countries had previously achieved levels of per capita income where the likelihood of democratic regression appeared improbable. Additionally, democratic institutions in Venezuela and Hungary were seemingly well-established, while Turkey's democracy seemed to be progressing towards consolidation. The United States, by contrast, possesses greater wealth and a more firmly institutionalized political system. However, drawing parallels with these cases aids in elucidating the causal mechanisms by which democracy can deteriorate, even under otherwise favorable political and economic conditions. Thus, it offers valuable perspectives on developments within the United States during the initial twenty months of the Trump presidency. It is an uncontested argument that a transition to competitive authoritarianism in the United States is improbable, though not completely inconceivable. Unlike the middle-income countries discussed later, the American political system features institutional characteristics that pose significant barriers to outright authoritarian rule, including formidable obstacles to constitutional revision. In juxtaposing the sequence of events in the cases of democratic backsliding with that of the United States, the aim is not to test a single overarching theory of regime change. Nevertheless, this current analysis is informed by two strands of theoretical literature on democratic regressions. One strand focuses on how polarization and dysfunction within the regime strain public support for democratic institutions and a second, influential perspective builds upon Juan Linz's seminal work[285] on democratic failures in interwar Europe. This perspective emphasizes elite polarization and the incapacity of political institutions to prevent the electoral success of extremist factions.

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[285] Which can be found in Kaufman, Robert R. and Stephan Haggard. "Democratic decline in the United States: What can we learn from middle-income backsliding?." *Perspectives on Politics* 17.2 (2019): 417-432.

Drawing from these frameworks, there can be three interconnected causal processes linked to the reversion from democratic rule in middle-income democracies. These processes can be seen as unfolding in overlapping phases. First, polarizing class or identity cleavages erode support for centrist political forces, paving the way for majoritarian or autocratic electoral appeals. Notably, polarization weakens norms of tolerance and self-restraint among competing political elites, increasing the probability that illiberal majoritarian appeals will garner electoral support. A crucial second stage in the regression process revolves around how autocratic electoral victories translate into dominant legislative majorities that consent to the concentration of executive authority. Finally, during the third phase, executive powers are incrementally employed to weaken institutions responsible for horizontal accountability, opposition groups, and civil and political liberties. Unlike abrupt authoritarian seizures of power, such as military coups, the gradual nature of this process makes it challenging to pinpoint a single abuse that decisively tips the balance towards autocracy. This combination of legal, economic, and coercive resources tilts the competitive playing field but is subsequently directed towards the corruption of the electoral process, intimidation of political challengers, and the suppression of civil and political freedoms.

Highlighting Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey is useful not only for comparison –due to their widespread recognition as prominent instances of political regression–, but also because they present intricate scenarios. The backsliding observed in these nations is particularly notable as it occurred in the context of prior democratic advancements. In the case of Venezuela, following the overthrow of a military dictatorship in 1958, the country enjoyed four decades of uninterrupted constitutional governance. However, concerns arose due to its heavy reliance on petroleum, issues of corruption, and the pervasive influence wielded by party, union, and business elites with access to oil resources, all of which cast doubt on the depth of democratization. Nevertheless, Venezuela stood out for its extended history of stable electoral competition between two well-established centrist parties, setting it apart from the personalist, military, or one-party regimes prevalent in most of Latin America until the early 1990s. Hungary's political reforms and its accession to the European Union initially portrayed it as a democratic success story. Meanwhile, Turkey faced its own democratic challenges, marked by electoral distortions, military interventions, and discrimination against political Islam and the Kurdish minority during the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, the election of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's moderate Islamist AKP party in 2002 seemed to chart a more democratic course for Turkey before the sharp political reversal witnessed in the late 2000s.

It is crucial to acknowledge, of course, that these countries exhibit considerable variation in other potentially relevant parameters. For instance, Hungary's expanding ties to Western

institutions were anticipated to reinforce democracy, while Venezuela's dependence on oil and the religious and ethnic divisions in Turkey presented their own unique challenges. However, the objective is not to provide an exhaustive account of all potential causal factors influencing these outcomes. Pairing Venezuela with Turkey and Hungary serves as an instructive exercise as it underscores the significance of polarization itself, rather than any specific ideological orientation. While Hugo Chávez appealed to the political left and exploited class divisions, Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán identified with the political right and sought support from religious and rural constituencies while targeting urban elites, ethnic minorities, and foreigners. Nevertheless, it is important to note that none of these autocratic leaders can be neatly categorized along a conventional left/right political continuum. Their economic policies, like Orbán's and Erdoğan's, as well as those of Donald Trump, defied easy ideological distinctions. Orbán, akin to Chávez, advanced nationalist economic policies and rejected globalization. Both he and Erdoğan introduced welfare policies aimed at securing support from marginalized segments of society. Rather than ideological alignment, their commonalities lie in their anti-system stance and polarizing electoral appeals, which both reflected and exacerbated underlying societal divisions. All three leaders relied on promises of majoritarian rule to upend corrupt elites in the name of 'the people' and increasingly portrayed their political opponents as criminals and even traitors.

The likelihood of President Trump effecting substantial constitutional changes similar to those witnessed in Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey within the framework of the U.S. Congress is exceedingly low. In middle-income countries experiencing democratic backsliding, formal constitutions often lacked strong popular backing, rendering them considerably more adaptable. Rulers in such nations could, through popular referenda or ordinary legislation, augment executive authority, modify the effective influence of the judiciary and legislature, and even draft entirely new constitutions. However, in the United States, the constitutional framework exhibits a high degree of rigidity with respect to critical checks and balances, including term limits, the bicameral legislative structure, and the federal political system. These elements collectively constitute formidable obstacles to the establishment of full electoral autocracy. Furthermore, the economic grievances in the United States have their roots in globalization, technological transformations, and, ultimately, in stagnant wage growth, rising economic inequality, and the ensuing impacts on political accountability. More immediately, these grievances can be attributed to the profound repercussions of the Great Recession, where substantial segments of the population did not benefit from the limited recovery during the Obama administration. Research has indicated that the Trump vote, marked by distinct populist appeals, correlated with economic factors such as

exposure to international trade, challenges facing smaller metropolitan areas, and socio-economic indicators such as poor health, limited social mobility, and weak social cohesion.

Nonetheless, polarization in the United States is also intricately linked to identity politics, described in the sections above. To give another overview, political parties began to undergo realignment during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and subsequently on contentious issues such as affirmative action, welfare, and immigration, all of which carry deep racial, ethnic, and cultural connotations. While racial politics in the U.S. are rooted in its unique historical context, they bear a resemblance to the divisions leveraged by leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. A cascade of top-down factors exacerbated grassroots resentments on these issues and cultivated public perceptions that government is ineffective. With polarization came a steep decline in public trust in political institutions, attributable to various factors including policy gridlock in Washington, the distortive incentives of the primary system, and the inflow of substantial financial resources into right-wing organizations and communication networks that emphasized government shortcomings. Between 2007 and 2015, trust in political institutions, as evidenced by Pew polls[286], consistently ranged between approximately 20% and 25%, marking the lowest levels in over half a century. The erosion of trust extended not only to specific institutions but also encompassed diminishing support for the democratic system itself.

For Trump, these conditions provided a fertile ground for a campaign reminiscent of his counterparts in Venezuela, Hungary, and Turkey. He tapped into the same disdain for institutional checks and the dynamics of pluralist democracy, which was expressed by all three leaders in middle-income nations. Like Orbán and Erdoğan, Trump exploited both economic distress and cultural divisions, as well as a widening gender gap. Despite his own controversial conduct toward women, he positioned himself as a defender of the 'traditional values' cherished by his evangelical support base. Notably, the demonization of racial and ethnic minorities occupied a central position in Trump's campaign. These themes persisted during his presidency, commencing with his early efforts to implement a comprehensive travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries and continuing with equivocal responses to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville. The administration's emphasis on perceived threats posed by immigrants appeared to deliberately blur the line between undocumented and legal immigrants, further fanning hostilities toward minority groups. In one significant aspect, Trump's ascent to power diverged from that of other populist leaders: his electoral support was narrower, and opposition to his presidency was more robust.

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[286] Pew Research Center. "Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government". (2015). Available at https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/#:~:text=Currently%2C%2022%25%20say%20they%20are,30%25%20expressed%20anger%20at%20government.

Trump secured a narrow victory in the Electoral College, hinging on a few pivotal votes in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, but he lost the popular vote. Moreover, despite disparities in Senate representation and gerrymandering in the House of Representatives, he confronted a united Democratic opposition in Congress.

The presidency of Donald Trump, often characterized as "abnormal"[287], is itself a consequence of deep-seated dysfunction and polarization that contributed to his initial election. These underlying trends are unlikely to dissipate with Trump's departure from the political stage. Furthermore, the post-Trump era is bearing the scars of lasting harm incurred during his tenure. Trump's influence over the Republican Party has progressively pushed it toward positions marked by intolerance and extremism. Additionally, the defeat of the Democratic Party in 2016 has exacerbated divisions between its moderate and more militant factions. Lessons drawn from middle-income countries undergoing democratic decline illustrate that such divisions and the waning support for established political parties can render them ineffective in checking autocratic tendencies, thereby opening the door to anti-system appeals. As already discussed, the most enduring institutional damage is expected to impact the legitimacy and integrity of the judicial system, with consequential implications for civil liberties and the integrity of the electoral process. Perhaps most crucially, the Trump experience has expedited the erosion of norms that had long served as pillars of democratic stability in the United States. At the elite level, the discourse during the Trump era eroded boundaries that once prevented overt appeals to racial and ethnic hostilities, as well as the conventions that discouraged politicians from portraying their opponents as existential threats. At the mass level, Trumpian populism has deepened the polarization of American society, heightening the inclination of competing factions to prioritize their own side's victory over fair democratic processes. While the erosion of institutions and political norms may not extinguish free and fair electoral competition, as seen in middle-income countries experiencing democratic backsliding, it does signify a notable weakening of the rule of law, accountability, and the political rights typically associated with liberal democracy.

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[287] *Op. Cit.* Kaufman, Robert R., and Stephan Haggard. "Democratic decline in the United States: What can we learn from middle-income backsliding?.": 428.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the future of democracy, focusing on its erosion in various parts of the world and arguing that this backsliding is highly driven by toxic political polarization, with a particular outlook on the United States. The first chapter delves into the events surrounding the January 6th, 2021 assault on Capitol Hill, exploring the factors that led to this incident and its implications for US democracy. It analyzes Donald Trump's role in inciting the insurrection, analyzes the freedom of speech provisions in the U.S. Constitution, and questions whether the attack amounted to an attempted coup. The second chapter provides a theoretical background on democracy, emphasizing the various interpretations and definitions of the term. It discusses the historical perspectives of democracy, including the warnings from thinkers like Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Madison about the potential dangers of democratic rule. The chapter also explores the relationship between liberalism and democracy and introduces the concept of 'hybrid regimes', where democracies can regress into more authoritarian forms of governance. It then highlights the current issue of pernicious polarization, which is analyzed more in particular with the example of the United States in the third chapter, tracing the political development of the country in the twentieth century and its transformation into a democratic model for other nations. It highlights the inherent vulnerabilities in the American political system –with a specific attention to polarization–that make it susceptible to democratic erosion. The chapter provides a brief history of U.S. political parties and how polarization has intensified over the past few decades. It underscores the role of Donald Trump's presidency in exacerbating polarization and reshaping the Republican Party, while also acknowledging that democratic erosion began before Trump's term. The chapter concludes with a comparative analysis of democratic erosion in the United States, Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela. In summary, this dissertation has explored the erosion of democracy, with a specific focus on the United States as a case study. It has argued that factors such as political polarization and the rise of populist leaders like Donald Trump contribute to the weakening of democratic values. This work also emphasizes the importance of understanding these issues for the future of democracy worldwide, as countries that tolerate instances of democratic backsliding might face long-term consequences.

The question this conclusion wishes to focus on is: what lies ahead? A comparative approach ultimately offers distinctive but complementary insights into the contemporary landscape of American politics. For instance, the success of the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom, the current administration led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary, as well as the notable electoral achievements of figures like Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, along with the popularity of parties such as the Danish People's Party and the

Freedom Party of Austria, all serve to illustrate that Trumpism is not the sole contemporary manifestation of right-wing, nativist, and protectionist populism within advanced industrial democracies. These movements exhibit numerous shared characteristics with the ascent of Trumpism in the United States. While none of them has yet attained full governance or achieved more than a secondary role in a governing coalition in Western Europe, they have influenced mainstream political parties towards adopting more nationalistic and anti-immigrant positions. Furthermore, they have redirected national political discourse, even in nations like Germany, where ruling parties remain committed to global liberalism. These cross-national instances provide a broader dataset than can be derived solely from American historical experiences and offer insights into factors beyond the United States' borders that may contribute to the further rise of Trumpism and its potential consequences.

As underlined by this dissertation, the most extreme concerns associated with Trumpism, particularly those rooted in authoritarian tendencies and the outright rejection of electoral institutions, revolve around the potential for a change in the established political order. Such a scenario would constitute a breakdown of democracy, a possibility that has previously been considered outside the realm of realistic speculation. This thesis has also accepted that around the world, there exist numerous hybrid or competitive authoritarian regimes that, on the surface, exhibit some democratic features but systematically disregard liberal democratic norms and processes. These regimes conduct elections under conditions that are far from fair, centralize power in the hands of a dominant political party or leader, erode institutional checks and balances, and curtail the rights of political opponents. By viewing the United States in isolation as a unique and self-contained model of democracy, one neglects valuable insights from the study of regime change, stability, and transition in other countries where similar challenges have arisen more frequently.

The rise of political polarization over the last 25 years has raised concerns among a significant portion of the American population and scholars regarding the state of the political landscape. This apprehension is understandable: polarization, within reasonable bounds, can serve as a beneficial element for democracies by fostering healthy debates; however, when it reaches an excessive level where entire segments of the population are unwilling to consider opposing viewpoints, it obstructs democratic mechanisms designed to address societal issues. On one hand, there is the possibility that polarization is following a self-perpetuating upward trend driven by misconceptions and avoidance. On the other hand, it may have recently peaked and started to swing back towards moderation. Nonetheless, this thesis contends that it remains premature to

definitively determine the trajectory of polarization, but it is evident that addressing and rectifying misperceptions could be a critical factor in this context.

As emphasized throughout the text, political polarization is characterized by the emergence of increasingly dissimilar attitudes within specific subsets of a population concerning political parties, party members, ideologies, and policies. Notably, polarization in the United States has reached unprecedented levels recently. Over the past half-century, members of both major political parties have exhibited progressively extreme ideological inclinations, with this trend being more pronounced among Republicans, particularly in the last ten years. Americans, to an unprecedented degree, now align themselves with their party's positions across the entire spectrum of issues. Since the 1990s, there has been a notable rise in Americans' affinity for their own party while concurrently harboring strong aversions towards their political opponents. Therefore, the debate among political scientists regarding the ramifications of polarization persists. In its most constructive form, polarization can yield benign effects and contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democracies. It encourages civic participation, with polarized citizens being more inclined to vote, engage in protests, and join political movements –all essential components for a functioning democracy. Moreover, polarization encourages the presentation of diverse policy options, a fundamental requirement for democracies that depend on citizens' ability to consider multiple policy proposals and engage in comprehensive, constructive debates. Ideally, such civic engagement and pluralism culminate in the establishment of effective and stable governance. This process helps societies identify policies that offer optimal solutions to their most pressing problems and are less likely to be overturned when a new political party assumes power, as they enjoy mutual agreement. However, at its worst, polarization can have pernicious effects and pose a significant challenge to the democratic process. Highly polarized individuals often exhibit a reluctance to engage with those holding opposing viewpoints, summarily dismissing potential flaws in their own perspectives and disregarding the merits of their adversaries' arguments. In such circumstances, constructive debates become unattainable, and the development of mutually acceptable policies remains elusive.

The future of political polarization can present two distinct possibilities. The first one stresses that there is a likelihood that polarization will persist and intensify due to a self-reinforcing cycle. This cycle begins with Americans (but this is also valid for other countries) perceiving higher levels of polarization than actually exist and subsequently distancing themselves from those with opposing views. This distancing then leads to increased real polarization, prompting a further exaggeration of perceived polarization. Several factors contribute to this overestimation: biased polling methods may inadvertently promote division by framing questions in a polarizing manner;

additionally, a vocal minority of extremely liberal or conservative individuals often dominates political discourse, influencing people's perceptions. The psychological impact of negative political content, which tends to be more attention-grabbing, memory-dwelling, and impression-shaping than positive content, further amplifies the perception of polarization. This exaggeration of political polarization can initiate a self-perpetuating cycle, as individuals who overestimate polarization tend to dislike and avoid their political opponents, ultimately increasing polarization. Avoidance behaviors can lead to even greater ideological divergence, and echo chambers can reinforce existing partisan beliefs. Furthermore, overestimating how much one is disliked by political opponents can foster reciprocal animosity, pushing individuals further from perceived opponents.

Alternatively, polarization may have reached its peak, primarily due to Americans' growing dissatisfaction with polarization and its consequences. This dissatisfaction has two main drivers. Firstly, polarization often results in more extreme policy proposals, which Americans generally find unattractive, even when they originate from their own political party. Secondly, Americans might disapprove of the consequences of polarization, perceiving a decline in the quality of political discourse characterized by insults and a lack of substantive debate. They may also express distress over the antagonistic behavior exhibited by current politicians. Instead of endorsing representatives who berate opponents, the majority of Americans voters might prefer civil and respectful political interactions, particularly among liberals. Furthermore, they might consider political close-mindedness to be both unintelligent and morally objectionable, and they reject co-partisans who refuse to consider opposing viewpoints, sometimes even socially excluding such dogmatic co-partisans. In response to polarization leading fellow partisans to become disrespectful and close-minded, Americans may disengage from their political parties and beliefs, resulting in weaker polarization. For instance, when individuals observe their co-partisans disrespecting opponents and disregarding their views, they tend to disidentify with their political parties and gravitate towards more moderate positions.

What the future will look like is difficult to foresee, as both the theories just considered may be at work simultaneously. Existing research and findings provide mixed evidence as to what future is most likely to occur; nevertheless, the key element which may eventually determine which one will prevail is whether political and mainstream media institution tolerate or combat misperceptions of polarization; doing so successfully might bring the conflicting parties to find a common ground, thus obstructing polarization's self-perpetuating cycle.

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