

UNDERSTANDING THE GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC DECLINE. CASE STUDY: THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract. *This paper aims to investigate the global democratic decline and examines specific indicators and qualitative data released by major research bodies around the world (Center for the Future of Democracy, Freedom House, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Idea International). It focuses on the status of democracy, quality of democracy and citizens' satisfaction with democracy. An overall conclusion is that the world experiences the worst democratic decline from the past two decades.*

Furthermore, a closer analysis is being completed for the United States of America situation with the purpose of understanding the democratic erosion from 2016-2020. The current research concludes with a series of recommendations regarding the social polarization, the spread of disinformation and the ultraconservative movements, and improvements needed for the overall health of democracy.

Keywords: *democratic erosion, democracy status, satisfaction with democracy, US presidential elections*

1. Introduction

In a 2015 article, Larry Diamond, founding co-editor of the Journal of Democracy, explained what had happened since 2006, when there was a stagnation in the number of electoral democracies (the number ranging between 114 and 119). He identifies data showing that the number of electoral and liberal democracies declined after 2006 and then reached a plateau. Adding to this, he mentioned that world's level of freedom has failed marginally since 2006.

Diamond suggests there were two ways to interpret the facts and data: a) "see them as constituting a period of equilibrium—freedom and democracy have not continued gaining, but neither have they experienced net declines" and b) "viewing the last decade as a period of at least incipient decline in democracy". The second viewpoint was the one chosen to conduct his research on the democratic decline and to further find out that "democracy has been in a global recession for most of the last decade, and there is a growing danger that the recession could deepen and tip over into something much worse" (Diamond, 2015).

Furthermore, Marc F. Plattner, founding co-editor of the Journal of Democracy, was underlining in a 2016 article: "Democracy's global decline is at an early stage and far from irreversible, but it presents a serious danger. The situation can still be turned around before it becomes truly dire." (Plattner, 2016). The way democracy works or backslides

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has been thoroughly analysed and numerous reports and studies have showed that the world is experiencing a decline in democracy.

On the other hand, Levitsky and Way talked about the “myth of democratic recession” and argued in their research from 2015 that “Perceptions of a democratic recession are rooted in a flawed understanding of the events of the early 1990s. The excessive optimism and voluntarism that pervaded analyses of early post–Cold War transitions generated unrealistic expectations that, when not realized, gave rise to exaggerated pessimism and gloom. In fact, despite increasingly unfavourable global conditions in recent years, new democracies remain strikingly robust.” (Levitsky and Way, 2015).

This paper hypothesizes that the democratic decline is not only a perception, but a reality that can be observed in the multiple sets of data gathered by different research centres and renowned publications across the globe. We believe that this decline can be spotted and understood from multiple perspectives.

In this paper, we will utilize data that relates to the satisfaction with democracy, the status of democracy, the quality of democracy, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for democracy. One limitation of the paper is that of theorising and classifying the stages of democratic decline/recession which are subject to other ongoing research.

2. The Overview of the Global State of Democracy

To understand the democratic decline, we begin with examining how citizens feel about democracy. For attaining this objective, we first look at the findings presented by the *Global Satisfaction with Democracy* report, released in 2020. The report acknowledges that “across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise” and that “this is the highest level of global dissatisfaction since the start of the series in 1995” (Global Satisfaction with Democracy, 2020)

The authors argue that the main reasons for this low level of satisfaction with democracy is based on the happenings and environments that relate to policy crises, economic dysfunctionalities and the level of corruption. The positive (indirect) connection between democracy and the economic growth is supported by others, e.g. Knutsen (2021), who argue that “democracy affects growth through, for example, enhancing human capital or strengthening the protection of property rights”.

The main connections illustrated by the figure are the following: the high levels of dissatisfaction from the 2000s are associated to the economic recession from that period of time; 2004 is connected to the EU enlargement (and shows a decrease in the dissatisfaction that keeps its downward trend for the next couple of years); the year 2008 is associated to the collapse of the financial and banking systems;; 2010 is linked to the eurozone crisis (the level of dissatisfaction was below 50%); the year 2012 is associated to the bailout fund set by the EU and its international partners (pointing an increase in dissatisfaction); 2015 marks the beginning of the refugee crisis in Europe and leads to an increased level of dissatisfaction (in the same period of time the Greeks vote to reject the bailout agreement proposed by the European Union and international partners); 2016 is the year when when the British electorate voted for Brexit and Donald Trump is elected president in the United States; a high level of dissatisfaction is registered in 2018, when a populist coalition (made of the anti-system 5-Star Movement and the far-right, anti-immigrant League part) wins the popular vote in Italy; 2019 marks the highest level in dissatisfaction (since 1995) and one event linked is that of the election of Jair Bolsonaro (former military officer) as president of Brazil.

Figure 1 illustrates the rising dissatisfaction with democracy worldwide and connects the low levels registered with the events that contributed or enhanced this process.

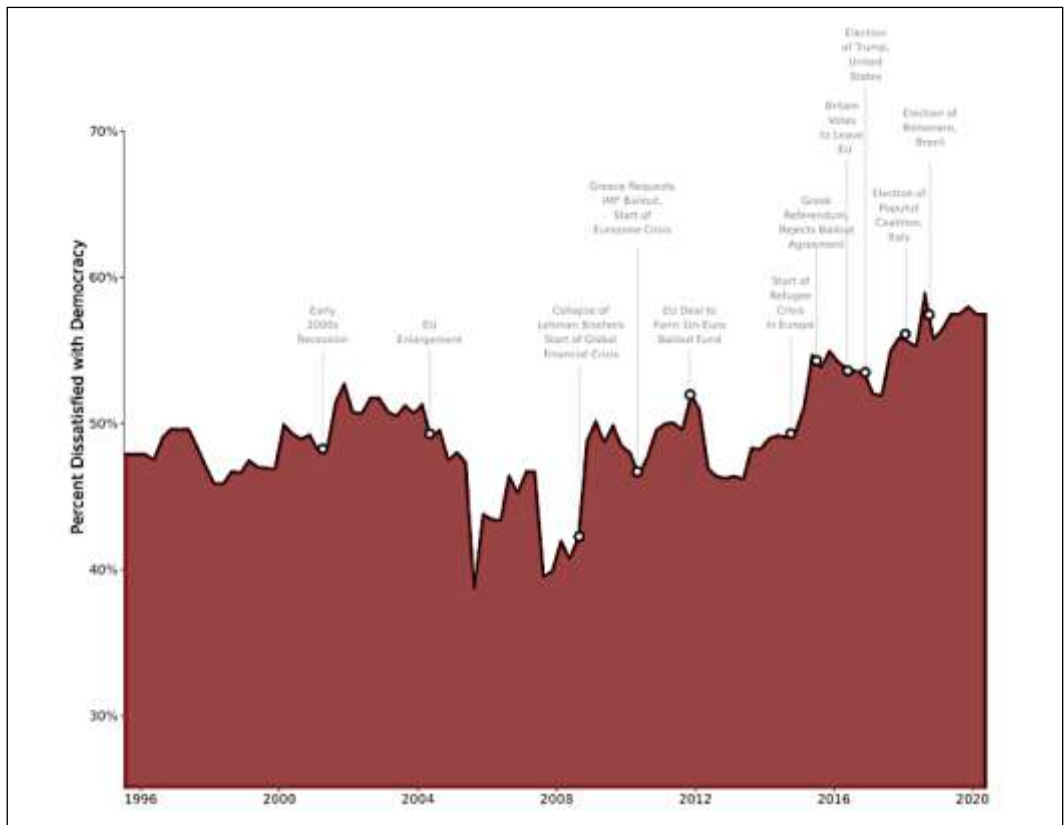


Figure 1 - Rising dissatisfaction with democracy across the world

Source: Global Satisfaction with Democracy (2020)

While the graph demonstrates the increasing levels of dissatisfaction with democracy across the globe (the aggregated data typifies 2.43 billion individuals from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, East Asia, and Australasia according to the report), the image of the events linked is partially completed as the contexts refer more to Europe, the United States and Brazil (one explanation is because of the available data).

The next reports reviewed for the purpose of this paper are those issued by Freedom House. Firstly, we have examined the qualitative remarks regarding the democratic decline. In this respect, Freedom House points out that “2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom” and that “many freely elected leaders are dramatically narrowing their concerns to a blinkered interpretation of the national interest [...] such leaders—including the chief executives of the United States and India, the world’s two largest democracies—are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas” (Sarah Repucci, Freedom House, 2020).

In terms of quantitative data, Figure 2 shows the democratic decline between 2005 and 2019.

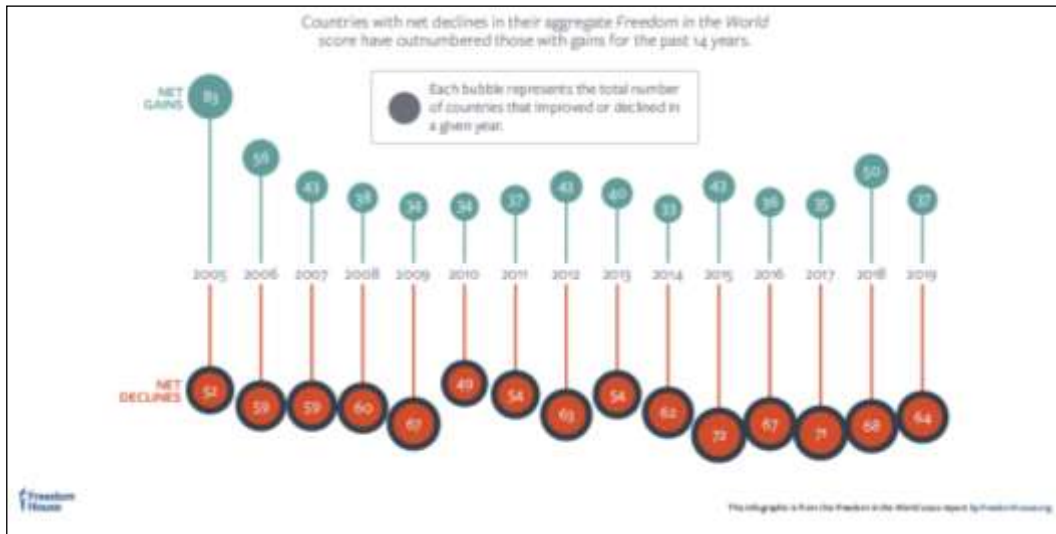


Figure 2 - The 14 years of consecutive democratic decline in the world

Source: Freedom in the world, Freedom House (2020)

If we were to overlap the data regarding the level of dissatisfaction with democracy (Center for the Future of Democracy) and the data made available by Freedom House, there are a couple of questions that result from: a) is global dissatisfaction with democracy linked to the democratic decline in the world; a.1) if yes, is there a direct connection or an indirect one; a.2) if yes, which precedes: the level of dissatisfaction can be observed first or the rate of democratic decline is the first indicator of citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy; b) if no, how can we explain the similarities between the low levels of satisfaction from 2009 and the democratic decline registered then (67 countries experienced a decline in that period) or the situation from 2015/2016 or the one from 2019/2020. We will attempt to identify a couple of answers to these questions in the second part of the paper where the focus will be on the United States of America.

Another report studied from Freedom House regards democracy scores in the 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia that are included in the *Nations in Transit* report (Zselyke Csaky, Freedom House, 2020). The latest data shows that political leaders from these regions are “openly attacking democratic institutions and attempting to do away with any remaining checks on their power” and this process has “accelerated assaults on judicial independence, threats against civil society and the media, the manipulation of electoral frameworks, and the hollowing out of parliaments, which no longer fulfil their role as centres of political debate and oversight of the executive”. The report also shows that there are currently fewer democracies in these regions than there used to be at any point between the launch of the report in 1995 and the last data presented.

Figure 3 shows that the worst years in democratic deficits were 2013 (with 17 countries experiencing net declines), 2014 (with 16 countries facing net declines), 2017 (accounting for net declines in 18 countries) and 2018 (when the peak was set for 19 countries experiencing net declines).

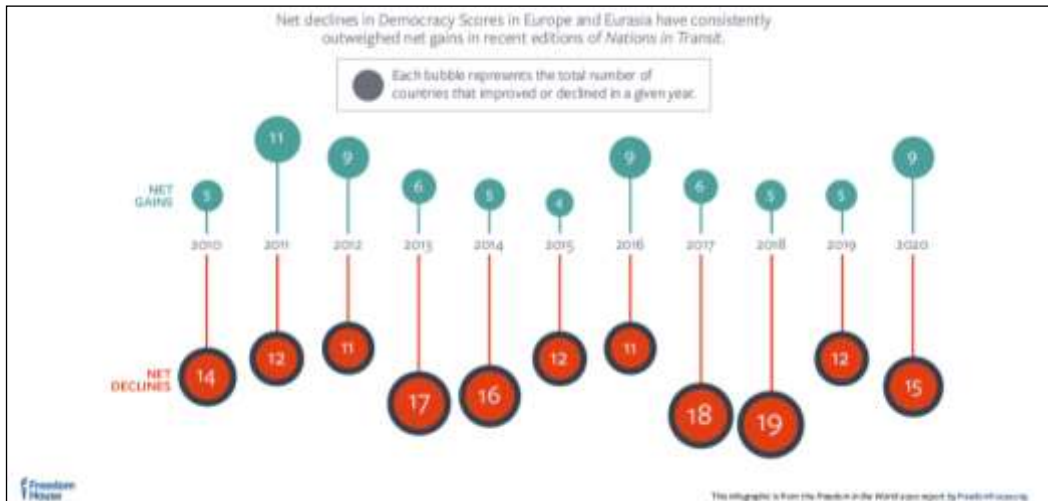


Figure 3 - The net declines and gains in Democracy Scores for the Nations in Transit countries
Source: Freedom in the World, Freedom House 2020

The above-mentioned report marks the highest decline for Montenegro, Serbia, Poland, and Hungary. Montenegro has transitioned from a score of 4.21 (out of a maximum 7) registered in 2010 (when it was a semi-consolidated democracy) to a score of 3.86 in 2020 (when it was categorized as a transitional hybrid regime). Serbia has experienced the same change by going from a score of 4.29 in 2010 to a score of 3.96 in 2020. Poland changed its status as a consolidated democracy by losing its score of 5.68 in 2010 to 4.93 in 2020 and thus becoming a semi-consolidated democracy. The biggest fall was listed for Hungary, which passed from a score of 5.61 in 2010 to a score of 3.96 in 2020 and thus moving from a consolidated democracy to a transitional/hybrid regime.

Furthermore, the report (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) exemplifying Democracy Index (*Figure 4*), from the Economist Intelligence Unit, shows that the global average score fell from 5.44 in 2019 (out of a maximum 10) to 5.37 in 2020. This change represents the lowest global score since the launch of the index in 2006.

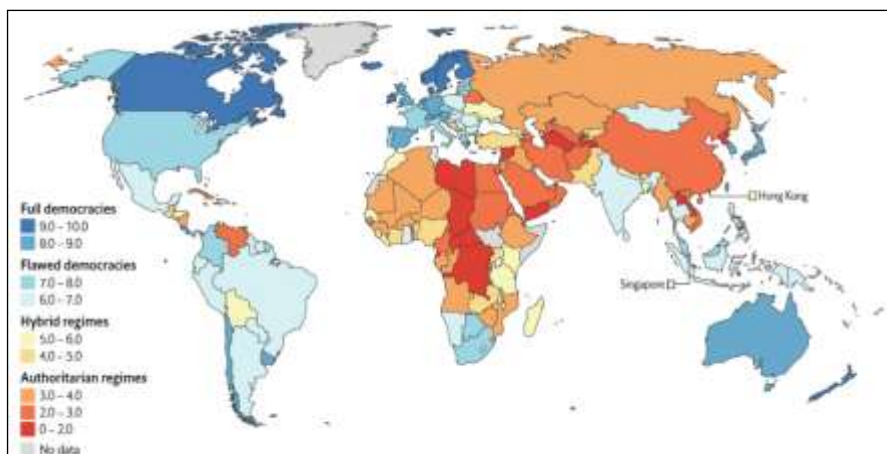


Figure 4 - Democracy Index for 2020
Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021)

The authors note that “in 2020 a large majority of countries, 116 of a total of 167 (almost 70%), recorded a decline in their total score compared with 2019” and there were seven negative changes regarding the regime category (out of which we can mention France and Portugal, which were downgraded from full democracies to flawed democracies). The report also focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for democracy, by referring to the “the biggest rollback of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime (and perhaps even in wartime)”.

The final report considered for this research is that of Idea International which developed the *Global Monitor of COVID-19’s impact on Democracy and Human Rights* (Idea International, 2021). The Global Monitor adds its conclusions to the Global State of Democracy Indices 2019, which show that at that time in the world (data available for 162 countries) there were 99 democracies, 30 hybrid regimes and 33 authoritarian regimes.

The Global Monitor shows that “more than half of the countries covered in the Global Monitor (99 out of 162 countries, or 61%) had implemented measures to curb COVID-19 or experienced developments during the pandemic that presented concerns from a democracy and human rights perspective, with a clear transgression of democratic standards, because they were either disproportionate, illegal, indefinite or unnecessary in relation to the health threat”.

Given that during the pandemic, the main instrument used to adopt measures was that of declaring a state of emergency, we consider relevant to include here the observations of Lührmann and Rooney (2020). They have drawn their conclusion from an analysis performed on 60 democracies for a time range starting with 1974 and ending in 2016: “...democracies are 75 percent more likely to erode under a state of emergency. This evidence strongly suggests that states of emergency circumvent democratic processes in ways that might inspire democratic decline.”.

Some of the essential findings displayed in the Global Monitor have been summed up in *Table 1*. This depicts the overall image on how the pandemic affected democracy across the globe and illustrates a comparison with the hybrid and authoritarian regimes.

Table 1 - Essential findings from the Global Monitor of COVID-19’s impact on Democracy and Human Rights

Criterion	Democracies	Hybrid regimes	Authoritarian regimes
Representative government	53 electoral processes were organized or are scheduled	7 electoral processes were organized or are scheduled	5 electoral processes were organized or are scheduled
Effective parliament	15% of the countries had parliamentary sessions suspended	33% of the countries had parliamentary sessions suspended	27% of the countries had parliamentary sessions suspended
State of emergency (SoE)	72% of the democratic countries declared a SoE	47% of the hybrid regimes declared a SoE	33% of the authoritarian regimes declared a SoE
Freedom of expression	14% of democracies registered worrying developments	43% of hybrid regimes marked concerning developments	52% of authoritarian regimes registered worrying developments

Criterion	Democracies	Hybrid regimes	Authoritarian regimes
Freedom of association and assembly	90% of democratic countries experienced protests	67% of hybrid regimes experienced protests	61% of authoritarian regimes experienced protests

Source: author's display based on the data retrieved from Idea International (2021).

As all the reports reviewed for this paper suggest, the democratic decline was scored high before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the measures adopted in some cases by the political leaders have generated additional risks for the status and quality of democracy. Same can be said about the citizens' satisfaction with democracy that marked the lowest score a year before the world discovered a common enemy in the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Reaching the end of this section, we can summarize it by referring to the conclusion introduced by Professor Ronald Inglehart (University of Michigan) in a 2018 edition of *Foreign Affairs*: "the world is experiencing the most severe democratic setback since the rise of fascism in the 1930s." (*Foreign Affairs*, 2018). We believe that the democratic decline has the potential to characterise this decade (2020-2030) and to lead to negative effects that will be hard to tackle in the years to come, be it through policy options or through a more responsible and honest political leadership.

With this mind, we aim to analyse in the following section the US case and to identify the vulnerabilities of the American democracy that have led to a democratic erosion and that can be furthered be understood as a prerequisite for democratic decline.

3. Case study: the United States of America and the democratic decline

In this section, we will focus our analysis on the period of 2016-2020, by addressing the following two subjects: a) the significance of the 2016 elections, b) the mandate of Donald Trump and its impact on the quality of democracy. We will conclude the section by looking at the ultraconservative movements in the US and the 2021 storming of the Capitol.

Back in 1787, James Madison, one of the Founding Fathers of the American democracy, was writing in the *Federalist Papers* No. 10 that "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm" (Madison, 1787) by referring to the clashing interests and the need to correct the political differences in a way that it continues to serve the public good. This assertion could not be truer than in 2016, when the Republican nominee, a businessman in real estate with no political experience, managed to win the electoral race and become the 45th president of the United States.

3.1. The 2016 presidential elections

Prior to his election, Donald Trump has shocked the public by making powerful negative declarations about how to behave with women and was accused of sexual misconduct (BBC, 2016). The inappropriate behaviour and dangerous affirmations were also seen in the 2016 campaign when he incited supporters from a rally in Iowa and told them that "If you see somebody with a tomato, knock the crap out of them." (Time, 2016). At that moment, this was his call to deal with protesters that were present at his public appearances. The contentious attitude was also expressed with relation to his counterpart in the 2016 presidential elections, the Democrat nominee Hillary Clinton. During a presidential debate he characterized Clinton as being "such a nasty woman", while at a

rally he referred to her as being “a monster” adding that she is “not strong enough to be president” (Schreckinger, Politico, 2016).

The 2016 presidential campaign was rich in shocking catchphrases as well. One of the most popular chants of Trump’s supporters was that of “Lock her up!” which managed to lift the spirits every time the Democrat candidate was mentioned in a public event: “It fit right in with Trump’s core pitch to voters: that Clinton couldn’t and shouldn’t be trusted. His fans broke out in the chant at any mention of the Clinton Foundation, the email server or any other of his attacks on her” (Stevenson, Washington Post, 2016). This was in response to Hillary Clinton’s investigation for setting and using a private email server for both personal and professional correspondence while she was Secretary of State.

Another matter connected to Clinton’s staff which lead to a chain of negative events was that of John Podesta’s emails. While he was the campaign manager for Hillary Clinton, Podesta’s personal email account was hacked, and his correspondence was published by WikiLeaks. Out of the messages made publicly a new conspiracy theory was born - “Pizzagate”. The supporters suggested on Twitter and on other online platforms that Podesta’s emails contained coded messages about a connection between high-ranking Democrats and US restaurants that that together set up a human trafficking and child sex network (BBC News, 2016).

While the story was later proved to be a false one, many Trump supporters continued to believe in the existence of the trafficking network and the need to speculate the truth they thought to have discovered. For doing this, they have used online platforms such as 4chan, known for free speech, uncensored content and extremist messages. This behavior can be explained by a poll conducted in 2016 that showed Trump supporters were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories than other Republican supporters (Cassino, 2016).

The conspiracy theories do not appeal only to Conservative supporters. A study conducted in 2016 showed that “conservatives are more likely to endorse ideologically motivated conspiracy theories – such as the idea that President Obama was not born in the US – if they have low levels of trust in government and greater political knowledge. Liberals, in contrast, are less likely to endorse liberal conspiracy theories if they have both greater political knowledge and more trust in government” (Miller *et. al*, 2016). This study has connected its findings to a previous research which showed that “half of the American public consistently endorses at least one conspiracy theory and that many popular conspiracy theories are differentiated along ideological and anomic dimensions” (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

While the endorsement of conspiracy theories alone does not constitute a factor of the democratic decline, we believe that it can represent a key to understand the level of trust in politics, the level of political polarization and interference of foreign actors. Conspiracies can also be efficient as drivers of voter manipulation and this was seen in the 2016 presidential elections. That year was called by some authors as the “conspiracy theory election” (Uscinski, 2016) and the Republican nominee brought its contribution to it. In interviews and press declarations, Trump frequently used expressions such as “people are saying”, “a lot of people think” or “there is something going on that we don’t know about” (Johnson, Washington Post, 2016) together with actively validating various conspiracy theories such as the one focused on Barack Obama’s citizenship and religion.

With a presidential candidate that ran on an anti-establishment platform and supporters ready to believe in false stories that confirmed their political biases, it is not

difficult to understand how foreign political actors could have influenced the elections, with the purpose of putting at test the strength of the American democracy.

In this sense, we consider relevant to present the conclusions of the report (US Department of Justice, 2019) on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, conducted by special counsel Robert S. Mueller. The report was released in 2019 by the US Department of Justice and has two volumes. The first volume sums 448 pages and contains information about: the Russian “active measures” social media campaign, the Russian hacking and dumping operations, the Russian government links to and contacts with the Trump campaign, the prosecution and declination decisions. The following information has been included in the executive summary of the report and will be presented here according to the original:

- The Russian interference was executed through the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a company funded by the Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin and based in St. Petersburg, Russia.

- The report finds that the Russian social media campaign conducted by IRA was “designed to provoke and amplify political and social discord in the United States” and that the program initially launched in 2014 with the purpose to undermine the US electoral system grown into a targeted operation to favour candidate Trump and to belittle candidate Clinton.

- The time of switching the focus on Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton by IRA coincides with another form of interference supported by the Russian government namely the hacking and the releasing of materials detrimental to the Clinton campaign (including those of John Podesta). The report mentions that these operations were performed by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army.

- The investigation shows that there were contacts established between Trump Campaign officials and people connected to the Russian government. However, the report did not conclude that members of the Trump Campaign conspired with the Russian government for its election interference activities.

- The report shows that “many of the individuals and entities involved in the social media campaign have been charged with participating in a conspiracy to defraud the United States” due to their activities to undermine “through deceptive acts the work of federal agencies charged with regulating foreign influence in U.S. elections, as well as related counts of identity theft”.

- The investigation found out that a couple of people affiliated to the Trump Campaign lied to the Office and to the Congress about their connection with Russian connected individuals. Consequently, “former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn pleaded guilty to lying about his interactions with Russian Ambassador Kislyak during the transition period”.

The conclusions of this report show a clear foreign interference in the 2016 presidential election and the backing of one candidate detrimental to the other one. Given that free elections represent a core element of a healthy democracy, we believe this can be a strong indicator of a democratic erosion in the United States. However, the action itself cannot explain the big picture of the American elections and we need to consult relevant data to see the respect for democratic institutions and the confidence in the electoral process among the American voters.

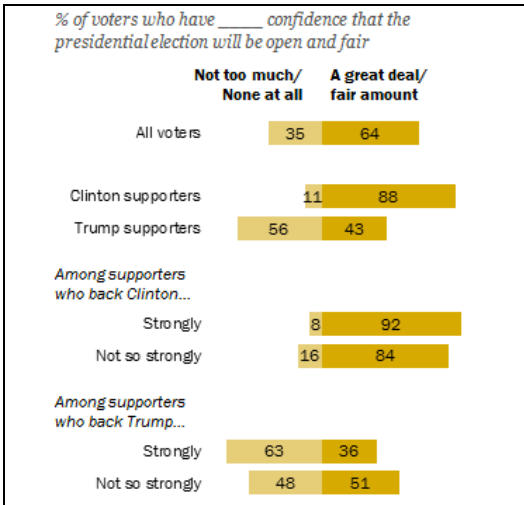


Figure 5 - Voters' confidence in the elections
 Source: Pew Research Centre (2016)

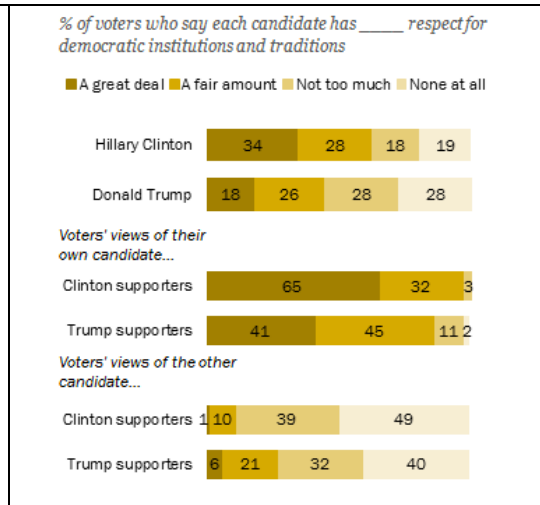


Figure 6 - Views of candidates' respect for democratic institutions
 Source: Pew Research Centre (2016)

Figure 5 shows that most voters had a great deal/fair amount of trust in the openness and fairness of the 2016 election. However, when looking at difference between supporters, we see a high level of trust among Clinton's supporters (more than 80%) and a low level of confidence among Trump's supporters (less than 50% of them believed that the elections were going to be fair and open).

On the other hand, Figure 6 displays how voters see each candidate with relation to the respect for democratic institutions and traditions. Hillary Clinton is perceived by 34% of voters to have a great deal of respect for democratic institutions and by 28% of voters to have a fair amount of respect for democratic institutions and traditions. At the end of the spectrum, 19% of voters believe that she has no respect for democratic institutions and traditions. When it comes to Trump, only 18% of voters believe he has a great deal of respect for democratic institutions, while 28% believe he has no respect at all.

The survey made by the Pew Research Centre also includes data (Pew Research Centre, 2016) on what voters say is important to maintaining a strong democracy. 90% of the registered voters questioned said that national elections which are open and free are very important for a strong democracy and 78% affirmed that is very important for people to have the right to non-violent protests, while 77% said that is very important that the rights of the people who do not share the popular views to be protected.

Concluding with the subject of the 2016 elections, we believe that a more in-depth research should be made to better understand the impact of Russian interference in the elections and people's level of support for democratic institutions and free elections. It is thought-provoking to observe that Trump's supporters who had less confidence in the elections and were prone to share conspiracies were those who had the winning candidate. At the same time, it would be worthwhile to document how this chapter of American democracy led to a democratic erosion or even decline.

3.2. Donald Trump's mandate and its impact for the quality of democracy

Trying to answer, at least partially, to the last path for research defined, we will discuss the mandate of Donald Trump by looking at the specific indicators on the status of democracy, quality of democracy and citizens' satisfaction with democracy. The first

observation with relation to the changes in the political system of 2016 is that of a destabilized legitimate opposition. As it was previously expressed, the Trump's campaign sought to weaken the political opposition and eventually to delegitimize it in the eyes of the voters.

The political scientist, Julia Azari (2016), pointed out that that “Strong partisanship with weak parties makes for a couple of fairly serious problems for a democracy. The destabilization of institutions, for one. It is hard for institutions — elected ones like Congress, the presidency, or state governments — to have legitimacy when partisan motives are constantly suspect. [...] Citizens view much of what these institutions do through a partisan lens.” The partisan issue is also described by a Vox journalist and researcher: “Today, the strongest and most politically important identities are partisan identities. We do not talk about big states and small states, but about red states and blue states. If there is a threat to American unity, it rests not in the specific concerns of Virginians or Alaskans, but in the growing enmity between Democrats and Republicans.” (Klein, 2018).

To examine the degree of polarization between Republican and Democrat supporters/voters during Donald Trump's mandate we have looked into the data collected by the Pew Research Centre. A 2017 survey suggested that less than 1/3 of Americans have a mix of liberal and conservative views. Compared to former similar surveys, that have been applied in 1994 and 2004, when ½ of Americans held a mix of values, this represents a major increase in polarization (*Figure 7*). The results of the survey show that: “The median Republican is now more conservative than 97% of Democrats, and the median Democrat is more liberal than 95% of Republicans. By comparison, in 1994, there was substantially more overlap between the two partisan groups than there is today: Just 64% of Republicans were to the right of the median Democrat, while 70% of Democrats were to the left of the median Republican. Put differently, 23% of Republicans were more liberal than the median Democrat in 1994, while 17% of Democrats were more conservative than the median Republican. Today, those numbers are just 1% and 3%, respectively.” (Kiley, Pew Research Centre, 2017)

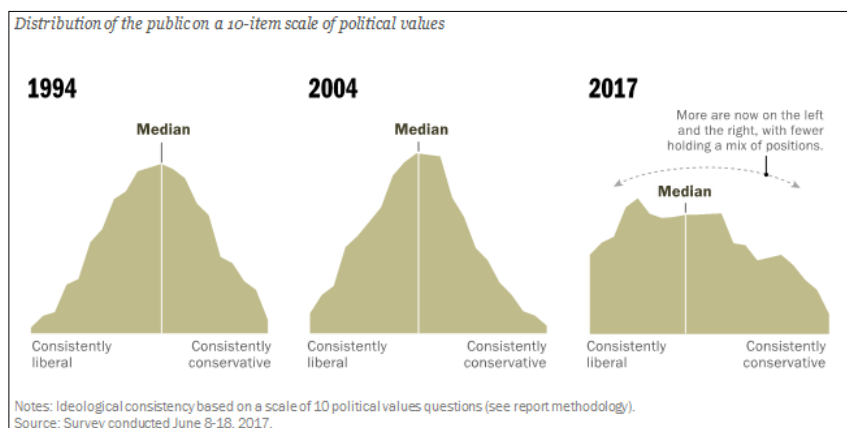


Figure 7 - The level of polarization between conservatives and liberals in the US
Source: Pew Research Centre (2017)

Furthermore, we looked at the study case for the United States, presented by the Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020 (Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020). The authors of the report mention that “in few countries has the decline in

satisfaction with democratic performance been as dramatic or as unexpected as in the United States”. They link the increase in the level of dissatisfaction with the moment of the 2008 financial crisis. At the same time, they identify reasons for which the citizens were no longer satisfied to how democracy was improving their life: “rising political polarisation”, “government shutdowns”, “the widespread use of public office for private gain”, a “growing spatial and intergenerational inequality”.

The report acknowledges that such a decrease in the level of satisfaction would not be surprising in other countries, but for the United States of America it is an unusual stage to be at. Donald Trump is also being seen as a changemaker for the “American exceptionalism” which is no longer about promoting democracy in the world, but rather about putting “America First”. Consequently, the slogan “Making America Great Again” was not about the US influence in the world and its commitment to build a culture of democracy and respect for human rights, but rather on how it can benefit the most from the relations with third countries, democracies or not.

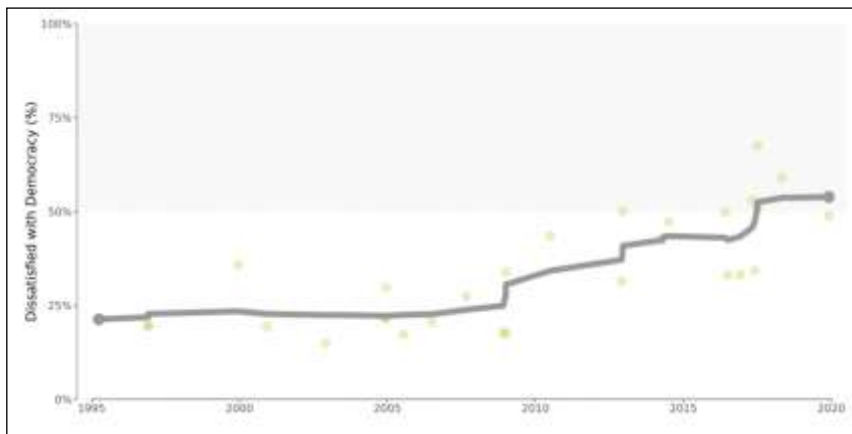


Figure 8 - The level of dissatisfaction with democracy in the US
Source: Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report (2020)

This shift in the “American exceptionalism” can also be seen in the citizens’ attitudes towards the foreign policy of the United States. In the 2019 research commissioned by Eurasia Group Foundation shown that “the public confidence in America’s example is apparently eroding” and compared with 2018 “fewer Americans believe the US is exceptional for what it represents, and more believe the U.S. is not an exceptional country” (Hannah and Gray, 2019). The research also concluded that the rise in anti-exceptionalism belief is attributed more to the younger Americans (*Figure 9*).

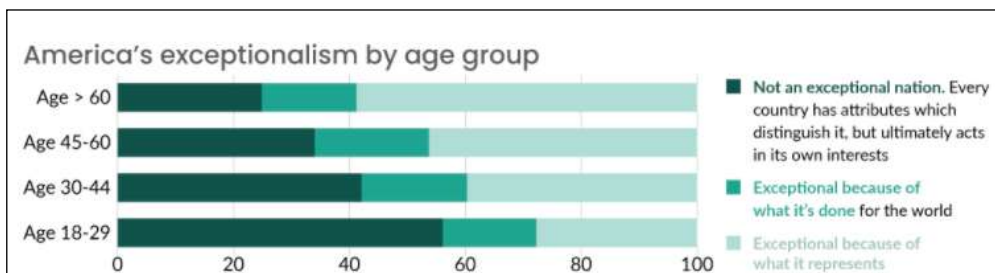


Figure 9 - American exceptionalism explained by age group
Source: Eurasia Group Foundation (2019)

Even though the erosion of the “American exceptionalism” during the Trump mandate does not constitute an indicator for the democratic decline, we believe that the data can be integrated in the overall debate on the US global role for the advancement of democracy and respect for human rights. When dealing with domestic challenges that affect the quality and status of democracy, US can face tangible difficulties in portraying itself as an authentic defender of democracy and promoter of the respect for human rights in the world.

The next set of data and information relevant to our paper belongs to the Freedom House which issues annually the “Freedom in the world” report. We have compiled the relevant data for a period of for years and displayed it in a comparative manner in *Table 2*.

Table 2 - Comparative key developments in the US between 2016 and 2019

Key developments 2016 (Freedom House, 2017)	Key developments 2017 (Freedom House, 2018)	Key developments 2018 (Freedom House, 2019)	Key developments 2019 (Freedom House, 2020)	Key developments 2020 (Freedom House, 2021)
Donald Trump won the presidency of the US, despite that Hillary Clinton got the popular vote	Donald Trump took office in January and continued to promote his private businesses	The president appointed Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, who was formerly accused of past sexual abuse	New restrictive policies towards immigration have been introduced by Trump’s administration	The measures taken to counter the effects of the pandemic have been deeply influenced by politicised misinformation from the President
US Intelligence agencies accused Russia of interfering in the 2016 elections	The president-elect named his daughter and son-in-law as presidential advisers	The Trump administration attempted to block asylum applications for those who crossed the border through unofficial ports of entry	In a mass shooting 22 people were killed at a store in Texas; the gunman was supposed to be motivated by racist and xenophobic attitudes	The killing of a Black civilian by the police caused one the largest protest movements in US history; on this occasion several journalists who covered the protests were arrested or faced assaults
The Republican leaders in the Senate refused to hold confirmation hearings for a new Supreme Court justice	Donald Trump adopted political decisions with prior little consultation or transparency within the executive branch	The investigation on the Russian interference in the elections resulted in criminal charges against several nationals from Russia and guilty pleas from a couple of Americans	The House of Representatives approved the articles for impeachment of the president, arguing that he attempted to extort a political favour from foreign leaders and obstructing Congress	Following his defeat in the 2020 presidential elections, Donald Trump refused to acknowledge the results of the elections and publicly shared messages regarding a large-scale fraud and promoted conspiracy theories

Source: Freedom House (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021)

Going through the key developments from 2016-2020 indicated by Freedom House, we can observe that the proposals advanced/associated by/with the Trump administration affected multiple core elements of a healthy democracy: the integrity and independence of the public office, the transparency of the decision-making process, the respect for the rule of law, the legality of electoral process, the equal treatment of various segments of the population, etc. In quantitative terms, the Freedom House score gained by the US in 2017 was 89/100, while in 2021 was 83/100, marking an important decrease that can be attributed to a worrying democratic erosion. While the American democracy is equipped with accountability tools and control mechanisms able to circumvent dangerous policies and political decisions, we can acknowledge that some of the damages done to the American democracy between 2016 and 2020 are hard to repair and in some cases almost irreversible.

The *Global State of Democracy 2019* (GSoD) report offers a slightly different perspective on the state of democracy in the US. While suggesting a democratic erosion given the decline in multiple sub attributes, the authors affirm that “these declines are not serious enough to be labelled democratic backsliding, which is defined in the GSoD framework as the gradual and intentional weakening on Checks on Government and accountability institutions, coupled with declines in Civil Liberties.” (Idea International, 2020)

Advancing with our paper, we uncovered data about 2020, and for this we have studied The Economist Democracy Index, which puts the US on the 25th rank at the global level. The Index shows that the US registered low scores for the functioning of the government and for the political culture. Evaluating the regime type, the USA is included in the flawed democracy type since 2016. The authors of the report have also outlined the following characteristics of the US democracy: “The US’s performance across a handful of indicators changed substantially in 2020, both for better and worse. The country exhibits a number of democratic deficits that could result in a further deterioration in its score and ranking soon.” (The Economist, 2021).

3.3. The ultraconservative movements in the US and the 2021 storming of the Capitol

On January 6th, 2021, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer was addressing to his colleagues, in the Capitol Building on the need to support and defend the constitution. In his address he referred to the health and the example of the American democracy, to the fact that the incumbent president has not accepted the results of the elections and thus he does not see them as being legitimate. In late 2020, Donald Trump was defeated by Joe Biden, the Democrat nominee, who received 306 of the Electoral College votes (the minimum to win was 270 votes). Trump did not recognize the result of the elections, called them a “major fraud on our nation” (BBC News, 2020b) and filed tens of lawsuits in various states with the purpose of getting recounts (Bazon, New York Times, 2021).

Senator Schumer invited his colleagues to reflect upon the message and the example the US was showing to the world: “What message will we send today to our people, to the world that has looked up to us for centuries? What message will we send to fledgling democracies, who study our Constitution, mirror our laws and traditions, in the hopes that they, too, can build a country ruled by the consent of the governed? What message will we send to those countries where democratic values are under assault, and look to us to see if those values are still worth fighting for? What message will we send to every dark corner of the world, where human rights are betrayed, elections are stolen, human dignity denied?” (Schumer, 2021).

Outside of the Capitol building, groups of Trump's supporters gathered for a march to spread messages about the "rigged elections" and about the fact that their candidate was the only one that can save America. The events turned into an insurrection movement with the sole purpose of overturning the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 elections. The rioters managed to get in the Building, occupy it and vandalize the legislative floor. The whole world was looking to what was happening in the United States and the international reactions were not long in coming.

One of the responses came from the former president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, who tweeted that "There are Trumps everywhere, so each and every one should defend their Capitol." (Tusk, 2020). Support messages for the strength of the American democracy continued to be delivered in the following days. At the same time questions and remarks about the manifestation of such a tragic event for democracy were laid forward by various political analysts and researchers. One of the themes of these analyses was that of the rioters' profile and backgrounds.

Several research pieces and investigations regarding the participants to the riots and the storming of the Capitol showed that members of various ultraconservative movements have been directly involved. One of the movements that operated in the insurrection was that of *The Proud Boys*, a far-right group which encourages violent activities against people who have different ideologies (Wall Street Journal, 2021). Members of the movement have been accused and arrested for violent activities at the Capitol. Also, Canadian officials have characterized the group as a terrorist organization, at the beginning of February 2021 (Levy and Ailworth, Wall Street Journal, 2021).

Other groups that stormed the US Capitol Building were supporters of the QAnon movement, which was built around the theory that President Trump is leading a sacred operation against Satan-worshipping paedophiles in government, business, and the media (Wendling, BBC News, 2021). This conspiracy theory has somehow evolved from the *Pizzagate* theory and propagated Donald Trump as the genuine protector of the American values.

One reason for which QAnon became so well known to the public may be related to the fact that President Trump has previously validated the members of the movement saying about them that "I heard that these are people that love our country" and sharing QAnon related content on his social media accounts (Colvin, AP News, 2020). In a report released in 2019, the FBI Phoenix Field Office mentions that "these conspiracy theories will very likely emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts."

To the end of this section, we would like to draw the limits that derived from our analysis. This part of the paper has focused on describing the facts associated to Donald Trump's mandate and the follow-up of the 2020 elections. We have not investigated the reasons for which people get to support conspiracy theories or join far-right movements. We believe that these two directions should constitute the analysis of a different research. We aimed to display the changes occurred in the American society and the political system to understand which of them have directly or indirectly contributed to a democratic erosion.

One of the main conclusions of this section is that the documented interreference of a foreign actor in the 2016 elections constitutes a serious impediment for running free and open elections and this leads to a decrease in the quality of democracy. Secondly, the development of conspiracy theories and ultraconservative movements lead to increased divisions in the society, which not only affect the fundamental freedoms of the

individuals, but also the overall state of democracy. Lastly, the citizens' satisfaction with democracy should represent a key indicator for the political parties, who should further work in favour of developing the citizen's trust in the democratic institutions and actors and not their discontent with how politics works.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The first part of this paper was focused on understanding the democratic decline. For this, we have investigated the data available and presented the overview as it was measured by major research bodies (Freedom House, The Economist, Idea International and Centre for the Future of Democracy). We have started with looking at the citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy and understood that this indicator is closely linked to the events that caused an increase or a decrease in the satisfaction with democracy.

We observed the indicators that measure the state of democracy and we recognised that 2019/2020 was an all-time low compared to the initial years when these measurements were executed (starting from 1995 to 2006). By analysing the data and **trying to put** it into context, we reached to the conclusion that **democratic decline is mostly happening through the erosion of the democratic institutions caused by the political representatives** that have been freely elected in most cases.

This represents a troublesome conclusion to which we should pay more attention in the future. The control mechanisms and the checks and balances in a democracy may not be enough to counter the authoritarian inclinations of some governments. Situations such as the pandemic can represent first-rate opportunities for some political leaders to put at risk both the status of democracy and its quality. It is important in these cases to call for transparency, accountability and integrity in the decisions made.

Lastly, what happened in the US should be a signal that democracy is not immovable anywhere in the world. Be it external interferences or internal divisions, the quality of democracy can suffer on a long term when it is put at risk. The US case should also teach us that the biggest threats to a democracy come from within and when people feel unrepresented or ignored by the political class, they will find ways to manifest even violent ones.

Donald Trump has validated movements that were profoundly anti-democratic and this has given them leverage to be even more dynamic and outspoken at the national level. While their ideal president is no longer in office, it does not mean that the purpose of their attention has drifted apart. Most probably, the leadership void will be filled by some other political leader that will give voice to the members of the movements.

Given this, the US should focus on repairing the divisions between the citizens and help decrease the level of polarisation and hatred. The people need to feel that they can contribute equally to the same goal and work towards rebuilding trust and cooperation. The Global Democracy Summit announced by president Biden should start with working on improving the quality and status of democracy in the US. If this will be successful, the world will have an example that one country can be on the verge of democratic decline and still recover from it. The European Union's *Conference on the Future of Europe* if done right can also inspire the political sphere in the US and can be a constructive way to legitimately reengage the citizens.

Building and rebuilding democracy takes time and this can be hard as citizens always want to see concrete results in a short amount of time. But not acting on safeguarding democracy is a decision that no political leader should ever make. As a recent report (World Economic Forum, 2021) points out the collapse of an established

democracy is a global risk for 2021 and not only. The fact that “a legal rather than a violent coup erodes the system, with knock-on effects on other democratic systems” is a worrisome fact that should be acknowledged by all political leaders and a signal for responsible, ethical and honest political leadership that should be sent at a global level.

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