

COMPARING DEMOCRATIC DISTRESS IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

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Liberal democracy is in crisis where it was long thought most securely established. In both Western Europe and the United States, polls suggest voters are losing faith in democratic institutions; polarization and illiberalism appear to be on the rise. A striking feature of this crisis moment is the perception that many of the most pressing political issues are shared conditions of the United States and Europe—a significant change from earlier decades. This perceived convergence raises critical questions: To what extent are current democratic weaknesses in Europe in fact similar to or different from those facing the United States? And what are the most fertile areas for mutual learning and cooperation?

Shared Challenges

- Following recent governance crises, popular confidence in political institutions has plummeted to historically low levels on both sides of the Atlantic—particularly among the less educated and less well-off.
- Many U.S. and European voters are disenchanted with mainstream political parties, which they see as ineffective and out of touch. This groundswell of antiestablishment sentiment has benefited more extremist outsider movements and candidates, triggering greater political polarization and fragmentation.
- Citizens are finding it harder to determine which news sources are trustworthy and which are not. Deliberate efforts to spread disinformation create new challenges for democratic discourse.
- Government responses to terrorist threats have triggered new concerns over creeping extensions of executive power. Finding the right balance between security and individual liberty has become increasingly complex, partly due to unsettled questions about citizens' right to privacy.

U.S.-Specific Challenges

High levels of partisan polarization in the United States—heightened by its winner-take-all electoral system—have eroded democratic norms and produced gridlock, thereby undermining democratic performance.

Skyrocketing socioeconomic inequality and weak institutional safeguards allow wealthy U.S. elites to exert disproportionate political influence. Partisan polarization thus coexists with heightened vertical polarization between a small group at the top and the rest of society.

A deeply contested electoral process that is characterized by atypical levels of decentralization and partisanship exacerbates these dynamics in the United States: issues like voting restrictions pose much larger hurdles to representation than in most European democracies.

Europe-Specific Challenges

European electoral systems provide more room for extremist and antipluralist political forces to gain political representation. In Hungary and Poland, democratically elected governments have already taken major steps to weaken independent civil society and the rule of law.

A European democracy deficit persists: as decisionmaking has moved from the national to the European level, efforts to boost citizen participation have not kept pace. The disconnect between Brussels and many European voters has fueled Euroskepticism, which in turn thwarts efforts at institutional reform.

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