The Rise and Fall of Liberal Democracies

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Liberal democracy has been a defining political development of the modern era, offering governance structures grounded in individual freedoms, the rule of law, and checks and balances on power. This model has driven significant political stability and economic prosperity, spreading globally during the 20th century. However, liberal democracies now face profound challenges, including internal weaknesses such as political polarization and institutional erosion, as well as external pressures from authoritarian regimes and shifting geopolitical landscapes. This paper examines the historical rise of liberal democracies, the factors underlying their global proliferation, and the multifaceted challenges that have contributed to their decline in various regions. Through a historical and analytical approach, the study explores the dynamic nature of political systems and the implications of the potential decline of liberal democracy. It concludes by proposing strategies for resilience and renewal through adaptation, a recommitment to democratic values, and enhanced international cooperation, emphasizing that the trajectory of liberal democracy remains critical for the future of global governance
	Keywords: Liberal democracy, political systems, rule of law, checks and balances, democratic decline, global governance, political resilience, democratic values, institutional challenges, international cooperation.

Introduction

Liberal democracy has been one of the most significant political developments of the modern era, offering a system where individual freedoms are protected under a rule of law and governmental power is limited through checks and balances. Yet, despite its successes in promoting stability and prosperity, the liberal democratic model has faced significant challenges in recent decades. This paper explores the rise of liberal democracies, the factors contributing to their global proliferation, and the internal and external challenges that have led to their decline in various regions. Through a historical and analytical lens, this study seeks to understand the trajectory of liberal democracies and the implications of their potential decline.

I - The Rise of Liberal Democracies
1. Origins and Philosophical Foundations
The roots of liberal democracy can be traced back to the Enlightenment, a period in the 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized reason, individualism, and the rule of law. Thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu laid the groundwork for democratic governance by advocating for popular sovereignty and the separation of powers. Locke's social contract theory, for example, argued that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed and exist to protect individual rights.[1] These principles were institutionalized in landmark documents such as the United States Constitution (1787) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789).[2]

2. Expansion Through Revolutions
The rise of liberal democracies was catalyzed by a series of political revolutions, most notably the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the French Revolution (1789–1799). These revolutions challenged monarchic

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[1] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1689).
[2] United States Constitution, 1787; French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789.

and aristocratic systems, replacing them with governments based on popular representation and constitutional frameworks.[3] The success of these movements inspired similar demands for democratic governance across Europe and Latin America in the 19th century.[4]

3. Post-World War II Proliferation

The modern era of liberal democracies began after World War II, as the defeat of fascist regimes and the onset of the Cold War led to the promotion of democratic governance as a counter to communism.[5] Institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system reinforced liberal democratic ideals through international cooperation and economic integration.[6] The Marshall Plan further contributed to the rebuilding of democratic institutions in Western Europe.[7]

4. The End of History?

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a high point for liberal democracies. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously declared the "end of history," arguing that liberal democracy represented the ultimate form of government.[8] By the early 21st century, liberal democracies had become the dominant political system worldwide, encompassing much of Europe, North America, and parts of Asia and Africa.[9]

5. Liberalism and Democracy: A Complex Relationship

Liberalism emphasizes individual freedoms and constitutional constraints, while democracy focuses on majority rule. The marriage of these two ideas—ensuring that majority rule does not trample individual rights—was a gradual and contested process. Early democratic experiments often excluded large segments of the population, such as women and the working class, from political participation. It was only through social and political struggles that the inclusivity associated with liberal democracy was realized.

II- Challenges to Liberal Democracies
1. Internal Strains
• Populism and Polarization

One of the most significant internal challenges to liberal democracies is the rise of populism. Populist leaders often exploit societal divisions and dissatisfaction with traditional elites to gain power, undermining democratic norms in the process.[10] Countries like Hungary and Poland have witnessed the erosion of judicial independence and press freedoms under populist governments.[11] Similarly, polarization in established democracies like the United States has weakened the ability of institutions to function effectively.[12]

• Economic Inequality

Economic inequality has exacerbated discontent with liberal democracies. While globalization and technological advancements have generated wealth, the benefits have often been unevenly distributed, leading to a perception that liberal democratic systems favor elites over ordinary citizens.[13] Movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Yellow Vests in France reflect widespread frustration with economic disparities.[14]

• Erosion of Civil Liberties

In some cases, governments in liberal democracies have curtailed civil liberties under the guise of national security or public health. The expansion of surveillance programs, such as those revealed by Edward

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[3] R.R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

[4] Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[5] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2005).

[6] John G. Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[7] Michael J. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947-1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[8] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[9] Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: Times Books, 2008).

[10] Cas Mudde, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[11] Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Rule of Law and the Frankenstate: Why Governance Checklists Do Not Work," *Governance* 26, no. 4 (2013): 559–562.

[12] Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).

[13] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[14] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2013).

Snowden in 2013, has raised concerns about the balance between security and freedom.[15]Similarly, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted tensions between public health measures and individual rights.[16]

2. External Threats
• Authoritarian Resurgence
The resurgence of authoritarian regimes, particularly in China and Russia, poses a significant challenge to liberal democracies. These regimes offer alternative models of governance that emphasize stability and economic growth without liberal democratic principles.[17]China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's influence campaigns in Eastern Europe have undermined democratic institutions in various regions.[18]

• Cyber Warfare and Disinformation
Advancements in technology have enabled authoritarian states and non-state actors to disrupt liberal democracies through cyber warfare and disinformation campaigns. The 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum were both marred by allegations of foreign interference.[19]Such tactics undermine trust in democratic processes and institutions.[20]

• Decline of International Institutions
The weakening of international institutions, such as the United Nations and the European Union, has also undermined liberal democracies. These institutions were designed to promote cooperation and uphold democratic values, but growing nationalism and geopolitical rivalries have diminished their effectiveness.[21]Brexit is a stark example of this trend, reflecting broader discontent with supranational governance.[22]

III- Case Studies of Decline
1. Hungary and Poland
Hungary and Poland illustrate how internal and external factors can converge to erode liberal democracies. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has consolidated power by undermining judicial independence and curbing press freedoms.[23] Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party has similarly sought to control the judiciary and media, raising concerns within the European Union about the erosion of democratic norms.[24]

2. The United States
The United States, long considered a beacon of liberal democracy, has faced significant challenges in recent years. The January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection highlighted deep political polarization and threats to democratic institutions.[25] Economic inequality and systemic racism have further strained the social fabric, raising questions about the resilience of American democracy.[26]

3. The Arab Spring
The Arab Spring of 2010–2012 initially appeared to signal a wave of democratization in the Middle East and North Africa. However, many of these movements failed to establish stable democracies, with countries like

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[15] Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

[16] John Coggon, *What Makes Health Public? A Critical Evaluation of Moral, Legal, and Political Claims in Public Health* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[17] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

[18] Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

[19] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[20] P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

[21] Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (New York: Portfolio, 2012).

[22] Anand Menon and Jonathan Portes, eds., *Brexit and the Future of the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[23] Gábor Halmai, "The Decline of Liberal Democracy in Europe: Hungary as the Forerunner," *European Yearbook on Human Rights* 17 (2017): 395–414.

[24] Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[25] Robert A. Pape, "The Capitol Rioters Aren't Like Other Extremists," *The Atlantic*, February 2021.

[26] Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021).

Egypt reverting to authoritarian rule.[27]This demonstrates the difficulty of transitioning from authoritarianism to liberal democracy in the absence of strong institutions and social cohesion.[28]

IV- The Future of Liberal Democracies

- **Adaptation and Resilience**

Despite these challenges, liberal democracies have shown an ability to adapt and endure. The European Union has taken steps to address threats to democratic norms, such as invoking Article 7 against Hungary and Poland.[29] In the United States, civic engagement and activism have surged in response to perceived threats to democracy.[30]

- **Renewing the Social Contract**

To regain legitimacy, liberal democracies must address the root causes of discontent. This includes reducing economic inequality through progressive taxation and social programs, as well as strengthening public trust in institutions.[31] Greater investment in education and civic engagement can also help rebuild the social fabric and counteract polarization.[32]

- **International Cooperation**

Revitalizing international institutions and fostering global cooperation will be essential for defending liberal democracy against authoritarian challenges. Multilateral efforts to combat cyber warfare, climate change, and economic inequality can reinforce the principles of liberal democracy on a global scale.[33]

Conclusion

Liberal democracy, once heralded as the pinnacle of governance, now stands at a crossroads, facing unprecedented internal and external challenges. The historical trajectory of liberal democracies—from their Enlightenment origins to their global proliferation—has underscored their capacity to adapt and flourish. Yet, as the 21st century progresses, the very principles that have defined liberal democracies are being tested by populism, economic inequality, authoritarian resurgence, and technological disruptions. Internally, the rise of populist leaders and polarized political environments has eroded public trust in institutions, undermining the checks and balances crucial to democratic governance. Economic disparities further fuel dissatisfaction, creating a perception that liberal democracies cater to elites rather than the general populace. These trends are compounded by threats to civil liberties, as governments grapple with the delicate balance between ensuring security and preserving individual freedoms. The result is a growing skepticism about the effectiveness and inclusivity of liberal democracy, even in its most established strongholds. Externally, authoritarian regimes like China and Russia challenge the ideological dominance of liberal democracy by presenting alternative governance models. Through strategic initiatives and influence campaigns, these regimes have weakened democratic institutions in regions already grappling with instability. Advances in technology, including cyber warfare and disinformation, have become powerful tools in undermining democratic processes, further destabilizing liberal democracies from within. The decline of international institutions, designed to uphold democratic norms and foster cooperation, exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Despite these challenges, the resilience of liberal democracies should not be underestimated. Historical precedent suggests that these systems possess an inherent capacity for reform and renewal. Addressing the root causes of discontent, such as economic inequality and political polarization, is essential for rebuilding public trust. Renewing the social contract through inclusive policies, progressive taxation, and robust civic engagement can help reinvigorate democratic values. On a global scale, revitalized international cooperation is necessary to combat shared challenges, from cyber threats to climate change, and to reaffirm the relevance of liberal democracy in an interconnected world. The survival of liberal democracy depends on its ability to adapt to contemporary realities while remaining true to its foundational principles of freedom, equality, and rule of law. As it navigates this pivotal moment, the question is not whether liberal democracy will endure but how it will evolve to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and divided world. In this evolution lies

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[27] Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[28] Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012).

[29] Laurent Pech and Kim Lane Scheppele, "Illiberalism Within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU," *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 19 (2017): 3–47.

[30] David Litt, *Democracy in One Book or Less* (New York: Ecco, 2020).

[31] Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

[32] Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[33] John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the opportunity to reaffirm its place as a model of governance that champions both individual liberty and collective prosperity.

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5. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 120.
6. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 152.
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15. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 30.
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19. Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.
20. Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy* (New York: Times Books, 2008), 124.
21. Cas Mudde, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47.
22. Nathaniel Persily, *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 25.
23. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 45.
24. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 118.
25. Daniel Treisman, *The Return of Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 65.