

Is democracy in crisis?

As remarked by H. L. Mencken, “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard”. Yet, it is the common man who questions the legitimacy of their vote, and is starting to lose belief in those who represent them. Interestingly, democracy remains the dominant language of political legitimacy even as public trust in democratic institutions appears increasingly fragile. This paradox raises a central question: is democracy collapsing, or are its visible tensions evidence of a system still capable of self-correction?

To meaningfully assess whether democracy is in crisis, it is necessary to distinguish between dissatisfaction and structural breakdown. As suggested by Robert Dahl, democracy rests on the foundational principles of contestation and participation, which act as enablers to both scrutinise and replace those in power. However, as argued by Steven Levitsky, democratic erosion can occur despite the presence of formal institutions and processes such as elections. This distinction reflects a broader philosophical divide between procedural and substantive conceptions of democracy. A procedural understanding, associated with Joseph Schumpeter, defines democracy through competitive elections and institutional continuity, whereas substantive approaches, such as Robert Dahl’s, emphasise legitimacy, pluralism, and meaningful participation. This essay argues that while substantive democratic quality may be eroding globally, procedural functionality largely persists. Crisis therefore depends not on whether democratic procedures exist, but on whether they still carry consequence. As such, it cannot be termed a crisis unless the people lose the power to change the government. Democracy derives legitimacy not from guaranteeing correct outcomes, but from preserving the possibility of peaceful political correction. This necessarily requires recognition of legitimate disagreement, since democracy presumes that no individual, party, or ideology possesses a permanent monopoly over political truth. To this end, the loss of capacity for political correction is observed in three primary scenarios: when opposition becomes ineffective, outcomes become irreversible, or political power no longer genuinely contestable. Put simply, democracy enters crisis not when people dislike those in power, but when those in power no longer fear the people.

France illustrates the first danger: democracy can remain legal while becoming less deliberative. When key provisions for extraordinary circumstances become normalized, this allows for executive shortcuts, thereby weakening deliberative democratic decision-making. As observed by Peter Fenn, “A basic tenet of a healthy democracy is open dialogue and transparency.” This shows that democracy rests on legitimacy and transparency rather than legality alone. From a procedural perspective, such mechanisms may remain constitutionally valid. However, from a substantive democratic perspective, legality alone cannot substitute for meaningful deliberation and accountability. Article 49.3 exemplifies this tension.

Ex-French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne, nicknamed Madame 49.3, invoked this article 23 times between May 2022 and January 2024, passing bills such as pension reforms without parliamentary consultation and highlighting how such mechanisms had become routine governing tools. Such mechanisms are increasingly overused, replacing deliberation and agency with imposition. This reveals a deeper democratic tension between constitutional correctness and participatory legitimacy, since decisions may remain lawful while gradually becoming less democratically meaningful. This erosion of democratic legitimacy is especially

alarming since it is incremental and lawful, making detection and correction extremely challenging.

India illustrates a second danger: democracy can remain electoral while losing the appearance of a coherent mandate. Democratic legitimacy is often associated with majority rule. However, in pluralistic societies, governance increasingly emerges through coalition-building and negotiated compromise rather than unified public mandates. While coalition governments can, in many contexts, enhance representation, they may also obscure electoral intent, making it less evident whether governing outcomes reflect coherent public preferences or negotiated compromise. An illustration of this is India, the world's largest democracy, a multi-party system with two dominant and several regional parties. In 2014, the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) won only 31% of vote share, but won 52% of Lok Sabha seats, underscoring how a simple majority of public voteshare is no longer a requirement to serve as the democratically elected government. By contrast, in the 2024 general election, BJP failed to win sufficient seats to establish themselves as the sole governing party, and hence turned to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to establish a coalition government. This directly weakens the losers' consent, since their opinion was not overshadowed by a broad section of society, but rather by electoral strategies. This creates a sense of underrepresentation despite consistent electoral participation. This reveals a central democratic tension: procedural legitimacy may persist even when no governing outcome reflects a clear collective mandate.

Democratic decline is accentuated by the transition from policy competition to religious and moral validation. In a healthy democracy, elections are the basis of governance, and opposition is seen favourably as a catalyst to development. However, in the real world, politics has begun to be moralised, increasingly framing disagreement as dissent or anti-national. As such, political legitimacy becomes rooted in religion, civilisational narratives, and ethical superiority, rather than in deliberation and debate. Democracy fundamentally depends upon the recognition of legitimate disagreement. Once political opponents cease to be viewed as legitimate participants and instead become framed as immoral or anti-national, democratic pluralism begins to weaken. An example of this is India, a constitutionally declared secular state. In practice, campaigning in India is often centered around religion and identity, appealing to a sense of community rather than promising progress. Additionally, leaders continually attempt to show opposition in a negative light, wielding the moral high ground and claiming to represent the 'true India'. Despite the depiction of opposition as illegitimate, the indispensable democratic processes continue as intended, highlighting the decline, but not crisis, of democracy. By transforming disagreement into moral betrayal, democracy loses its capacity for pluralistic self-correction.

The United States illustrates the most serious danger: democracy approaches crisis when the mechanism of correction itself becomes vulnerable. Prior to the 2024 elections, the use of gerrymandering by both major parties allowed districts to be drawn in a manner that suited incumbents. By either consolidating oppositional voters into smaller areas to reduce total seats won, known as packing, or by spreading the voters out to prevent the opposition from winning a region, known as cracking, incumbents were effectively able to weaken opposition through the manipulation of electoral boundaries. This was then coupled with polarised disputes over voter ID requirements, mail-in voting, ballot access, and immigration, which oppositional media labelled as attempts to bias electoral power. While non-citizens cannot

vote in federal elections, immigration still became politically significant because of its perceived effects on representation, resources, and long-term electoral balance. If such mechanisms were to allow either party to preserve power despite sustained public rejection, it would become increasingly difficult for the opposition to meaningfully replace incumbents, since those in power could iteratively bias electoral conditions to maintain jurisdiction. This presents a key tension between the substantive and procedural aspects of democracy as a whole, showing how a democracy can approach crisis without abolishing elections: by weakening the conditions under which elections translate public rejection into political replacement. This is particularly dangerous because democratic decline would not occur through the abolition of elections, but through the gradual weakening of the election's corrective force.

If these mechanisms were to allow either party to preserve power despite sustained public rejection, the United States would cross from democratic strain into democratic crisis. At that point, elections would continue to exist procedurally, but their substantive meaning would be hollowed out. Democracy would retain the ritual of choice while losing the consequence of choice. The danger is therefore not polarisation itself, but the institutionalisation of polarisation into irreversible power.

Another objection is that the definition of crisis itself is too narrow. If citizens lose trust in institutions, opposition is morally delegitimised, executive shortcuts become routine, and elections are distorted by unequal rules, democracy may already be in crisis before political replacement becomes impossible. By the time citizens can no longer remove incumbents, democracy may have already been hollowed out from a substantive standpoint. This once again presents a key tension between Dahlian and Schumpeterian interpretations of democracy, but the above symptoms are ultimately democratic decay, not outright crisis. A democracy may be damaged, polarised, or substantively weakened while still preserving its central corrective function: the ability of citizens to remove governments and alter political direction. Distrust and erosion are therefore symptoms of danger, not proof of collapse. Crisis begins only when dissatisfaction loses consequence.

Critically, as defined earlier, we must once again recognise that distrust or dissatisfaction does not correlate with democratic crisis, with true crisis being defined as the breakdown of democratic functionality itself. The case studies therefore reveal a hierarchy of democratic danger. France shows how legality can weaken deliberation, India shows how elections can produce governments without a coherent majority mandate, and the United States shows how democracy approaches crisis when the conditions of replacement themselves become vulnerable. In the first 2 cases, while democracies may appear fragile due to their internal conflicts and decision making processes being publicized, these are instead inherent features of democracy. Democracy is fundamentally premised upon the existence of legitimate disagreement, making negotiation and contestation indicators of pluralism rather than institutional failure. By contrast, a crisis emerges when disagreement itself becomes politically irrelevant. Nonetheless, while the existence of contestation is crucial, there is a fine line between contestation and dissent, and current media narratives often blur and cross this line. As such, democratic contestation simultaneously functions as evidence of pluralism and as material through which media narratives amplify perceptions of instability.

By comparing the United States of America example with the other aforementioned case studies, it is understood that true democratic crisis emerges when political outcomes cease to be meaningfully reversible, and when the very intention of the incumbents is to maintain power through legislative loopholes as opposed to authentic democratic victory. As long as governments remain electorally vulnerable and political replacement remains possible, democratic correction continues to function. Crisis emerges when these processes are either absent, or meaningless in practice, with elections failing to influence political trajectories. Globally, this is largely untrue, since processes continue to function with heed to temporal continuity, hence making this a structural strain rather than a terminal collapse.

In conclusion, the perception of democratic crisis is largely a misinterpretation of democratic strain. Democracy was never designed to guarantee stability, consensus, or consistency. Rather, the core pillar of democracy was always change, centered around the idea of iterative development. From a procedural perspective, as advanced by Joseph Schumpeter, democracy fundamentally depends upon the continued possibility of political replacement. By contrast, Robert Dahl's emphasis on contestation and pluralistic participation highlights the importance of meaningful opposition within democratic systems. While Steven Levitsky correctly identifies the gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions, erosion alone does not constitute crisis so long as democratic correction remains possible. Democracy therefore weakens not when it is criticised or contested, but when political outcomes cease to be meaningfully reversible. While legislative loopholes and media exposure may generate instability, they simultaneously expose institutional weaknesses and create the conditions for corrective pressure. In this regard, the United States of America serves as a glaring example of democratic strain approaching crisis: the impending weakening of meaningful political replacement and opposition. Dissatisfaction and opposition would no longer consequentially impact governance, signalling the state of crisis. Democracy is therefore not collapsing, but renegotiating the balance between legitimacy, pluralism, and institutional stability under conditions of intense public scrutiny. Contestation, opposition, and reversibility all coalesce to constrain power, hence proving that democracy endures not due to stability, but due to adaptability. This is indeed a strengthening of the democratic substratum. However, if democratic adaptability ceases to restore legitimacy, democratic strain may yet evolve into genuine crisis. Ultimately, democracy is not in crisis because it is noisy. It is in crisis only when the noise no longer matters.