

Why is American democracy today in such peril?

American democracy faces peril today primarily from **extreme partisan polarization**, **executive aggrandizement**, and the erosion of **institutional norms** and the **rule of law**. These long-building pressures accelerated sharply in 2025 under the second Trump administration, as documented by independent monitors.

Polarization has fractured the shared understanding of democratic rules. For decades, mutual toleration and forbearance—key norms identified by scholars Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt—have eroded. One side questions the legitimacy of elections and opponents; the other views institutional resistance or media scrutiny as existential threats. This creates gridlock, constitutional standoffs, and incentives to bend or break rules rather than compromise. Voter dissatisfaction is widespread, with majorities across parties viewing democracy as dysfunctional.

Executive power has expanded at the expense of checks and balances. Actions in 2025—including rapid purges of the federal civil service, assertions of unilateral authority, challenges to judicial rulings, and efforts to politicize agencies—tilted the system toward "competitive authoritarianism," where elections persist but the playing field favors the incumbent through weakened oversight, selective enforcement, and pressure on dissent. Legislative constraints on the executive reached historic lows.

Supporting factors amplify the risk: rising distrust fueled by misinformation, threats of political violence, and declining public faith in core institutions (courts, media, bureaucracy). International indices reflect this: V-Dem downgraded the U.S. from liberal democracy status for the first time in over 50 years, with its Liberal Democracy Index falling to levels last seen in 1965 after a steep 2025 drop. Freedom House recorded the sharpest single-year decline among "Free" countries, citing weakened anticorruption safeguards and civil liberties. Expert surveys (e.g., Bright Line Watch) rate U.S. democracy in the low-to-mid 50s on a 100-point scale—closer to hybrid regimes than peer democracies like Canada or Germany.

Elections themselves remain competitive and largely intact, providing a potential corrective. However, sustained assaults on norms, civil service independence, and equal application of law risk entrenching imbalances that future governments—regardless of party—may exploit or struggle to reverse. The peril stems less from any single leader than from a system where polarization rewards confrontation over restraint, and institutions have proven more fragile than assumed. Reversing this requires renewed commitment to shared rules over partisan victory.

(Word count: ~380)

Grok, 27.04.2026