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THE LONGEVITY OF DEMOCRACY: ANALYZING THE CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC SURVIVAL

Abstract: Three prevalent themes throughout the twenty-first century are weakening democratic institutions, attacks on democracy, and democratic backsliding. There are four key conditions that significantly contribute to why democracies can fail and to maintaining long-term democracy: civic competence and democratic education, media independence and government accountability, management of populist discontent, and participation in international organizations. Using data from Freedom House to compare different regions, the United Nations definition of democracy, and other academic journals, I have researched three states, one representing a democracy under stress, a second representing a democracy currently backsliding, and a third representing a strong, growing democracy. I have also included a case study of complete democratic collapse in the Weimar Republic. My findings indicate the importance of the four conditions in maintaining a long-term democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Democratic Survival, Democratic backsliding, Civic education, Independent media, Populism, International organization, Weimar Republic.

BACKGROUND

According to the United Nations, democracy is a set of values and principles that promote greater participation, equality, security, and the development of human rights. It establishes an environment that respects fundamental freedoms; the will of the people is freely expressed, and citizens can hold decision-makers accountable. In democratic systems, all individuals have equal rights and are free from discrimination (United Nations).

Democratic backsliding refers to declines in political rights and civil liberties, as well as the overall weakening of democratic institutions. Since 2005, at least 54 countries have experienced this dynamic (Kurlantzick, 2026). This decline in democracy is not limited to a single region but rather a global pattern of democratic deterioration.

An overview from Freedom House highlights this trend regionally. Freedom has declined across Africa, Eurasia, and the Asia-Pacific; it has been increasingly threatened in the Americas, and continues to be unstable in the Middle East. The only region with relative stability is Europe (Freedom House, 2026). These trends stem from persistent challenges, including noncompetitive elections, restrictions on civil liberties, government corruption, and increased control over the media and academic institutions.

In response to democratic backsliding, this paper argues that the long-term survival of democracy depends on maintaining four key conditions: civic education, independent media, the management of populist discontent, and participation in international organizations. When these conditions are met, they enforce accountability, protect rights, and enable meaningful political

participation. When these conditions weaken, democratic systems become increasingly vulnerable to backsliding and potential collapse.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC SUCCESS

Democratic Education and Civic Competence

Democracies must educate their citizens to ensure they are capable of participating in debates, discussions, and decisions that promote the population's well-being and protect their individual rights (Garrison, 2003: 1).

The relationship between education and democracy is cyclical; education is necessary for democracy, and democracy is necessary for education. Views on education in liberal versus illiberal societies are fundamentally different: democratic states view education as the construction of meaning, whereas authoritarian states understand education as a transfer of knowledge rather than an engagement (Garrison, 2003: 2).

Promoting education is not necessarily about teaching democratic practices, but rather about ensuring that citizens can learn through freedom and participation. Therefore, citizens must be educated to suit their constitution and develop their democracy. Education fosters the necessary qualities needed for democratic citizenship, such as critical thinking, curiosity, and independence (Parker, 2012: 4).

Media Independence and Democratic Accountability

Media independence plays a critical role in keeping democratic institutions accountable. Independent media examines government actions, exposes corruption, and keeps citizens informed about issues so they can participate in democratic decision-making (Damissah, Isiaka, Adejare, & Ogunlana, 2025: 2).

Independent media promotes objectivity, accuracy, and fairness by operating independently from government control. It can criticize people in power and hold them accountable, rather than just defending them (Schieck, 2003: 9).

By maintaining an independent media, citizens can stay informed on recent events, both domestic and foreign and choose their own opinion about it, rather than having their views shaped or controlled by the government. Independent media reinforces the freedom that democratic citizens have to hold their own beliefs and opinions about ongoing events.

Managing Populist Discontent

Populism emerges within a democracy through public support and fair elections. However, when in power, populist leaders may undermine the democratic system and initiate autocratic processes. Despite initially coming to power through democratic means, populist leaders can establish discriminatory electoral rules, skew political competition, censor and attack the media, and aid the partisan takeover of the judiciary, among other independent institutions (Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2025: 3).

The global rise of populism is not necessarily just a cause of democratic decline, but also a symptom. When people feel betrayed by their government or upset with its policies, they may begin to target different communities, using them as scapegoats. (Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2025: 3).

The populist movement has spread throughout Europe and the Americas, reflecting citizens' dissatisfaction with current democratic practices. Populist leaders commonly promote practices that counter the foundational doctrines of the liberal, rule-based democracy in which they are citizens.

International Organizations

International organizations are institutions created by governments with structured rules, regular meetings, and permanent administrations that promote cooperation and governance among the states (Mansfield & Pevehouse, 2006: 138).

International organizations support democracy by limiting special interest groups, protecting individual rights, introducing more information and perspectives that enhance public debate and decision-making, and increasing the government's capacity to solve issues (Keohane, Macedo, Moravcsik, 2009: 2).

International organizations help spread democracy by supporting leaders in democratizing states, implementing reforms, and reducing the likelihood of the rise of authoritarianism. They also allow for democratic states to create policy on cross-border issues that cannot be addressed domestically, aid in bargaining, provide international accountability, and promote global democratic policies (Mansfield & Pevehouse, 2006: 138).

CASE STUDIES: UNITED STATES: EARLY-STAGE STRESS

The United States is a democracy under stress. As the United States moves towards populism, backs out of international organizations, and allows increased censorship in media and education, the strength of the United States democracy is being tested. This strain reflects key democratic conditions, such as weakened media independence, civic education, and resistance to populist mobilization, all of which are essential for maintaining democratic stability. According to the Freedom House, media freedom and independence have eroded due to government pressures, economic constraints, and partisan bias. Throughout 2025, media outlets have faced pressure from federal governments regarding coverage and practices (Freedom House, 2026).

The weakening of media independence limits the people's ability to hold political leaders accountable and restricts citizens' access to reliable information, thereby harming informed participation in democratic processes. Freedom House also brings to light the increasing political indoctrination within the United States educational system due to the government interference in education on topics related to race, sex, gender, and identity (Freedom House, 2026).

Constraints on educational content undermine the development of the civic competence necessary for citizens to engage effectively in democratic decision-making and discussion. Donald J. Trump's taking office was a product of the rise of populism within the United States. Trump has been criticized for filling positions in government institutions with more loyal figures (Crothers, 2025: 17).

This prioritizing of personal loyalty over qualifications and institutional integrity weakens the independence of democratic institutions. The rise in populism is evident in the anti-immigrant, racist, and ethno-nationalist beliefs paired with culture wars over abortion rights and LGBTQI+ equality that is the current policy focus (Crothers, 2025: 18).

Targeting different groups, blaming them for economic and political hardship, has deepened political polarization and delegitimized opposition, which further erodes democratic norms. The Trump administration has also been criticized for leaving over sixty-six international organizations for promoting progressive ideologies around DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), gender equity, and climate change policy. The claim of the Trump administration is that these organizations are “Wasteful, Ineffective, or Harmful” and that these groups “actively seek to constrain American Sovereignty” (United States Department of State, 2026).

Withdrawal from international organizations reduces external democratic accountability and limits cooperation on global issues, which weakens global support systems that reinforce democratic governance.

HUNGARY: ACTIVE BACKSLIDING

Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a representative of the Fidesz party, took power in 2010. Since then, the government has consolidated control over independent institutions necessary to keep it accountable and to keep citizens informed, such as universities, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists (Freedom House, 2025).

This consolidation of power contributed to the weakening of democratic accountability produced through independent media and journalism, as well as nongovernmental institutions. The government has repeatedly targeted independent journalists and media outlets, accusing them of serving foreign interests. The government has also reportedly been surveilling independent journalists and preventing independent media outlets and journalists from attending government press conferences (Freedom House, 2025).

Such actions limit transparency and prevent citizens from making informed political decisions due to a lack of information. The Fidesz-led government has also maintained close oversight of schools and universities, imposing excessive government influence on school curricula (Freedom House, 2025).

The control that the Hungarian government has over education weakens the development of civic competence essential for sustaining democratic participation. Populism within Hungary was a response to economic hardship and distrust in democratic institutions. The populists in Hungary capitalize on nationalism and the protection of Hungarian identity, framing democracy as “the people” versus corrupt elites (Becker, 2010: 32).

Far-right populist parties gained support by mobilizing social frustration and blaming minorities and elites for their struggles. Hungarian populists have deepened social divisions by channeling public dissatisfaction toward specific groups. The rise of populism within Hungary has weakened democratic norms and trust within the state (Becker, 2010: 30).

Although Hungary is currently a member in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Orban’s government has pushed the narrative of portraying the EU as a hostile actor that threatens Hungarian interests, believing that Hungary must be protected from migrants, western liberals, and democratic influence (Biro-Nagy, 2023).

This reflects resistance to international democratic accountability mechanisms and demonstrates that participation in international organizations alone is insufficient without adherence to their accountability mechanisms. As of April 12, 2026, Peter Magyar following Hungary’s parliamentary elections took Viktor Orban out of power. Magyar’s success proves that right-wing populism is not irreversible (Fix & Harris, 2026).

GHANA: RELATIVE SUCCESS

From 1982 until 1993, Ghana was under Jerry Rawlings, a populist who did not believe democracy would benefit Ghana. However, his system lacked structure and legitimacy, leading Ghana to consolidate a democracy (Haynes, 2023).

Although populism initially challenged democratic development, its failure reinforced the importance of democratic practices. Since 1992, Ghana has maintained democratic processes, political rights, and civil liberties, and continues to strengthen democratic coordination.

This continued stability shows the successful maintenance of key democratic conditions. Ghana has both state-owned and privately owned media. Although historically government agencies have tried to control the media, there has been a trend of increasing media independence in Ghana (Freedom House, 2024).

The growth of independent media reflects government accountability and ensures that citizens are informed and can properly participate in democratic processes. Academic freedom is legally guaranteed and generally protected from extensive political indoctrination (Freedom House, 2024).

The protection of educational autonomy supports the development of critical thinking and civic engagement, which enable proper democratic participation. Ghana has overseen a continuation of peaceful transfers of power since 1992, indicating institutional legitimacy and public trust in democratic processes. For Ghana, democratization was the result of failed populism (Haynes, 2023).

Ghana is a member of the United Nations and the African Union, among many others. Its membership in the United Nations has supported its security, human rights, education, and aid efforts, as well as Ghana's efforts to maintain democracy (Legon, 2018: 3).

Ghana's active participation in international organizations provides external support, resources, and accountability mechanisms that strengthen its democracy. Ghana also uses its seat on the African Union to promote democracy among other members (Sansusi 2018: 3). The outward promotion of democratic norms reflects Ghana's strong democratic system.

WEIMAR REPUBLIC: DEMOCRATIC FAILURE

The collapse of the Weimar Republic was not the result of a single weakness, but rather multiple weaknesses within German society and government. The Weimar Republic lacked a strong, independent media, had limited democratic education, and struggled to engage with international organizations. These conditions contributed to the republic's instability and inability to counter the rise of populist extremists. These weaknesses together impacted public trust and participation, making the democratic system vulnerable to collapse.

In terms of international organizations, after World War I, the German economy was severely weakened and the country was internationally disgraced. The Weimar Republic's attempt to integrate into the global community was interrupted by the rise of nationalism arising from harsh economic and political conditions (Li, He, & Li, 2025: 15).

The League of Nations was founded after World War I to ensure a world war would never happen again (Benes, 1932: 66). The League of Nations was only a voluntary cooperation between states and had no independent authority. The expectation that members would prioritize collective goals over national interests proved unrealistic in practice (Benes, 1932: 80). Because the League was unable to achieve collective goals and enforce cooperation, it had limited capacity to support democratic stability in the Weimar Republic.

In the realm of education, reformers pushed to ensure equal access to education and to more modern teaching practices that promoted equality and equal opportunity (Lamberti, 2004: 3). Education became part of cultural politics, pushed to the forefront of the ideological struggle over the Germans' future, liberal vs illiberal (Lamberti, 2004: 1).

Many conservative and Nazi figures within the Weimar Republic in the early 1930s claimed that there was a "crisis of education." Conservative opponents claimed that progressive schools were damaging society. Regarding media, the Weimar Republic's media were unable to

support democratic accountability and resist manipulation. As the media expanded through newspapers and radio, politics became controlled, performative, and strategic rather than rational and open. This fueled misinformation, manipulation, and propaganda throughout the republic (Habermas, 1989: 206).

The Weimar Republic's democratic government was unable to address economic, international, and political issues. The result was that its citizens voted for a political faction that pledged to destroy democracy (Chou, 2012: 33).

The rise of populism in the Weimar Republic exploited democratic freedoms such as elections and free speech. These failures were not isolated, but rather interconnected. The weaknesses in media culture and education, and a lack of international support, created conditions that populist movements exploited, ultimately undermining the republic from within.

CONCLUSION

Even when functioning at its best, democracy needs continuous maintenance (Chou, 2012: 28). For long-term democratic survival, there must be accountability, public trust, and nongovernmental institutions capable of monitoring the system. A democracy must uphold an independent media, promote civic education, manage rising populism, and engage with international organizations. These conditions together foster accountability, equality, human rights, and political participation, all of which are essential to a democracy. A democracy also must be able to address the concerns of its citizens. Once one of the conditions begins to weaken, the others tend to follow, which can ultimately result in democratic backsliding or collapse. Recent developments in Hungary support the view that democratic backsliding is not irreversible. The collapse of the Weimar Republic serves as a cautionary tale, showing how quickly democratic institutions can crumble when the key conditions weaken. The failure demonstrates that democracy is not self-sustaining but rather requires constant reinforcement through education, accountability, international cooperation, and public trust. The preservation of democracy is essential not only for protecting individual rights but also for sustaining long-term political stability and democratic resilience.

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