



## Explaining Democratic Decline: Competing Camps, Diverging Solutions



**Worldwide, democracy is in trouble. What should we do about it? To answer this question, we turn to the experts...Too bad they don't agree.**

**By Joseph Foti, Principal Advisor, Emerging Issues, Open Government Partnership**

From Washington to Warsaw, New Delhi to Brasília, democracies are breaking under pressure. The search for causes has yielded dozens of books, each offering a compelling diagnosis.

But behind the diversity of authors and geographies lies a deeper structure: competing schools of thought, each grounded in different assumptions and bodies of evidence about what drives democratic backsliding.

This post attempts to create a simple map of today's most influential theories of democratic decline. In doing so, it clearly does violence to the subtlety and complexity of many of these authors, many of whose work I deeply admire. (A few less so.) It classifies leading arguments by the source of the decline (elites or the masses) and by what ultimate driver they emphasize: economic, institutional, cultural/spiritual, or technological. While no author fits neatly into a single box, each rests on a primary hypothesis.

Understanding the differences is not just an academic exercise. It would be easy to wave your hand and say, "They're all a little bit true." But that denies three epistemological propositions underpinning these observations:

1. **These theories are not all compatible.** A mass-driven cultural backlash is not the same as an elite-led authoritarian project; the remedies may be mutually exclusive. Mollifying the public is not the same as containing organized crime, for example.
2. **The evidence for them is not the same.** Some arguments are grounded in robust comparative data; others rely on narrative, anecdote, and intuition alone.
3. **Resources are finite.** Philanthropists, policymakers, and activists must make strategic bets. That means surfacing the tacit assumptions behind their choices. While folk explanations are fine for happy hours, they are not adequate to the task of ensuring human flourishing, freedom, or any of the other goods that come with democracy.

## Sources of Decline: Actors and Fundamental Drivers

Within each type of explanation, theories diverge depending on who they see as the main actors.

- **Public actors:** These explanations view authoritarianism as a response to widespread public demand—whether due to economic anxiety, cultural backlash, or moral fragmentation.
- **Elite actors:** Those believing elites are the main actors argue that democratic erosion is primarily top-down, driven by self-interested elites exploiting institutional gaps or fighting amongst one another.

Understanding this distinction is critical. If the threat comes from the masses, then reforms must address the root causes of grievance or polarization. If it comes from elites, then the issue is establishing systems

to constrain or incentivize different elite behavior.

But debates are not only about elites or mass politics. They also have to address the questions: Why now? Why all over the world?

Four broad classes of explanations are offered as to what is driving the decline in democracy.

- **Economic:** These theories argue that material insecurity, inequality, or status loss fuels resentment—among masses or elites. Some analyses focus on conflict between classes—especially between educated and uneducated elites.
- **Institutional:** Here, the focus is on how democratic procedures have been weakened or distorted—through gerrymandering, executive aggrandizement, or party decay. Alternatively, some explanations focus on how current institutions do not properly channel public voices. Reforms aim to shore up checks and balances (to limit the power of elites) or reforming the rules of our democracy to strengthen participation and deliberation.
- **Cultural:** These accounts emphasize values, identity, and moral cohesion. Some lament the decline of civic virtue; others point to ethnonationalism or moral polarization. Interventions often target education, media narratives, or social healing.
- **Technological:** This emerging category spotlights how digital platforms, AI, and surveillance reshape political incentives and public trust. Responses include platform regulation, digital literacy, and democratic tech design.

The table below summarizes these positions before we go deeper into each group.

Table: Schools of democratic backsliding AN

What changed to start the decline?	Who drives the decline?	
	Elite-driven	Public-driven
Economic	The Warriors	The Deliverists
Institutional	The Power Elites	The Pluralists
Cultural	The Stoics	The Scouts
Technological	Cyberpunks	

## The Seven Competing Camps

To better summarize these competing camps I’ve collapsed the full spectrum of different explanations. (Apologies to the many excellent economists, political scientists, sociologists, think tankers, and opinion havers that I missed. I will try to reduce your life’s work to a caricature in a future piece.)

# The Class Warriors

***In a nutshell:*** Demographics and economics are changing and the old coalitions cannot hold. In a scramble for control, some parties are turning to anti-democratic means. Can they build new supermajorities?

## Overview

This group of theorists is interested in how coalitions break down, especially—but not exclusively—among elites. For example, in *How Democracies Die*, Levitsky and Ziblatt offer an elite-centered theory rooted in economic interests: conservative coalitions are willing to support democracy as long as they can win many elections and implement their interests. When that prospect wanes, so too does their support for democracy. Adam Tooze and others offer a tripartite class system to explain why both the upper class and working classes have joined forces to punish the professional managerial class.

Class-based analysis is not a left-wing monopoly: Nathan Levine writes that “[anti-managerialism is back](#),” and David Brooks points out, “[How Ivy League Admissions Broke America](#).”

Nor all of these critiques strictly material in its basis: [DeLong](#) and [McGhee](#) both place status politics at the core of the backlash against equality, and not only in America.

Still others account for the decline of democracy through unchecked corporate monopolies, with both [Daron Acemoglu](#), [James Robinson](#), [Lina Khan](#) and [Zephyr Teachout](#) making the direct link between market concentration and the narrowing scope of democratic decision making.

## Strength of Evidence

The evidence for these explanations is strong, and this certainly fits a pattern that empirically rigorous scholars like [Pippa Norris](#) have been able to demonstrate in the Western World. Beyond the Western World, what this empirical body lacks is an explanation of why everywhere and why now? Explaining baby-boomer blowback on multiculturalism simply does not map onto Indonesia or Russia.

## Governance Implications

The implications are that cross-class coalitions are essential. In many cases, it has been the global collapse of the center left, especially among uneducated voters that has given rise to authoritarianism. This is true for the (currently) left of center professional managerial class which is not large enough to win elections on its own (outside of college towns and research hubs) and for conservatives who support democracy when they are a cross-regional fusion of different groups. There is a growing chorus of scholars, including [Henry Farrell](#), [Hahrie Hahn](#), [Didi Kuo](#) and [others](#) who focus on rebuilding “[hollow party structures](#)” to allow more competition and coalition-building and to limit polarizing para-party structures.

# The Deliverists

***In a nutshell:*** The forces of democracy have not shown that they can govern well. When that happens, people turn to a strongman. If they could only deliver more services and infrastructure, they might turn this around

## Overview

This group strongly believes that state capacity to deliver and stimulate economic growth and well-being is the main problem. [Francis Fukuyama](#) and co-authors, who have [long felt](#) that states need to focus on delivery. In the United States, so-called “[Abundance Dems](#)” and adjacent journalists [Ezra Klein](#), [Derek Thompson](#), [Annie Lowery](#), [Matt Yglesias](#), and [Noah Smith](#)—believe that introducing well-targeted

measures to improve affordability will make people believe that the government can do great things again, in turn winning elections. A subset of this group is particularly concerned with the issue of inequality, most famously, [Christopher Lanker](#) and [Branko Milanovic](#) with their "elephant graph." Their approach is a mix of targeted government interventions and market mechanisms. In development economics, much of this approach also centers around eliminating petty corruption and mismanagement, especially at the level of service delivery.

## Strength of Evidence

I personally find many of the proposals of this group appealing, and it certainly is the most popular set of explanations among my many mildly social-democratic friends. Nonetheless, I do not think that this school of thinking has the evidence behind it. I personally believe that the problems it deals with—inequality, affordability, social mobility, urbanization, and fighting petty corruption—are worth dealing with on their own. At the same time, the evidence linking their implementation to renewed democratic vitality are speculative at best as is the link between the slow pace of building infrastructure and the withering of democratic virtues.

## Governance Implications

A large portion of this group, in particular, sees open government reforms—transparency requirements, public participation in permitting, judicial review—as directly harmful, [a procedure fetish](#) in which processes have overtaken actual justice and fairness. For many, improving the quality of social spending and redistribution is also important, especially in a targeted and high quality manner. For those focused on economic inequality in particular, questions are raised about the [effectiveness of globalization](#) and whether some amount of protectionism and possibly industrial policy serve as better responses.

## The Power Elites

***In a nutshell:** The mega-rich, including organized crime, are taking over political systems and cementing their power, undoing democracies one step at a time. We need to create institutions that can constrain their abuses of power.*

## Overview

This group focuses on how elites have discovered a way of exploiting weaknesses in the legal and financial structures at the national and international levels. They are, in particular, focused on the dictators, kleptocrats, propagandists, and oligarchs who dominate transnational finance. Some combination of the following ideas, especially where they cross boundaries and can pinpoint the autocratic impulses beyond the borders of the United States are quite popular with [members](#) of the [DC foreign policy establishment](#).

According to these theorists, there are three impacts on democracy that arise due to the influence of power elites.

- **Financial secrecy:** Charles G. Davidson and Ben Judah focus on how modern transnational capitalism gave rise to a [financial secrecy industry](#) that sells anonymity as a means to moving money without regard to borders. They argue that where capitalism and democracy were once closely linked, that industry has not only driven them apart, but has often directly undermined democracy.
- **State capture:** Daniel Kaufmann has long been arguing for "[state capture](#)" framing—in which wealthy people and industries capture the machinery of the state to confer political advantage to their preferred candidates, policies that they prefer, and, in some cases, to directly line their pockets. This form of political organization emerged in countries with weak institutions following the collapse of the iron curtain, but has metastasized and indigenized around the world driving the ebb of democracy's Third Wave.
- **Elite capture and polarization:** A number of scholars, most notably [Thomas Carothers](#) of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, emphasize democratic retreat as multi-causal: the

continuation of authoritarianism in countries like Cuba or Belarus, reversion to the norm in weak democracies (as in Central Asia), and democratic crisis in richer countries. What unites these explanations is that, in each of them, elites are able to capture the system and drive division to maintain some form of competitive authoritarianism.

## Strength of Evidence

The evidence for this explanation is quite robust and can be empirically tested across numerous cases using historical, qualitative, and quantitative methods. What is harder to understand is why the ebb of the Third Wave seems to be near-simultaneous. Some elements, such as financial secrecy explanations make more sense as they offer a global asynchronous explanation (both Donald Trump and Emmerson Mnangagwa can ferret money away through technology like cryptocurrency or social institutions like gold markets and trusts as well as anyone). Technology, too, could play a significant role, especially as a tool for mass mobilization.

## Governance Implications

The fundamental aim of this group is to constrain the anti-democratic and self-aggrandizing behavior of transnational elites and authoritarian strongmen. This means ending financial secrecy, strengthening democratic controls over strong men, promoting investigative journalism, and rule of law. It depends on cooperation of government agencies and private sector actors who risk [enabling anti-democratic behavior](#).

## The Pluralists

***In a nutshell:** Societies are complicated—too complicated for old-fashioned representative democracy alone. Citizens feel like their voices are not being heard anymore. If we can build better methods to get people to better express their preferences, we will see a revitalization of democracy.*

## Overview

Another group, the pluralists, feels that institutions (and to a lesser extent, culture) do not reflect the range of political expression that is present among the populace. This may be due to the narrow focus of elections or nationalization of politics (the tendency for local politicians to run on national, rather than local issues). In essence, what this group has in common is a belief that the current representative democratic rules in many liberal democracies are insufficient to maintain legitimacy. As a result, voters and citizens have soured on electoral democracy as narrowly defined. Rejuvenated structures for decision making, they argue, can renew the social contract between people and their governments and widen the possible futures. These thinkers (and doers) start from a shared diagnosis, but move quickly to a preferred set of solutions and reforms.

- **Deliberative and participatory democracy:** There are numerous organizations and individuals embracing deliberative techniques. While they are themselves a diverse group, they include [Jane Mansbridge](#), [James Fishkin](#), [Claudia Chwalisz](#), and increasingly some mainstream scholars like [Larry Diamond](#) or [Rachel Kleinfeld](#). Indeed, governments including France, Chile, and Iceland and major international organizations like the [OECD](#) have experimented with deliberative forms. Of course, fields like community-based development, environment and health have long embraced participation and inclusion as core models for engagement, but rarely do such communities of practice appeal to the overall renewal of democracy.
- **Electoral system reform:** Another group of reformers would change rules of elections (and sometimes, constitutional reform processes). This has been particularly popular in the United States, where high barriers to regular constitutional reform and a strongly entrenched two-party system limit representation in their view. Among the many advocates are notables such as [Danielle Allen](#) and [Lee Drutman](#). In Europe, individuals like [Alberto Alemanno](#) have advocated for Europe-wide elections for the EU Parliament and voting rules to encourage pan-European citizenship over

national citizens. Many countries in the EU already have innovations such as ranked-choice voting, multi-member districts, electoral pacts, and instant runoffs.

- **Decentralization:** Some circles say that local government is, "[where the rubber hits the road](#)." Local governments enjoy higher citizen trust. Others make the argument that polyarchic (distributed decision-making), decentralized structures are more likely to counter authoritarians at the national level. There is strong evidence, at least in the United States suggesting that the nationalization of politics, the decline of local institutions (especially local accountability journalism), has contributed to polarization and democratic decline. In other countries, such as Indonesia or India, incomplete decentralization means that local governments often lack the capacity or budget to deliver on their legal mandate.

## Strength of Evidence

- **Deliberative reforms:** At a micro-level, there is strong evidence to support positive outcomes for individual deliberative processes; people who participate in *well-designed* deliberative processes report increased [social](#) trust, favor moderation, support for democracy, and a sense that decisions are legitimate. There remains, however, [intense debate](#) and little [evidence](#) that the deliberative processes can achieve these effects at the scale necessary to reverse democratic decline. Of course, there are numerous benefits of such reforms, including at the local level outside of reversing democratic decline. (Note that, in many of its forms, this deliberative school is parallel to more traditional participation such as that practiced in project-level reviews or community development.)
- **Electoral reforms and decentralization:** There are too many institutional reforms to assess the evidence and impacts of each, including decentralization. A full review would easily make this paper ten times its length. Needless to say, there is strong evidence to suggest that such reforms make significant differences in terms of encouraging [pluralism](#) and [electoral competition](#). Countries with alternative structures do seem to have [lowered polarization](#) as well.

## Governance Implications

The governance implications are rather straightforward for this group. Deliberative and participatory reforms have long been at the heart of open government reforms, in particular. While structural and electoral reforms have long been outside the scope of most democracy support, there is a growing understanding of their promise worldwide. Nonetheless, despite the willingness of the public to try such innovations, it has traditionally been hard to get countries with strong two- or three-party systems to give up their duopolies. Similarly, decentralization is often either gradual or occurs at key junctures such as constitutional reforms.

## The Stoics

***In a nutshell:** Our society has entered a period of decadence and decline. The liberal order has destroyed social cohesion, public virtue, and leadership. People need to be rooted in community and a spiritual renaissance. Majorities need to be able to get things done, which might include what looks like, "burning it all down."*

## Overview

The Stoics are most focused on virtue and its absence. For them, democratic backsliding less as a sudden sundering than it is the predictable result of lost values; institutional rot is downstream of moral decay and the abdication of leadership. They may be among the most varied as well, but the point is that elites have not served us well; the response is communitarian and contains a certain amount of metaphysics. They are not all convinced that democracy—perhaps except in its most straightforward majoritarian forms deserves to be preserved.

They trace the lineage from Aristotle through Cicero and Tocqueville, but their modern canon is best captured by [Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue](#). MacIntyre argues that liberal democracies fray when they

lose the thick moral traditions that once supplied citizens with shared ends, coherent narratives of the common good, and the patience to deliberate rather than destroy.

A number of these thinkers, including Ross Douthat and Steve Bannon, channel a Catholic-integralist variant. For Douthat, atomized individuals wandering a morally vacant public square cannot stop the [descent into decadence](#). A more sociological twist comes from William Strauss and Neil Howe's generational "[Fourth Turning](#)" thesis, popularized in policy circles by Steve Bannon. Here, civic virtue rises and falls in predictable 80-year cycles; constitutional crises erupt when a generation that never learned moral restraint collides with brittle institutions.

Not all theorists in this school are Catholic. At the grass roots, the journal and online community [Front Porch Republic](#)—inspired in part by Wendell Berry's agrarianism and Thoreau-styled localism—push the Stoic critique into daily practice. Their mantra of "place, limits, liberty" reframes democratic health as a question of whether neighbors still break bread together, steward a commons, and learn to settle disputes face-to-face. Some members of this community, like Patrick J. Deneen, argue that liberalism cannot provide what localization, communal bonds, and tradition can.

### Strength of Evidence

It is, of course, more difficult to measure this diagnosis in a traditional social science sense. Claims of moral decay would be hard to measure, especially in any meaningful cross-national manner. Their arguments are more humanistic in style and in method. As such they are non-falsifiable and resist quantification and testing.

### Governance Implications

Because the primary diagnosis is moral, so too is the prescription. Stoics champion investment in character-forming institutions—churches, private schools, and voluntary associations. They are skeptical of regulatory fixes and may prefer to operate in the realm of culture. In the most extreme cases, they operate with a sense of "plebiscitary dictatorship:" strong majoritarianism with unitary executives and weak checks and balances. The aim is a vigorous, executive to reclaim and rebuild the country and restore the unifying order of the nation or of place—the triumph of what [David Brooks calls](#) the "somewheres" over the "anywheres." A few, like [Adam J. Webb](#), however, might argue that new technologies, especially Web3 technologies like blockchain or digital IDs allow for the formation of voluntary communities across the traditional bounds of the nation-state. In many cases, they argue, stability and raised productivity will come from embracing [traditional gender roles](#) and hierarchies of caste and status (especially around [migration](#)).

### The Scouts

***In a nutshell:** For too long, we've abandoned civic virtue, treating citizens as customers or taxpayers. Our notions of rights need to be supplemented by the responsibilities of citizenship. Change is generational, but so is the deepest of change.*

### Overview

The Scouts (as in "girl scouts" and "boy scouts") ground their diagnosis of democratic decay in the character and everyday practice of ordinary citizens. As President Barack Obama [said multiple times](#), "The most important title is not 'president' or 'prime minister'; the most important title is 'citizen.'" Few of the Scouts are monocausal in their explanation for decline—they see the problems of money in politics, declining associationalism, and concentrations of power too. But the cure for all of these is to tap into the energy of civil society and peoples' ability to act collectively.

Scholars like Archon Fung or Amy Gutmann celebrate [empowered participatory governance](#). Self-government must be learned by doing. Citizens who co-design a school budget or craft policing priorities acquire habits of compromise that no civics textbook can teach. Similarly, the Obama Foundation's [leadership training programs](#) for "community organizers 2.0" embody the conviction, often voiced by Barack Obama, that democracy is a verb: something one practices in streets, churches, and chat rooms, not a service one passively consumes.

These thinkers and doers reject the New Public Management habit of treating people as "customers" of the state. Citizens are co-authors of collective decisions, obliged to justify their preferences in a language others can reasonably accept. Institutionally, in the United States, organizations like New America lead much of this thinking.

Some thinkers especially emphasize the role of debate and persuasion. Yascha Mounk adds an agora-centric twist, insisting that liberal orders survive only when diverse groups keep debating—publicly, vigorously, and under shared rules of civility. In each case, the remedy for polarization is not elite reform but the cultivation of civic muscle: reason-giving and active listening.

### Strength of Evidence

Evidence for the Scout thesis is pragmatic rather than statistical. Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting, Chicago's school board meetings, and national-service corps from Tunisia to Tennessee show that when citizens help govern, trust and compliance rise—even amidst scarce resources. The great social movements of the past provide inspiration: mass collective action and leadership matter. Critics note that cultivating public virtue is often generational, which makes it meaningful, but less suitable for addressing acute challenges.

### Governance Implications

Most Scouts are as omnivorous in their prescriptions as their diagnoses, but they all maintain a core of empowered leadership built on a community organizing and deliberation. All favor strengthening civic education. Some may favor civic-service (like Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, or a universal draft), deliberative mini-publics on major legislation, and funding formulas that reward municipalities for sustained volunteer rates. They would each maintain a strong sense of civil liberties—especially around free debate, organized civil society, and citizen voice. Above all, they would say that the aim of policy is not to streamline government for efficiency, but to thicken the webs of responsibility that bind citizens to the res publica and to one another.

## The Cyberpunks

***In a nutshell:** The types of technology we have developed have prized individualism, surveillance, disinformation, inequality, and outrage. This runs counter to the collective project of democracy. We must rein in dangerous technologies and shape them to democratic ends.*

### Overview

A strong argument can be made for the technological underpinnings of democratic decline. This idea is not new, of course, dating at least back to Marx's [German Ideology](#): "The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production." This group, "the Cyberpunks," emphasizes not just the accumulation of wealth, but the particular types and aims of technology. Their explanations are as numerous as they are:

- **Disintermediate and surveill:** Some scholars, such as Shoshana Zuboff argue that technology has been mustered to gather and reuse personal data: ["surveillance capitalism."](#) The aim—or at least the consequence—of such technology is to undermine free will and democratic deliberation. Outrage

helps to bypass the rational brain farming engagement and reaping advertising dollars. This breaks down the bonds of trust and polarizes society. But the private sector power alone cannot explain a global phenomenon. Some emphasize [disintermediation](#)—the idea that new technologies destroy gatekeepers and those with a professional interest in high-quality information. Still others emphasize that the specific technologies and the way they are regulated—or not regulated—are [inherently anti-democratic](#) by design, emphasizing property, privacy, and civil liberties over other values. Still, others [emphasize](#) how these technologies favor states built on surveillance as a core feature of governance.

- **Information integrity:** Closely related, there are numerous practitioners and theorists who [emphasize the role](#) of disinformation and misinformation. For some, this is driven by an [elite](#), while others emphasize the pervasive and [popular](#) notion. Still others emphasize the role of “[Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference \(FIMI\)](#),” as it directly influences the quality of elections, especially when pushed by Russians, Chinese, and other authoritarian regimes.

## Strength of Evidence

The evidence for many of these theories is quite strong. While democratic decline certainly began well before the adoption of cell phones and social media, it did seem to become supercharged, and not just in one place, but worldwide. Similarly, it may have enabled the wave of [2019 and 2020 protests](#) which ranged in topics from inequality to corruption to police violence to carbon taxes. Some explanations, such as mis- and disinformation-centered explanations remain hotly debated—there is a [growing body](#) of [evidence](#) that disinformation [harms democracy](#). Yet the democratic recession came before our current mass scale disinformation, suggesting some third, lurking explanation. The evidence that Russian- and Chinese-sponsored disinformation can explain the decline of democracy is weak. (This is not to say that it isn't harmful to democracy and other good things, but taken alone, it simply cannot explain a worldwide phenomenon.)

## Governance Implications

There are a variety of different approaches on offer within this one “school.” Individual members may even embrace completely opposing solutions. Some may wish to ban certain tech outright, such as [facial recognition technology](#). Others may seek state subsidy to ensure that democratic states [outpace the development](#) of critical technologies—most characterized by today's AI race.

## Conclusion: The Value of Making Assumptions Explicit

For funders, executives, and strategists, being explicit about these theories is not just a matter of intellectual honesty—it's a matter of effectiveness. Organizations designing interventions, allocating funds, or supporting coalitions are making bets, whether they realize it or not. This typology can help sharpen those choices.

Should we invest in democratic education, or campaign finance reform? In media innovation, or economic justice? Should we worry more about Fox News, Facebook's algorithm, or a captured judiciary? These questions all hinge on what we believe is really driving democratic decline.

No single theory will offer all the answers. But the stakes of democratic renewal are too high to let our assumptions go unexamined. By mapping the schools of thought—and the divergent paths they imply—we hope to invite clearer thinking, more robust debate, better strategy, and ultimately, more effective action.