

“The State of Democracy in the United States”. A Chinese Perspective Focussing on “Dysfunctional Politics”

A Semi Official Report by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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I. Preamble

In 2022, the vicious cycle of democratic pretensions, dysfunctional politics and a divided society continued in the United States. Problems such as money politics, identity politics, social rifts, and the gulf between the rich and poor worsened. The maladies afflicting American democracy deeply infected the cells of US politics and society, and further revealed US governance failure and institutional defects.

Despite mounting problems at home, the US continued to behave with a sense of superiority, point fingers at others, usurp the role of a “lecturer of democracy”, and concoct and play up the false narrative of “democracy versus authoritarianism”. To serve the interests of none other than itself, the US acted to split the world into two camps of what it defined as “democracies and non-democracies”, and organized another edition of the so-called “Summit for Democracy” to check how various countries had performed on meeting US standards for democracy and to issue new orders. Be it high-sounding rhetoric or maneuvers driven by hidden agenda, none can hide the real designs of the US — to maintain its hegemony by playing bloc politics and using democracy as a tool for political ends.

This report collects a multitude of facts, media comments and expert opinions to present a complete and real picture of American democracy over the year. What they reveal is an American democracy in chaos at home and a trail of havoc and disasters left behind as the US peddled and imposed its democracy around the globe. It helps remove the facade of

II. American Democracy in Chronic Ills

The US refuses to acknowledge the many problems and institutional crises confronting its democracy at home and stubbornly claims to be the template and beacon of democracy for the world. Such imperiousness perpetuates the ills of its democracy and causes dire consequences for other countries.

1. American Democracy in Further Decline

The functioning of American democratic institutions may look as lively as a circus, with politicians of all stripes showing off themselves one after another. But however boisterous the show is, it cannot hide the lethargy in addressing the long-standing, grave problems. Le Monde points out that 2022 is a year of doubt for US democracy. A silent civil war has taken root in the US, and repairing damaged democracy requires a sense of nation and public interest, both of which are currently lacking. This is sad for a country that has long held itself up as a model. In 2022, the Swedish think tank International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance added the US to its “list of regressive democracies”.

Two years after the Capitol riots on 6 January 2021, the US system of democracy still has difficulty in learning the lessons, as political violence continued to grow and deteriorate. *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker* observe that American democracy is in a worse state than ever before, with the congressional riots fully exposing social rifts, political divisions and rampant misinformation. The two parties, although not unaware of the age-old ills of American democracy, have neither the resolve nor the courage to pursue changes, given the increasingly polarized political atmosphere, as well as their focus on party interests.

In 2022, the US Congress was brought into another paralysis, not by riots, but by partisan fights. The farce of failing to elect the 118th House speaker lasted four days and a decision was only reached after 15 rounds of voting. In the last round, divisions were such that Republicans and Democrats voted strictly along party lines. *The New York Times* warned that Congress could see repeated chaos like this over the next two years. Brad Bannon, president of a US political consultancy, put it bluntly, “The impasse in the US House of Representatives over the election of the Speaker is another demonstration of the decline in our political institutions.”

This has aroused concerns among the general public. The Brookings Institution concludes in a 2022 report that the once proud American democracy is facing a systemic crisis and is accelerating its decline. The impact is spreading to all fronts in domestic politics, the economy and society, posing a mortal threat to the legitimacy and health of capitalism. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warns in a report that American democracy is at a dangerous inflection point, declining faster as the inherent ills of American capitalism worsen. Multiple challenges such as voting restrictions, election fraud, and loss of trust in government are accelerating the disintegration of American democracy. Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, writes that America’s dysfunctional politics raises fears that the 2024 presidential election would again provoke deadly violence in the country. A large number of hot button issues continued to provoke public anger and questions on the legitimacy of the US political establishment. Many worried about how long American democracy could continue to function.

2. Political Polarization Intensified by Partisan Fights

With radical factions rising in both the Democratic and Republican Parties, the two were increasingly at odds in many aspects, such as voter base, ideology and identity. As a result, the traditional inter-party balance based on policy compromise became more difficult to sustain. The two parties saw each other not only as political opponents, but also as a threat to the country. *The New York Review of Books* points out that America is already “a binational state” with the Republicans and Democrats leading two sharply opposed national communities that effectively operate as confederations under a single federal government. The United States of America has become the disunited states. The discord between “the two Americas” was deepening day by day, and political polarization reached an unprecedented level.

Amid the escalating political battles, politicians put the interests of their political parties and factions above those of the country and acted in an unbridled way to attack and pin blames on each other. On 8 August 2022, law enforcement raided former President Donald Trump’s Mar-a-Lago residence, and Trump accused the Justice Department of playing politics to stop his second presidential bid and of political persecution. The Republicans, on their part, were relentless on the discovery of classified documents in President Joe Biden’s residence, launched investigations into the Biden administration’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and demanded accountability. US state apparatus was reduced to a tool for political parties’ self-interest.

Party politics increasingly followed race and identity lines. According to the *Financial Times*, Republicans are white, small town and rural while Democrats are now almost entirely urban and multi-ethnic. More than a third of Republicans and Democrats today believe violence is justified to achieve their political ends. When one party loses, its voters feel as though their America is being occupied by a foreign power. Political scientist Barbara Walter considers the US “a factionalized anocracy” — the halfway state between autocracy and democracy.

Political polarization was more of an obstacle to policy decision-making. *GovTrack*, an online non-governmental source of legislative information and statistics, reveals a steady fall in the number of laws successive US Congresses could enact — from 4,247 by the 93th to 98th Congresses down to 2,081 by the 111st to 116th. The drop was even more pronounced when one considers how many bills could become laws, from 6% in the 106th Congress to 1% in the 116th, a slide of 5 percentage points over two decades.

The tactics used in partisan fights were more scandalous. Professor Larry Diamond of Political Science and Sociology at Stanford University believes the norms of democracy, such as self-restraint in the exercise of power and rejection of violence, which should have been observed by the participating parties in elections, have begun disintegrating in the US. A growing number of politicians and elected officials in the US have been willing to bend or abandon democratic norms in the quest to achieve or retain power. And as common political ground vanishes, rising proportions of Americans in both camps express attitudes and perceptions that are blinking red for democratic peril. Democracy in the US is at serious risk of breaking down.

3. Money Politics Surged

“Make money your god, and it will plague you like the devil,” so admonished British playwright Henry Fielding. In the US, money is the breast milk of politics and elections increasingly morph into monologues of the wealthy, while the public call for democracy is made only “a jarring note”. With the devil of money lurking in every corner of American politics, fairness and justice is naturally strained.

The latest illustration is the 2022 midterm elections. The whole exercise has a price tag of more than US\$16.7 billion — breaking the 2018 record of US\$14 billion — as found by Reveal, an online platform tracking the flow of political donations in the country. This amount dwarfs the 2021 GDPs of more than 70 countries. Federal Senate races in some states such as Georgia, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Ohio sucked in more than US\$100 million on average. Over 90% of those elected as lawmakers won by splurging funds. It was impossible to identify how much “dark money”, or funds from undisclosed sources, was involved.

American politics has increasingly revealed its nature as the “game of the rich”. US think tank the Brennan Center for Justice finds that the top 21 families making political donations contributed at least US\$15 million each, totaling US\$783 million, far more than the US\$3.7 million of small donations. Billionaires provided 15.4% of federal election funds, and most of it went to super PACs that can accept unlimited donations.

The enormous bills did not bring effective national governance in return. They only stimulated pork barrel politics. An article on *Lianhe Zaobao* observes that the past few decades has witnessed a decay in Western democracy. Wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few, making the poor poorer and the rich richer. Politics is controlled by the rich and politicians to serve their own interests. Despite a right to vote, the public does not have real sway over politics. This sense of powerlessness and loss of confidence in political parties and government has given rise to populism, and the problem remains unresolved.

4. “Freedom of Speech” in Name Only

The United States has always prided itself on free speech. In reality, however, freedom of speech in the United States is upheld according to self-centered “US standards”. Partisan interest and money politics have become the “two big mountains” that weigh on free speech. Any speech that is detrimental to the interests of the US government or capital is subject to strict restrictions.

The US government has all-encompassing regulations on media and technology companies to intervene in public opinion. In December 2022, Twitter CEO Elon Musk and journalist Matt Taibbi posted back-to-back tweets that exposed “Twitter files”, revealing that the US government is heavily scrutinizing all social media companies. Sometimes it directly intervenes in big media companies’ reporting, like frequently having Google remove certain links. Twitter censored sensitive information about presidential candidates ahead of the 2020 election, creating “blacklists” to limit the exposure of unpopular accounts and even hot topics, and working with the FBI to monitor social media content, all the while giving the US military the green light to spread disinformation online. All this has undoubtedly torn off the fig leaf of free speech in the United States.

Capital and interest groups basically can get anything they want when it comes to public opinion. In the face of capital and interest groups, American media's "freedom of speech" smacks of hypocrisy. Most American media firms are privately owned and serve the powerful and the rich. Whether it's the owner of the media or the investment and advertisement income that the media depends on, all of them are related to capital and interest groups. In his book *The Hypocritical Superpower*, Micheal Lueders, a well-known German writer and media professional, elaborated in detail how the "filtering mechanism" of American media, under the influence of interest groups, chooses and distorts facts. In January 2023, Project Veritas, an American right-wing group, published a video about Pfizer that went viral. It recorded Jordon Trishton Walker, a senior executive at Pfizer, saying that Pfizer was exploring plans to "mutate" the coronavirus, that the coronavirus vaccine business was a "cash cow", and that US regulators had vested interests in drug companies. To deal with the PR crisis, in addition to issuing a statement, Pfizer even had YouTube remove the video immediately on ground of "violating community guidelines".

The US uses social media to manipulate international public opinion. In December 2022, the independent investigation website "The Intercept" revealed that agencies affiliated to the US Department of Defense had long interfered in public opinion in Middle Eastern countries by manipulating topics and waging deceptive propaganda on social media such as Twitter. In July 2017, US Central Command official Nathaniel Kahler sent to the Twitter public policy team a form containing 52 Arabic-language accounts, asking for priority services for six of them. Following Kahler's request, Twitter put these Arabic accounts on a "white list" to amplify messages favorable to the United States. Eric Sperling, executive director of Just Foreign Policy, an anti-war organization, commented on this incident that Congress and social media companies should investigate and take action to ensure that, at the very least, the citizens are fully informed when their tax money is being spent on putting a positive spin on the endless wars.

In September 2022, the explosion of the "Nord Stream" natural gas pipeline shocked the world, and the international community was eager to know the identity and motive of the perpetrator. On 8 February 2023, Pulitzer Prize-winning veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published an article exposing the US government as the culprit of the incident. However, American and European mainstream media, known for their sensitivity to such scoops, stayed eerily quiet on this piece of explosive news. As observed by Canadian website *Western Standard* and German television channel ZDF, Hersh's report was one of the biggest stories of the decade, but few media in North America wanted to talk about it because the West does not want anyone to find out about the truth and the surveillance technologies it has deployed in the Baltic Sea. Western media even try to bypass the crux of the issue by questioning the authenticity of Hersh's report. On 15 February, Hersh wrote another article, accusing the US government and mainstream media of covering up the truth of the "Nord Stream" pipeline explosion. Analysts pointed out that given Western media's obedience to the US, their blocking of Hersh's revelations is not surprising.

5. The Judicial System Blind to Public Opinion

As an institution undergirding the country's Constitution, the US Supreme Court, like the American society, has become deeply divided. Judicial power is hijacked by public opinion, and partisan struggle has spread to the judicial system. Increasingly, Supreme Court decisions reflect the huge chasm between "two Americas"—the conservatives and liberals, and have been reduced to a tool of political warfare. The "separation of powers" is

constantly being eroded. Partisanship has abandoned tradition and crossed the line.

Both parties pursue their agenda by changing the political orientation of the Supreme Court. The presidential election has in some ways become a partisan battle for the right to appoint judges. The passing away of Supreme Court justices gave Trump the opportunity to appoint during his term three justices who took a conservative stance, giving conservative justices an overwhelming advantage over liberal ones. After Trump, radical white evangelical fundamentalists have taken the reins of the Supreme Court, according to an article on the South African website *Daily Maverick*. It's hardly surprising that the Supreme Court almost always makes decisions in favor of Christian evangelicals, big corporations and the Republican Party.

The US Supreme Court's decision on abortion rights fully demonstrates the consequences of being involved in partisan warfare and out of touch with society. On 24 June 2022, the Supreme Court flagrantly endorsed religious conservatism by overturning the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision and removing constitutional protections for women's abortion rights. The decision triggered protests across the United States. Polls show that more than half of Americans believe that stripping away abortion rights is a setback for the country. Israeli media "Haaretz" commented that on the issue of abortion rights, the Supreme Court has undermined democracy in the name of defending it, which is a typical case of "tyranny of the minority". Here is an unrepresentative Supreme Court, with its justices appointed by an unrepresentative president and confirmed by an obviously unrepresentative Senate; but it has made a decision that will affect the United States till 2030, 2040, and even 2050.

The Supreme Court also struck down a New York state law that had been in place since 1913 restricting people from carrying concealed firearms. As the nation reflects on gun violence, such a reckless reversal of New York's gun control law is intolerable, noted the governor of New York. American political commentator Matthew Dowd pointed out that the problems facing the United States today are rooted in the fragmentation of democracy. What American citizens want are a fair ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, a real gun reform, higher minimum wages, steeper taxes on the super-rich, better health care for all, and other reforms that heed popular calls.

6. Americans Increasingly Disillusioned with American Democracy

Americans' pride in their democracy has dropped sharply, from 90% in 2002 to 54% in 2022, according to a joint Washington Post-University of Maryland survey. A poll by the Public Policy Institute of California shows that Californian voters have widespread concern that American democracy is going off track, with 62% saying the country is headed in the wrong direction, 46% pessimistic about the prospect of Americans with different political views working together to resolve differences, and 52% dissatisfied with the current way American democracy works. According to a Quinnipiac University poll, 67% of respondents believe that American democracy is in danger of collapse, and 48% think there could be another Capitol riot in the United States. According to a Pew Center poll, 65% of Americans believe that the American democratic system needs major reforms, while 57% of respondents believe the United States is no longer a model of democracy. A UCLA study shows that the US government has been losing its ability to govern and its sense of democratic responsibility in recent years, and lacks effective measures to push forward large-scale reforms or address issues such as electoral justice and media fraud.

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