

The Role of Leadership-Followership in the Stabilization and Destabilization of Democracy in the United States: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

This study examines the role of leadership-followership in the stabilization and destabilization of democracy in the United States (US). The intention is to assess whether the tripartite institutions are resilient enough to sustain and strengthen the democratic ideals and practices amidst the challenges of the 21st century. To assess the resilience of these institutions, we utilize the World Bank data to derive three indexes of resilience; and we found the political institution as the least resilient in protecting democracy. Given the scholarly perspectives that the subversion of democracy is not solely contingent on military interventions, but also on the influence of political leaderships and their civic engagements, we posit that the actions of political leaders and their followers can significantly affect the stabilization and destabilization of democracy in the US. Through a reflective examination of the systemic and structural factors, the study further deepens our understanding of the dynamics that either bolster or weaken democratic principles and practices in the contemporary US with potential implications for global democratic or autocratic trends. In support of our assertion that political leaders and their rational and/or obsequious followers are the main causal factors in strengthening and dismantling democracy, we derive two sets of coefficients. The first set of coefficients reflects the degree to which political leaders and their rational followers can contribute to the stabilization of democracy, and the second set of coefficients measures the extent to which political leaders and the obsequious followers can cause the destabilization of democracy in the US.

Keywords: Leadership-Followership, Democracy, Stabilization, Destabilization, Institutions

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I. Introduction

According to political analysts, democracy is a political system where resilient political, economic, and social institutions (PESIs) have been the cornerstones in decision-making to ensure effective governance, which is fundamental to fostering and achieving positive economic growth and development outcomes. Democratic waves since 1776, when the US became an independent nation, have shown the importance of democracy. Gunitsky's (2018) analysis of the past two centuries showed 13 democratic waves from two dimensions: the origins of external influence, which could occur either through vertical hegemonic transformations/shifts or horizontal transnational interactions, and the strength of external influence with subsequent impact via contagion and emulation. This dual categorization underscores the intricate global interconnections and the profound

influence of external forces in transmitting democratic norms and principles, and this implies that the worldwide evolution of democracy transcends beyond individual national narratives and trajectories.

The US's democratic system has historically influenced global democratic governance models predicated on the adherence to the rule of law and the accountability of political leaders. The current global political climate has seen a rise in populist movements, often challenging established democratic norms. Within the context of the US, this study examines and highlights the factors that contribute to the stabilization or destabilization of democratic institutions by providing a reflective exploration of the dynamics within its bipartisan or partisan political environment. The research seeks to understand the broader implications of political actions and rhetoric on the perception and efficacy of democratic governance in the US and the international implications. Given the reflective exploration, this analysis contributes to a scholarly discourse on the resilience of democratic systems in the era of the extremely polarized political landscape in the United States.

This study contributes to the literature by focusing on leadership-followership as one of the fundamental causal factors in the stabilization and/or destabilization of democratic government in the US. Given the two-party (Democratic Party and Republican Party) system, it is apparent to the entire world that the Democratic Party is determined to sustain/preserve and strengthen the democratic government in the US and around the world. In contrast, it is obvious that the political leaders and obsequious followers [Dean and Altemeyer (2020, 2021)] within the Republican Party are determined to surgically dismantle the democratic government in the US and around the world, and this will lead to the implant of a kratocratic government. We therefore assert that the political leaders and their obsequious followers within the Republican Party are the main causal factors in destabilizing democratic government in the US. For comprehension, we derived two sets of coefficients. The first set of coefficients captures the degree of stabilization of democratic governance in a normal political era while the second set of coefficients measures the extent of destabilization of democratic governance in the US. Given the aggressive actions taken by political leaders and their obsequious followers within the Republican Party to derail all democratic principles, one can easily deduce that the coefficients of destabilization are much stronger than the coefficients of stabilization in the toxic political environment in the US; therefore, its democracy is at the precipice of destruction with adverse international consequences.

We organize this paper as follows. Section 2 provides the background of studies that have examined democracy and the vital institutional pillars. Section 3 presents the trends in the institutional pillars of democracy in the US using schematic illustrations to show the institutions that can easily enable democracy to transition into kratocracy. Section 4 provides the theoretical framework to highlight the fundamental factors that can stabilize and/or destabilize democracy in the US. Section 5 provides the concluding remarks with political implications.

II. Background Studies

The literature is replete with studies [such as Huntington (1991), Gunitsky (2014, 2017, 2018), and Haggard and Kaufman (2016)] that have examined the waves of democracy dating back to 1776 (the Atlantic Wave of 1776-1798) when the US gained its independence. The democratic waves highlight the importance of democratic governance. Huntington (1991) identified three waves now dubbed the "Huntington's three waves." According to Huntington (1991), the first wave, which lasted over the 1828-1926 period, yielded the *Jacksonian democracy* that granted white males the right to vote in the US and yielded 29 democracies in the world. The reversal of democracy started in 1922 when Benito Mussolini ascended to power in Italy, and some newly democratized countries became overwhelmed with the aggressive rise of the expansionist communist, fascist, and militaristic authoritarian movements that systematically dismantled democracy. The second wave of democracy, which also resulted in 36 recognized democracies occurred after World War II; and the third wave, which started with the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal also brought the transitions to democracy in various parts of the world since the 1980s.

Like Huntington's (1991) analysis of democratic waves, Gunitsky (2018, 2017, and 2014) analyzed 13 democratic waves that occurred over two centuries covering different periods of human history.¹ In the 21st century, two important democratic waves occurred. The Colour Revolutions occurred in post-Soviet states while the Arab Spring Uprisings occurred in the Middle East and North Africa. Both democratic waves occurred due to authoritarianism, electoral fraud, human rights violations, kleptocracy, and political corruption. Achieving democracy is an arduous task, yet democratic backsliding has increased remarkably since the end of the Cold War as the extreme right-wing Christian nationalist movements gained momentum. According to Bermeo (2016), open-ended coups d'état, executive coups, promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, strategic electoral

¹These democratic waves are: Atlantic Wave (1776-1798), Latin American wars and independence (1809-1824), First Constitutional Wave (1820-1821), Romantic-Nationalist Wave (1830-1831), Spring of Nations (1848-1849), Second Constitutional Wave (1905-1912), Post-World War I (1919-1922), Post-World War II (1945-1950), African Decolonization Wave (1956-1968), Modernization Wave also known as the Third Wave (1974-1988), Post-Soviet Wave (1989-1992), Colour Revolutions (2000-2007), and Arab Spring Uprisings (2011-2012).

manipulation, and harassment, which political institutions legitimized, have contributed significantly to the current democratic backsliding.

The debate about why and how democracies collapse, fail, die, or succeed is ongoing and unsettled because some Western democracies are gradually unraveling in many countries in the European Union and the US. In other words, we are in the era of global democracy destruction. Diskin *et al.* (2005) provided a study that identified 11 variables: federalism, presidentialism, proportionality, constitutional weakness, cleavages, malfunctioning economy, unfavorable history, fragmentation, polarization, governmental instability, and foreign involvement, which are fundamental to the collapse of democracies. They grouped these 11 variables into four major categories, and each variable in each category has its own clarifying hypothesis. The first category consists of **institutional variables**: federalism, presidentialism, proportionality, and constitutional weakness. Among these institutional variables, the authors' hypothesis that "presidential or semi-presidential regimes are more prone to democratic collapse than parliamentary ones" captures the importance of presidentialism.

The second category comprises the **societal variables**, which are cleavages, malfunctioning economy, and unfavorable history. In the case of a malfunctioning economy, the explicatory hypothesis is that "countries with weak or unstable economies are more prone to democratic collapse than those with stable economies." This line of argument about the relationship between democracy and economic performance or growth dominated the growth literature in the 1990s and early 2000s [Przeworski *et al.* (1996, 2000)]. The third category involves the **mediating variables**, which include fragmentation, polarization, and governmental instability. Among the three mediating variables, the authors' hypothesis that "highly polarized party systems are more prone to democratic collapse than systems with low polarization" provides the best description of polarization. The hypothesis about polarization also matches with that of fragmentation, which some political researchers have examined extensively for decades. The fourth category deals with the **extraneous variables**: foreign involvement, which Diskin *et al.* (2005) identified as the single and important variable. The authors argued that foreign involvement "has rarely received any attention in the discussion of democratic stability, but which has proven to be essential," and they hypothesized that "countries experiencing serious levels of involvement by foreign forces are more prone to democratic collapse than those with low involvement."

To highlight the significance of these 11 variables, Diskin *et al.* (2005) used a sample of 30 cases of collapsed democracies and 32 cases of stable democracies in which they coded each variable as either positive or negative in their logistic regression to show which variables were more important and the extent to which each variable can predict why democracies collapsed. Diskin *et al.* (2005) found that all the variables, *except* federalism, are statistically significant in predicting the collapse of democracies with the five strongest variables being foreign involvement, unfavorable history, malfunctioning economy, cleavage, and governmental instability. The foreign involvement variable has the highest correlation coefficient and logistic prediction, however, the authors cautioned that no single variable can predict democratic collapse and that the key to the demise of a democratic system is a combination of variables from the four categories.

The subject of foreign involvement in democratic stability did not gain much attention because Western democracies have been known to be active democratic mentors in influencing the newly emerged and emerging democracies around the world. However, the environment of foreign involvement has changed since 2015, and it quickly gained attention during the 2016 presidential election in the US as its main foreign adversary, Russia, interfered in the election outcomes. Tennis (2020) pointed out that after Russia interfered in the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, Russia became more emboldened and publicly interfered in the French presidential campaign in 2017.

According to Brooking's (2021) analysis of the unclassified report on Russian interference in the presidential election released by the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an extensive influence campaign in support of the candidacy of Donald Trump, using overt propaganda, hacking, and clandestine social media manipulation to bolster Trump's chances while denigrating his opponent, Hillary Clinton." Furthermore, Brooking (2021) outlined four primary areas, which the DNI report addressed. The first area addressed Russian most significant operations in 2016 that involved the cultivating and harnessing of Trump allies through a third party, WikiLeaks, which they used as the avenue to launch malicious information to steer the political discourse in the US. In 2020, they adopted the 2016 template "by directly targeting prominent US persons and media conduits, feeding them hacked materials and nudging their actions."

In addition, Brooking (2021) discussed the second area of the DNI report that addressed Iran's interference attempts, which grew notably more aggressive during the 2020 presidential election, and initially, it was wrongly attributed to Russia. However, with respect to Iran's interference, the report did conclude that "most of these influence activities were essentially benign, focused on repackaging Iranian state propaganda for foreign audiences rather than attacking elections or undermining rival political systems." The third issue addressed in the DNI's report was China's determination that direct election interference was not worth the risk because of the concern that such a move would backfire, especially since information conflict escalated over whom to blame for the pandemic during the tariffs-restricted trade wars between both countries. The fourth and most principal issue

addressed in the report dealt with the fact that the Trump administration officials misrepresented the nature of influence activities around the 2020 election. This was a manifestation of the baseless conspiracy theories and disinformation intended to mislead the American people. Brooking (2021) concluded that it will be difficult to imagine a future presidential “election that will not be haunted by fears of foreign interference.”

For the institutional variables, Diskin *et al.* (2005) pointed out that the emphasis on institutional variables or institutional hypothesis is not new in the political debate and its linkage to economic growth over the past four decades. For example, many scholars viewed institutional variables from the dimension of economic growth [Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001)]; and many empirical studies over the past two decades provided evidence in support of the primacy of institutions [see Knack and Keefer (1995), Przeworski *et al.* (2000), Rodrik *et al.* (2002), Kaufman and Kraay (2002), Acemoglu *et al.* (2005), Rodrik and Wacziarg (2005), Persson and Tabellini (2006)]. From these studies, strong and effective institutions exist in strong democracies; therefore, everyone considered these institutions to be resilient enough to rein in the autocratic impulses of their political leaders, thus the collapse of democracies in Western countries did not grab much attention until now.

In Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) book about how democracies die, they laid out the important roles that the elected autocratic leaders play in the collapse of democracies in developed and less developed countries. They argued that democracies do not die at the “hands of generals,” but at the hands of elected leaders who subvert the basic process with which they gained political power. They also argued that if “the political parties, organized citizens, democratic norms do not defend the constitutions or unwritten rules of toleration and restraint, the institutions alone are not enough to rein in elected autocrats.” To support their assertion, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) listed countries such as Hungary, Venezuela, Ecuador, Georgia, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Sri Lanka, and others where their elected would-be autocratic leaders undermined democratic institutions and constitutions. In addition, they argued that other nominally democratic institutions remain in places where people continue to vote in rigged elections.

According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, the most crucial variable in predicting the success of a democratic transition is the self-confidence of the incumbent elites or leaders. If the political leaders feel they can compete under democratic conditions, they will accept democracy. If they do not, they will not. Studies by Dorf (2016), Smith (2018), Alberta (2019), Greenberg (2020), and Acemoglu (2020) argued and concluded that American democracy unraveled under President Trump. This assertion is also consistent with and corroborated by Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) assertion that “Institutions alone are not enough to rein in elected autocrats” and that the Constitution of the US is “only a piece of paper,” which “is not self-enforcing.” That is, in well-functioning democracies, such as the US, the rule of law may provide the necessary constitutional guardrails for the three co-equal branches of government.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) view the Constitution or the rule of law as not self-enforcing. Simply put, presidential leaderships in collusion with leaders of other co-equal branches matter because they govern these institutions, and they can invoke law and order politics to manipulate both the Constitution and the rule of law for their self-interests at the demise of representative democracy. Given the governance structure in the US, any president endowed with democratic ideals would be guided by the rule of law in building and strengthening the institutions rather than invoking law and order to undermine the rule of law in which the goal is to subvert the institutional pillars of American democracy. In countries where ambitious would-be autocrats ascend to power, their objective is to cause political chaos, violence, and intimidation.

From Smith's (2018) perspective, would-be autocrats tend to invoke law and order because they want to achieve social dominance or authoritarianism. In the process, would-be autocrats use law and order politics to undermine the rule of law and subvert the institutional constraints because they aim to achieve autocratic power or become president-for-life. These reasons agree with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) argument that when established parties opportunistically invite “extremist outsiders,” such as the 45th (now 47th) POTUS, into their ranks, they imperil democracy in that once a would-be autocrat makes it to power, democracy faces a survival test as autocratic presidential leaders will subvert democratic institutions that would constrain them. In addition, they pointed out that “Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy we imagine it to be.” Instead, institutions become political weapons, wielded forcefully by those who control them against those who do not. This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy— packing and ‘weaponizing’ the courts and other neutral agencies, buying off the media and private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to permanently disadvantage their rivals. Owoye (2020) argued and concurred that institutions are not sacrosanct anywhere in the world because the entire world witnessed how political leaders in the US, such as the 45th POTUS, were determined to subvert and reverse the institutional pillars of democracy.

According to Janda (2023), the Republican Party under Donald Trump has transformed from a governing party that was once committed to effective governance to one that opposes the traditional norms of government. In addition, the Republican Party became an antigovernment party by endorsing states' rights, opposing civil

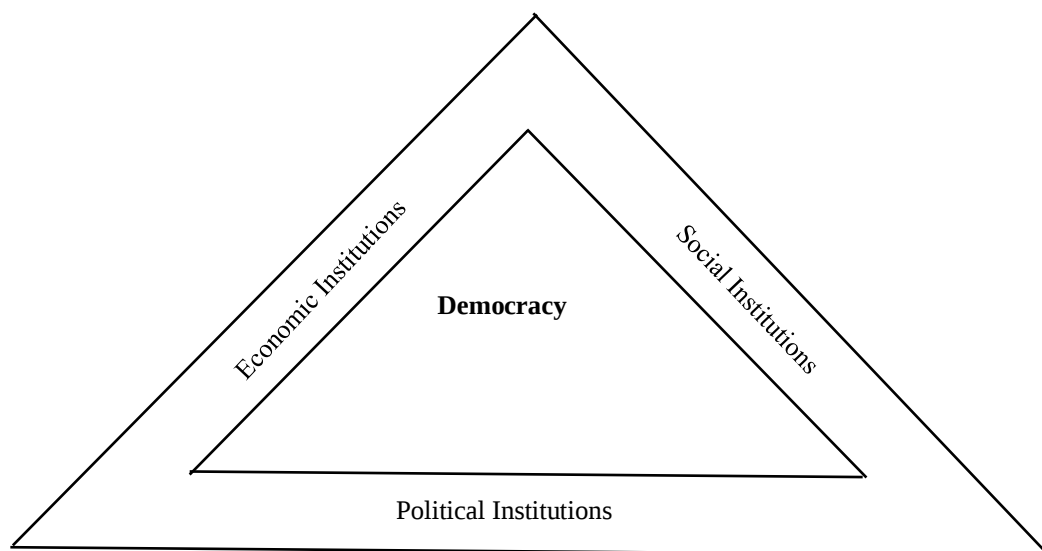
rights, and voting rights,² which the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has enabled and emboldened; and in the process, the party has become increasingly ethnocentric as manifested by the promotion of “America First.” From the perspectives of political experts, these political deceptions have contributed to the failure of the political institutions, thus threatening American democracy. In a recent study, Egorov and Sonin (2024) provided a survey of the theoretical and empirical literature on the political economics of non-democracies to highlight the strategic decisions that dictators make in non-democratic environments. These decisions include the hiring of unqualified loyalists to positions that require competency, restricting media freedom, running propaganda campaigns, organizing election fraud, purging opponents and associates, and repressing citizens to maintain absolute power and control. Cronyism or kakistocracy, which is the appointment of unqualified loyalists, friends, associates, and family members to the positions of authority is common in some democracies; thus, it is not a new phenomenon in the US. Breidbart (2024) considered the July 1, 2024 SCOTUS’s ruling in *Trump v. United States* as an affront to democracy and the rule of law because it surrenders the normal critical checks and balances on executive power, undermines criminal accountability for presidents if their law-breaking occurs in the course of “official” conduct, and it endangers democratic accountability by potentially shielding presidents from prosecution for trying to overthrow elections. By granting permanent immunity, the SCOTUS finally unleashed the death knell to democratic governance in the US.

III. The Trajectories of the Institutional Pillars of Democracy in the United States

To comprehend the challenges facing democracy in the US and other democracies around the world, we provide a graphical illustration intended to highlight the stabilization and the ongoing efforts to subvert the vital institutions, which would destabilize the treasured democracy in the US. Panel A of Figure 1 shows that for over two centuries, the political, economic, and social institutions (PESIs) provided solid guardrails, which political leaders and their followers from both parties could not derail because everyone adhered to democratic principles and norms. It is obvious that democracy in the US and elsewhere around the world faced generational challenges during which some democracies transitioned into autocracies, but democracy remained relatively stable in the US due to its resilient PESIs, which many economists [Acemoglu (2003, 2009), Acemoglu and Robinson (2006, 2008)] attributed to the remarkable economic growth over the past four decades.

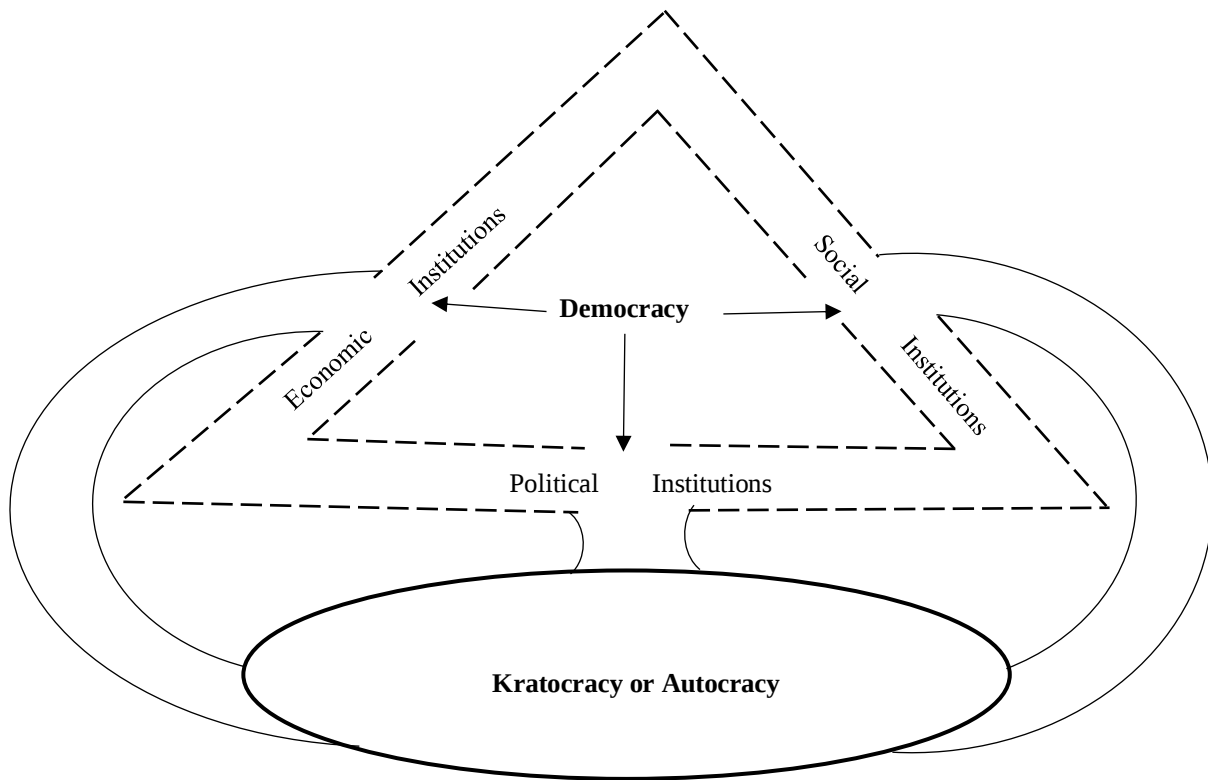
As shown in Panel B of Figure 1, when the guardrails of the tripartite institutional foundation of democracy breaks due to a host of factors, democracy transitions into kratocracy or autocracy. As we pointed out earlier, history is replete with democratic waves and the back and

Figure 1: Democratic Transition from Stabilization to Destabilization



Panel A: Stable Democracy Due to Resilient Institutions

²The Campaign Legal Center (CLC, 2022) provided cases in which the SCOTUS has undermine democracy. See https://campaignlegal.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/CLC%202022%20SCOTUS%20Report_072022%20%281%29.pdf.



Panel B: Transition of Democracy to Kratocracy or Autocracy Due to Subversions of Institutions

forth transitions between democracy and autocracy in countries around the world. Given that other democracies have transitioned into autocracies during the 20th and 21st centuries, there are pertinent questions for scholars to answer: Are the tripartite institutional guardrails of democracy in the US resilient enough to prevent its democracy from transitioning or backsliding to autocracy after two centuries? Which of the three vital institutions provides the quickest pathway for transitioning from democracy into kratocracy or autocracy? What are the factors that can cause democracy in the US to transition into kratocracy or autocracy?

To answer the questions as to which of these institutional pillars of democracy in the US are resilient and which one is more likely to fracture and provide the quickest pathway to kratocracy or autocracy, we construct three unique indexes based on the data on worldwide governance indicators provided by the World Bank (2024). First, we use the scores on voice and accountability (VA) and political stability and absence of violence (PV) scores assess the political institutions resilience or guardrail index (PIRI or PIGI). Second, we apply the scores on government effectiveness (GE) and regulatory quality (RQ) to measure the economic institutions resilience or guardrail index (EIRI or EIGI). Third, we utilize the scores on the rule of law (RL) and control of corruption (CC) to evaluate the social institutions' resilience or guardrail index (SIRI or SIGI). Simply put, the three PIRI, EIRI, and SIRI are:

$$PIRI \text{ or } PIGI = \frac{1}{2} (VA + PV) \quad (1),$$

$$EIRI \text{ or } EIGI = \frac{1}{2} (GE + RQ) \quad (2),$$

and

$$SIRI \text{ or } SIGI = \frac{1}{2} (RL + CC) \quad (3).$$

We apply the same scores provided by the World Bank as the guideline in our assessment of the resiliency or guardrails of the three institutional pillars of democracy in the US. In addition, we consider the scores between 0 and 2.50 for PIRI, EIRI, and SIRI as indicative of resilient institutional pillars of democracy, as demonstrated in Panel A of Figure 1. In contrast, the scores ranging between 0 and -2.50 indicate no resilient institutional pillars of democracy, which signals the broken guardrails that would enable democracy to backslide into autocracy as illustrated in Panel B of Figure 1.

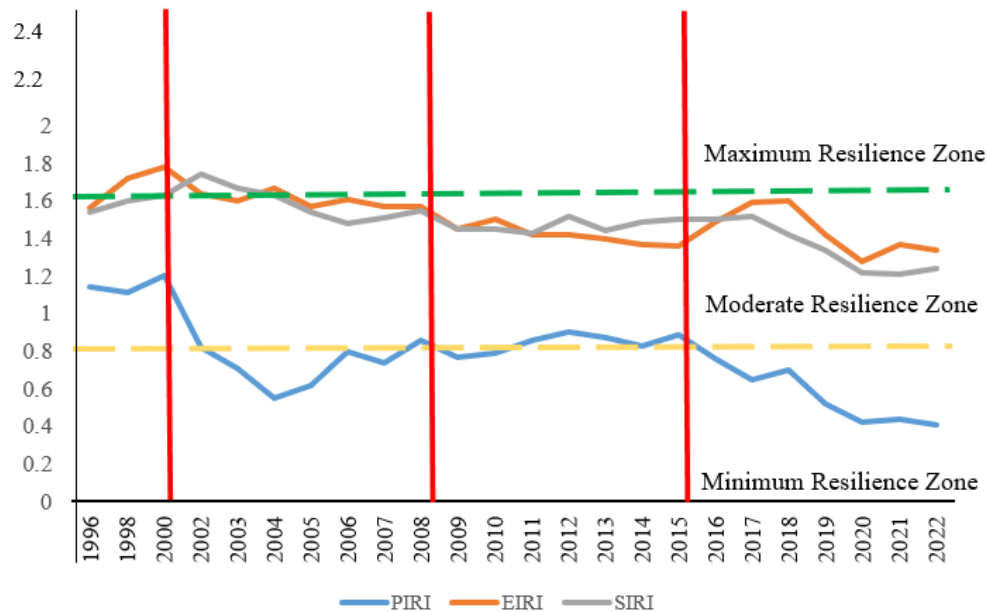
Furthermore, to show the variations in the resiliency of the three institutional pillars of democracy, we divide the 0 to 2.50 scores into three categories. The three institutions are deemed to be in the minimum resilience zone if the scores range between 0 and 0.83 while scores between 0.84 and 1.66 indicate the moderate resilience zone, and scores 1.67 and 2.50 are the maximum resilience zone of institutional pillars of democracy. In contrast,

we divide the 0 to –2.5 scores into three categories to show the varying degrees of no resilient institutional pillars of democracy. We consider the scores ranging between 0 and –0.83 as indicative of weak no resilient institutional pillars of democracy while those scores between –0.84 and –1.66, and –1.67 and –2.50 indicate weaker and weakest no resilient or dysfunctional institutional pillars of democracy in the US and elsewhere in the world.

Alternatively, we consider another unique measure dubbed the “Institutional Resilience Cycle (IRC),” which has three phases: *peak*, *decline*, and *recovery*, as an extra assessment of the resilience of the institutions. This means the IRC can peak anywhere between 0 and 2.50, which is indicative of maximum institutional resilience, and IRC may decline gradually until it reaches its lowest level at –2.50, which implies the worst no resilient institutions. A country may experience a declining IRC for some years, and it may or may not recover back to its peak; therefore, the survivability and sustainability or stability of democracy requires the resilience of these institutions not to decline below the minimum resilience zone.

Figure 2 provides the trajectories of the PESIs based on the available World Bank’s (2024) data used to construct PIRI, EIRI, and SIRI. From the trajectories of the PESIs, we can simply deduce that the economic and social institutions were in the maximum resilience zone while the political institutions were in the moderate resilience zone prior to 2000. While the resilience of the economic institutions peaked in the maximum zone, the resilience of the political institutions peaked in the moderate zone in 2000 under the presidential political leadership of Bill Clinton. Thereafter, the resilience of the economic and political institutions declined into the moderate and minimum zones, respectively. The resilience of the social institutions peaked in 2002 under the

Figure 2: Trajectories of the Resilience of the Political, Economic, and Social Institutions Indexes



Source: Constructed by the authors to show the resilience of the three institutions

presidential leadership of George Walker Bush. As the economic and social institutions remained steady in the moderate resilience zone, the resilience of the political institutions hovered between the moderate and minimum resilience zones with a remarkable decline since 2015 and thereafter. This aligned with the Democracy Index (DI) developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), which showed that the US transitioned into one of the flawed democracies around the world during the 2015-2016 period.³

The declining trend of the DI for the US also coincided with the sharp increase in its partisan political division on major political issues such as the Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obama Care). Everything that can

³To provide statistical evidence of the resilience of these vital institutions, we use the difference-in-means (DIM) estimation method normally used in economics and other social sciences to compare the periods before and after 2015 to assess the null hypotheses of no differences in the periods before and after 2015. The estimated results showed that the political institutions experienced the worst decline in resilience after 2015. Based on the DIM’s estimated results for the trajectories of the resilience of the three institutional pillars of democracy in the United States, one can easily surmise that the political institutions will surely provide the shortest pathway for democracy in America to transition into autocracy in the 21st century. The results are not reported here in order to conserve on space. The results are available upon request from the authors.

destabilize democracy amplified in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election. The surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center (2017) pointed to issues such as “government aid to needy,” “racial discrimination,” and “immigration” as some of the factors that have magnified the ongoing extreme partisan division in the US. Although both Democrats and Republicans pulled further away from each other during Obama’s presidency, the DI still ranked the US as a “Full Democracy” because its DI was above the 8.0 benchmark. The US fell below the 8.0 benchmark and became a “Flawed Democracy” during the 2015-2016 period and thereafter as the “Make America Great Again” gained momentum, and this further fueled the partisan division that further threatened the foundation of democracy. The insurrection of January 6, 2021, which the country and rest of the world witnessed, was based on the endless propagation of public lies about the “stolen 2020 presidential election.” This was one of the glaring ultimate manifestations of the threat to democracy in the US.

There are important takeaways from Figure 2. We see some structural breaks in the resilience or guardrails of the institutional pillars of democracy in the US. The first structural break occurred in 2000 when SCOTUS interjected and disrupted the 2000 presidential election by stopping the recount needed to determine the winner of the election. By stopping the presidential election recount in Florida in what is known as Bush v. Gore, the SCOTUS consciously or unconsciously fractured and dismantled the guardrails of the political institutions in the US. Between 2000 and 2004, the derailments of the political institutions amplified and briefly recovered to the 2002 level in 2008. The second structural break occurred in 2008 – the year of the global financial crisis and Great Recession in the US. Throughout the tenure of President Obama, the strength of the guardrails remained far below the 2000 level. The third structural break occurred in 2015 when the Republican Party allowed an “extremist outsider” [see Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)] to join their party as a candidate for the 2016 presidential election and became the 45th (and now the 47th) POTUS; and since then, the resilience of the political institutions remained in the downward trajectory, and it is projected to remain in its downward spiral. The fourth and most significant structural break occurred during the 2024 presidential election. On July 1, 2024, the SCOTUS ruled to grant unprecedented presidential immunity to further embolden Trump; and on November 5, 2024, American voters elected Trump as their 47th POTUS despite his records of two impeachments when he was the 45th POTUS, four indictments, and convicted on 34 felony counts for falsified business records. The projection is that these outcomes will undermine American democracy [Breibart (2024)].

More importantly, the computed PIRI, EIRI, and SIRI show that the economic and social institutions are three times more resilient than the political institutions in the US. The weak resilience of the political institutions in the US since 2001 under the presidential leaderships of Bush, Obama, Trump, Biden, and now Trump could explain why its democracy is unraveling [Acemoglu (2020), Greenberg (2020), Breibart (2024)], thus at the precipice of destruction due to all the challenges that emerged since 2000 despite its robust economy relative to other countries.

IV. Theoretical Framework

Given the diagnosis that the political institutions in the US are more susceptible to the destabilization of democracy, we provide the theoretical framework to answer the question as to the fundamental causal factors, within the political institutions, which can contribute to the destabilization of democratic government (DDG) in the US. To provide a reflective theoretical framework, we view these causal factors from two dimensions: stabilization and destabilization. This study aligns with Diskin *et al.* (2005) that no single variable can predict democratic collapse and that the key to the demise of a democratic system is a combination of variables. In other words, research scholars should always consider the composite factors that can cause the stabilization and destabilization of democracy

To understand the composite fundamental causal factors and the extent of stabilization of democratic government (SDG) and destabilization of democratic government (DDG) in the US, we express the SDG and DDG in two composite functional forms as:

$$SDG = (PESIs.PLs)^{\phi} (PLs.RFs)^{\alpha} (PLs.PT)^{\beta} (PLs.PT.NTVOs)^{\delta} (RFs.PT.HLA)^{\gamma} (H_s)^{\pi} \quad (4)$$

and

$$DDG = (PESIs.PLs)^{-\Omega} (PLs.OFs)^{-\eta} (PLs.PD)^{-\theta} (PLs.EPCTs.SMPs)^{-\lambda} (OFs.EPCTs.PCV)^{-\sigma} (H_b)^{-V} \quad (5)$$

where *PESIs* represents the core political, economic, and social institutions (including the SCOTUS) that are fundamental to decision-making in order to stabilize and/or destabilize democratic government, *PLs* represents political leaders whose political transparencies (*PT*), by telling the truths, can help to build public trust and national unity, which were easily communicated through the traditional newspapers and television outlets (*NTVOs*) prior to this era of digital information technologies and artificial intelligence, and *PD* represents political deceptions intended to build distrust and divisions. In contrast, some political leaders have aggressively engaged in the exponential propagation of conspiracy theories (*EPCTs*) through various unregulated social media platforms (*SMPs*).

Furthermore, *RFs* capture strong rational followers within the two political parties who are not afraid to hold their leaders accountable (*HLA*) while *OFs* represents the obsequious followers who are exposed to the exponential propagation of conspiracy theories, which are overloaded with baseless public lies that these followers deliciously and willfully consume without verification through social media platforms to incite political chaos and violence (*PCV*). While *Hs* is a vector of other explanatory variables such as political dignity, integrity, decency, and logrolling and compromise that dominated the political landscape in the 20th century, *Hd* is a catch-all term for other group of mediating explanatory variables such as the amplifications of corporate money in politics, which the SCOTUS enabled, polarization, fragmentation, foreign involvement, racial/gender hatred, and “Stop the Steal” propaganda used to incite political chaos, violence, and intimidation over the past three presidential elections in the US. Equations (4) and (5) to highlight the effects of the composite variables on *SDG* and *DDG*.

We transform equations (4) and (5) into logarithm ($\log SDG = sdg$ and $\log DDG = ddg$) linear forms as:

$$sdg = \varphi(pesis.pls) + \alpha(pls.rfs) + \beta(pls.pt) + \delta(pls.pt.ntvos) + \gamma(rfs.pt.hla) + \pi h_s \quad (6),$$

and

$$ddg = -\Omega(pesis.pls) - \eta(pls.ofs) - \theta(pls.pd) - \lambda(pls.epcts.smps) - \sigma(ofs.epcts.pcv) - \nu h_d \quad (7).$$

To provide a clear interpretation of equation (6), we take the partial differentiations with respect to each composite explanatory variable to get:

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pls} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pesis} \cdot \frac{\partial pesis}{\partial pls} = \varphi \quad (8),$$

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial rfs} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial rfs} = \alpha \quad (9),$$

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pt} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial pt} = \beta \quad (10),$$

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial ntvos} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial pt} \cdot \frac{\partial pt}{\partial ntvos} = \delta \quad (11),$$

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial hla} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial rfs} \cdot \frac{\partial rfs}{\partial pt} \cdot \frac{\partial pt}{\partial hla} = \gamma \quad (12),$$

and

$$\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial h_s} = \pi \quad (13).$$

Interpretatively, $\frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pls} = \frac{\partial sdg}{\partial pesis} \cdot \frac{\partial pesis}{\partial pls} = \varphi$ highlights the influence of political leadership in sustaining and strengthening the guardrails necessary to ensure the resilience of the *PESIs* in order to enhance the stabilization of democracy in the US (see Panel A in Figure 1). Theoretically, we consider α as the coefficient that shows the extent of dedication by political leaders and their rational followers to ensure the stability of democracy in the US. While β and δ are the coefficients measuring the degree of political leaders' transparency, which used to be communicated through the traditional newspapers and television news outlets that dominated the transmissions of news in the 20th century, γ is the coefficient that shows the degree to which the rational followers hold their political leaders accountable thus ensuring the stability and strength of democracy.⁴ Also, π is a vector of the coefficients that measure the extent to which other democratic norms have contributed to the stability of democracy in the US.

Next, we use equation (7) to provide the framework through which we analyze the degree to which political leaders and their obsequious followers, derailed institutions, political deceptions nourished by self-deceptions and self-projections, exponential propagations of conspiracy theories through unregulated social media platforms used to incite political chaos, violence, and intimidation, have contributed to the ongoing strategic destabilization of democracy in the US in the 21st century. The partial differentiations of *ddg* with respect to the composite explanatory variables yield:

$$\frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pls} = \frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pesis} \cdot \frac{\partial pesis}{\partial pls} = -\Omega \quad (14),$$

$$\frac{\partial ddg}{\partial ofs} = \frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial ofs} = -\eta \quad (15),$$

$$\frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pd} = \frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial pd} = -\theta \quad (16),$$

$$\frac{\partial ddg}{\partial smps} = \frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pls} \cdot \frac{\partial pls}{\partial ofs} \cdot \frac{\partial ofs}{\partial epcts} \cdot \frac{\partial epcts}{\partial smps} = -\lambda \quad (17),$$

$$\frac{\partial ddg}{\partial pcv} = \frac{\partial ddg}{\partial ofs} \cdot \frac{\partial ofs}{\partial epcts} \cdot \frac{\partial epcts}{\partial pcv} = -\sigma \quad (18),$$

and

⁴The γ coefficient captures the rational followers within the Democratic Party who held President Biden accountable by pressuring him to withdraw from the 2024 election due to the age fragility exhibited in the first presidential debate.

$$\frac{\partial s dg}{\partial h d} = -v \quad (19).$$

Interpretatively, when $\frac{\partial d d g}{\partial p l s} = \frac{\partial d d g}{\partial p e s i s} \cdot \frac{\partial p e s i s}{\partial p l s} = -\Omega$, this means the three institutional pillars of democracy are no longer resilient due to the broken guardrails, which the SCOTUS and political leaders from the three co-equal branches of government enabled, thus the ongoing tactical destabilization of democracy in the US. In other words, democracy can transition into kratocracy or autocracy via the three institutional outlets. As illustrated in Panel B of Figure 1 and Figure 2, one should expect the political institutions to provide the quickest pathway for democracy to transition to autocracy in the US. The $-\eta$ coefficient shows the extent to which political leaders and their obsequious followers have contributed to the deliberate destabilization of democracy since 2015 when Trump announced his candidacy. Next, $-\theta$ is the coefficient of political deceptions, extracted from psychology's concepts of self-deceptions and self-projections, which pervaded the political landscape of the United States since the 2016 presidential election.

Similarly, $-\lambda$ is the coefficient that shows the extent to which political leaders have aggressively engaged in the exponential propagation of corrosive conspiracy theories overloaded with baseless public lies intended to achieve political power and control. While $-\sigma$ coefficient⁵ shows the destruction of democracy when the obsequious followers deliciously and willfully consume the toxic conspiracy theories aimed at inciting political chaos and violence, the overriding objective is to gain autocratic power and control through political intimidation perpetrated by the obsequious followers. Finally, $-v$ is the catch-all coefficient that assesses the mutilation of democracy in the US due to the ongoing amplifications of big corporate money in politics, partisan political polarization, fragmentation, foreign influence, gender and racial hatred, and the endless "Stop the Steal" propaganda meant to incite political chaos and violence in the 21st century.

Another important question is: Do equations (4) through (19) reflect the political actions or behaviors of leadership-followership within the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States? Given the extreme partisan polarization in the US, one can objectively deduce that equation (4) and the coefficients derived in equations (8) – (13) capture the political environment within the Democratic Party where the political leaders and their rational followers show dedication to sustaining and strengthening democracy in the US and around the world. Conversely, equation (5) and the coefficients derived in equations (14) – (19) reflect the political ecosystem within the Republican Party where their political leaders use aggressive EPCTs overloaded with baseless public lies to incite their obsequious followers to take semi-military actions that would eviscerate democratic principles and norms in the US.

In summary, φ , α , β , δ , γ , and π are the coefficients of *SDG*, which can be considered as reflective of the **passive actions** taken within the Democratic Party while $-\Omega$, $-\eta$, $-\theta$, $-\lambda$, $-\sigma$, and $-v$ are the coefficients of *DDG* that capture the **aggressive actions** within the Republican Party in the US. Even though it is difficult to quantify the ongoing passive and aggressive actions of the two political parties, however, we add the *SDG* and *DDG* coefficients to derive what we consider as the stabilization-destabilization of democratic government (*SDDG*) coefficients. Simply put:

$$SDDG \text{ Coefficients} = \varphi - \Omega < 0, \alpha - \eta < 0, \beta - \theta < 0, \delta - \lambda < 0, \gamma - \sigma < 0, \pi - v < 0 \quad (20).$$

Interpretatively, equation (20) provides the algebraic lens through which one can easily conjecture that the ongoing aggressive actions taken by political leaders within the Republican Party to destabilize democracy are much more potent than the passive actions taken by political leaders of the Democratic Party to stabilize democracy in the United States and around the world. Given the current unprecedented presidential immunity granted by the SCOTUS on July 1, 2024, one should expect the ultimate transition into an oligarchy democracy or autocratic nation, which other democratic countries experienced in the 20th century, and some are still experiencing it today. Unfortunately, the destabilization or obliteration of democracy in the United States would take many decades and/or generations before it can recover and regain its democratic principles/norms.

V. Concluding Remarks and Political Implications

This study provides a reflective theoretical framework with which to gauge stabilization and the ongoing destabilization of democracy in the United States in this era in which the extreme right-wing Christian nationalist movements have gained momentum worldwide. This paper aligns with research scholars who argued that strong institutions and democracy are not sacrosanct anywhere in the world because many power-hungry autocratic leaders can subvert and reverse the vital institutional pillars of democracy to destabilize and obliterate all democratic principles and norms. Over the past decade, the United States provided a good illustration of the

⁵The $-\sigma$ coefficient reflects the degree to which the obsequious followers within the Republican Party cannot hold President Trump accountable for his anti-democratic behaviors, which political and legal experts have documented.

fragility of the institutional pillars of democracy. During this period, the United States witnessed the strategic derailment of its political institutions, and as data evidence showed, the political institutions provided the quickest transmission channel needed for its democracy to transition into autocracy.

Today, we see that political leaders from both parties in the United States have a strong influence over their rational and/or obsequious followers to the extent that these followers, from each party, can do the implicit bidding of their political leaders. Similarly, political leaders from both parties can strategically and corruptly manipulate the vital political, economic, and social institutions to achieve their party's political goal, which could be the stabilization or destabilization of democratic government. In addition, we computed three unique indexes to highlight the extent to which the tripartite institutions are resilient in protecting democracy in the United States. In this era of digital information technology and artificial intelligence, political leaders in the Republican Party have adopted the aggressive strategy of engaging in the exponential propagations of conspiracy theories, loaded with baseless public lies perpetrated through unregulated social media platforms. Their goal is to implicitly call their obsequious followers to take violent actions to intimidate their political rivals and voters from the opposition party. Given the current political landscape where the Democratic Party has shown their dedication to sustaining and strengthening democracy in the US and around the world, and the Republican Party has shown their adorations of autocratic leaders in countries that were once democratic, one can easily surmise that political leaders in the Republican Party have succeeded in convincing more than half of the voters in the US that their democracy is inferior in comparison to kratocracy or autocracy.

We view the political implications from both national and international perspectives. If the structure of the leadership-followership within one (Republican Party) of the political parties remains in its current form of leadership-hero worshipping, one of the major national consequences could be the termination of the Constitution by 2025 or thereafter and the elimination of various institutions to solidify political power and control solely within the executive branch of government. This may include the dismissals and massive deportations of nonwhite Americans, like the "Nazi Germany" template. According to Borjas (2024), the National Socialist Party enacted legislation known as the *Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service*, which mandated the dismissal of all Jewish professors from German universities. The remarkable dismissal of Jewish professors led to the dismissal of 18 percent of German mathematics professors (such as John von Neumann, Richard Courant, and Richard von Mises) between 1932 and 1934 [see Waldinger (2010)]. This eventually undermined the quality of university education and impacted mathematics departments in many universities in Germany such as the University of Göttingen and the University of Berlin.

Given the current political ecosystem in the United States and the Christian nationalist movements around the world, it is apparent that authoritarian leaders are fixated on immigration; therefore, research scholars and political pundits should not underestimate the replication of this 20th century political ideology and how the conjectured dismissals of foreigners, who are experts in different professions, could impact the political economy of the United States in the 21st century. As for one of the major international consequences, the European countries and allies around the world are concerned because the Republican Party regained power and control of the three co-equal branches of government, and the United States may withdraw from the established global alliances such as the United Nations, National Atlantic Treaty Organization, World Trade Organization, and World Health Organization.

Remarkably and importantly, the twice impeached former 45th POTUS, indicted four times, and convicted on 34 felony counts on falsified business records won the 2024 Presidential election and became the 47th POTUS. With the Republican Party in complete control of Congress and the White House, and given the expected implementations of "Project 2025," many vital institutions are on the precipice of elimination along with the "expected termination" of the Constitution of the US between now and the next Presidential election in 2028. Conjecturally, the 47th POTUS and the Republican Party with the partial judicial support of the SCOTUS can falsely declare and convince the public that the Constitution is too old and that to fully celebrate the 250-year anniversary of independence, the Constitution needs immediate termination and/or revision to allow the 47th POTUS to run for a third term or be the president for life. Given the nerve-racking outcome of the 2024 Presidential election, the world is terrified that the toxically obsequious voters outperformed the rational voters in the 2024 Presidential election in the United States. Globally, the jaw-dropping outcome of the election leaves the world with no more confidence in the United States' democratic system of governance. Ultimately, this would question the validity of the United States' global leadership position because when the president of the most revered democracy in the world is emboldened and empowered by roughly 77.3 million obsequious voters/followers, and now, the 47th POTUS sees no need to adhere to the traditional democratic values or obey the Constitutional rule of law, and this would pave the way to the new wave of global autocracy movement.

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